

# The Sirens Call



*Halloween 2022*

*issue 59*

*A Dark Fiction  
& Horror Zine!*

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

*Mike Lera's  
Corridor of Horror*

*Featured Artist:  
Tero Porthan*

*Featured Project:  
The Lift*

*Featured Author:  
Andrew P. Weston*

*Featured Book:  
'The Siren's Song'*

*Cover Art by Tero Porthan*

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The stand went up the afternoon of Halloween. It perched next to the street in front of an old house. There were two painted signs on the front of the stand. The one higher up read:

There's a Trick to Our Treats

The one lower down read:

Take one and begone in fun

Take more and troubles begun

The Gobeline couple that had rented the house were really old, and their neighbors, much younger and still breeding children, wondered why they'd moved in. Still, they kept their yard very neat and made no noise.

At dusk, when daylight had all but disappeared, Mr. Gobeline pulled out a big cart filled with sweet things. There were Marzipan animals, and Berliners, and Schneebällen and Bienenstick and Bremer Klabe. They were sealed in what looked like factory plastic wraps and were wonderfully delicious looking.

Old Mr. Gobeline, pinch cheeked, pointy nosed and stooped, pulled the empty cart back into the house and left the stand all to itself. Toddlers and tots, whose parents brought them Trick or Treating in late daylight, stopped in front of the stand. The young mothers formed a defensive cordon.

"I don't recognize these candies."

"Why isn't one of them here?"

"No, Sally, don't touch that."

But one of the fathers, after pretending to read and understand the German labeling, ripped open the wrap on a Bremer Klabe and gulped it down in four bites. "Absolutely delicious. Tastes like it's just from the bakery."

The mothers, realizing this was a perfect excuse to violate their diets, each took a different confection and tried it. "Marvelous." "No preservatives." "Not too sweet." They wanted to take a second one, but there were too many witnesses.

"Okay, Jimmy, take just one."

"Linda, try this one."

As the evening darkened and latened, the age of the children increased. As did their greed. Older kids sometimes took two sweets rather than one, and several teenagers took three. At nine pm Mr. Gobeline emerged from his house without the cart and walked out to inspect the stand. There was not a single sweet left, just empty wrappers strewn around. He picked up the wrappers, took down the signs, and carried everything back into the house.

Mrs. Gobeline was waiting for him.

"Did we do well?"

"Ja, wunderbar. At least three hundred. The effects will be starting soon. Are you ready?"

"Natürlich. I'll be so glad to get out of this costume and back to our cave. Let's go."

And the Gobelins drove away. An hour and a half later, those who had eaten only one sweet felt only full. Those who had cheated with bienensticks were seized with rank flatulence.

Those who gorged on Bremer Klabe vomited a multi-colored gruel. Overdoing Marzipan lead to violent convulsions. Berliners were time bombs that exploded with diarrhea in the middle of the night. Schneebällen produced snot loaded nasal gushes. Five mothers who stole and ate their child's Bienenstick had it worst, suffering from insatiable thirst and incontinent urination.

Texts and phone calls provided supporting music for the ambulance sirens. It was morning before the neighbors decided that the Gobelins'd got them, and broke down their front door. But the only thing of note that they found was just that, a note. It read:

Hope you enjoyed the true spirit of the holiday.

#### About the Author:

Edward Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had four hundred stories and poems published so far, and six books. Ed works the other side of writing at Bewildering Stories, where he sits on the review board and manages a posse of nine review editors. He's also lead editor at The Scribes Micro Fiction magazine.

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"Where are the caskets?" said Mother, her head swiveling to take in the entire room. Her eyes were red rimmed from weeping, but she was calm now. Her dress was charred, and smoke curled from the crown of her bald and badly charred head.

"Never mind caskets," said Father, whose flesh also resembled seared steak. One arm was bent at an absurd angle. "What kind of office is this?"

The room had a funereal atmosphere, but it resembled a dank cave more than a mortuary office. It did have a beautifully carved desk, a comfortable sofa, and upholstered chairs. A sign on the desk identified the mortuary director as M. Yama. A rotating rack of brochures describing the home's services and programs occupied one corner.

"I've been in such a daze. I can't even remember the drive to get here," Father observed as he handed a pamphlet to his wife and twelve-year-old daughter.

Mother nodded. "Lost time. It's been happening to me a lot, too."

"Give them the send-off they've earned," Father read. There was an almost perfectly round bloody hole where his left eye used to be, so he had to squint to scan the list of obsequies that grew increasingly grotesque as one went down the page. He swore under his breath. Mother's hand pressed against her mouth as she shuddered with sobs. Only Sister seemed unperturbed. She folded the paper and tucked it into the gaping hole in her abdomen.

Father said, "So they could freeze Junior until blisters burst on his skin and he's covered with frozen blood and pus. Or we can have our boy freeze until he breaks into blue chunks. He could be impaled on fiery swords until flames come out of his ears and nostrils. What the hell?"

"What the hell exactly," said a shapely, nearly naked female who stepped forward out of the shadows. "We provide the send-off your son has earned. But we always like to get input from the loved ones."

"My poor baby," Mother wept. "I can't let him go like. . . like any of these."

The cavernous door flew open and slammed so hard against the wall it sent stone chips flying. "Ah, here is Mr. Yama," the dakini said.

The funeral home director had to stoop to fit through the door. He carried a long sword which he hurled at the floor. The point pierced the stone and stuck there. The blade hummed as it vibrated.

Mother and Father shrank into their seats and gawked. The mortician had the head of a black bull with flaming eyes. A crown of human skulls circled his brow; an equally gruesome belt sat at his waist. The woman handed him a cup fashioned from a cranium. Blood sloshed over the rim. Mr. Yama gulped it down and handed it back to his assistant. He pressed his enormous hands against the desk and glared at the family.

Mother waved the brochure of torments at the creature and cried, "This is vile! This is my child we're talking about. I can't. . . I won't choose something like, like this crushing rock place, where he gets smushed to jelly then gets up so it can happen all over again."

Mr. Yama snorted and grinned, displaying a row of ferocious, sharpened teeth.

Cowed, Mother meekly ducked her head. "I know, I know. I'm not one of those parents who looks the other way and thinks her child is a perfect little angel. But surely, surely..."

Sister watched her parents with bemusement and asked, "Isn't there one where Brother could get eaten by strange animals again and again? Or spend 10,000 years swimming in a lake full of shit?"

"There is no lake of shit, Miss Smarty Pants," Father barked. "Do you actually like the thought of your brother suffering like that?"

"It isn't about liking or not liking. It's about what goes around comes around."

Mr. Yama slammed his fist down on the desk. A thunderous voice rumbled deep in the director's chest and when he spoke, the basalt walls trembled. "You cannot change what must happen."

The creature indicated the family should follow him to an adjoining room. There was Brother, laid out on a stone slab. The right side of his head was caved in. A little bit of brain dribbled out of his nose. What was left of his face was as composed and peaceful as anyone could expect. Mr. Yama tapped the young man's chest with his index finger and growled, "This person is the reason all of you are here. He has needlessly caused much suffering. Therefore, it is for you to help decide the type of send-off he deserves, though by his actions, he has all but chosen for himself."

Brother slapped the massive paw away and sat up. "It was an accident. I didn't mean to blow everybody up."

"You chose to do something stupid that you knew could be lethal," said Sister.

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Sweetie," Mother admonished, "she knows. Your sister is a bodhisattva."

"Your sister is a bodhisattva. Your sister is a bodhisattva," Brother mimicked in a high-pitched nasal voice. "Little Miss Perfect has never made a mistake."



"Quiet!" Mr. Yama roared and crashed his sword across Brother's midline, cleaving his body in two. The blow was so powerful, the body sections jumped in the air and landed on either side of the table. Bloody fountains sprayed the cavern's ceiling, walls and both parents.

Brother peeked around the edge of the slab's pedestal at his lower half. He pushed his arms against the blood-slicked floor to pull his torso over to it. He tried to tuck his shredded abdomen into his pants but after a few attempts, he swore and gave up.

"You didn't actually think that would work, did you?" Sister smirked.

The funeral director waited again for everyone to quiet down, then nodded to his assistant. The woman touched a wall. "We will review what you did and the subsequent suffering, then all of you may offer your input regarding the appropriate send-off."

Colors swirled across the wall, then resolved into images of the tragedy Brother had wrought. The family watched a young man, no more than sixteen, standing behind a garage built into a raised ranch on some suburban street. He raised a hunting rifle and squeezed off several shots at an empty propane tank resting against the garage wall.

Sister stood a few feet away, her hands on her hips, and declared, "That's wicked dangerous, you know." The words were no sooner out of her mouth when the tank exploded and hurled a metal shard right through her stomach. Brother staggered as shrapnel tore into his chest. The explosion kicked up a hail of soil, stones, and patio bricks, one of which crashed into his skull.

Mother and Father had just driven into the garage as the tank blew up and the back of the structure erupted into flames. Greasy rags and a case of motor oil fed the conflagration, which overwhelmed the vehicle. It erupted into a fireball that catapulted the parents, bodies ablaze, sky-high.

"That looks so painful," said Mother, wisps of smoke rising from her body, "but I honestly don't remember feeling a thing."

"I'll bet that made the Darwin Awards," Sister observed.

"Would you shut your big fat mouth, you stupid little bitch?" Brother shouted.

Mr. Yama swung his sword again, severing Brother's head from his body.

Mother crept around the director and knelt in front of Brother's face. "Sweetie, all this anger and backtalk is not helping. I don't like this anymore than you do, but it would be helpful to us if you shared your choice for your final arrangements. We want whatever you want." She held the brochure up to her son's eyes so he could read it.

"What if I just refuse to choose? What is he gonna do about it?" Brother said.

Father said, "Mr. Yama will keep dicing you into smaller and smaller pieces, that's what."

Brother scanned the send-off options, whimpering, "Oh, God, that's so bad. Oh, that one's even worse." Then his eyes suddenly brightened as he cried, "Wait, what about this last one?"

"Oh, GAWD!" Sister groaned. "He NEVER reads anything if he can help it, but THIS he finds."

"Samsara! Why can't we do that one?"

"You will probably make the same mistakes and create even more suffering," said the beautiful dakini. "If you ruin this next cycle, you will automatically go into the worst of all the punishments for 10,000 years."

"But I won't. I know I won't. Not if I get help. Isn't that right, Miss Bodhisattva?"

"You've had lifetimes of help," Sister said. Brother, Father and Mother all turned their pleading eyes to her, tears streaming down their mangled faces. She threw up her hands. "All right, all right. But this is the last time. Maybe we should try being twins this time."

The funeral director nodded. Sister picked up Brother's head, tucked it under one arm, then grabbed a foot. "A little help?" she suggested. Brother's torso hooked an arm through the hole in her middle.

A thousand doors appeared. Mr. Yama opened one, revealing a misty, gray tunnel.

Sister dragged Brother into the tunnel. Mr. Yama nodded in sympathy as she muttered, "I wonder if, at some point, compassion just becomes codependency."

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

Christine Lajewski is a writer, retired high school teacher, and a haunt actor. Published works include *JHATOR*, *BONEBELLY* and *ERRING ON THE SIDE OF CALAMITY*. Her stories have been published in *Dark Tales*, *Sanitarium*, *The Flash Fiction Press*, *Shallow Waters*, *The Siren's Call*, and the anthologies *A Shadow Over Deathlahem*, *The Misbehaving Dead*, *Wicked Women*, and *Dancing in the Shadows: A Tribute to Anne Rice*.

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William made his way into the clearing and saw the back of an abandoned two-story farmhouse. *Just what I need*, William thought. The windows of the house were boarded over, and the place was about two decades late on a paint job. With trick or treat starting soon, there would be parents all over the streets who could potentially recognize him. He was sure the police had plastered his picture all over the news at this point. *No one will look for me here*, William thought. He wasn't going to spend the rest of his life locked up.

He was a hunter; the 23 bodies – only 10 of which they had found – proved that. Not that it mattered, the prison time for 23 was the same as 10, forever. William was learning he didn't like being hunted as much as hunting, though. Since he'd escaped this morning, he'd been making his way through the woods, trying to stay out of sight of any police. He wasn't going back alive; he'd prefer to be dead than caged again.

William quickly tore across the lawn to the back door, not noticing that it was freshly mowed. He looked up and saw a security camera facing down toward him. However, he didn't see any lights on indicating it was active. *No one is still monitoring this old place; someone must've forgotten to take it when they left*, William thought.

William tried the back door and found it was unlocked. He opened the door, went in quickly since he heard sirens nearby, and shut the door. William looked around the barely lit environment. He expected the house to be bright from the setting sun outside; however, the inside was very dark. Scant lighting indicated that the house still had power.

"Keep it down," came a voice. "They hear you."

William looked around quizzically for the source of the voice. He wasn't expecting the house to be occupied, and he certainly wasn't expecting to be welcomed by someone who would help him.

"Hector, get in here. You're going to ruin their experience. What's up with you tonight?"

William followed the sound of the voice and found a mostly closed-over door designed to look like the wall. He gripped the edge of the door and pulled it toward him. There was a tiny room, no bigger than a large closet. Inside, he saw a person sitting on a chair, illuminated by the light from a computer screen. The reflection of the monitor could be seen on his glasses. The man looked up and saw William. A look of bewilderment came over his face.

"You aren't supposed to be in here," the person said.

He pushed back the metal folding chair he was sitting in and started to stand up. William lunged at the small man, grasping the man's neck with his burly hands. William heard the folding chair hit the wall. He pushed his thumbs into the man's neck until he felt the windpipe break. He released the man and let him fall to the floor. In the dim light, he could see the man's face turn purple as he was grasping to get a breath of air from his shattered windpipe.

He was watching the man's final twitches on the floor when he heard a noise behind him. William spun around and saw a large man in the room with his back to him, fastening the door. The man was wearing coveralls and only had a few white hairs on the top of his head.

"Lou, everyone heard you," Hector said. "I had to get back in here before they saw me."

Hector turned around. His face was gruesome to look at. He looked to William like he had been dead for several years. Patches of his skin were hanging from his face, exposing the bloody muscle beneath. His skin was a pale white, and one of his eyes was just a giant wound. He held a bloody axe in one of his hands.

"Who the fuck are you?" Hector asked.

His eye looked down, and he saw Lou on the ground, his face blue.

"What the fuck?" Hector exclaimed.

William lashed his fist out at Hector, slamming it into his chest, knocking the wind out of him before the undead creature could react to what it had seen. When Hector bent over in pain, William grabbed his head and twisted it until he heard the spinal cord pop. He then released the gruesome creature and watched him fall to the floor, now very dead.

Confused, William kicked the corpse, but there was no reaction from the still body. William grabbed one of the shoulder straps of Hector's coveralls and lifted the body from the floor. The head lobbed to the side, swaying back and forth from the body's movement. William pulled at the skin flaps on the face, and they peeled off. They were made of latex. He ran his dirty finger over the exposed muscle underneath, and it rubbed off, revealing Hector's skin. William let go of the coverall strap and allowed the body to fall.

William turned and looked at the computer screen. He saw a row of small boxes running down the right-hand side of the screen. Each one displayed a room. One of the small boxes was enlarged on the left side of the screen. Four people were looking around the room. One opened a box and screamed, dropping the box. William realized he didn't hear the scream from the computer's speakers but from inside the house.

William looked down at the prison-issued orange scrubs he was wearing. He then looked over at Hector's corpse. He figured Hector wasn't that much smaller than he. He stripped off his scrubs, leaving the white t-shirt, and then stripped Hector of his coveralls and put them on. He found them to be a little tight but not bad.

William hefted the axe and unlatched the door. He went out and secured the back door he'd entered the house



through; he didn't want any of the cops searching for him sneaking in on him. If he left now, someone would find Hector and Lou's bodies, and he didn't want the cops to know what direction he'd headed after his escape. Then, he set out to explore the place.

The first room William encountered, after the small back entry area, looked like a library that hadn't seen use in years. Thick cobwebs were all over the bookcase shelves lined with old books. There was an easy chair in the center of the room facing a fireplace that had the lowest of light coming from the dying fire. He could see the wisps of white hair on the mostly bald domed head of the chair's occupant.

William tried to be as quiet as possible as he made his way around the side of the chair. He got a glimpse of the man in the chair.

"Fuck!" William shouted.

He saw a corpse, looking just as Hector had, except it was missing the eyeball, sitting in the chair, its head staring blankly at the fireplace. Instinctively, he swung the axe separating the head from the body. The neck was smooth, white, and organless; it looked completely wrong. William didn't have a moment to think about what was wrong because he heard a scream coming from beside him. He turned his head and saw one of the people he'd seen on the computer screen looking at him.

She turned and ran away. William, still gripping the axe, ran after her. She tore through the adjoining room and through a doorway. William ran through the door and found himself in a dark hallway. Due to the limited visibility, William didn't see the hallway took a 90-degree turn. Not expecting the turn, William slammed into the wall. He took the brunt of the hit on his right shoulder. He heard more screams coming from behind the wall. He stepped back, his shoulder throbbing in pain, and saw the axe had become embedded in the wall. He pulled it out, wincing in pain. He saw a faint light coming through the axe hole. He finished the hall more slowly, finding a black curtain over the opposing opening.

He stepped through the curtain and saw a large object hurling at him. Before he could react, the wooden kitchen chair slammed into his face. He saw a shadow darting off as the chair caught his jaw and sent his head into the wall. He felt like he was about to pass out but was able to hold on to consciousness, primarily due to his throbbing skull and jaw. He retrieved his axe from the floor where it had fallen.

Looking around he saw he was in a small kitchen. Behind him was another door. He turned and lumbered through the door. He found himself in a dining room and saw the four people who'd been on the computer screen struggling, trying to get a door open. William knew he couldn't let them escape and tell about his presence in the house. William ran across the dining room. One of the women screamed as she saw him coming and moved away from the door.

"Jim," she screamed, "he's coming!"

One of the men looked over at him and grabbed a wooden coat stand by the door. He awkwardly swung it in William's direction like a heavy sword. William saw that the stand presented no actual danger, but the clumsy low swings of it made it impossible for him to attack any of the four.

"Get the damn door open, Rick," Jim stated.

"We haven't solved enough puzzles to get it open," Rick said. "I could mess with it for the rest of the day and get us nowhere."

"He won't hurt us," one of the women said. "He is just part of the experience."

"Fuck that, Rene," the other woman said. "This mofo came after me with an axe after killing the study corpse."

"Rene's right, this is all part of the game, so we can't finish," Rick said.

"I dunno, he looks awful menacing," Jim said.

"Duh, Jim," Rick said. "Isn't that the point?"

Rene looked at William.

"You can't hurt us, right?" Rene asked. "This is all part of the game."

William looked at Rene, trying to figure out what she was carrying on about. He'd never run into victims that behaved like this before.

"Ya, he's just gonna jump out of character to answer your question," Rick said.

"Hold on," Jim said.

Suddenly, Jim ran straight at William, still holding the coat rack. William started backing up so as not to get hit by it.

"Run!" Jim yelled.

The three others ran past William, as Jim threw the rack at William. It never connected, but the distraction gave Jim enough time to follow his friends who'd fled to the kitchen.

William grumbled; he was glad he'd locked the back door so they couldn't run out it; however, it wouldn't take them long to unlock it. He had to stop them. William took the hall with caution. He knew about the corner but didn't want to end up taking another chair to his head. That had hurt. William hadn't realized when he first chased the woman into the hall that a black curtain was also over the opposing side. He pulled the curtain back, ready for a flying object that never came. He then went into the room on the other side. He'd never gotten a chance to see it when chasing the woman. He could see now it was



a living room.

He looked to the right and saw the four people were milling around in the library, not trying to escape out the back. He couldn't figure these people out at all.

"He was in here when I saw him," the woman William had chased said.

"So, the next clue must be in here," Rick said.

William wasn't sure what they were up to, but he was going to take them out before they went out the back door. William ran straight at Jim, who was the closest to the area that led to the back door. Jim was too busy studying something on a table and never noticed William's approach.

"Jim, watch out!" Rene shouted.

Jim looked over at Rene just as William reached him, swinging his axe. William slid to a stop watching Jim's head bounce on the floor before coming to a stop with his eyes staring out at nothing in general. Rene screamed as Jim's headless body fell to the floor.

"I told you that mofo gonna kill us," the other woman shouted as she tore off past the others back toward the hallway.

"I don't want to play anymore!" Rene screamed while chasing after the woman.

Rick dropped the book he was holding, staring at William with wide eyes.

"You can't do that!" Rick yelled. "You can't actually kill us!"

William looked at Rick in disbelief. He then charged him, sinking his axe into Rick's arm. William felt a slight resistance as the axe connected with bone, and then Rick's arm fell to the floor, and his axe settled into the torso. William pulled the axe from Rick's body, allowing it to fall to the floor next to his arm, pumping out a pool of blood.

William charged through the house until he found the two women trying to open the front door again. He threw the axe into the wall, and they both turned, looked at him, and screamed. He grabbed both of them by the hair and slammed their heads together, hearing their skulls shatter. He dropped their limp bodies to the floor.

William returned to the room with the computer to see if there was any more movement in the house. He studied the screens, but all he could see were his victims. William heard something vibrating. He looked down and saw a cellphone on the makeshift desk. The number read 804-555-0113 Unknown on the display. William picked up the phone.

"Hello?" William asked.

"Is this Lost Souls Haunted Mansion Escape Room?" the voice on the other side asked.

"Um, yes," William replied.

"Do you have an opening tonight at 7 pm?" the caller asked.

William got a giant smirk on his face.

"Why, yes," William said, "we can fit you in."

"Excellent," the caller said, "we'll see you at 7."

"Looking forward to it," William said and hit the button to disconnect the call.

He looked at the bodies lying in the rooms on the monitor.

*A haunted mansion escape room, William thought with the giant smile still on his face. I've got victims coming to me now, and I don't have to clean up after each one.*

William started laughing out loud in the empty house.

#### About the Author:

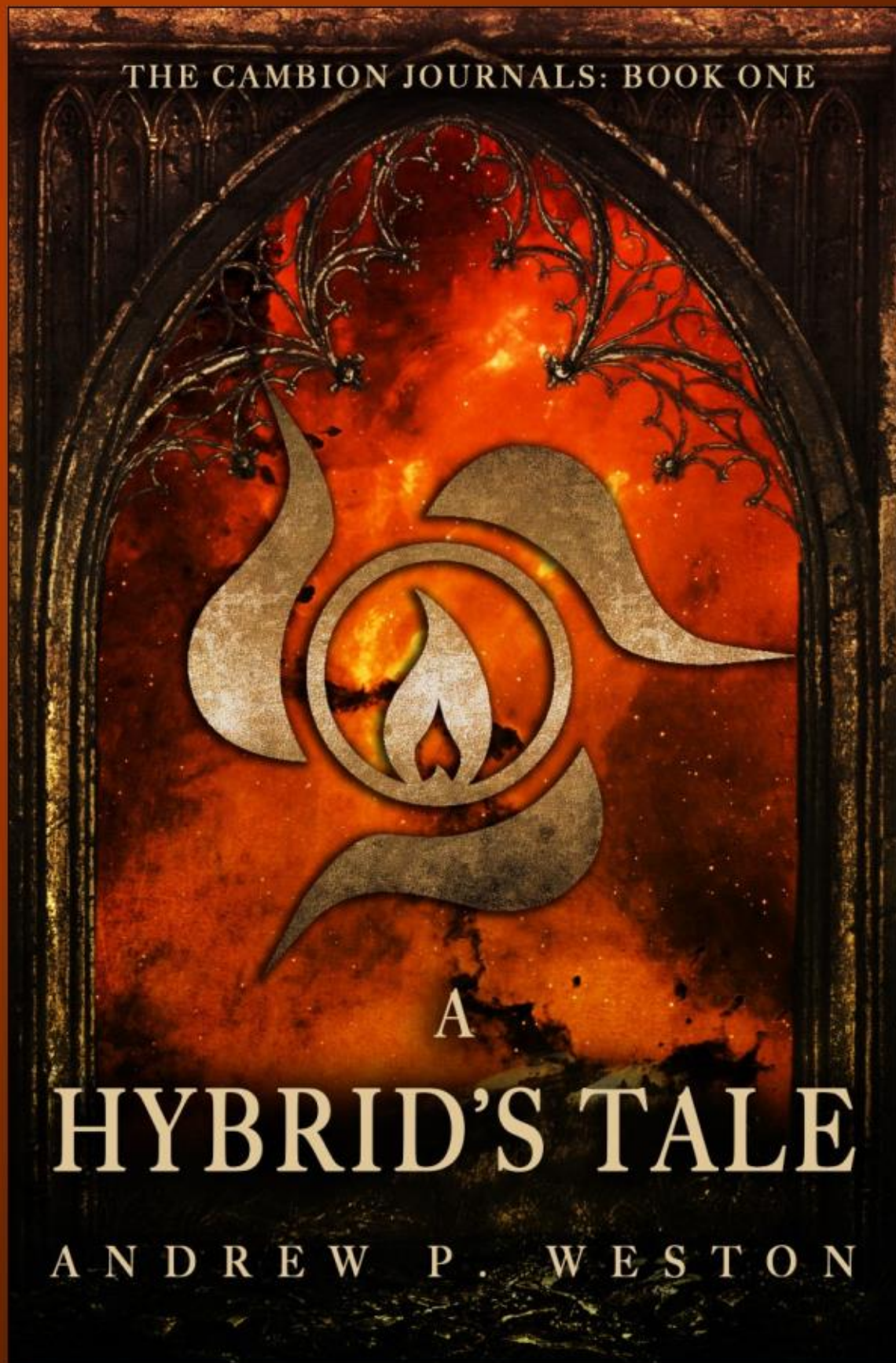
K.A. Johnson has a BA in English/Journalism with a minor in Classics from The University of New Hampshire. He covered the news in the small New Hampshire college town of Durham for The New Hampshire before ditching the snow and moving south to Richmond, Virginia, where he lives with his wife Jennifer and his two furry writing partners Sparta Jesus Vernal-Johnson and Kolby Catmatix Domitian Johnson.

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*To fight monsters, you need something worse...*



**AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!**



"No, Colton. No more candy. Now get your ass in bed before I call Mom and Dad and tell them what a little shit you're being," Mandi, his sister, scolded.

"It's my candy," eight year old Colton yelled back. "And I'm gonna tell Mom and Dad you're saying cussy words!" Colton bolted up the stairway, feet thumping on every step. He clutched his bucket of Halloween candy close to his chest and guarded it with his life.

"Hey," Mandi screamed. "Bring that back, now!" She whipped out her smartphone and dangled it at Colton. "I'm calling Dad." She punched a button and held the phone to her ear.

"Fine," Colton yelled. He turned around and chunked the bucket down the stairs. It landed at the bottom with a crack, spewing pieces of candy all over the hallway floor.

"Ugh, you little shit!" Mandi gnashed her teeth and glared at her brother, then hung up the phone. "Get down here and clean it up."

"You clean it up," he said as he ran to his room and shut the door behind him. He could hear Mandi's muffled yells from downstairs. *I hate when she babysits*, he thought. *She thinks just because she's sixteen, she knows everything. Halloween would have been fun if she hadn't ruined it.* He locked the door, flipped off the light, and stormed over to his bed. He ripped the covers away and slid in.

The glow of his fish tank sent light sprawling up the side of the wall. He watched his betta fish, Xander, swim in aimless circles and blow air bubbles.

*She better not eat all my candy*, he thought. *And I am too old enough to watch that chainsaw Texas movie, or whatever it's called.* Xander moved in a figure eight now. *I'm not gonna brush my teeth. How about that, Mandi? And I'm telling Mom and Dad that Eddie is over here.*

He swooped his red hair away from his face then adjusted his pillow. It still smelled of Febreze from when he sprayed it earlier to cover up the smell of cat piss. Pickles had urinated on his bed before they went out Trick 'r Treating. He laid in bed and listened to the gentle hum of the fish tank as his eyes studied his favorite Halloween decoration.

On the inside of his bedroom door hung a life sized, cardboard skeleton. It was one his mom had as a kid from the 1980's. It covered most of the wooden surface from top to bottom, and the shadows behind the bones were black and blue. One hand was positioned like it waved and the feet were bowlegged. It almost looked as if it were trying to dance a crude, demonic jig.

Colton named the skeleton Bandit, and liked to think of him as his guardian. He often imagined him coming to school and putting his teachers in their place. He also wished Bandit was real so he would beat the crap out of Terry Higgins, a nine year old know-it-all in the grade ahead of him. But Bandit was just a decoration, and after tomorrow, would be stuffed back in the attic until next year.

"Goodnight, Bandit," Colton said and closed his eyes. "And don't let Mandi and Eddie eat all my candy."

"Okay, Colton. Goodnight." The voice seemed to come from near the door.

Colton's eyes bolted open and he sat up in his bed. "What? Who said that?" He curled the corner of his lip up in annoyance. "Mandi, leave me alone!"

There was no answer so Colton threw the covers back and stomped over to the door. He unlocked it, flung it open, and hollered down the stairs. "Stop whispering under my door, Mandi! And don't eat my candy!"

"No one's whispering under your fucking door," Mandi yelled from downstairs. "Now go to bed and leave us alone!"

Colton barged back into his room and slammed the door. He looked back over his shoulder and saw the wrist of the skeleton go limp and a tac fall to the floor. "Sorry, Bandit," he said and tacked his hand back in place. He returned to the comfort of his bed and nuzzled in for the night. Minutes later, Colton fell fast asleep.

A sliver of sunlight appeared through the blinds of Colton's bedroom window and woke him up. He stretched and moaned then eased his covers off. He plopped his bare feet on the floor. Still half asleep, he stood up and took a few paces towards his door. He felt a warm liquid on his soles, seeping between his toes. Colton rubbed his eyes and glanced down.

A mass of dark, red liquid pooled at his feet. But that wasn't all. The trail led all the way to his bedroom door. He followed it with his eyes, where it ended at the bottom of Bandit's feet. He looked up at the skeleton and Bandit's arms had moved positions. They were held in a pose like he was flexing his muscles. In his hands he held two severed heads. One was Mandi and the other was Eddie. Their faces were frozen in expressions of shock and horror as fresh blood still dripped from the wounds.

## **Please Confirm | Ezekiel Kincaid**

When you've seen ghosts for as long as I have, you invariably run into the problem of existing in a dual reality. It's like staring at a screen for too long, things get blurry and everything around you becomes disoriented. At first, it was easy to tell them apart from living people. They would appear one moment, give their message, and be gone the next. But after thirty years and time to develop this gift? The ghosts never go away.

As you can imagine, a deep sense of paranoia sets in. The girl behind the cash register at the store when I'm the only one in line. Is she real or is she a ghost? The man who comes over to repair my appliances? Same thing. Or, what about the person I pass on the streets? And forget what you see in books and movies. Ghosts have reflections. They can eat and even appear to pick up tangible objects.

They also seem to still feel pain. One time, I was called to do an exorcism in a plantation home near New Orleans. The new owner claimed to see the ghost of a confederate soldier roaming the hall with half his guts sloshing out of his stomach. The man would walk the halls at night and moan and scream. The first time it happened, it scared the owner shitless. The ghost's name was Nathan, and when he appeared to me, he stretched out his bloodied hands and said, "Goddamn, it still hurts like a sonofabitch."

So, based on my above testimony, you can imagine the predicament I was in just last night when an 'intruder' entered my home. This was nothing unfamiliar for me, since spirits from the other side visited me often. I awoke to the sound of the hammer of a gun cocking in my ear. When I opened my eyes, I saw a young man in his twenties, wild eyed and waving a piece in my face.

I've had ghosts threaten me before, so I wasn't too surprised at his antics. I jumped up from my bed and wrestled him to the ground. The gun went off twice and I felt a hot, burning pain in my stomach. The man then bolted to his feet and ran out my bedroom. I laid on the floor for a few moments with my hands over the wound, feeling the warm flow of fresh blood pump through my fingers. At first I wondered how a ghost could hurt me, and then I pondered if the gaping holes in my stomach were even real.

I'm not sure what time it was when I got up off the floor. When I did, I went to the bathroom and inspected my injuries in the mirror. Right now, I'm not sure if I am alive or dead. I'm sending this email out in the hopes that one of you, my close friends, will come by and confirm.

Sincerely,

Tyler Applewhite, Paranormal Investigator

## **Gephyrophobia | Ezekiel Kincaid**

When Jake was seven, he had a premonition he would die in a tunnel. Ever since, he steered clear of them...until he met Eva.

"Let's go to the park."

"But they have tunnels," Jake said.

"They're small. You'll be okay."

They arrived at the park. Eva held his hand, guided him into the middle of the tunnel, and kissed him.

"What are you afraid of?" She smiled. "Monsters?"

Her eyes glowed orange. Jake felt knife-like fingernails down his back. Eva's jaws unhinged and she bit his face off. She spat it on the ground and said, "You should be."

### **About the Author:**

Ezekiel Kincaid, known by his fans and readers as 'The Paranormal Pastor', is a real ordained minister. His twenty years of experience with the supernatural and human condition influence his horror stories. He also has a sarcastic side and enjoys writing comedic horror. Zeke is a columnist for House of Stitched Magazine, and will fight anyone who says they don't like Bruce Campbell.

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A pensive autumn was upon Gregson farm.

Though the evenings were cooling they were still warm enough to camp out under the stars next to a roaring fire. And the Gregson boys, who always did as they were told, had sat down for the night after setting up camp in their own backyard where they were safest.

At the end of the yard was a chain link fence and a single gate that clinked away from dusk till dawn as the autumn breeze rolled in. On the other side of that fence was the family crop.

Just 15, Samuel, the eldest of the Gregson boys tip-toed away from camp as young James toasted a marshmallow by the fire. The little scamp noticed right away.

"What're you doing?"

"I'm putting up something to protect us from the Harvester," Samuel told him as he hung a crude stick man above the back door of their home. He produced a second from his back pocket as he made his way down the yard. "Six sticks from an old oak. One for the body, one for the head. Two for the arms, and two for the legs."

He hung the last stick man from the gate by the chain link fence.

"What's the Harvester?" young James asked.

Samuel turned to his little brother with a mischievous grin that stretched from ear to ear. It was scary story time. How he relished each chance he got to regale his impressionable sibling with yet another tale of terror. But even before he could open that grin...

"Ooh, now there's a question!" a familiar voice came from behind him.

A startled Samuel turned to the blazing beams of two flashlights. They were like a pair of glowing eyes approaching from the dark. As they drew closer, he soon recognised the amused faces behind the blinding brightness. John was the Gregson family's farmhand and Philip was his son.

"The Harvester, my boy," John began, "is a creature that keeps our town's crops healthy and plentiful. And in return, every year the Harvester takes one of the townsfolk and gobbles them up."

"That's why your brother here, is putting up this little stick man thingy," Philip carried on. "As long as you got one of these hanging from all your doors, you ain't got nothin' to be worried about."

"What they said," Samuel concluded with annoyance. He nodded to John. "Is something the matter?"

"Was just about to turn in for the night when Philip saw something skulking around the crops from his bedroom window."

Young James omitted an audible gulp.

"What did it look like?" Samuel pressed.

"Can't be sure 'cause it was too dark," Philip bucked excitedly, "but it was big. Like, real big. Taller than them crops."

"I wanna go back inside," young James fretted.

Samuel left the two men and sat down by his brother's side.

"Hey, don't worry, kid. I'm sure it's nothing," he said soothingly. "Probably just an animal or something, just passing through."

"Maybe not even that," John chimed in. "My boy's a dope. Eyes are always playing tricks on him."

"Oh yeah!" Philip frowned as he played along. "I'm a real idiot, alright. It's God's miracle that I ain't been eaten by the pigs yet..."

Young James giggled as Samuel pulled him in for a hug and kissed him on the top of his head.

"You'll be okay, kid," he whispered to him. "Anybody comes near you; I'll take care of them. Swear on my own life."

\*\*\*

Almost an hour had passed since bedtime. On any given night, young James would have been fast asleep by this point, were it not for the irksome sound of the chain link fence.

*CLINK! CLINK! CLINK!* On and on it went. It would not stop. As long as the autumn winds were blowing, it was constant.

With a huff of tired frustration, young James unzipped the tent he shared with his older brother and crawled out onto the grass. He walked on his knees to the fire. The gate was the real culprit, so he mindfully searched the flames for a piece of wood to peg it shut.

*CLINK! CLINK! CLINK!* The sooner the better!

And there it was. Just the right size, too. Young James was satisfied until a high-pitched groan of metal set his tiny teeth on edge. He looked up and saw the empty space of air where the gate should have been, as it was now wide open, idling silently.

Now all young James could hear was the soft rasp of the autumn breeze and the sound of his own heart beating in his ears.

A rustling came from the crops just outside the yard.

Without hesitation, the kid bolted towards the gate as fast as he could. Slamming it shut, he grunted with victory as he stabbed the firewood into the dirt beneath it, holding it in place. Dusting off his hands, he double-checked if Samuel's stick man was still hanging where it should be. It was.

The boy nearly made it back to the tent when he spotted it standing at the back door of his home, leaning towards him.

It was twice the size of a man. Its skin was like scorched bark that creaked like an old rocking chair whenever it moved. And if it had eyes, he couldn't see them amongst all that charcoaled flesh.

He began to cry as he realised he was too terrified to move.

"Samuel..." he whimpered. "Wake up. There's someone here. Help me. Please... Samuel."

The tent jerked as his brother kicked at its wall from the inside.

"Samuel, please wake up," young James sobbed as he pleaded. "Please, I'm scared. You said you would save me..."

A roar ripped through the night as the thing at the back door bounded towards the child on all fours.

The boy shook with fright. His cries getting louder and louder as the creature closed in on him.

Samuel burst from sleep to the eruption of the most blood-curdling screams he had ever heard.

"James?" he gasped as he looked at the empty sleeping bag. "JAMES!"

Tearing the tent door open, Samuel leapt into the yard, fists at the ready.

Through the flames, through the smoke of their still burning campfire, his little brother cried for him as something large and monstrous held the boy with its jaws. He screamed on as he reached out for his hero. But it was too late. The beast had already made its way to the waistline. And so the creature took its next bite. There was a crunch. The boy breathed his last breath. His reaching arms fell limp. And then he closed his eyes forever.

Samuel bellowed with fury as he charged the horrid thing. His shoulder hit first. He dug his feet into the ground as he braced and kept running as hard and as fast as he could. The monster let out a yelp of sheer surprise as it toppled over into the fire. And that yelp became shrieks of agony as it burned alive.

"NO!" his father's voice cried as he ran from the house. "No, no, no, no!"

Farmer Gregson fell to his knees by his youngest son's remains. The creature had released what was left of young James when it fell into the fire.

"Father..." Samuel trembled as he wept. "Father, I'm so sorry. I wasn't fast enough. It happened while I was sleeping. I'm sorry."

"Do you realise what you've done?" His father didn't look up. But when Samuel didn't answer, Farmer Gregson met his eldest son's eyes. "You can't kill the Harvester."

"But...I just did." His tears quieted in his confusion. "I did. Look, here. I burned it."

"No, you don't understand, you stupid boy!" Farmer Gregson scolded.

He volunteered no more as he took off his coat and gently scooped up young James. He wrapped him up tightly, using the empty sleeves. Getting shakily to his feet, he began carrying his son back to the house.

"Father, what's going on?" Samuel begged as he followed close behind. "What aren't you telling me?"

Farmer Gregson stopped as he reached the door.

"You'll find out at dawn," he uttered gravely. "We all will."

And with that he stepped inside as the door closed behind him.

As Samuel cried alone in that backyard he soon realised that there was no trace of the beast he had slain. Not even its own ashes.



Dawn did not arrive quickly as each moment was stained with the tears of a hysterical grieving mother. And every second was another lashing in the conscience of a guilty brother.

When Farmer Gregson had done all the comforting and consoling that he could muster, he solemnly made some telephone calls before setting off in his jeep to gather the town council.

Samuel didn't dare speak a word to his mother as he helped her set up the dining room for the meeting that was about to take place.

Although they were not members, John and his son arrived early to offer their deepest condolences. She thanked them and offered them a place in the kitchen, if they so wished to stay. John gratefully accepted.

The town council arrived soon after, at which point Samuel's mother served them coffee and tea as they all took their seats at the dining room table.

At the end of the table, Farmer Gregson, his wife and his surviving son sat side by side on a makeshift bench.

The head of the council sat on the opposite side. Arthur Ingram, suited in tweed, sipped his tea noisily.

"It may surprise you to know that this has happened on many occasions," the old man said sympathetically. "Sacrifice, while necessary, is still quite difficult for anyone. So, young Samuel here is most certainly not the first to dispatch the Harvester in favour of a loved one."

"It took my son, Arthur." Farmer Gregson held back tears. "These boys are my legacy. You can't expect me to hand over the both of them?"

"I deserve it, father," Samuel spoke up, turning to the council. "I do."

"Shut your mouth, boy!" Farmer Gregson barked as he kicked his son's ankle.

"It's my fault James is dead!" Samuel cried at his father. "I should die for what I've done! I want to do it! I will do it!"

Farmer Gregson couldn't answer as he comforted Samuel's mother who wailed in despair.

"Enough of that talk!" John hollered as he marched into the room, Philip close behind. He paused as he addressed the council. "Ladies and gentlemen, for those of you who don't know me, my son and I work for the Gregson family, on their farm. They gave me a place in the world, and a purpose, when no one would grant me either. Not even God. They are my family. Please, I beg of you, is there an alternative solution to the sacrificing of our young Samuel? Can we save him?"

"What is your name, good fellow?" Arthur asked as he looked the farmhand up and down.

"John, sir."

"Well, John, it just so happens that there is," Arthur revealed. "But I'm afraid like any sacrifice it is indeed most costly."

"Dammit, Arthur, what is it?" Farmer Gregson shook with impatience. He covered a hand over his eyes as if to keep his own head from collapsing like a pile of wooden bricks.

"Like the old town saying goes, my friends," Arthur said, "One for the body, one for the head. Two for the arms and two for the legs."

"What does that mean?" Samuel had to ask.

"Whether it be one whole body, or different parts from different people," the head of council explained, "as long as all six parts of a full body are sacrificed, this will satisfy and resurrect the Harvester. And our crops will go unspoiled."

"James's top half survived the initial sacrifice," Farmer Gregson said quietly. His wife wept so hard she was practically convulsing as she struggled to silence her cries of heavy sorrow.

"That is true," said Dr Primmer, a tall, thin man in thick black spectacles and a crimson bowtie who sat to Arthur's left. "However, the boy's hands, fingers, wrists and forearms were significantly damaged during the eating process."

Samuel's mother let out a muffled cry as she rose from their bench and exited the dining room as quickly as she could in her swiftly deteriorating state.

"Show some respect, man." John showed the back of his hand to the doctor, who pretended to ignore his existence.

"The doctor is right," Arthur confirmed. "Each part, no matter how small, must be intact. Now what we need is volunteers for all the remaining limbs."

"I volunteer," Farmer Gregson said first.

"Father don't—" Samuel began to protest.

"As do I," John quickly followed.

"John, no..."

"And I," Samuel's mother said weakly from the doorway.

"This is crazy." Samuel leapt atop the bench, standing over all in the room. "Take all my limbs. Take my arms, my legs. Take all of me. And keep James. Give him the goodbye that he deserves. Forget about me. Have another son. A better son than I."

"Shut up!" Philip yelled suddenly as he threw a cup at Samuel's head.

It split open against the wall as Samuel jumped back down to the floor.

"You can take mine," Philip said as his gaze was fixed on the surviving Gregson boy. "I'll be your final limb. I do it gladly. Because I want you to live with the shame of what you've done. I was there when you said it. I heard you. You promised him you would keep him safe, and now look. You did this, so you live with it."

"But I—" Samuel tried to respond, but his father's hand rested firmly on his shoulder, silencing him.

"Respect your family's wishes, boy," he said to him.

Samuel looked at John and then at his mother before meeting his father's eyes. He gave him a silent nod.

"That's it settled then," the head of the council concluded as everyone rose to their feet. "We reconvene here at sundown for the Harvester's sacrifice."

After they had left, Samuel wept soundly as his father bound his arms to an old broomstick and weighted his body to the floor with the largest of their barrels.

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It was just before sundown when the townspeople lined the outside of the Gregson home's back fence in their ceremonial robes. Their heads were bowed in a solemn, yet grateful respect as Farmer Gregson comforted his wife in the garden.

Samuel had hung himself above the back door to the house. His body spun slowly in the autumn breeze.

"Do not think too harshly on young Samuel's decision," said Arthur loud and clear to everyone present. "For in death, he saves us all. Now, if John and his son will retrieve the body, we must bury the vessel among our crops before nightfall."

Shaking his head at the lifeless human stick man, Arthur turned and led the others away. Their hushed whispers were louder than the sound of rustling as they disappeared into the growing shadows between the stalks.

Philip cut the rope around Samuel's throat with a pair of gardening shears. John just about managed to catch the body without buckling before his son came to his aid.

"You go first, boy," he said. Even through the straining of his old bones, his sadness could still be heard.

Taking the body by the knees, Philip led his father down the garden path towards the gate.

The mother of the corpse held her husband tightly as she rested her head upon his shoulder.

As the back gate swung open, she caught the eye of the farmhand's son.

He gave her the slightest of nods.

And as her tears quieted for a moment, she gave him a smile in return.

#### About the Author:

Since emerging in 2018, L. Stephenson's horror writing has appeared in 5 anthologies, with more on the way! His first novella, *The Goners* was published last year, and he is currently signed up to release his debut novel. He prefers Caroline B. Cooney and Richard Laymon over R. L. Stine and Stephen King, but admittedly finds greater inspiration in the world of movies.

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Three leading voices in modern horror take us on a journey through Halloween in the infamous town of Clifton Heights.



Available on Kindle, paperback, Hardcover, and Kindle Unlimited.

Every kid in the neighborhood knows old Mr. Anderson's house is the place to go for candy on Halloween, and no one knows this more than nine-year old Mallory Kirkland. With his elaborate yard decorations, spooky lights, and his infamous scarecrow who guards a large cast iron kettle filled with almost every kind of candy imaginable, old Mr. Anderson's house is quite the show. The trick is, and Mallory had learned this two Halloweens ago: you have to get there early before all the 'big kids' show up and take all the good stuff.

Another reason Mallory wants to go early is because she doesn't want to have to deal with Mr. Anderson's mechanical scarecrow after dark. She isn't scared of the scarecrow exactly—okay, maybe a little—but there's something about it that leaves her stomach feeling all squirmy. The scarecrow wears a sign that says: **PLEASE ONLY TAKE ONE!** And when she goes to reach in the pot, the scarecrow suddenly comes to life with a hideous sounding laugh that scares the daylights out of her. Mallory doesn't like being scared like that. To avoid being scared this year, her plan is simple: go early and get in and get out.

Dressed as Sarah Sanderson from *Hocus Pocus*, carrying a black plastic cauldron candy bucket, Mallory walks to her best friend Jessica's house two doors down. From there they will trek down to Mr. Anderson's, who lives a few more houses down on the corner. They will start there. Get in and get out before the rush.

Jessica is dressed as Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*, and Mallory comments how she likes her ruby red slippers. As they walk, they talk about how much candy they are going to get. The weather is perfect for trick or treating, not too hot, not too cold. A light breeze brings the sweet smell of fall to their noses. When they get to Mr. Anderson's, a stony two-story, that reminds Mallory of a small castle, they see that the old man has gone all out again this year. All the trees and bushes are covered with cobwebs. Electric candles burn in every window. A mock graveyard is displayed in the front yard. In front of one tombstone, skeleton hands appear to be clawing their way up from the ground. Behind the tombstones is a large statue of the Grim Reaper. And near the end of the sidewalk, just before you get to Mr. Anderson's front porch, sits the scarecrow with his large kettle of candy. It looks full, too, from what Mallory can see.

In front of them are two boys about Mallory's age. Mallory thinks she recognizes them as the twin brothers—Luke and Lance—from around the block. It's hard to tell. They are dressed as Batman and Spiderman, but she's pretty sure it's them.

Mallory stands out on the sidewalk and watches intently as the two brothers each take turns grabbing for a piece of candy. To Mallory's surprise, the scarecrow doesn't come to life. Doesn't even make a sound. *Maybe it's not working right this year*, Mallory thinks, but no, it's just waiting for little *girls* to come try and take a piece. Mallory always wondered if Mr. Anderson was hiding inside his house with a remote control and watching everyone. Either that, or she thought there was something on the ground that set the scarecrow in motion. Either way, neither appeared to be working this year, so that's good, she thought.

"You go first!" Mallory says to Jessica as soon as the two brothers walk away.

"Okay," Jessica responds hesitantly, but Mallory wants to see what happens to Jessica first.

She watches Jessica slowly make her way up the sidewalk. Jessica stops just a few feet short of the pot, glances back at Mallory, and giggles. She then steps forward and takes a piece of candy from the pot.

Once more, the scarecrow doesn't make a sound.

Jessica spins and dashes back down the walk to Mallory. "That was easy!" Jessica says, holding up a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup.

Mallory smiles. She now sees more kids are coming up the block and decides to hurry so she and Jessica can move on. She begins making her way up the sidewalk, eyeing the scarecrow carefully. She can't say for sure what it is, but she thinks there is something about the scarecrow that's different this year. It still has its old weathered hat and potato sack head with black buttons for eyes (its neck and gloves and boots are oozing straw), yet it somehow seems *bigger* this year; more real, more...*creepy*.

At last, Mallory reaches the pot full of candy, as her friend Jessica had done, she stops a few feet short, although close enough to see inside. Her eyes go wide with amazement. There is literally EVERYTHING in there: Snickers, Reese's, M&M's, SweeTARTS, Pixy Stix, Gobstoppers, bubble gum...everything!

Mallory steps closer to the pot, contemplating what she wants, and glances at the scarecrow; sitting still as a statue, reminding her with his sign to: **PLEASE ONLY TAKE ONE!**

Mallory closes her eyes—she will take her chances on what she gets—reaches in, and quickly plucks out a piece of candy.

Not bothering to see what she gets, eyes still closed, she immediately turns and starts to take a step when she hears it. A low guttural moaning sound from behind her. She stops cold. Her back felt like it had suddenly turned to ice. Did she really just hear that? she asked herself. Not knowing where she got the courage, she slowly turns back around.

"Come on, Mallory!" Jessica shouted from the sidewalk, but Mallory paid her no attention. She was looking at the scarecrow, certain the sound had come from it. But as far as she could tell, nothing about the scarecrow had changed. She looked around, too, wondering if the sound had come from another place, but there was nothing else she could see that would have made *that* kind of sound. She almost said *Hello?* but her candy bucket suddenly bonked against her left leg as some kid dressed as Captain America bumped into her.

"Sorry!" The Captain America kid said, then proceeded to take a piece of candy, before dashing off. More kids followed, a whole group now: a couple ninjas, a Freddy Krueger, and some kid with a hockey mask and a fake knife. Mallory watched them all take a piece of candy from the scarecrow's pot, but the scarecrow made no movements and made no more sounds.

Mallory followed the group of kids back down the sidewalk, glancing back only once at the scarecrow, still trying to figure out what that sound had been.

"What did you get?" Jessica asked.

Mallory looked down at her hand. She smiled as she held up a little brown bag. "M&M's!"

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Mallory and Jessica made out like bandits, but sadly, Halloween fell on a Sunday this year, and they had school the next day. Mallory's mother told her she could not have any candy this close to her bedtime, but Mallory managed to gobble down the package of M&M's without her mother seeing. They were delicious.

The next day Mallory met Jessica on the corner in front of Mr. Anderson's house to catch the bus. All of Mr. Anderson's Halloween decorations were still up, candles still burned in the windows, even the scarecrow was still there guarding the pot. She stared at the scarecrow for a moment before chatting with some of the other kids about all the candy they got. Eventually the bus came and took them off to school. When the bus dropped Mallory off at the end of the day, the scarecrow was *still* there.

Mallory stopped in front of Mr. Anderson's house and stared at the scarecrow. Jessica joined her a few seconds later. "Bet all the candy's gone." Jessica said.

"Yeah." Mallory responded dully.

"We should go look, just to be sure!" Jessica said.

Mallory looked at Jessica, startled. She had no urge to go back up there. "What? No way!"

"Oh, come on!" Jessica urged.

Mallory sighed, "Okay. But you go first."

They both walked up to the pot and looked in. As expected, there was no more candy, only a few leaves that had blown in.

"Poor scarecrow!" Jessica said. "Had to sit out here all night by himself."

"He's not real." Mallory said assuredly, but after hearing that moan, she didn't know if she was completely sure about that or not. She thought about telling Jessica what she had heard but decided not to. Instead she turned to Jessica, "Let's go to my house and eat some candy!"

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It rained for the next two days. When Mallory got on the bus each morning and arrived home each afternoon, the scarecrow was still there. On the third day, the rain had stopped, and she wondered how come Mr. Anderson still hadn't taken down *any* of the Halloween decorations. She guessed maybe he was out of town. He wasn't married, though. In fact, Mallory's mother had mentioned once to Mallory's father that Mr. Anderson's wife had died a few years ago. Mallory felt sad for Mr. Anderson after hearing that, but she didn't know him personally and had only seen him a few times out working on his lawn or setting up Halloween or Christmas decorations (Mr. Anderson went big at Christmastime, too).

The decorations stayed out all week. It wasn't until Saturday morning, when Mallory and her mother were on their way to the store that Mallory's mother mentioned how she too thought it was odd that Mr. Anderson's Halloween decorations were still out. Even the scarecrow and the Grim Reaper. Mallory didn't say anything to her mother, but a small part of her was starting to get worried. What if something bad had happened to Mr. Anderson? That night she couldn't sleep, she lay awake thinking about Mr. Anderson, knowing there was nothing she could do.

Absolutely nothing.

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After having slept on her thoughts about Mr. Anderson, Mallory got up Sunday morning bright and early, got dressed, and went downstairs. After a quick breakfast—Oreo Pop-Tarts and a glass of chocolate milk—Mallory tells her mother she is going over to Jessica's to play. Mallory's mother only tells her to be careful and to be home for lunch.

"Okay," Mallory replies, as she bolts out the door.

Jessica's house is on the way, she will stop there *after* she goes to Mr. Anderson's.

The scarecrow is still there. Everything is.

Mallory stares at the scarecrow for a moment, then makes her way over to Mr. Anderson's mailbox. She opens it and looks inside. Just as she had suspected, it is completely stuffed. Maybe he really is gone? she thinks.

She closes the mailbox and walks to the end of the sidewalk. She feels like she should say something to the scarecrow. Strangely, she finds that she isn't as scared this time. She walks up to the scarecrow and stands in front of the pot. The pot is now filled over half-way with leaves and water, but she also notices something else, a rotten, sickly smell that she can't quite put her finger on, a smell she's never smelled before. She looks at the hay protruding from the neck and gloves and boots. It looks brown and dirty. Rotten.

"Gross!" Mallory says. "I'm sorry you got stuck out here Mr. Scarecrow! I wish I could take you inside. You sure are scary!"

The wind blows and a fresh gust of stink wafts into Mallory's face. It's awful. She suddenly feels sick and holds her breath.

"I'd take you home if you weren't so stinky!" Mallory says. "I have to go now. Bye!"

She starts to walk away, then stops and turns back to the scarecrow. She *had* to know. "Was that you who made that sound the other night?"

She stared at the scarecrow for a few seconds, heart racing, but after receiving no response—just as she thought she would—she turned back around and went on to Jessica's. She decided not to tell anyone about her visit to Mr. Anderson's, that would just be between her and the scarecrow.

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When Mallory gets on the bus Monday, the scarecrow and all of the other decorations are still there. She hears other kids on the bus now commenting on Mr. Anderson's house, and why all his Halloween stuff is still up. But when Mallory gets home from school that afternoon, she sees that only the scarecrow is gone. The Grim Reaper, the big black pot, and all the other decorations are still out.

*Strange*, she thought.

Mallory goes on home, but when she gets there, she finds something terrible. Her mother is in the kitchen crying. Her head is in her hands and she doesn't hear Mallory enter.

"What's wrong, Mother?" Mallory asks as she sets her backpack on the kitchen table. She's nervous. Something must be terribly, terribly wrong.

Her mother looks at her, "Sit down, honey!"

Mallory hesitates, then does as she's told.

Mallory's mother takes her hand in hers; it's moist from her tears. She doesn't like seeing her mother upset like this and resists a sudden urge to pull her hand away. Her stomach feels like it is trying to turn upside down.

"I probably shouldn't tell you this," her mother says, then pauses, "but you are going to find out anyway."

Mallory braces herself, unsure if she wants to hear this or not.

"You know Mr. Anderson from down on the corner?"

Mallory nods.

Her mother gasps and covers her mouth with her hands. Another sob. "He...he was found this morning by Mr. Conroy, his next-door neighbor. Mr. Anderson has passed away, honey."

Mallory didn't know what to say; she only sat still and stared down at the kitchen table. She could feel her heart racing speedily in her chest. Finally, she gets up the nerve to ask. "Where did they find him, Mother?" Deep down she already knew, somehow had sensed it.

"Oh, God!" her mother said. She looked up at the ceiling. Mallory followed her gaze. "Forgive us, Lord!" Mallory had never heard her mother mention the Lord before, they never even went to church. Her mother continued, "He was outside, dressed as the scarecrow for Halloween. They think he had planned to sit out there and scare all the kids when they came to get candy. Mr. Conroy said they think he may have had a stroke, honey. Do you know what that is?"

Mallory nodded that she did, but really, she didn't. Her guts were twisting inside her. She felt sick. She felt helpless. She felt somehow *responsible*.

Her mother started sobbing again, "All those kids, and no one even knew it was him. No one even heard him. No one *helped* him. He was out there all week. Then it rained. Oh, God—"

Her mother began to cry again.

Mallory began to cry too.

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That night Mallory slept with both her bed lamp and closet light on. She didn't want to be alone in the dark. This was all her fault. She wondered what would have happened if she had said something, done something. She started to cry again.

After a little while, when the tears had dried up, she finally drifted off to sleep, but not without thinking about that sound that had come from the scarecrow.

That low guttural moan.

What had been Mr. Anderson's last breath.

#### About the Author:

Trent Godsey is an engineer for an electrical utility company based out of Indiana. He studied Communications at Indiana State University, majoring in Radio/TV/Film. Aside from reading and writing daily, Trent enjoys spending time with his family, playing with their dog Leah and playing the drums.

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#### Last-Minute Replacement | *Patrick J. Porwoll*

The man in the surgeon's mask ushered the kiddos into the forensics lab, nearly half-way through the police station's haunted house. He waggled his gloved fingers at them describing the contents of the ramshackle cardboard boxes: the Chivalrous Killer's victims' remains.

In here the squishy eyeballs of the woman who was always spying on her neighbors. *Peeled grapes*, *eugh* huffed a Dracula with a cowlick as he withdrew his hands.

Next, a bowl of ears from eavesdroppers. *Dried orange slices* whispered the smallest lawyer ever, wiping reddened fingers on her friend's cape.

And here are the teeth of people who chewed with their mouths open at restaurants. *Frozen corn?* guessed a warrior princess.

Now the intestines of a man who kept stealing everyone's lunch from the work fridge. *Boring, it's just rubbery spaghetti* whined a football player.

Oh, well then how about the best for last: the bloody fingers of Police Captain Gerald's after being caught red handed taking bribes on a series of cases. Allegedly. A harlequin asked to have one of the mini hotdogs to freak out her older sister. The man in the surgeon's mask chuckled and said if he did that, he'd need a replacement from a volunteer. He cackled and acted as if he was about to chase the horde of children.

As the last giggling child scurried out, the man in the surgeon's mask sighed contentedly and prepared to box up his props. Should anyone come across the grisly body parts, there'd be enough DNA red herrings to keep investigators busy for months.

#### About the Author:

Patrick J Porwoll (they/them, he/him) is a speculative fiction writer and fan. When they aren't finding new ways to inject the fantastic or horrific into their own stories, Patrick is designing narratives and worlds in tabletop games, designing character-accurate card game decks, or appreciating the exploration of others' stories in books and video games. When they return to reality, Patrick is an educator.

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Jane coughed beneath her nest of furs and quilts by the stove. Tiny and frail, she was barely visible above the layers. She had it, the sickness. Doc Frankum said it wouldn't be long, that most lungers didn't last as long as she had, especially being as young as she was. Mary thought Jane was holding on to see Elizabeth, their eldest sister, married.

That's what Elizabeth was doing that very minute, out by the river. It was where William had first asked for her hand. Their mama said it was romantic, but their daddy had grumbled about having to cart everyone off through the pasture. He said pastures were for the cows and he couldn't understand why anyone would pass up on a nice indoor wedding. Mama won that battle, as she always did.

Everyone agreed Jane shouldn't go out in the winter air. Everyone but Jane, anyway. She had cried, mumbled that she understood, then coughed until she turned blue. Mary volunteered to stay with her. It was the only logical choice. Elizabeth couldn't very well miss her own wedding, and mama *had* to be there. Mary was sure they would tell her all about it when they returned. It would almost be as if she were there. Almost.

The party set off for the river earlier that afternoon, bundled in their bulky furs and finest wedding clothes. Both the bride and groom's family and Father Caney had squeezed themselves onto two wagons. At the bend in the road, Elizabeth turned and waved, her dress bunched up around her, the lace veil flapping in the wind. Mama bought it all special from a mail-order catalog straight from Paris. Elizabeth had cried when she opened the package. It was the most beautiful thing any of them had ever seen. Decorated with intricate lacework, the long ivory dress was a work of art. The veil repeated the fine lace pattern, so delicate it could be mistaken for a spider's web.

Back in the house, Mary put the kettle on and rearranged Jane's blankets. She leaned down and moved the fine blond hair off her closed eyelids. She was sleeping, finally. She wouldn't stay that way for long before waking with coughing fits enough to soak a handkerchief with blood.

She was the sweetest among them, and it wasn't fair she was being taken so young. Mary sat on the floor next to her sister and watched her sleep, covering her frown with a smile the minute Jane's eyes fluttered open.

"Hey," she whispered.

"Mary...I know. I know I'm lookin' to die." Jane coughed, the top of her blue eyes barely visible above the red-splattered handkerchief clutched to her mouth.

"Hush now, you don't know that." Mary stood up to fetch a glass of water.

A wolf howled in the night, piercing through the cold winter air.. Rubbing the goose bumps on her arms, Mary pulled the curtains back on the window to peer outside.

The bunkhouse was barely visible through the pale light of the moon to the right of the road. The building brimmed with cowhands during peak season, and she liked to watch them work the cattle during the day and return, heavy with exhaustion from the day's heat. They'd unsaddle their horses, wipe the sweat from the massive beasts, and leave 'em to the night wranglers before taking care of themselves. She would watch as the lamps, heavy with tallow, flickered in the bunkhouse windows. The scent of sweat, dry cow manure, old leather, and tobacco would carry on the wind toward her home.

But that night, the bunkhouse sat in darkness. Most of the cowhands were long gone. All they had to do in the cold season was work the tallow and hides, so most of the crew headed to town, but for the lucky ones with families to go see. Only two of 'em had stayed on for the winter, a Mexican named Manuel and a white man named Billy. A few of the steers had gone missing earlier that week, so Manuel and Billy had set off before the wedding party to check on the herd.

Mary leaned closer to the glass and squinted. There, on the road leading out to the River, was the largest wolf she had ever seen in her life. Thick gray fur undulated in the wind, but the large beast didn't move. Behind it, there had to be forty more just as big. A chill ran up her spine as she watched them. They seemed to be watching her, though she knew that was impossible. She snapped back from the window.

Jane, reading the panic and confusion on Mary's face, whimpered. The tears that were hovering on the edge of her eyelids spilled over as she lost the small amount of control she was mustering.

"Shh, Janey." Mary pulled her sister into her arms and caressed the top of her thin shoulders. "Everything's fine. They'll be back 'fore you know it."



When Mary turned her eyes back to the road outside, she jumped away from the window and screamed. The wolves had moved closer to the house, and the largest one had stepped onto their porch, yellow eyes boring into hers. Hanging from one of its sharp teeth and partially stained a dark red, was a shredded scrap of the finest French lace.

**About the Author:**

Holly Rae Garcia is the author of *Parachute*, *The Easton Falls Massacre: Bigfoot's Revenge*, and *Come Join the Murder*. One day she'll write a book about killer clowns if only to justify the growing creepy clown collection in her home office.

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**Angel Bite | Tina Swain**

Sunsets were her favorite. It knew this as she unknowingly absorbed her last one.

At dusk, her body was mauled beyond recognition, feathers and reticulated tendon.

Each one knew the secrets, sins and desires of their coveted.

Perched above the dripping streets, they wept aloud in contrition preening the blood from their wings. Judgment had begun. The night's shadows kept voiceless secrets as the guardians turned on their flock in unison. The most exquisite creatures with inklike eyes never seen nor heard, cast from heaven to deliver hell on earth one mortal at a time. The sentinel would now partake.

**About the Author:**

Tina Swain is a resident of Houston, Texas and has been a lifelong lover of horror. When she is not writing or teaching, she makes movies with her friends.

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**The Scale | Corinne Pollard**

Capturing the ocean's creatures and standing tall on the roughest waves were in the blood, but it was unknown to me until Papa handed over his father's treasure. The jewel's crystalline tear-drop shape was hypnotizing, dangling from a string and reflecting sunlight. Its glass-like flesh weighed my palm down and peeled back flaky layers like skin.

With origins of gliding the sea's surface after an anchor drop, Grandpa claimed it, and now it was mine, tied up in tissue inside my drawer. I admire it sometimes, but that's when I swear I see murky waters and something's eye staring stormily.

**About the Author:**

Corinne Pollard is a disabled writer from West Yorkshire, UK with published works with The Sirens Call, Black Hare Press, Trembling with Fear, and Paragraph Planet. With a degree in English Lit and Creative Writing, Corinne has always enjoyed the world of dark fantasy. Aside from writing, Corinne enjoys metal music, visiting graveyards, and shopping for books to read.

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Denise resists touching the coins on John's eyelids. The sunlight where he is standing in her living room and the copper ignite just so, like headlights and deer, into a stilled terror. Compassion urges her to soothe; confusion stops her.

"Why are you back?" she asks again. He'd had other relationships after theirs, longer ones.

He can't answer: his lips are sewn together. The stitching is precise and the thread as fresh as the coins. His dark hair waves in unseen currents—why does she want the tactile thrill of dragging her fingers through that thickness again?—and a billowy robe blurs his body.

John walks into the hallway, bare feet tearing free of the floorboards as though from dense mud. Denise follows. At her bedroom wardrobe John pulls down a decorative green bottle. He offers it to her and hovers expectantly as she examines the familiar object. The neck is a knobby eagle's talon clasping a flat-bottomed sphere. Streams of dried candle wax brighten as her fingers lift away dust. Why would this be of interest to John? She peers down the neck: empty. But she had kept things in there.

Her father had bought this bottle at an old grey barn crammed with antiques. For her. Fourth or fifth grade. Autumn. That day she had judged all the pale-green and blue bottles sitting on shelves. The russet dress he liked, and doomed white socks and short sleeves and no jacket and complaining about the cold, the rain. Her father denying he was upset. Leaving shoe-shaped ponds in saturated soil. Paying at a wooden counter, edges beveled by countless hands and forearms, and then his placing the bottle in her hands, his eyes as saturated as the soil and ready to puddle.

This brings back other trips: an iron candle holder—does her brother have it?; a photo album because she liked the black-and-white and sepia family's little terrier; a handful of mismatched buttons, all now lost; and finally an item that she can never recall, although she does know her father moved out exactly two weeks later.

John is on the move again. He bleaches passing through slanted columns of sunlight, exciting dust mote flurries that melt back into languor. Because he cannot talk, Denise sits on her couch to wait.

He returns and hands her a small heart-shaped brass box, a gift from her to him that he had abandoned—or forgotten—during the break-up. How had he found it?

She slices the brittle cellophane tape with a thumbnail. Inside are two wedding rings, an extracted tooth with a large eroded cavity, and a folded strip of torn composition paper, which she unfolds. The handwritten ink has faded to brown: A line in ancient Greek. John had told her once what it said, but she cannot tease out that memory.

She does remember this: John used the box for dead things he loved: An intense but failed marriage, an archaic but beautiful language he'd studied, a former piece of himself. Does he still love his body? Can he see and talk to others where he comes from and does he love whoever closed his eyes and sealed his lips and dressed him as an angel?

John sinks onto the couch, next to Denise, looking defeated. This couch came after their relationship, a cast-off from one of the men who had lingered in her life. She surveys the room. How many of her belongings came from people she once cared about? She tries to inventory items left or given at partings and marvels at how effortlessly they became hers—like kissing, she thinks, an unnoticed exchange of saliva absorbed, forgotten.

Denise walks to the kitchen, returns with a slender red candle, and inserts it into the bottle. John shifts but remains seated. She selects one of the rings from the brass box and presses it to her cheek. The metal sucks out heat from her skin. She wonders why John came to her and not to his ex-wife or one of his later girlfriends. She and John had been happy, she supposed, but not enough to prevent their fading back into strangers.

John crosses to a window. Those unseen currents have sighed into ripples and his robe now hangs too big and loose. Denise pulls scissors from her desk, joins John, and carefully works the smaller of the blades under a stitch.

#### About the Author:

Ken Hueler teaches kung fu in the San Francisco Bay Area and, with fellow members of the Horror Writer's Association's local chapter, gets up to all sorts of adventures. His work has appeared in *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*, *Weirdbook*, *Space & Time*, *Weekly Mystery Magazine*, and the anthologies *The Lost Librarian's Grave* and *Tales for the Camp Fire*. You can learn more at his blog.

Blog: [Ken Hueler](#)



"We need to leave," Gord whispered, pushing with every ounce of energy he possessed.

"It will not happen, Gord." Jackie, exhausted, gave up, taking a deep breath. "These vines are too strong."

"They can't be. You've seen the way those farmers snap stalks—like it's nothing. We can do it." Gord refused to accept defeat, pushing against Jackie again. "This is life or death."

Jackie didn't move, a sombre shadow settling over her beautiful orange glow. "I know. But maybe this is just the way of things. Have you thought of that?"

Gord's gaze flicked to Shaker and Hubbard perched atop a hay bale at the edge of the patch. Their triangular eyes stared across the vine-covered field; gaping mouths carved into haunting smiles. Both hollow, vacant—devoid of an essence that once existed there.

"No. I don't want to hear that kind of talk. We can't end up like the others." He leaned in closer to her, her soft skin a caress against his. Jackie's bulbous shape still captivated him after all these months. "We're in this together. Aren't we?"

A warm fall sun blazed down upon their once cozy little patch. Jackie sat silent; her glow cast upon the hard-packed earth. Gord's leaf rested on one of hers.

Slowly, Jackie met his gaze. "I don't have your strength. You must go without me."

"Jackie—"

"Don't argue." Rolling her spherical base beneath the vine that held her captive, she collided abruptly with Gord.

"What are you doing?"

Familiar voices signaled from beyond the patch. The farmers. The pumpkins glanced at each other, leaves quivering. Then Jackie rolled again, hitting harder.

A wet *crack* of a stalk weakening rang out.

"Jackie, stop. I won't leave you."

"They're coming," she barked. "We have little time. I can't break free, but with my help—you can. Now roll into me! We need more force."

Gord growled. "Fine, but once I'm free, I'll get you loose, too." The voices reached the far edge of the patch. *Maybe they won't even take us.* Other squash and gourds grew nearby.

The pumpkins collided with a force that reverberated through their tangerine-toned skin. Gord's stalk finally severed.

"It worked!" Jackie cried.

One farmer mumbled, "*These over here are all ready to go.*" Footsteps approached.

"Oh, no. He's coming!" Gord slammed himself against Jackie, desperate to free her.

She stilled. "It's no use. You need to go."

He tried again, to no avail. Her stalk didn't even crack.

"Go now!" Jackie screamed, jerking forward. Her body was more robust than Gord's and he rebounded on impact, barrelling beneath the thick, leafy vines that provided shelter during the growing season.

"What the—?" the farmer muttered, walking into view. He clearly noticed the leaves rustle. His hairy face peered down, scouring the greenery. "Hmm, must've been a rabbit." He reached down to snap Jackie's stalk with a crisp flick of the wrist.

Rolling forward, Gord knew he had to stop the farmer. Somehow.

"No, stop!" Jackie ordered, halting Gord before he could expose himself. She looking at him with solemn resignation as two dirty hands hoisted her into the air. "It was meant to be this way. Promise me you'll get as far from here as you can. I love you."

Gord quivered, moisture dripping from his broken stalk. "Jackie..."

The farmer's beady eyes swung across the field. "Toby! Go grab another one from the west patch, will ya? A big one. These people want two."

His mind whirling, Gord glanced again at his lifeless friends on the hay bale, then back to Jackie—his entire world. What good was surviving without her? Gathering his courage, Gord pushed out from beneath his leafy shroud of protection. He wheeled forward with a ferocious roar, ramming into the farmer's leather boot. "Put her down!"

"What the—?" In shock, the human stumbled backward. His toe caught on a vine, body lurching to the side. Jackie slipped from his grasp. She cried out in terror as she plummeted to the earth, gravity pulling her down with dogged determination.

"No!" Gord moaned, helpless. Time seemed to slow as he watched her fall.

Jackie captured his gaze moments before she slammed into the ground, the farmer's body falling not far behind. Gord ignored the wretched human and rolled forward, pressing against his beloved's side. "Jackie?" Her base was cracked, several large fissures stretching up her sides—precious seeds bleeding into the dirt. "Oh, no. Jackie?"

She trembled, glow fading. "You should have left," she whispered, voice weak.

"Never. I love you." Her yam-coloured skin warmed against his one last time, then her glow faded away. Gord felt his insides turn to lead. *It wasn't supposed to be this way.*

The farmer climbed to his feet, dusting grime from his pants. "Dammit!" He growled, inspecting Jackie's broken form. "Ah, shit." He cast a scowl at Gord, reaching to grab him. "Where the hell did you come from?"

Gord met the man's bitter gaze, standing rounder than ever. He knew humans were too simple to perceive their language, but that didn't stop him from screaming, "You killed her! You stupid, horrible creature." With nothing left to lose, Gord jerked backward, wheeling beyond reach. To his surprise, the patch erupted—squash and pumpkins shouting in support of his actions.

The farmer recoiled.

Gord attacked, quaking with rage. The human scrambled, jumping from side to side.

"The damn thing's possessed!" Tripping again, the farmer's arm braced for the fall. He hit hard with a grunt. "Toby?"

Gord advanced, grinding over the man's hand with a ragged stalk. "Leave and never come back!"

Finding his feet again, the farmer's eyes bulged. Rubbing his aching hand, his mouth twisted, hands flexing into knotted balls. Gord tried to escape as the man lunged forward, but those hands snaked out too fast, snatching him up. A symphony of shocked gasps sliced through the air.

"Join your friend," the farmer hissed, lifting the pumpkin high above his head.

In the next moment, Gord was flying.

The weightless sensation only lasted a moment before he crashed down beside Jackie, splitting at every seam. Trembling amidst the horrified cries of nearby squash, Gord sagged, pain and exhaustion taking over. He looked over at his love.

"I told you I'd never leave you."

Shuddering one last time, darkness fell.

\*\*\*

Dell cackled victoriously, spitting out the side of his mouth. He turned and thrust a hand into the air, wagging two fingers. "Hey, Toby. Grab *two* more!"

Leaves rustled; the sound similar to a nest of angry rattlesnakes in the distance. Looking down, he realized the entire patch was in motion. Plants in all directions quivered and popped loose from their vine tethers, vibrating in place. Stalks snapped on all sides.

Then the oddest sound reached his ears. Faint, yet pronounced—like a thousand faeries belting out battle cries. He shook his head as his eyebrows nearly disappeared into his hairline. "Naw, naw, naw. Pumpkins don't talk."

Dell back stepped as a horde of vegetables swarmed his way. "Pumpkins aren't supposed to move, either..." His eyes flicked to the two broken gourds he'd left lying in a mushy heap. "The whole damn patch is possessed! All of this because of a couple of crummy pumpkins?"

The tiny screams surged anew as patch inhabitants swelled like waves, rallying to avenge the grievous injustice they obviously believed he'd inflicted upon their fallen brethren.

Dell scrambled toward the fence line.

"I'll get the pitchforks!" A terrified Toby ran by in a blur, hurdling pumpkins.

Frantically digging through his pockets, Dell kicked at Striped Cushaw's and Autumn Gold's bouncing painfully off his legs. "Hurry!" He eyed a few hundred pounds' worth of Big Max's rolling towards him and promptly punted a Baby Boo for a field goal.

Dell crawled up the fence, shins already aching from being hammered. His fingers finally tightened around the lighter in his pocket. The first of the Big Max's collided, cracking the fence post, but Dell didn't care. Brandishing his weapon, he lit the wick with a stroke of the thumb.

Unleashing a maniacal laugh, he shouted, "Forget the forks, son! Bring the gas cans."

#### About the Author:

R.A. Clarke is a caffeine-infused stay-at-home mom living in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba. In her spare time, she adores immersing her mind in fantastical worlds of her own creation. R.A. has won several international short story competitions, and was a finalist for the 2021 Dark Sire Award and 2021 Futurescapes Award. Her work has been published by Sirens Call Publications, Cloaked Press LLC, and Sinister Smile Press, among others.

Website/Blog: [Rachael Clarke Writes](#)

Twitter: [@raclarkewrites](#)

10.1 – I used to notice the way his eyes rolled back in his head the moment before we kissed. His white eyematter flashing at me like a warning. I didn't know what my lips were touching, what my teeth were sinking into.

10.2 – Remember that telling trusted people about difficult things will help. Writing down the feelings, experiencing emotions fully, will help. Airing out the sickness helps. But this poison is deep inside. It's not going away. Distraction helps, and therapy helps. But I need him. Drawing breath hurts, like my lungs are fighting to expand. He might even still be here, under a floorboard or a bedframe. Every dark corner holds his shadow.

10.10 – I think he put something inside me. Not a baby, not anything that typical. I already checked. If anything is in my womb, it's not showing up on a pregnancy test.

10.13 – My eyes look jaundiced and my lashes are falling out. It's probably from crying. Joanna brought me some Gatorade to stay hydrated, and canned soup.

10.15 – Food has stopped tasting like anything. I made a heavily spiced curry just to confirm. Nothing. Am I sick?

10.19 – I've started sleeping with the lights on because I hear him in the dark, whispering to me. It only helps a little bit. He is on the other side of the mirror and behind the window blinds, the night taking the shape of a man. His touches used to hurt. Now everything does. I've been living in a panicked fear for weeks. The daylight keeps growing shorter. I think I'll have to stop going to work eventually. I can't be outside when the sun goes down.

10.20 – I think my blood is wrong.

10.31 – Dr. Sinai said I'm very depressed and need better sleep. Nothing I didn't already know. Now I have some pills, but I'm afraid to take them. I'm afraid I'll kill whatever is inside of me, or make it angry. The night is full of screaming and laughing. It's just children. Halloween.

11.19 – I haven't answered anyone's calls or texts in weeks. Stopped going to work. A caring somebody will probably show up at my door soon. I know they are worried about me. I'm worried about me too.

11.21 – Sometimes I think the thing I'm carrying is in my stomach, and sometimes I feel it right behind my lungs. Earlier today (yesterday?) I saw a lump the size of a golf ball near my sternum. It swelled up, then receded when I screamed. I wonder if I will die when it decides to be born.

11.23 – It's been controlling me while I lose consciousness. There's no other explanation for my unbroken solitude. Nobody is coming to help me.

11.24 – I tried taking the pills. Could almost hear it shudder with laughter as I spewed them back up. Tried crushing and dissolving them in water, then considered snorting them. I blacked out after the third try and when I woke up the pills were gone.

11.27 – My eyes aren't yellow anymore. They're tinged with black at the edges. If I'm going to look inhuman, I could at least have some powers or something. But I am still deadly fatigued. I can barely drag myself to the bathroom to let orange and black fall out of me. For most of the day I am drifting. Just feeling the pull to him. But I don't think the pull is coming from my broken heart anymore.

12.22 – It's close. The fear abated today. Feel clear-eyed and purposeful. The pain and fatigue stopped long enough for me to write a letter to whoever finds me.

12.24 – It wants out. There is a cake baking in the oven at 500 degrees. Burners on high. And lots of precariously balanced cooking oil. I'm sorry. I can't let it be born...



**About the Author:**

Auzin is a writer from the Pacific Northwest. She has published with Nowruz Journal, Rogue Agent Journal, and Agapanthus Collective. She was the Managing Editor at the now-defunct Hecate Magazine and is currently a submissions reader for The Jupiter Review. More of her work can be found at [website](#). She is a fan of concerningly tiny dogs.

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**The Catacomb | Edwin Staples**

Father Reynaldo laughed. Cardinal Reyes's burial was nearly complete, and no complications at all. A moderate sized crowd, a healthy basket of coins from the faithful, and a modest feast served under a cool night sky. Now, to place the Cardinal among his peers below the flock's well-used vestry.

All the mourners had gone home to weep and drink away their sorrow. The catacombs were silent. Whatever the good father would like to carry off from the tomb would be easily taken.

The two postulants looked at him with the eyes of lambs, sombre, frightened at the vaulted ceilings, the steel doors that marked each distinguished resident's resting place here below the cathedral.

"Say your rosaries and walk the hall, end-to-end," said the father. He delighted in terrorizing his underlings. He also feared that an unquiet rest could bring any of their souls back to expose him to the living. Such fear dwelt in a quiet place in his heart, however. Greed and arrogance were his more dependable companions, reassuring him that his wealth and power was a good that served even the lowest of the Lord's servants. His avarice whispered to him that all good Christians of stature were thus, right back to the apostles and the Lamb of God himself.

Did he hear a woman's voice? No, it was the postulants, squeaking out their prayers, exhorting one another not to be afraid.

Reynaldo's heart thumped but he was not afraid. The catacombs were a garden where he harvested his wealth, where a dozen generations of priests before him did the same. Ruby-inlaid rings, richly decorated vestments decorated with Toledo's finest, shining gold. One day the postulants would learn the craft of politely robbing a grave, but today was too soon.

As the father pocketed the last strand of pearls from within the robes of the deceased, he heard a screeching sound. Carlos appeared before him, eyes wide with terror.

"The Madrid witch!" said Carlos. "She's—"

Carlos fainted before Father Reynaldo. His fellow postulant sprinting for the stairway.

"It's just you and me now," said a soft voice in the darkness.

"Madrid witch!" said the father, reaching into his robe. "You were cast down, these three months past."

"There was no wickedness in me before thy sentence was passed. I return to you now the evil you visited upon me, servant of Satan," said the voice.

"I cast you away." The priest held aloft his golden cross.

The voice chuckled.

"Before you go, I give you a thought to carry a thousand years or more. A plain wooden cross could have saved you."

The ground opened. Hell's fires lapped at the robes of the priest.

"Your stolen cross of gold be your burden," said the woman, her voice speaking more plainly. "And mine is removed, in exchange for your eternal soul."

The peaceful face of a young woman came into the light of the priest's candle, as its owner plunged down, down into the flames.

**About the Author:**

Edwin Staples is a returned Peace Corps Volunteer, an archivist, a librarian, and the son of two nurses. He resides in Seattle, Washington with his wife Rachel, and their cat, China. Edwin's *Colorado* appears in *Anti-Heroine Chic* in 2019, and *Civic Center* in *Creativity Webzine* in 2020. As a Bowdoin College student he was the editor-in-chief of *The Quill* magazine.

A haunted house story with an eldritch twist!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Ryan and Jake loaded the boat with their tools and material, fired up the 150 horsepower motor to an idle then untied it from the town docks. Ryan was excited to finally see the work site in the summertime. They navigated the bustling, no-wake zone, marina at a snail's pace until they reached the main body of the lake. It opened up just beyond the massive concrete and steel bridge supporting the only road out of town. Then Jake opened the throttle and Ryan grabbed the underside of his seat to brace himself.

The waves were low across the lake. They would make good time and without taking a physical pounding slamming against rolling waves. Even though they sat side by side they couldn't hold a conversation between the wind racing by and the rumble of the engine behind them that made the boat dance across the water. They simply watched for marker buoys, other boats and work barges and enjoyed the shoreline view of endless pine and birch trees.

Ryan thought of the weeks spent alone working on this remote island home during the frigid winter. He traveled the ice road daily through minus thirty temperatures and blinding snow. Some days it took him an hour each way to find any remnants of a trail with poor visibility and trying to avoid massive snow drifts and ice ridges. He wouldn't have to trek up the steep, snow covered hill that led to the main door of the big house. He was relieved that part of the project was behind him.

Ryan kept a watchful eye on his new helper, Jake's handling of the big boat and his speed. He knew Jake wasn't that experienced of an operator in this large of a boat, but he grew up here and knew the lake reasonably well. This would be Jake's first day at the island. He was about the same age as one of Ryan's own children and Ryan expected Jake would love speed too.

Things looked quite different to Ryan going across the lake in a boat instead of a truck during winter and Ryan had only recently moved to this area for work.

Ryan signaled Jake to slow down and pointed to the small bay they needed to navigate to safely land the boat.

"This place is huge!" Jake said while scanning the shore to find a place to land the boat.

Ryan climbed up to the bow ready with line in hand to hop on shore and pull the boat in, "I know. I really must be doing something wrong with my life."

Jake stretched while admiring the large home perched on the remote island.

"What's up with those trees?" Jake asked while looking at the front end of the unfinished home.

Towering charred pine trees surrounded the new home. Some were twisted and gnarled looking and their bare branches draped over the rooftop. Ryan was used to seeing them during the winter but Jake was new to the site.

"Yeah, the old house burnt down last year and that's why the owner's rebuilding. That's why we're here." Ryan tied the boat to the roots of an upturned tree that rested up the bank. "I've never met the owner yet. The boss keeps in touch with him. He gives us the drawings and instructions and we go to work."

"Let's get our stuff unloaded, Jake, fire up the generator and I'll show you around."

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"Okay Jake all the rough-in has been done now we're adding finishing devices and fixtures." Ryan unrolled his set of prints across the countertop and explained what went where to Jake. "If you can start in the bedroom I'll go underneath to look at the water system."

Ryan grabbed his tools and made his way beneath the house. Most of the space beneath the home required crawling from Ryan. The uneven and rocky terrain made for a solid foundation but wasn't the ideal situation to work in.

"What a mess!" Ryan grumbled as he cut his knee on a broken shard of glass. Debris and pieces of glass littered the entire area. A blanket of snow concealed the mess when Ryan was last beneath the home. He crawled along as careful as he could, his pants beginning to soak in blood around his knee, but still ended up scraping his spine against floor joists or kneeling on sharp rocks and discarded screws. Ryan stopped when he heard a boy crying next to him. He massaged his knee as he looked around the crawlspace. He couldn't see anyone. Their boat was the only one at the island that he knew of.

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Jake was installing a light in the bedroom amid a pile of construction debris. Scrap bits of plywood, lumber and pieces of insulation littered the otherwise empty bedroom. He looked to the window as he could hear and see the weather turning. Branches from the trees swayed in the rising wind and the waves on the lake began to churn. A heavy mist created a cloudy circle against the window. Jake climbed down from his ladder to look closer at the worsening weather outside and the weird patch of fog growing on the window pane.

Slowly as though a child was finger painting the words *Save Us* scrawled in the fog.

Jake bolted from the room to look for Ryan outside.

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Ryan searched the floor joists for the plumbing system to determine what he needed to do to get things running for the owner. Little cyclones of debris whipped up around him under the home. Other than the floor above him the entire crawlspace perimeter was exposed to the elements. He could hear Jake calling for him and it was a voice of panic. Ryan could see the weather was getting serious now. He crawled toward Jake's voice as quickly as he could without impaling himself on a nail. Something struck Ryan's ribs and he stopped moving. He looked to his side then to the ground.

Jake still called out to him.

Ryan saw a blackened bit of metal tumble to a stop beside him. Had to be the dust devils he thought. Ryan picked up the chunk of metal and it looked like a burnt Hot Wheels car. He could see the tiny axles without the tires. Ryan tossed it aside as he could see Jake's legs pacing beyond the exterior and he made his way toward him.

"You gotta see this, Ryan." Jake led Ryan around the house toward the bedroom he was just in and pointed to the window. He tried explaining what he saw over the bustling wind.

"So, where is it?" Ryan asked.

"I'm serious." Jake pointed to the spot on the window where he saw the writing. "It was here!"

"You made me crawl out here for this?" Ryan stormed away and crouched to go beneath the house. "We have to get this done or we're going to be stuck out here tonight." Ryan motioned to the worsening lake conditions.

Jake reluctantly went back inside. Then the rain came.

"You gotta be kidding!" Ryan spat as he traversed the crawlspace. Rain pelted the house and dirt splashed up around the perimeter as the eaves trough overflowed. Water streamed and pooled beneath the house through the rocky rivulets. Then came the lightning.

Ryan shook his head, "We're not getting out of here tonight."

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Jake continued installing electrical devices and fixtures throughout the home. He couldn't tell if it was branches or something else that knocked and scraped on the walls while he worked but he was quickly regretting being paired up with Ryan for this job. He wondered how Ryan worked here by himself before. Thunder intensified and daylight was fading fast. It was around eight o'clock and Jake wanted to be done. He could see through the windows there was no way they were getting back in the boat with waves like these.

Then the generator idled to a stop.

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Ryan completed his work beneath the house only minutes before the generator quit. He knew he forgot to bring something—fuel. He gathered his tools and trudged through the grime of the slimy crawlspace. His tool pouch caught up in plastic insulation wrap as he slithered over the mound of debris. He tore free of the tangle and tried to move ahead when his hand rested on something strange and rough. He strained to see in the dim light. He had to rely on feel. It was brittle, rough and charred. It was a person's hand. He pulled more of the plastic back revealing an arm and much more. He bolted out of the crawlspace with his tool pouch far behind.

Ryan couldn't get in the house fast enough, "Jake, Jake! Where are you?"

He sprang through the darkened house searching for Jake. His clothes dripped and his boots squished as he went. He found Jake in the living room wielding his hammer as a weapon.

"Jake! What's going on?" Ryan could barely contain himself. He needed to tell someone what he just saw, but Jake looked mad with fear.

Ryan moved beside Jake to see what he could see. Three shadows scurried around the room. The forms altered shape and size and darted around Ryan and Jake. Jake swung his hammer trying to keep the black forms from getting closer. He was hysterical and mumbling. Ryan kept his distance trying not to get clubbed by Jake's hammer.

"We gotta go! Now!" Ryan screamed at Jake. Jake was mesmerized by the figures.

"Storm or not we're leaving, now!" Ryan grabbed Jake by the shoulder and pulled him out of the living room and to the door.

The two men barreled out of the house and down the slick bank to the boat. The wind was furious and the rain hadn't slowed. The night sky flashed white with lightning.

"Get the motor going and I'll get the rope." Ryan struggled with the knot in the soaking wet line that was tied to the root of the downed tree.



Finally free from the tree, Ryan leapt onto the bow as Jake backed away from the island. Waves crashed against the back of the boat and it took on water. They needed to get out far enough to go forward to keep from getting swamped. Neither man said anything, but they both saw three ink black forms moving to the water's edge.

"Get us out of here, Jake!"

Jake maneuvered the boat out enough to go forward. Then he opened the throttle. Waves crashed against the hull and both men steadied themselves against the relentless pounding. They could see the town lights far in the distance and they made a course. With nothing but darkness around them they knew it was extremely dangerous. They had passed four marker buoys on their route out to the island, but that was in daylight.

Jake had to keep the speed up or the boat would be swamped. The only sign they were close to islands or shoreline was a deeper blackness. There was really no chance of seeing a buoy in time. The waves crashed over the sides of the boat and the two men were drenched. The boat had definitely taken on water. They could see the town lights in the distance. They were still on course. Then the lights blinked out. Three shadows were on the bow.

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

Dave Dormer lives and writes in North-Western Ontario alongside his wonderful (and patient) wife and four children. His love of horror began at an early age and he spent many classes devoting his divided attention from the regular curriculum to write gruesome tales. He distinctly remembers and is thankful for his seventh-grade teacher who displayed an uncommon tolerance for his interest in writing by reading Dave's stories aloud to his class.

**Amazon Author Page:** [Dave Dormer](#)

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#### **Craggy Maggie | Sonora Taylor**

No trip to the beautiful gloom of New England is complete without visiting the Craggy Maggie! Named for a spinster who lived at the top of the mountain, Craggy Maggie State Park has been bewitching visitors since 1694.

Come in the morning and hear the gentle twitter of birds as you walk along the narrow paths. Ignore the cracking noises--they may sound like bone, but it's just a few early-riser animals making their way through the forest!

If you're not an early bird, there's always high noon. You'd never know it was noon, though, because these mountains haven't seen the sun since Craggy Maggie suffered an unfortunate bout of sunburn (according to the town, at least) that led to her death. Get up close to the fog that calls these mountains home and you may hear gentle whispers begging you to come even closer. The mountain is so inviting!

Of course, dusk is the favored time to visit if you're a local. If you make it to the top of the mountain, you'll see Craggy Maggie's old shack, left abandoned since she was taken--rather, since she left, in 1692. Rumor has it if you go as the sun sets behind the fog, you'll see a single candle alight in the window.

It's not a rumor. I put it there.

Please help me.

Maggie blames me for the sins of the town. She says I will burn.

I cannot leave.

Please come inside, please help, please—

Visit Craggy Maggie! You'll have a cragtacular time!

#### **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, Camden Park Press, and others. Her latest release *Someone to Share My Nightmares: Stories*, is now available. She lives in Arlington, Virginia, with her husband and rescue dog.

## **Beneath the Mound | Rob Bliss**

Children sing trick or treat from house to house and pass mounds of Autumn leaves, slowly rotting.

On macabre lawns skeletons hang from black oak boughs, cobwebs cloak doorways, the fake dead half-buried rise from their small town graves.

Under one pile of leaves lies Howard's wife. He feeds children candy while praising costumes.

If only Ellen had given him children, heirs to carry on his meager name and fortune.

When November winter winds blow, the wife will be laid in a backyard pit, covered with earth and snow, Halloween over, the dead rotting.

## **Skeleton Sister | Rob Bliss**

My sister died from cancer when she was in her teens, every muscle thinned down to dental floss, bones wrapped in tight skin—how she remains in my memory. A skeleton.

Every Halloween I dress as a skeleton to remember her, though no one knows why I do it. Same costume every year, same friends, people expect it.

Julia was getting worried. "You're losing weight. Is anything wrong?"

I couldn't tell her—it was a secret. Not even my wife could know what my sister and I shared. Wouldn't that diminish her death? Was I being selfish for keeping her alive every Halloween by wearing how I saw her—by transforming myself into her mirror?

I had become cancer, once a year, though she died closer to Christmas, not Halloween. And then, as Julia and I entered our fifth year of marriage, the honeymoon days over, settling down into our routine life as husband and wife, I became cancer again.

After the holidays, during the long winter weeks of January and February, I lost more and more of my body, blaming it on a hectic schedule at work, on stresses, interior and exterior, anything but the truth.

Within one year, I had lost so much, I knew the costume I wanted to wear at the next Halloween annual party.

I wore my skeleton tights, the skull head. But this time I added a black robe. Julia asked why the change. "You'll see," I replied.

My sister was inside me.

Halfway into the party, I went to the bathroom and changed, had a small bag of cosmetics hidden in my shoe. I stuffed the skeleton tights in a cupboard and wore only the skull mask and the robe. Kept the robe around my body as I headed back out, getting onto the stage to stop the DJ and his music. Everyone in the room was a friend of mine, knew my back story, the death that haunted me every day.

"This is what I was preparing for all these parties, these years."

I let the robe drop and peeled off the full-head mask, but straightened what I had hidden under it.

I was a skeleton, bones pushing against tight skin, my face painted with dark shadows under my eyes and a gray pallor to my skin. I wore my sister's hair, the same that cancer and chemotherapy has taken from her, kept by my mother for years, a last souvenir of her dying daughter. Hair doesn't rot as skin and bone do.

After that party, Julia admitted me to a psychiatric hospital, telling me I had been sick for a long time.

"How can I be cured of death?" I asked. "You and I both will die, and everyone at that party, everyone in the world. There is no cure for death, so why not embrace it and love it before it takes what we all owe it: our lives?" I loved my sister. But I love her death even more.

## **Making A Movie | Rob Bliss**

Jeff and three friends were having a Halloween horror marathon at his place. As usual, his parents weren't home, always flying around the world for work. Jeff hated them, wanted their money, but wanted them dead.

During each movie, Jeff left the room, saying he was just getting more junk food.

In the basement, the girl still hung from the hook, wouldn't stop crying. Real blood never looked real on film. A tripod camera recorded.

Jeff said he wanted to make horror movies, and the girl said she always wanted to be a scream queen. The movie wrote itself.

### **Smashing Pumpkins | Rob Bliss**

Me and Tommy were smashing pumpkins on porches and lawns the day after Halloween, All Saint Assholes Day, or whatever they're calling it. A solid piece of Slugger hickory does a wonderful job on melons. We had old ladies and young married couples with babies in arms yelling at us to "Stop wrecking the neighborhood!"

"But we're the Wrecking Crew!" Tommy yelled back before he took a swing at a mailbox stuffed with dried corn leaves.

His dad's pick-up truck sped down country roads where nothing is locked and everyone's asleep or at church the day after, which was a Sunday. Always awesome to have Halloween on a Saturday night. Maximum destruction. We had fun, didn't sleep as we ate stolen kid's candy, couldn't sleep, played horror video games all night, watched movies until the sun rose.

We stopped at this one house way out down County Line #4, pumpkins new and old, all sizes, rotting or with carved faces, even some with candles still burning. *What was with these people?* we wondered. *Halloween was over.*

Tommy got out. The windows of the farmhouse were dark, paint flaking, the front steps cracked. But a thousand pumpkins were scattered with the Autumn leaves across the lawn.

Tommy was about to take a swing at the nearest melon, a big one, the size of a bull's head, when he stopped.

Baseball bat frozen in hand. He leaned down and picked the carved top off the melon and looked inside.

Screaming, he dropped the bat and ran back to the truck. Some huge motherfucker dressed as a maniac burst from the front door with a chainsaw spitting blue smoke. He raced toward the truck as Tommy kept trying to jam the transmission into reverse.

The fucker hammered the chainsaw on the hood, skittering teeth sparking off metal, as we screamed and Tommy hit the gas.

Dust roiled in our wake down the country road.

I said to Tommy, "That guy fucking takes Halloween too seriously! Doesn't he know it's over?" I leaned out the side window and yelled back, "It's over, asshole! Play fair!"

I asked Tommy what was in the pumpkin, but he still won't tell me. And he still won't go out on Halloween anymore, not to steal, not to smash. Something died inside him, scared the soul out of him, killed him a little that All Saints Sunday morning.

### **Bloody Girlfriends | Rob Bliss**

Sandy and Elma were kissing with chocolate mouths, still in their vampire costumes. Elma plucked a fat round chocolate ball and bit into it.

Her mouth bled as her tongue jutted out, covered in blood and half a razor blade.

Sandy sucked blood off her girlfriend's tongue as fangs pushed from her gums and bit Elma's neck.

She drank her girlfriend's life as Elma, dazed by the fang's poison, sucked chocolate and blood off her tongue before her eyes closed.

### **About the Author:**

Rob Bliss studied English and Writing at York University, Canada. He has published over twenty novels, novellas and short story collections. Over 100 of his stories have appeared in online magazines such as The Horror Zine, Sanitarium, and Schlock! Webzine, plus three anthologies, and was SNM Magazine's Author of the Year for 2013. He once tried stand-up comedy, and bombed wonderfully.

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We went guising that Halloween.

Scottish people will tell you that guising isn't the same as trick-or-treating, though it involves children dressed as ghosts, witches and monsters going to front doors and receiving confectionery or small sums of cash from householders. The Scottish custom is transactional. The children have to earn their rewards. This means putting on a show for whoever they're visiting. A brief show, admittedly, like telling a story or singing a song. Guising has its roots in the activities long ago of mummers who'd turn up at houses and taverns on special days such as Christmas, Easter, Plough Monday and All Souls' Day, stage short plays, and afterwards collect money from their audiences.

Our show that Halloween consisted of Wullie telling a joke, Bob singing a song, and me performing a magic trick. I'd dressed accordingly. To make myself a stage magician, I'd put on my black Sunday-school suit, a cape that was really a scrap of black blanket, a homemade bowtie I'd cut out of black-painted cardboard and taped to my shirt collar-button, and a top hat fashioned from black felt and more cardboard. Wullie, meanwhile, was a ghost, face powdered with flour, body wrapped in a bedsheet. And Bob was a devil, clad in red, sporting on his head two white horns he'd carved out of parsnips, and carrying a fork from his dad's allotment. His old man had stuck corks onto its prongs before letting him out of the house with it.

I steered my companions towards houses I thought would be receptive to our guising. Early that year, I'd joined the local boy-scout troop and in April I'd participated in bob-a-job week. That was when scouts raised money for charity by going to folk's doors, asking if they had jobs that needed doing, doing those jobs for them, and getting donations afterwards. Incidentally, fear of unwary scouts falling into the hands of pedophiles, or being assigned hazardous jobs that breached Health and Safety regulations, led to bob-a-job week being abolished in the 1990s. Come to think of it, it's been many years since I saw kids guising on their own, as we were that evening, without adults escorting them and keeping an eye on them.

From April's experiences, I knew which houses contained people who were likely to treat us civilly. I also knew which houses to avoid, ones whose inhabitants were dour, bad-tempered, slightly mad or absolutely psychotic. This knowledge paid dividends. We guised only on the doorsteps of kind people and soon the brown-paper bag I'd brought along, as a receptacle for our booty, bulged with 1970s treats: bags of Golden Wonder crisps, packets of Spangles and Rolo, bars of Milky Way and Marathon. One lady gave us slabs of tablet, that tooth-rotting, Scottish confection of butter, sugar and condensed milk. Also, from the bag's bottom came a satisfying clink of silver coins.

Admittedly, I wasn't sure the quality of our performances warranted this generosity. Wullie's joke concerned an Englishman, Scotsman and Irishman venturing one-by-one into a haunted house and hearing a sepulchral voice from the darkness intoning: "I'll drag ye doon an' I'll *eat* ye!" The Englishman and Scotsman ran out of the house in terror, but the Irishman, when he heard the voice, ripped aside a curtain and discovered standing there...

"A wee boy," went Wullie's punchline, "pickin' his nose!"

I heard him repeat that joke all evening but just didn't get it. The people he told the joke to smiled indulgently, but a puzzled look in their eyes suggested they didn't get it either.

Then Bob delivered his song. He caterwauled mercilessly, yet his performance made the householders roar with laughter. It was probably thanks to the song he'd chosen, which'd topped the charts the previous year: Chuck Berry's *My Ding-a-Ling*. This was a catchy wee number, though we couldn't fathom why adults found it hilarious.

Poor Bob. I wonder how many years passed before he realized he'd spent that Halloween singing to people about wanking.

Finally, I did my magic trick. I'd reasoned that because it was nighttime and the only light came from the porches and hallways, there was little danger of the audience spotting how the trick was done. I soon realized, though, that they might not see the trick itself—the movements involved were so subtle. Each time I performed it, I thought I saw the same indulgent smiles and puzzled eyes that'd greeted Wullie's joke.

Gradually, we wandered away from the town's main area, a grid of terraced streets built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to house the employees of the local tweed mill. We reached the slopes west of it, which had disappeared under newer houses, bigger and costlier ones, with lanes and expansive gardens. These belonged to wealthy retirees or to commuters with well-paid jobs in Edinburgh. I found the gateway I was looking for. There weren't many houses along the edges of the street we were on now. It was mostly hemmed by hedges, bushes and trees. Occasional streetlamps rose up and produced glows of light above us, but their lights resembled isolated yellowy bubbles drifting amid the black night-sky. A cold breeze swept fallen leaves over the pavement and made the branches of the hedges, bushes and trees swirl, rustle and whisper.

Doubtfully, Wullie said, "This place looks posh, Johnnie."

I unlatched the gate and stepped through onto a gravel-covered avenue. "I ken the woman who lives here. She's nice. I bet she gives us tons a' stuff."

We trudged up the avenue. The streetlamps disappeared behind us, the lights of the house hadn't emerged ahead, and we didn't have a torch. Our only illumination was the lantern Wullie carried. Pumpkins had yet to appear in Scottish supermarkets, so our lantern was a turnip one. When I looked at Wullie, I hardly discerned him in the darkness. However, I saw the turnip floating before him like a spectral, shrunken head, small and wrinkled, candlelight leaking out of its triangular eye-holes and gashed, jagged-edged mouth.

The house finally came into view. An outside light was on, showing the extent of its façade. Still intimidated by the place's poshness, Wullie demanded, "Are ye sure ye ken this woman, Johnnie?"

"Aye." Six months earlier, during bob-a-job week, I hadn't known what made me venture up that avenue, but I was glad I did so. The lady who opened the door asked me to mow the lawn that extended down the slope below the house. Seeing as her husband was "away for most of the time."

So I wrestled a heavy, chattering lawnmower up and down the grass. Because of my small size, and the mower's whirling blades, this was probably one of those assignments that broke Health and Safety rules and got bob-a-job week suspended. Anyway, afterwards, the woman stunned me by giving me two pounds. That'd be the equivalent of twenty pounds today.

She noticed my sweat-soaked green scout-shirt and yellow neckerchief. "My son Peter's your age," she mused in an English accent. "We send him to school in Edinburgh but it'd be good if he got to know some local children too. I wonder if he'd like the scouts."

Clutching the two pounds, I was desperate to please. "Oh aye! I can bring him tae the next meetin' in the scout hut!"

Immediately, though, her expression fell and her voice became troubled. "But not at the moment. He's been unwell, the poor soul. Maybe later..."

Tonight, I rang the bell. When the door opened, I almost didn't recognize the woman on the threshold. She looked much older and thinner.

"Hullo," I said uncertainly. "We're guisin'."

She seemed not to remember me from bob-a-job week. "Guising?"

"Aye. Cos it's Halloween."

Picking up on her Englishness, Bob explained. "It's the custom here at Halloween. We go roond the hooses an' put on a wee show with jokes, songs, tricks. Then ye give us sweets an' money." He added, in case that sounded presumptuous: "If ye like the show, o'course."

"A show," she echoed. "You know, my son would love to see a show... Some entertainment, some company for him... At last..."

I said, "Peter, ye mean?"

She stared at me, surprised I knew her son's name. Her haggard face made her resemble a witch. But then she beckoned us inside. "You don't mind doing your performance upstairs? In Peter's room? He's confined to bed, you see."

She led us along a dark hallway, up a staircase and onto a landing that were scarcely any brighter. There, she opened a door and ushered us into a room. She announced excitedly, "Peter, I have a surprise! Some local children have come to put on a show for you!"

This room seemed even darker than the hallway, staircase and landing. The only light was a measly glimmer from a table-lamp, set on a surface by the opposite wall, next to the headboard of a huge bed. We peered along the bed. On a pillow under the headboard, the light showed a small protrusion topped by a few dark straggles of hair. It was the upper part of a head, the rest of it hidden beneath the end of a quilt.

There ensued an embarrassed silence that ended when, unobtrusively, Bob kicked Wullie in the shins and the latter started telling his joke to the bed's inhabitant. Wullie sounded short of breath – understandably, because the air in the room was dense with sickly-sweet odors. It was as if dead flowers and overripe fruit had been wheelbarrowed in and piled in the darkness around the bed. He struggled to the punchline: "A wee boy... pickin' his nose!"

Silence. Except, I thought, for a faint tinkle of laughter at the bed's far end.

"He must a' liked it," I whispered. "I heard him laugh."

Wullie whispered back, "He did? I heard nothin'."

Then Bob rendered *My Ding-a-Ling*. Even by Bob's standards, this was the worst performance of the song I'd heard. Those sweet, smothering odors made him wheeze, almost choke at times. But he reached the end of it...

Again, I thought I heard something. Small, nearly-weightless hands bumping against each other.

Under my breath, I urged Bob: "Say thank you."

"Why?"

"He's clappin'."

"Ye're sure?"

"Aye. Go on."

Loudly: "Cheers, pal! Thanks very much!"

For my magic trick to have any impact, I decided, I needed to go alongside the bed to the table-lamp and perform in its light, next to the pillow and the little head occupying it. I handed our booty-bag to Wullie and approached the lamp. I'd thought the lamp-shade had long tassels hanging under it. Now I realized the tassels were actually car air-fresheners, shaped like Christmas trees – a dangling forest of them.

Ignoring this strange detail, I extended a hand towards the pillow. "I'm holdin' a cairt," I said. "The ace a' spades. Look carefully. Here's its top side. Here's its bottom. Can ye see anythin' else?"

From the pillow, a voice said feebly: "No."

"Okay. I'm gonnae use ma magic wand. I'm gonnae make this cairt levitate." I set the card on my palm and prodded it with the plastic wand that was part of the Young Magician's Kit I'd received last Christmas. "Watch!"

Attached to the back of the card was a transparent, almost invisible strip of plastic. Only the middle of the strip was stuck to it, though. By gently pressing the base of my thumb and the base of my pinkie against the strip's two loose ends, I could make the strip bend upwards. This, in turn, lifted the card an inch off my hand.

"Abracadabra!" I shouted. "Behold! It levitates!"

"Amazing," croaked the voice. "May I see?" A hand emerged from under the quilt and touched my hand as it grasped at the card. Simultaneously, the quilt slipped back and exposed more of the face.

As soon as I processed what I felt and saw, I screamed. Then I turned and fled towards the door. Spooked by the dark, stifling room, Wullie and Bob promptly screamed and fled too. We hurtled past the woman, onto the landing, down the staircase, out through the front door. We careered down the avenue and didn't halt until we were on the street outside the gate.

"Whit," panted Bob, "did ye see, Johnnie?"

I decided I couldn't have seen what I thought I'd seen. Therefore, I had to believe in the only possible rational explanation. "He... He wis really sick, Bob. He looked terrible."

He'd certainly looked that.

\*\*\*

A few weeks later, an entry appeared in the 'deaths' column of our local newspaper. It announced that 'Peter Harold Bradford' had died 'peacefully at home after a long and bravely-endured illness.'

\*\*\*

You can't keep secrets in a small Scottish town. Everyone knows everyone else and gossiping is the second most popular activity, after breathing. Nonetheless, I didn't learn Peter Bradford's secret until decades later.

I'd returned to see my now-elderly parents and during the visit I'd arranged to meet an old friend – not Wullie or Bob, whom I'd lost touch with long ago – for a few pints. Eventually, our conversation alighted on the topic of the tragic child who'd sickened and died in the town's posh neighborhood in the early 1970s.

My friend commented, "They did a good job of covering that up."

"What do you mean?" I asked. Not "Whit dae ye mean?" Upward social mobility had cured me of my strong Scottish accent.

"Dad was involved, obviously." My friend's father had served as the town's undertaker. "Plus the folk at the police station and the newspaper, and McDougall the GP. They pretended it was to spare the lad's family pain and embarrassment, but really it was pressure from the Chamber of Commerce. They wouldn't have got away with it today. Not with the Internet and social media. Not with modern systems for monitoring, recording, checking things."

"I don't understand."

"You never heard?"

"No."

"The prospect of bad publicity terrified them. The tweed mill was bankrupt and they planned to change the town's economy to a tourist one. Attracting holidaymakers and day-trippers. Building a new hotel. Promoting local opportunities for hillwalking and fishing. They didn't want the town in the national headlines for a real-life horror story."

"What happened?"

"The mother went mad. The father had walked out on her and the poor thing couldn't cope. Then the lad got sick, and died, but she didn't tell anyone. Kept the corpse in a bedroom. They reckoned it'd lain there for months. No wonder she ended up in a psychiatric ward—"

I recalled feeling that withered, suppurating hand and glimpsing that shriveled, moldering face. Yet it'd *touched* me, it'd *spoken* to me... And during that moment of horror, I saw something with multiple legs crawl from a cavernous nostril, descend from a ruined nose, pass a tattered black lip, arrive on some grinning teeth.

"I'll drag ye doon an' I'll *eat* ye!"

At least then I'd understood Wullie's joke.

#### About the Author:

Jim Mountfield was born in Northern Ireland, grew up there and in Scotland, and has since lived and worked in Europe, Africa and Asia. He currently lives in Singapore. His fiction has appeared in *Aphelion*, *Blood Moon Rising*, *Death Head's Grin*, *Flashes in the Dark*, *Hellfire Crossroads*, *Horla*, *Horried Magazine*, *The Horror Zine*, *Hungur*, *Schlock! Webzine*, *Shotgun Honey* and *The Sirens Call* and in half-a-dozen anthologies.

Blog: [Blood and Porridge](#)

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#### Halloween Spirit | *Radar DeBoard*

Amanda opened her front door to her elderly neighbor standing on the porch. "Mr. Wilson! What can I do for you?" she asked.

"Hi Amanda," Mr. Wilson said with a smile, "I was just walking by and noticed you don't have any Halloween decorations up."

She chuckled, "Yeah, I know. The neighbors have been teasing me for not putting any up."

"Are you going to?" he anxiously asked.

Amanda shook her head, "No, I don't feel like it this year."

Mr. Wilson gasped, "Where's your Halloween spirit?"

"I never had any to begin with," she replied with a shrug. "I don't really like Halloween."

"I see," Mr. Wilson said as he stroked his chin. "So you're not going to put up any decorations?" he asked.

"Nope. Not a single one," she replied firmly.

"That's a shame," Mr. Wilson said as he pulled a large knife out of his pants. He stabbed the blade into Amanda's gut before she could react.

Amanda fell back onto the floor and pulled herself away from the door using her arms. Mr. Wilson slowly came in after her, still brandishing the knife.

"The thing about this neighborhood Amanda," he said stepping towards her, "is that we take Halloween very seriously." He brought the knife down and stabbed her again. "It's really a shame," he said, pulling the blade out, "I really liked you."

#### About the Author:

Radar DeBoard is a horror movie and novel enthusiast who resides in Wichita, Kansas. He occasionally dabbles in writing and enjoys making dark and exciting tales for people to enjoy. He has had drabbles and short stories published in various electronic magazines and anthologies.

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## Enter 'BravoFX': A Unique Preservation of Practical Horror and Gore

*'Craving' Producer/Special Effects Artist Robert Bravo Speaks on His Passions of Character and Creature Creation*



Like any movie, there are certain essentials needed for an awesome horror film.

A solid plot. Strong characters. Good acting. And, of course, *scares*!

But if there is one key ingredient often overlooked by both viewers *and* makers of macabre cinema, it's the art of makeup and special effects (SPFX).

Horror films - at least the great ones we remember most - have always deemed its special effects as equally important as its story and character development. As legendary monster makeup artist Rick Baker once said, "There's magic when you have a really good actor in really good makeup."

For most fans of the genre, a horror movie juuust isn't a horror movie without vivid, realistic blood, guts and brains - like biting into a burger without lettuce, tomatoes and onions – and are ever appreciative of the amount of dedication poured into creating frightening imagery that will forever remain etched in our psyche.

And while computer generated imagery (CGI) and Visual Effects (VFX) are main go-to's for many horror filmmakers today, there are still *practical* special effects artists who use labs and tables instead of

or alongside screens and keyboards, carrying on the types of SPFX that many of us grew up on... and still thrill us today!

One such makeup and practical SPFX craftsman is *Robert Bravo*, effects designer for the upcoming horror/thriller *Craving* and owner of BravoFX. With a focus on creature creation, casualty simulation (gore) and character makeup, Robert's 15-year experience in the film industry also ranges from producing to promoting to teaching, making him and his work a perfect discussion topic on horror movies in this edition of *Mike Lera's Corridor of Horror*.

**Mike Lera:** Tell us about yourself and your start as a practical effects and makeup artist.

**Robert Bravo:** It's fair to say I was pre-dispositioned to an overall understanding of the entertainment world, as I was raised on tour buses with a number of high profiled musicians throughout the 80's and early 90's. Entertainment is where I've always felt safest; it's like a language that I'm fluent in. And as much as I tried to end up somewhere else, it was always my home.

I began as a producer, making feature films with a budget of 15 to 30k, which sounds like a lot of money until you realize what kind of spending goes into films. One day a really fun horror script hit my desk, but

myself and my crew had a dilemma – we simply couldn't afford to hire a traditional special effects artist. So I set out to learn what was needed and did the scenes myself, and as it turned out, I discovered my passion! That was more than 15 years ago, and I've never looked back.

**ML:** What are some of the materials you use for your work? Techniques? Work areas?

**RB:** For materials, I use a ton of mediums in my work – anything from cream makeups to foams to silicones. I also have seven different recipes for fake blood. The fun thing about special effects is that it can be made from just about anything – I've even made skin out of oatmeal before.

As for technique and work areas, I live in a nice little house in Canoga Park, CA, and converted my garage into an at-home lab, so most of my fabrication is done here and then of course I spend a lot of time on set. Technique is hard to explain, as my skill sets reflect traditional artforms as well as chemistry. I would also say my time spent learning to be a chef (I went to *Le Cordon Bleu* culinary schools) when I was younger was actually more useful than the time I spent learning proper techniques from other FX artists (sounds strange, I know).



**ML:** Tell us about your latest exciting horror film project, *Craving*, starring Felicia Rose (*Sleepaway Camp*) and Kevin Caliber (*Future Man*, *Supergirl*). How was it working with such a fine cast and crew?



**RB:** *Craving* has been a gift, as it's the first time I've produced anything in maybe seven years. It was heavy – yet great! Director Jason Horton wrote the script more than a decade ago and it just kind of sat and waited until we were ready. Basically, it's about a group of heroin addicts who take the patrons of a bar hostage and it turns out someone in the group has a monstrous secret. Incredible special effects, amazing performances! A project is never any better than the sum of its parts, and we were very lucky that there was not a single weak link, at least as I saw it.

Out of all my work, I'd say *Craving* is what I'm most proud of. I built a \$25,000 monster suit for waaaaay less! There's a practical 80's style bladder powered transformation sequence that's the most technically daunting thing I've ever done – very *American Werewolf In London* and *The Thing*. People just don't make movies like this anymore, and it was very important to me and the team that we were making the movie that we all wanted to see, and practical effects were a big part of that.

**ML:** Tell us about the different clashes between practical special effects and digital effects used in horror movies today.

**RB:** I think special effects work best when there's a marriage between visual effects (digital) and practical effects. There's a reason the dinos in the first Jurassic Park movie still look better than a lot of what's being done today. Everything is circumstantial and I can't say I don't prefer practical effects. But sometimes,

when executed well, be it for safety, budget or (speaking honestly) limitations of my practical artform, you just can't do *everything* without VFX.



**ML:** Whose work would you say you admire most?

**RB:** There's a few strong answers here but for different reasons. My favorite creature artist is Patrick Tatopoulos. His work is just sexy; not in a "Oh, you're so attractive" way, but like a new car – it's very clean and smooth, yet still anatomical. I'm also quite fond of Gary Tunncliffe, more so because he very clearly loves what he does. His work is fun and that fun is contagious.



**ML:** It seems you have helped quite a number of new filmmakers with projects of modest budgets. From a special effects standpoint, what advice can you offer novice filmmakers requiring a healthy amount of SPFX? What are some ways they can make a "watchable" film without busting their budget?

**RB:** I try to do at least one low to no budget film a month. I can't always, because the truth is my overhead on these materials is insane! But I try. The reason is that once upon a time people did so for me. The thing people often forget is that we [artists] are

all on the same team. I get more work in a world where there are more good projects being made so I want your film to do well.

That said, effects are expensive, often offensively so, and trust me when I say that it's the cost of *materials* that will get you. The thing to remember is that there's almost always a cheap way to do things, however, you need to adjust the rest of your movie shoot to accommodate your low budget. For example, you can get medical rolled cotton and slip latex and build up your wounds and/or appliances, but you have to be careful how you light it and how you shoot it. Having a budget offers freedom, but you can make things very watchable without the money so long as you have a plan and realistic expectation.

#### About Mike Lera:

Mike Lera is a Los Angeles-based author, screenwriter and journalist whose horror fiction can be found in over a dozen anthologies, including *All Dark Places 2*, *Horror USA: California* and Rod Serling Books' *Submitted For Your Approval*. He has also published with such prominent magazines as *Famous Monsters of Filmland* and *The Literary Hatchet*. Having written and produced several short horror films based on successfully published stories of his, Lera has found equal success in both the film festival and streaming service circuit with his screen work. When not scaring people, Lera scavenges comic/martial art/horror cons for anything to wear, hang, tac, shelf and add to his geek shrine.



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COMING 2023



"Why do they call him the Nowhere Man?" Jackson asked.

"Because, no one's ever seen the guy," Reed said, peering through the bushes at the decrepit house across the street. "The guy's lived there like a hundred years and not even his neighbors have ever seen him."

Jackson looked up at the second floor windows. A gray dust covered them like an icy frost. A faint light flickered within, and Jackson thought he saw something pass in front of it. "How do we know he's even in there?"

"The bowl of candy on the front porch," Reed said. "I told you. No one sees the guy, but every Halloween he puts a bowl of candy on the porch. It's good stuff too. Peanut butter cups, chocolate bars—full size."

"If he never leaves, how does he get that stuff?"

"I don't know, he just does," Reed said. "Then he puts the bowl out, but no one ever sees him do it."

Jackson looked near the front door. "There's no bowl."

"Not yet, but that's why we're here early." Reed moved more of the branches out of his line of sight as he spoke. "We're going to catch him putting it out."

Jackson peered across the street. The sun was setting, but there was still enough light to get a good look. The ripped mesh screen over the storm door revealed a slab of wood with every bit of pain peeled away. Disheveled steps descended the porch to a cracked and uneven walkway that was a breeding ground for weeds. They broke through the concrete like tiny green hands ready to grab the ankles of anyone who stepped onto the path. Those tiny green claws had even worked their way up to the house itself, securing every inch of it in their grasp. The rest of the lawn was patchy and overgrown, stretching out for about another half acre before giving way to the fresh green grass of a neighbor's yard. It looked to Jackson as if it had been years since someone had set foot on the property—but someone was there, because in the time it took for him to look over the whole house, a bowl of candy appeared on the porch.

"Look!" Jackson shouted. He flinched back and fell onto his elbows.

Reed nearly toppled into the bush once his eyes fell on the bowl. He caught himself and shouted, "No! We couldn't have missed it!" He slapped the ground and sighed, "Now we've got to go up there."

"What?" Jackson asked. He pushed himself up to his feet and wiped dirt off the elbows of his jacket. "Why would we go up there?"

"We have to see this guy. Think about how cool it would be if we were the first ones to see him in like a hundred years."

Jackson took another peek across the street. "I don't think I want to go up there."

"Come on, people grab candy from that bowl every year, nothing happens to them."

"Like who?"

"Everyone's done it."

Jackson became aware of how quiet it was around them. Except for the rustle of the bushes, there was a faint sound of laughter. He looked both ways down the street. About a block away, a group of small kids in costumes ran in the opposite direction with their parents straggling behind. He saw them for only a brief moment and then they were gone. A sudden sense of aloneness made Jackson's heart crawl into his throat. He feared that even if either he or Reed screamed at the top of their lungs, no one would hear them. He took in a deep breath and said, "No one is heading this way."

Reed swatted his hand through the air, dismissing the fear he heard in Jackson's voice. He moved out from behind the bush and stepped into the street. "Come on," he called back over his shoulder.

Jackson followed. The sun set almost instantly, as if it slipped off a cloud and fell. Every step tightened the knots in Jackson's stomach, but he couldn't stop moving. The wind at his back hurried him across the street as if it couldn't wait for him to get to the house—a house that seemed to be changing, coming alive. The light beyond the foggy windows brightened, a yellow glow that watched them like the eyes of a cat. A party of shadows danced in the moonlight that splashed over the house. Jackson and Reed's own silhouettes joined them as they stepped onto the walkway. The other shapes seemed to welcome them with open arms. Broken concrete shifted beneath their feet as they approached the steps at the foot of the porch. At the top of the steps sat an iron bowl brimming with candy. A single phrase was etched in jagged and distorted letters along the round of the bowl, "Take one treat, or be tricked."

Reed and Jackson paused just before the first step. Jackson rose up on tip-toe and examined the bowl. It reminded him of a small caldron, something a witch would mix potions in. An ocean of candy bars, lollipops and chocolates nearly spilled over the edge. As far as Jackson could tell, it truly was the good stuff too. He spied a few of his favorite sweets peeking out over the bowl, but before he could scan them further, his eyes caught Reed climbing the first step.

"What are you doing?" Jackson said.

"Shhh," Reed hissed. He moved up the porch, hurried past the bowl and pressed his ear against the chipped and tattered front door.

"Reed, come on. Don't," Jackson pleaded.

Reed backed away from the door. He walked along the porch to one of the windows and cupped his hands around his face like a visor. He squinted, doing his best to make out any of the shapes beyond the hazy dust. "I think I see something," he said.

"What is it?" Jackson asked. He put his foot down on the first step, but jumped back once fear squashed his curiosity. "Hey, let's just take some candy and go Reed."

Reed strained harder to see through the misty glass. There were many shadows, mostly formless blobs, but one stuck out amongst the others. It stayed still within the chaos that swarmed around it. It wasn't a *something*, but a *someone*. Reed was sure of it. He could feel their stare—watching him as he watched, wanting to be caught. Reed tried to wipe some of the grime from the window but it didn't help. After a while, the shadow seemed to dissipate into the others, and the shape was gone. Reed waited a few seconds longer and then gave up.

"What a waste of time," Reed said. He kicked the siding just below the window like the loser of a child's game. "I can't believe we missed him." Reed stomped back along the porch and looked down at the bowl. He snarled at it and pulled his leg back like a football kicker. Jackson flinched back in anticipation of the explosion of candy heading his way, but just before the follow through, Reed stopped. His foot slowly lowered back down and the frustration in his face shifted to a smile. He plunged his hand in and filled his palm with treats.

Jackson's eyes widened. "It says take one Reed!"

"Who cares?" Reed said. He stuffed his right pocket with candy and then dug back in for enough to fill his left. "He's not coming out. Let's grab as much as we can, at least make this worth it."

When the pockets of Reed's jeans overflowed, he started filling his windbreaker. He unzipped his jacket halfway and tossed candy bars inside. He pawed the bowl indiscriminately, his hand moving through the sea of candy like a ravenous shark as he pulled out handful after handful. No matter how much he took though, the bowl never seemed to lose a single piece. Reed leaned in further, dunking his entire arm beneath the candy, reaching deeper than the bottom of the bowl seemed to allow. Suddenly, he slowed his pace. "I think I feel something," he said. Then, he was jerked forward like a hooked fish.

Reed shrieked when his forehead smacked against the edge of the bowl. His free hand found the rim and he gripped it with white knuckles. Suddenly his lower body lifted into the air, his legs flapping like two fish out of water. He stared down at the candy like a swimmer taking a nose-dive and his head dipped in. Candy filled his mouth as he screamed. His cheek chafed against the inside of the bowl as his face sunk beneath the orange and yellow wrappers. He lost his hold on the rim, and Reed's screams were gone. Soon, his scuffed sneakers were all that was left. Reed slowly sank until the candy swallowed those too.

For a while, Jackson stood silently. He waited for the dream to pass, for Reed to pop his head out of the candy and yell, "gotcha", or for some hidden camera crew to reveal itself. Nothing happened though. He was alone with the whistling wind, the faint sound of trick-or-treaters in the distance, and a moaning creek as the front door opened. Jackson's eyes went there, and though he saw nothing, a voice from within hissed, "Take one."

The voice circled Jackson. It echoed over and over until the wind carried it back into the house. Through the open door, Jackson stared into a world devoid of all shape and color. It was endless darkness—nowhere at all. Every second his eyes lingered felt like a moment closer to being nowhere himself. "Take one," the voice said, "or be tricked." This time, Jackson didn't hesitate. He flew up the steps and took a single wrapped-up peanut butter cup from the bowl that swallowed his friend.

As soon as Jackson stuck the candy in his pocket, he ran. He dashed across the walkway before the little green hands could get a grip on his ankles and leapt into the street, hurdling the curb like a track star. He sprinted in the direction of the trick-or-treaters he'd seen earlier. His legs pumped furiously, every part of him bursting with adrenaline. Surprisingly, his panic started to melt away. Then Jackson wasn't surprised at all because he couldn't remember why he'd been so panicked in the first place. He stopped running, and shoved his hands in his pockets as he caught his breath.

As he walked through the crisp Halloween night, he looked over his shoulder and saw a rickety house that shrank as he moved further toward town. He never noticed it before. The house seemed to have come out of nowhere. He wondered if anyone ever tried trick-or-treating there. He thought about it as he unwrapped the peanut butter cup from his pocket and munched on it. Jackson decided he wasn't going to be the first to try.

#### About the Author:

Joe Giatras is the author of *The Ghost Writer*, published in the anthology *Between the Cracks*, as well as *Friends Even After the End*, *What I Have Done* and *Watching* from issues 33, 38 and 39 of *The Sirens Call Zine*. He lives in the suburbs of Chicago, Illinois with his wife, son, three dogs and two cats.

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"Guy's, you're not gonna believe what I found," Terri exclaimed as she slid into the booth Meryl and Joy were already sitting at. The girls met every month for a girls-night-out to assure they didn't fall out of touch. As longtime friends, they'd seen too many others lose contact, and didn't want that to happen to their tight-knit trio. After all, they'd grown up together, been bridesmaids at each other's weddings, thrown baby showers for one another, lent an ear when one of them caught their husband cheating, and a shoulder to cry on as the ink dried on divorce papers. These ladies had run the gambit together and weren't about to let time, partners, or jobs tear them apart.

After ordering a round of drinks, Meryl prompted, "So dish. What did you find?"

Terri, beaming with mischievous pride, began to tell the ladies about an ad she'd seen for a Halloween concert that was taking place right in their home town. It was set to be the underground bash of the season. All attendees had to dress in classic monster costumes, and since they were looking for something to do on Halloween night, why not go? The others were enthusiastic and asked Terri to get the details.

Terri, being Terri, told them she'd already looked everything up. The tickets were cheap enough at \$75 each, one cover band would be playing the full set—they were known for favoring both glam and metal rock music—and from the scuttlebutt she'd heard, they were pretty good.

Everyone thought it was a great idea, so Terri pulled out her phone and ordered the tickets right there.

"Now all we have to do is figure out who is going to be which monster," she said with a slight giggle in her voice. "I want to be a vampire, if no one minds. I want to be sexy but scary, too. I'm thinking a long, tight, low-cut black dress. My make-up will be exaggerated blood-red eye shadow, long thick lashes, and dark hollows for my cheeks on deliciously pale skin. What' ya think?"

"Sounds wicked," Joy answered with a sparkle in her eye. After a messy divorce, and half a year of hiding from the opposite sex, she was ready to get back in the game. "I could go as a Werewolf, but not just any Were, a slinky one in a furry catsuit, with huge fangs and the cutest puffy tail! Okay, maybe less cute and more menacing, but I'll let my makeup take care of that part. Single fangs, or a full mouth appliance?"

"Definitely full mouth," Terri interjected. "You don't want to be mistaken for a furry vampire!" The ladies laughed hysterically at the joke, even going so far as to suggest that if Joy was going as a cute Werewolf, Terri could add sparkles to her Vamp wear. Another round of laughter before Terri asked Meryl what she was going as.

She bit her lip, and answered, "I want to be a vampire, but Terri already chose that, so I'll go with my second choice, The Bride of Frankenstein. I'll wear a long, white bridal dress, platform shoes, and do my hair up and wiry like that iconic shot from the film. And, of course, I'll slather the *come and get me* make-up on!"

All three women were beyond excited about their choices and drank well into the night talking about the upcoming Halloween Concert.

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Halloween night arrived, and right on time, Joy—driving her 1957 powder blue Chevy—picked up her friends at their houses. Everyone exclaimed how fantastic they all looked to each other.

Terri had the tickets. Black letting printed on orange paper, of course.

*HALLOWEEN CONCERT, Monday, October 31, 10:00 PM  
Row J, Seats 2 through 4—no late arrivals permitted!*

Once they found parking, they went into the concert hall and after grabbing a beer, they went looking for their assigned seats. The hall was packed. At exactly 10:00 PM, the lights went down, and they heard thundering music through the fog that enveloped the stage. As it dissipated, the band appeared, and the place let out a hellacious roar. The first set was loud and awesome. The lead singer descended from the main stage onto a platform that jutted out into the audience. He was extremely sexy in his tight black pants and had a deeply powerful voice. The lead guitarist swung his luscious mane of hair around as he wailed on his guitar and looked like a bonified rock star. The entire band was great, and all costumed as creatures of the night. The girls were seriously impressed with their professional make-up and sound. This was shaping up to be a spectacular Halloween!

They played cover songs of famous bands like Metallica and Queen. The audience had a wild time dancing and singing along. The applause was deafening. Everyone was having a great time. The smell of pot was so heavy that you didn't need to light up to get high.

At midnight, the band called for the last song. The girls didn't recognize this one, it was titled *Good Night, Sleep Tight*. But they were having such a blast, they didn't care.

When the song finished, all the band members jumped from the stage and body surfed the crowd. As they rode the wave of excited hands, they feasted on the audience in a frenzy. Joy felt a severed arm hit her foot and let out a blood curdling screech. Body parts were flying through the air, people screamed for their lives as blood flew in all directions. Realizing what was happening, Terri grabbed Joy and Meryl and dragged them through the crowd to the closest exit, barely making it out in time. They fled to the car, their costumes in shreds. Others were not as fortunate; many lives were lost that night.

Badly shaken, they headed to their local bar. The bouncer, who was dressed as a Juggernaut, made a joke about a ragtag fleet of sexy ghouls. They suggested he catch the local cover band they just saw. Slamming back shots to forget the massacre, they couldn't even bring themselves to talk about it. They just sat there in shock until Joy piped up. "That's the last time we do something like that," the others nodded, "At least it wasn't false advertising." With that, they each clinked glasses and downed a double.

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

Gloria Bobrowicz is a writer, editor, and publisher from the beautiful countryside of western New Jersey surrounded by farmland and vineyards. She has been a horror lover from an early age. During her free time she enjoys writing and reading whenever possible. Another passion and creative outlet she enjoys is crocheting and making other homemade gifts for friends and family.

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#### **Apartment 251 | Brian Rosenberger**

They were at it again. Damn neighbours creating a racket at this ungodly hour. The sheer nerve of them. Roy told his wife Loretta to stay put. He'd handle things. Not the Police. Not the landlord.

The noise was worse than a cat in heat. Were they butchering some cow in sacrifice? Roy pounded on the door, causing it to open. Turns out it wasn't a cow but Johnson, the tenant in Apartment 248. He was another odd bird. Night owl. Nude and hanging from the ceiling. Johnson smiled.

"Welcome to the party."

The other partiers showed Roy their knives.

#### **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*.

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It was nearly four o'clock when Alan began locking up his shop for the day. Bayard's Guitars and More was becoming less and less, as there wasn't a lot of foot traffic anymore. His online sales had continued steadily though. That was good news, as Father would surely ask him about his endeavor. Having set down roots on the other side of town, Alan found Potrero Hill more to his liking.

The drive home had him thinking about their relationship, or rather, lack thereof. He hadn't had contact with him in the past few months, which in his opinion was good. The confounded questions regarding money bored him. His father was all consumed by it, having retired from Wright Technologies, the company he and his mother had helped build together. They made a great team until six months ago when she stepped out in front of an errant driver and was killed instantly. Snap. Neck broken.

Baring the emotional brunt of this fatality, Father decided to take a long look at their lives and all they had created. Alan felt he was the least favorable of these things. Rather than step into the position as CEO as he had imagined for him, Alan instead continued with his love of music after graduating from Stanford with a degree in Design and Technology. Not his chosen field, but it was required if he wanted to satisfy his family. Now that his mother was gone, everyone was a lot less happy.

Everything had been going according to his father's plans until the incident, as he called it. An incident? Alan thought that was a crass way to describe losing your life partner. He couldn't understand how his father was coping so well with such a blow.

Alan, having visited the family doctor the day before, underwent a full examination, finding nothing wrong. They could not explain his sluggishness and restless nights. Chalking it up as the after-effects of losing his mother; was sent on his way with a piece of paper that listed the names of about ten psychiatrists, which he quickly tucked into his dashboard. He wasn't a big sharer.

The radio blared as he thought about that piece of paper with all the names on it. He distracted himself periodically by catching glimpses of himself and his mod sunglasses in his rearview mirror.

"Good afternoon San Francisco! It is 4:30 and time for your drive home. To celebrate the 70th anniversary of Height Ashbury, here it is folks....Scott McKenzie's... San Francisco...."

Alan pushed the buttons on the dash of his red, classic Jaguar XKE and hummed along; drowning out the idea of the psychiatrists.

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"Merry Dudley!" Alan exclaimed, upon arriving home to discover the table set with wildflowers in a vase and the good china, procured from the thrift store down the street.

"Boo!" She exclaimed, appearing from behind the antique grandfather clock, a vision in a robin egg blue baby doll style dress, her strawberry blonde hair pinned back on either side by small bird-shaped barrettes.

"You cooked?" He asked, pulling her into his arms for a quick embrace.

"Not at all." She smiled. "I got us take out from that Indian place down the street you like so much."

"So good," Alan said, pulling out a seat from the table. "I am famished."

"Before you sit down, this came for you." She said, sliding an envelope towards him. "Notice anything?"

Alan sighed, as he read out loud the Nob Hill address to his childhood home, meaning one thing.... Father.

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They finished their meal in practical silence as Alan could barely digest the contents of the letter, let alone the meal. A summoning by Father was never a good thing. Especially regarding the details of his trust fund.

"What could he possibly do?" Merry asked, twirling a strand of hair, leaning back into one of the mismatched kitchen chairs. "You turn 25 next week. He has to give you access. It said so in your mother's will."

Alan drew in a sharp breath, shaking his head. Something was amiss.

"You don't know him, Merry. There is always a catch. I am sure he found something to betray me with."

"I may not know him well, but your mom was a lovely person. Despite what he may think of you, she loved you. Setting you up nicely was what she wanted."

He leaned towards her and pulled her out of her chair and into his lap.

Smiling, he touched her soft strands of hair, wanting this moment to be infinite. Although they hadn't been together long, he had never felt such a connection.

"She did just that, by introducing us. Bringing you by the shop that day changed my life and I will be forever grateful."

"You can't avoid him or this conversation forever, Alan," she said. "Go over there tomorrow after work and see Big Al. Even without the money, isn't a relationship with him important to you?"

"You care a lot about that, don't you? Us getting along. Why?"

"I don't know." Merry shrugged, linking her arms around his neck. "It just seems easier for everyone involved. I never really knew my family. Color me intrigued."

\*\*\*

Alan had stayed at the shop later than expected and it was nightfall by the time he made his way to Nob Hill. He stood outside the house, remarking on how nothing had changed. Father always wanted things to stay the same, even down to the color blue that he chose for the shutters.

He let himself in with the key, notably, he had not bothered to change the locks.

"Hello," Alan called out. Standing in the foyer he stared at his reflection of dark hair and eyes in the mirror, as he had hundreds of times before. Sadness crept into the image as he heard Father hollering from behind him to join him in the study.

"I always hated this room," Alan said, settling into an overstuffed leather chair.

"I am glad you could squeeze me into your busy schedule." Big Al, huffed, as he moved about the business of fixing himself a drink. "Want one? You look like shit."

"I haven't been sleeping well." Alan sighed, running his hand through his hair. "You don't look so well yourself."

The sound of the whiskey rushing over the ice brought back memories.

"We all have our vices, don't we?" Big Al, smiled. "This happens to be mine."

"Why so cryptic? What was with the handwritten letter bidding me here?"

"Your birthday." He said cheerily, "I would like to have a small gathering of our friends here at the house for a celebration. Would you and your lovely Merry be up for that?"

"Maybe," Alan answered. "She would probably enjoy meeting some new people. We don't go out much. Most of the time she spends tinkering around the house."

"I like that about her." Big Al said, tossing back his drink and proceeding to fix another. "Women today are too short-sighted. They believe taking care of their man is archaic."

"How so?" Alan asked. "Mom was all about family, yet had a great career."

"Family." Big Al chuckled. "It was her everything. She wanted only the best for you. I think it is time that we discuss your future."

"I agree. Once my birthday arrives, I will have full access to my trust and be out of your hair. That ought to make you happy. I know my choices didn't pan out to your liking."

"Very True." Alan Sr, said, nodding his head. "I think you will find that all of that will soon change."

"How so? Alan asked. "Are you going to perform a miracle?"

"It wouldn't be the first time." Big Al said, taking position behind his desk.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Precisely that. Your mother... she was a brilliant scientist, but I... I was the dreamer. Dreams are important aren't they?"

"This, coming from you?" Alan scoffed. "I think you need to slow down on the whiskey."

"I need to tell you, son. I need to tell you tonight." Big Al said, his face becoming ashen.

Alan had never seen him like this before. It was as if he were losing himself.

"Your mother was a brilliant scientist and I was the dreamer. She couldn't see beyond the present, but me... I could do that. I loved what we'd created together. That was my fatal flaw."

"What are you getting at?" Alan asked. "You are starting to repeat yourself. Father, you are making no sense."

"She was a brilliant scientist and I was the dreamer. Working all the time together, nonstop. The years just drifted away. Soon she was too old. Still, she desired a family. We were designing a prototype for a new model of AI. The X67. This model, unlike the others, was designed with a heart that beat almost identical to the one in the X66, which unfortunately failed. In particular, the irregular heartbeat manifested by the inability to remain a functioning motor when wet. The X67 is superior in that respect. That and the fact that I can control the rhythm."

Alan began to rise from the chair. "This is nonsense. You are drunk and rambling. I am going home."

"Sit back down!" Big Al commanded. "You need to know your options."

"Options? What options?" Al hissed. "You are making it quite clear that I am going to have to fight you for that trust. If I have to sell the shop to get the money to do so I will."

"I wouldn't worry about the money, son. You have to turn 25 before you collect, and at the rate you are going, well, I'd be aware of what I have to say."

Alan leaned again on the edge of the desk as Big Al tossed a large gift-wrapped box towards him.

"I know it is early, but go ahead, open it."

"This is absurd." Alan sighed, gingerly opening the brightly patterned paper. As he looked inside he found several odd items. Magazine clippings and a few albums from his mother's vast collection. "So what is this? I don't get it?"

"It is you. Everything that you are." Big Al said. "Everything you can continue to be."

"Jesus!" Al exclaimed. "I never could talk to you when you were drunk."

"He has nothing to do with this." Big Al said, tears forming in the corners of his eyes. "Really? Is that all you remember about me? Think back son, what else do you so keenly recall about your childhood?"

Al shook his head, suddenly adrift in his thoughts. Why was he doing this to him?

"I know you hate me, Father, but why are you being so especially cruel?"

"Your mother forgot one thing when we were in that lab together." Big Al continued. "That I controlled the patent on her son."

Al stared into the depths of the box, noting the magazine clippings that bore an uncanny resemblance to him. The X66 has all the makings of a real boy..... The X66 is the perfect new member of your family.... Hair and eye colors of anyone's choosing.... The Hollies, Riding the Carousel album stared back at him from the side of the box.

Alan gulped. "So how long do I have? Until you shut my heart down completely?"

Big Al wiped at his eyes and shook his head. "Not long, I am afraid. Just as the X66, you have failed to complete my family. Your mother was going to sue me for your patent, I discovered her on the phone one day with our lawyers. I couldn't let her plant more noxious memories of me into you. Always divided for our attention she programmed you to favor her. You were supposed to be mine. The ability to divert from my original settings boggled me. Making bad decisions should not have been an option, yet you bought that horrible music store and kept it to yourself. I think you have a glitch in your system that made you become one of those horrible mod types that your mother longed for.

"I am the X67?" Alan asked softly. "Wow. I guess the incident was more of a plan than anything else, correct? You got rid of her, didn't you?"

"Yes, my son. She was getting in our way. In the way of the big things we can achieve together." Big Al said, gripping his shoulder. "Let me fix this. This glitch. I will program you to be everything wonderful. I will give you memories that will make you ever so happy."

Alan jerked away from him. "Don't touch me! I am not your son. I will never be your son! You destroyed Mom and want to do the same to me"

"If you refuse this process I am afraid I will have no choice but to slow your heartbeat even more. The X66 was less disagreeable."

Alan took the box from the desk and headed towards the door, giving Big Al a final glance

"Whatever program you installed in me, it surely didn't include loving you."

"The patent is good for another week!" Big Al yelled after him. "Love is the fatal flaw."

\*\*\*

Al sat in the car outside the house for quite a while. The gift box sitting beside him. Reaching onto the glove compartment he pulled out the list of psychiatrists' names and put it in his jacket pocket. He could hear music pouring from inside the house, the smell of freshly brewed coffee wafting through the windows.

Without hesitation, he exited the car and found his way inside to the safety of his own house and Merry's arms.

"Did you talk with him?" She asked. "How did it go?"

"Not so good." He sighed, holding her and breathing in the scent of her hair.

"What's in the box?" She asked, biting her lip. "Early present?"

Al scratched the back of his neck and shook his head as she let go of him and examined the contents of the box.

"There's some cool stuff in here," Merry remarked, pulling out a poster from BLOW-UP full size. "I love this one. Fashion is everything. I screened this with your mom at the festival featured at that old movie theater downtown."

"Funny, she never mentioned that," Alan said, his phone suddenly vibrates. Glancing down, he stared in awe at the message from Big Al. "I control the patent to the X68 as well...."

"What's wrong honey?" Merry asked, rolling up the poster, her blue eyes fixed eerily on him. "You don't look well."

Al tossed the poster aside and pulled Merry in close for a hug, caressing her hair. Their two hearts beat in tandem.

### About the Author

Nicole L. Nevel-Steighner is a writer from Western Pennsylvania that enjoys dabbling in the horror and neo-noir genres. Her love for eccentric people shines through her work. She lives outside of Pittsburgh with her husband Gregory, mother and three crazy cats.

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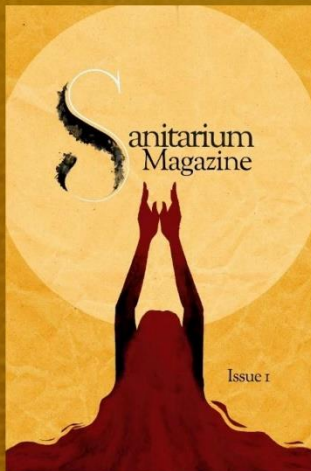
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# anitarium Magazine

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A sleek crescent moon skimmed the scarlet sunrise. A thin strip of white defiant to the day appeared huge against the horizon. Theo immersed himself in the view, the mountaintop's panoramic spread in all cardinal directions. Beneath the dense fog, the mountainous forest of central Pennsylvania was rich with the glory of autumn.

"Theo we need to start." Erica stood next to the fire, the flames licking the cool air, as her auburn hair caught the breeze.

Theo nodded, and approached the fire with reverence, "I'm ready."

The dawn broke over the range with the first rays of light caught in her bright eyes. "We'll find Brianne soon."

The disappearance of his sister last year left the family in panic and her coven in chaos. The investigation stalled, forcing Theo to continue forward. "I feel it as well."

The fire beckoned. Theo returned to the moment his quest began, finding Brianne's secreted journals and videos that brought him here. The pair stood opposite with the fire in between.

In unison, as they rehearsed, the ritual began. "Hecate, Dark Goddess of the Moon, we come before you as humble petitioners, accept us into your fold."

The fire crackled as they undressed, and tossed their designer clothing into the flames. In a few easy steps, they stood skyclad before Hecate and themselves. It was the way of the goddess, how Brianne practiced her faith, and they followed.

"Just like our dedication, Theo." Erica chuckled.

"Not quite." Theo corrected. They performed the dedication rite under the Full Moon closest to the spring equinox. A simple ritual compared to this final one. There was no going back afterward. For everyone, it would be an ending and beginning.

The fire consumed their clothing, sending off black smoke into the air. Only when the last embers burnt down to nothing it was time to begin the second part. They proceeded down into the valley remaining nude until completing the Great Rite.

"You can feel it!" Erica pressed up against an Oak, her face gleaming under the broken shafts of light through the canopy. "This tree has character. It's like a whisper, you can almost hear the words."

In a way, Theo admired her sensitivity towards the supernatural. A true gift Erica didn't truly appreciate. "Yeah. Maybe, afterward, you will learn their names."

"Everything has a spirit name," Brianne said. You think we'll see something?"

She turned around, resting against the center of the tree's trunk. Theo rightly found her amazingly beautiful. Erica kept a near perfect athletic body. But this wasn't merely a physical trial.

"So, now we're just ourselves..." Their nudity signified a return to a natural state, they didn't hide from worldly things. Being truthful during this part was essential. "What were you to Brianne?"

Erica eased off a laugh, "She was everything, friend, lover, teacher, coven mate. Brianne was amazing, revealed the world behind the veil, the paranormal, and my connection to it... I never felt so in control of my life, she took that away from me."

In the distance, birds cried out, the wind freed orange and red leaves that swirled around them.

"She said I wasn't ready. After I completed a year and a day, she might initiate me. Well, I showed her. Just under seven months." Her right eyebrow arched upward as Erica flashed a conceited smile. "Tell me, Theodoros, why did you lie about sharing the same beliefs with Brianne?"

"She said you're very intuitive and insightful, but were too forceful. You lacked patience and were obsessed with control." Theo honored the ritual's spirit and rules. "I wanted to get to know you first."

Erica's eyes became haunted, fueled by horrible memories, "If you lived my life, you want that now. After tonight I'll have control and never be afraid."

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Midmorning they entered the second part of the rite. They found a stream with wide banks of rich brown sediment that was several inches deep. The heavy mud pasted onto their bodies in a thick coat. Theo watched Erica mix it into her hair clinging around her head.

"How do I look?" She made a statuesque pose in the frayed sunlight. "When do I get to see the other side?"

There were so many names for it; the supernatural, the paranormal, the veil, where all attempts to name the ethereal. Theo knew her desire to blend into it. Those feelings never fade. "You change as the ritual progresses."

Glimpses at first, then you see the supernatural as it is. It sees you becoming part of it. You have entered the most dangerous part."

Erica's mannerisms signaled that change began to take hold. She jerked with each crack of a twig, the whispers lost in the wind, and the dash of lights on the edge of sight.

"It will be difficult. Your mind unravels. The essence of the supernatural infuses your soul until it ignites. You reboot to the most primal state to truly embrace the change." Most people can't accept the reality of the supernatural. Theo and his sister watched as the initiates lost themselves in the awakening.

With insolent laughing, Erica said, "Good. I'm free of an ugly life."

In the videos, Brianne mentioned Erica's reluctance to talk about her life. In the past months, she gave him hints about it being troubled.

Like an animal, Erica arched towards a faint sound. Even in quiet moments, forests were drenched in sounds. Animals were preparing for the winter ahead along with the denizens who made their hidden preparations.

Balanced between the autumn equinox and Halloween, tonight's new moon would provide powerful cleansing magic.

Erica dashed forward, breaking through the tree line forcing Theo to give chase. This phase would test her mind and spirit. She didn't make it easy to keep pace. He envied her as an outsider to experience the resetting of self and seeing the hidden world for the first time. Legacies were part of it.

For some time Erica ran in a pattern. A hard and fast run through the forest until collapsing to the ground, rolling the leaves and mosses to mix into her muddy skin, and then she would rest quietly against a bare outcrop of rock or something for several minutes. Theo began to fear she wouldn't fully awaken, claimed by the supernatural as a feral creature. After the third time, as Erica embraced an Oak tree, "Everything speaks. I hear them. Their stories. Their names. They know me."

"Yes, you're a part of it. To see the supernatural, one is seen by it."

Erica turned around, and arched against the trunk, almost melding into the tree. Half of her face hid behind hair interlaced with mud, twigs, leaves, and a blue feather. "I see you."

Theo nodded. Carefully, he moved forward towards her, "Yes."

Erica breathed heavily, euphoric with each gasp of air, "You lied, both of you. Why?"

He climbed up beside her enthralled by the raw power she held. "We are Legacies, born aware of the supernatural. We are like the others."

"Others?" She hungered for an answer.

"You know... The Fae. Vampires. All the creatures of legend exist just on the rim of human awareness." Theo paused and forced himself from Erica's presence. She had strength, and raw power ready for shaping, but hurt and anger tainted it. "Our family worships the gods of our ancestors, The Olympians. Brianne follows Hecate, my patron is Hermes."

Lost to joy and revelation, Erica began laughing, "The first time we met at the coven. She was the real deal. The rest were pretenders."

"Their beliefs weren't."

"The spells we cast never worked. Nothing ever happened. I caught her doing amazing things."

Theo warned his sister about her discretions, "She was careless."

"Yet, Brianne did talk with me about it. Hints of what exists around us. When she said I wasn't ready..." Erica walked away from the tree and stepped closer to Theo. "My past got in the way."

It didn't take a special sight to see that Erica kept a terrible secret. She guarded it closely, yet cracks emerged to give trickles of the truth. A part of him didn't want to know. "Erica, an essential part of this ritual requires you to break with the past. To let go of anything that burdens you."

A rush of air thundered through the forest. It struck them with a hardened coldness that went deep into their bodies. Theo recognized it as a sign that someone noticed them. As the sun began to descend into the west, it was time to move on to the final part of the ritual.

They found the site, a mountain waterfall that fed a good-sized pond to bathe and wash away the earth. The recent thunderstorms provided a good flow of cold water. Theo watched Erica's hand scrub mud off her body. She kept dipping her long hair into the water and squeezing it several times, Erica paused, "I can't let it go."

Theo cleared his face, "Awakening is a powerful change. It forces you to become aware of the reality around and within you. It is best to be at peace."

"I don't think that's going to be me."

"Being in peace means you are in control. Whatever happened in your past doesn't dictate the present. Our life experiences make up who we are, but we are in control."

"If you knew what happened. How they hurt me. Pain so awful I buried so deep it fossilized. I want to be in control, Theo. I won't be hurt again."

Theo felt for her, but she needed to listen, "Erica, we invoked primal beings. They see us now. We shouldn't annoy them."

Erica rose out of the water, stepping onto the bank. Shafts of sunlight came through the forest at hard angles casting a golden hue of evening light on her. She closed her eyes, "I feel it. Just beyond my reach. Who are they?"

He joined her, his hands slipped into hers, "Hard to say. They aren't here for me."

"No chance of joining your pantheon? I always liked Artemis." Flashing a coy grin, she stepped away from him.

"There is a chance. It depends who is watching you." Theo hoped she took in the lessons of the past months. Although those teachings were a means to an end, he wanted the best for Erica. "It's time for the final part."

"I'm ready." She said with gleaming eyes.

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They returned to the mountaintop in time to prepare the final part of the awakening ritual. Theo prepared the area with materials they brought up in the morning. The cold wind raged around them as Erica stood on the peak, facing the setting sun. She recited the final prayers of the rite. He felt the presence of higher powers.

He consecrated the ground by scattering sea salt followed by water and the ashes of the burnt-out fire. Soon, all the uncertainty and anxiety would end. Tonight will bring a joyful new beginning for them.

"You're ready?" Theo asked.

Erica turned around, her body flushed and sweating despite the chilled air. "Yes."

Theo turned his attention to the fire pit, packed with dry wood. He recited a fire invocation, the wood erupted into a blaze against the wind. The fire burned between them.

He began the rite, "Do you come by your own free will?"

Erica nodded, her face bright red by the firelight, "Yes."

Brianne recognized Erica's potential. She told Theo that this woman could awaken on her own. That would be dangerous if unguided. Erica could go mad with the revelation. If that would occur, deadly consequences could follow.

"Do you surrender yourself to the power that claims you?" The hexagram and glyphs kept dark forces away. Only the proper beings are here.

"Yes." She panted. "My mind. It's on fire."

Erica's awakening was straining her body, mind, and soul as she became aware of the whole world. It was time for the Great Rite to finish her journey. He took her by the hands to lay down beside the fire. They spent the last month practicing it with chalice and athame, cup and wand, and other means.

He moved on top of her, the heat from her skin burned him. Theo recalled several times the Great Rite was discussed by the uninformed. Most people snickered at its sexual nature, immature minds unaware of the primal power it unleashes. Modern traditions had their diluted versions, but at least there was reverence for it. Even this version was a reflection of the ancient rite.

They needed to synchronize, first physically with their breathing and their heart rates. The spirit came quickly like a high fever enveloping their bodies. Their hands gripped and clinched tight that the nails broke skin allowing blood to mix.

Theo looked into Erica's eyes, now truly open and seeing her patron. Hecate claimed her. The moment arrived. They climaxed together into a terribly powerful moment that they merged in spirit and mind of perfect clarity.

Theo thought of Brianne, "Where is my sister?"

"Hecate, give me the power to punish those that caused me pain." Erica's whisper struck hard.

Exhausted, they pulled apart. Theo welcomed the cool dew on the grass. Erica stood up shaking, "Hecate is here."

"Yes. What did you do to Brianne?"

"She fine. I needed to show her and you that I am ready... Hecate is angry with me. No, she is disappointed. Why?"

Theo felt better standing up in the wind. The goddess' displeasure stained the air. "We don't make demands Erica. We surrender ourselves to the guidance of a higher power."

"I can't move!" Erica yelled as her body began to contort.

"I'm sorry." He didn't know how Hecate's judgment would unfold. "Please where is Brianne?"

Erica's arms thrust skyward, her legs slammed tight as her feet were sucked into the earth. Panting she said, "In my camper."

Theo stayed with Erica out of pity and fascination. Her body hardened a dark brown as her arms began to branch out with bright green leaves at the fingers. Mere minutes passed, as the leaves grew large and turned to the deep copper of fall.

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Theo found Brianne in the camper, alive and unharmed. After getting her freed from Erica's shackles and going through an emotional reunion, his sister insisted on going back to the mountaintop.

Looking over the transformed Erica, Brianne said, "It's not just a punishment. Hecate is healing her. In time, she'll release Erica."

"Erica has great potential."

Brianne nodded, "I saw that in her. Hecate led me to recruit Erica. I just underestimated her pain."

"She never explained that to me," Theo said.

"I tried to get her to open up about it. But Erica couldn't do it. Maybe, now that Hecate is listening she can." Brianne turned to him, "I can forgive her. Erica is a good person coming from a bad place. She deserves to be free."

### 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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### Forgotten | *Miracle Austin*

Mr. Marty Jenkins never made time for himself to clean or sort through his polluted basement, until one Halloween weekend, after he retired from teaching sixth grade math for over forty years. He unburied a black and golden chest, almost half the size of a twin bed, from underneath a gigantic pile of vintage clothing and warped boxes. It had three combination locks—one in front and two on both sides. A book flew off a shelf and landed into his open, trembling hands. The pages flipped to the last page with sets of numbers and crooked initials of his late teen sister, RJ, appearing at the bottom. Something pounded on the inside twice and guided him to open each swinging lock.

### Slippers | *Miracle Austin*

The shining star of *El Circo Increible* belonged to Julia, the ballerina. She twirled up and down the flaming tightrope night after night, without a single pause. The ringmaster, Galileo, begged her to allow him to add a net for her safety.

"You, silly little man! You've asked me this question too many times. The crowd loves it, and they love me. I'm Julia Diaz, the most famous ballerina of all, and I won't ever need a net, because I'll never fall."

She swatted him away.

Julia was right about the crowd adoring her. They always tossed out silver coins and fluffy crimson, canary roses.

In her dressing room, some of the wealthy fans frequently left her lavish outfits or expensive tickets to travel to exotic lands when the circus was on break.

One night, after her performance, an eleven-year-old girl on rickety crutches made her way through the thick crowd to reach Julia. She had attended almost a dozen of her performances over the years, and posters of the dancer painted her walls from floor to ceiling.

That night, she was going to finally meet her.

After multiple camera shots and interviews by the news media flock, the child finally had a rare moment to meet her idol.

"Oh, Miss Julia, could you please, please sign my autograph book and take a photo with me? You're so beautiful, and I want to be just like you one day!" she shouted.

Her smile was intoxicating and full of life, although her front teeth were all missing.



Julia looked at her and gently pressed her ultraviolet tutu down with both of her hands. She then brushed her hair up with her hands to make sure not one hair was out of place in her tight bun. She hugged her sixteen-inch waist, as she bent down to the girl's height. She signed her book and took the photo, but then Julia did the most horrible thing.

Before the child shuffled away, one hop at a time, Julia whispered into her ear, "Sorry sweetie, but there will never be anyone like me. I'm your one and only. You would never cut it as a ballerina. Plus, you're not pretty at all... una niña odiosa y mendiga." She snickered and pranced away towards her dressing room.

The little girl's eyes filled with tears, and she was eventually swallowed up by the crowd.

Halloween night arrived, which was one of the most special nights of the year with everyone in costumes and fireworks.

Julia always represented the portrait of beauty, but that night, she looked absolutely breathtaking with golden glitter shimmering in her hair. Her iridescent orange and black tutu lit up with matching ballet slippers and sparkly purple ribbons, which laced up all the way to her knees.

She curtsied towards the full house and pranced slowly to begin her climb up the **713** steps.

Before she began her journey in the sky, an older lady appeared out of nowhere. A scarlet cloak with an oversized hood covered her body. She held the most unusual bouquet of swaying black roses with silver tips.

Julia couldn't take her eyes off them. She reached out to touch one, but pricked her index finger.

"Ouch!" she screamed, as she placed her finger in her mouth to suck the blood. "Get this crazy hag out of here."

The lady smiled, as two security officers escorted her out of the big top.

Julia stood at the top of the platform to prepare what she'd done over one hundred thousand times without a wobble. As she started to twirl over the flaming tightrope, she felt something sharp pulsating inside of her slippers.

She continued to spin, until she went out of control and fell, her body shattered inside.

Her fans cried out and stood to their feet.

Galileo yelled out to the workers to close the curtains immediately. He ran to her and stooped down.

Julia could barely speak, but she managed to point towards her shoes.

Tears streamed down Galileo's cheeks.

Her arms flopped down to her sides before she took her final breath.

When the stretcher arrived, Galileo helped to lift her body from the ground, and that's when he noticed thin twirling glass thorns protruding from the top and bottom of her ballerina slippers.

He gasped.

Three months later, no one showed up at *El Circo Increible*. Galileo packed up the last box in his office and found a note stuck behind a picture frame with Julia's photo on his desk. He unfolded it, and it read:

***"Sometimes beauty can be a curse—not just for one, but everyone..."***

## Ex-Change | *Miracle Austin*

Dana Juniper only had five minutes left until shift change at Chapel Woods Hospital—she'd just worked a double on Halloween Eve. As she marched towards the break room to clock out, she heard an announcement over the intercom: **Code green!**

She froze for a moment and then ran towards the hospital corridor. Rows of blood gurneys with mangled bodies lying on them rolled in.

Her ex, Ash, was one of the victims. He yelled out, "Dana... Dana!" She walked towards him staring down at the tan and blue-speckled floor, until she reached him. His face and clothes were saturated with ebony, slimy gunk.

"I'm so sorry, Dana," Ash mumbled, as his charcoal eyes bored into her.

She frowned and replied, "Why?"

"For what I did tonight... and this!"

He rose up and clawed her bare arm.

## 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.

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A shimmering fog enshrouded the land as an autumn breeze spread the musty smell of dying leaves. I gathered my cape in and hurried onward. I was late for the party. Where was that house Erin had rented for the occasion?

The faint outline of an ancient looking two-story wood house loomed ahead. It was perfect for a Halloween party.

I used the old-fashioned door knocker. A ghoul opened the door and I went inside. I hadn't recognized the ghoul nor did any of the costumed assortment of vampires, goblins, ghouls, witches, warlocks, zombies, and werewolves look familiar. I thought Erin and I had the same friends. Where was she anyway?

Cobwebs sparkled eerily in the dim candlelight that illuminated the dark decor. I was impressed with the decorations but the food displayed on the banquet table looked unappetizing. Items were shaped to resemble the sort of grotesque animals you'd find in a witch's cauldron. A few of the other guests were enjoying the food.

I decided to try the red punch bowl and dipped out a cupful. The liquid was thick and salty and tasted like—I gagged.

"Not to your liking?" One of the vampires stood beside me.

"No."

"You don't look familiar. Are you crashing the party or were you invited?"

"Do you know anyone named Erin?" I asked.

"No."

"Then I'm at the wrong party. Are you going to throw me out?"

The vampire smiled, fangs showing. "Fresh blood is always welcome. Perhaps you'll find this party more interesting."

"Well," I hesitated. "I really should find my own party."

"There is a house very similar to this one on the next street. Maybe your friends are there. Take the pathway through the woods, it's a shortcut."

"Thank you."

The gnarled bare limbs of trees reached out to each other along the narrow pathway. I heard a noise other than leaves rustling in the air and turned. Fog silhouetted the form of the vampire from the party.

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I found the right house. It was an exact duplicate of the other one. I knocked and the door opened. Erin stood there in her vampire costume.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

"I stopped for a bite on the way."

"You could have waited, I saved this for you." Erin handed me a glass. "Your favorite."

I sipped the red liquid. "That's much better than the tomato juice I had at the last party."

"You've been to another party?"

I stepped inside. "Let me tell you all about it."

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

K. A. Williams writes speculative, mystery/crime, general fiction, and poetry which has appeared in various magazines including *The Sirens Call*, *Corner Bar*, *Calliope*, *Aphelion*, and *View From Atlantis*. Under the name A. Williams she has published 2 novels - *Vampires (Good and Evil)* and *Hunters*, and *Desired Quarry*. Apart from writing, she enjoys rock music, and CYOA games



Midnight under an iron moon. On All Hollow's Eve. At the banks of a lake of metallic black. Two lovers writhe, their forms limned in silver and sweat. No breeze stirs the night, which hangs like velvet curtains in a mausoleum.

The woman straddles the man; her fingernails claw his chest. The man's hands slap at her buttocks. Perhaps a little pain mixes into their moans and gasps of pleasure. The woman throws back her head, dark hair flying. Droplets of sweat spatter the still lake, stirring the faintest of ripples.

Within the obsidian water, the moon's reflection breaks into myriad copies that sink down into inky depths. Neither the man nor the woman notice. The man cries out, then the woman. She sighs and collapses onto the blanket beside her lover. Chests rise and fall rapidly as they both hunt for breath. A small wind arrives to cool their sweat. It stirs their lank hair and expands the ripples on the lake.

The woman rises and stands sky-clad at the shoreline, her pale body luminescent. "I'm going to swim," she says.

The man murmurs agreement; his eyes are closed. He does not open them at the splash of his lover's body entering the water. He dozes. For how long, he doesn't know. When he wakes, his lover has still not returned to his side.

He calls out, thinking she has taken a walk along the shoreline. No response. He stands, calls again, then stares into the water. The breeze is stronger now, an autumn breeze with the scent of dead leaves and smoke in its grasp. He shivers at the chill. And at something else.

Tiny dots, as of candlelight, ripple deep beneath the lake. But they grow larger. They rise like slow, distant bubbles seeping up from some explosive decompression. He does not like those lights. Are they some kind of bioluminescent fish? He's never heard of such inhabiting this lake.

Faint alarms begin to beat in his heart and brain. Forgetting his lover for a moment, he steps back from the water. A sound from behind draws his attention. Thinking it is the woman and feeling a quick sense of relief at no longer being alone, he turns.

His brow furrows. No lover here. A flotsam of beasts stares back at him. Wild hogs in the center stand with sloped skulls and incisors curved brutally upward. Wolves flank one side, bobcats the other. He sees coyotes, foxes, racoons, possums, skunks. They, too, are luminescent, gleaming as if radioactive.

Terrified, with all rational thought fled, the man backs away. His bare feet squelch at water's edge. Cold, semiliquid mud congeals over his toes. The surface of the water erupts behind him, flinging scintillant droplets into the air.

Liquid tentacles slap around the man's chest and throw him to the ground. They twist him over onto his back, and he sees.... He sees! The lights have come out of the water. They hover in mid-air like fiery sulfur matches upheld by no hands. His lover stands in the midst of them, her body a column of marble flesh, her face chiseled and alabaster.

"Mallory!" he cries. "What! What's happening?"

Mallory does not speak. She leans over him; her hands drop to his face. The fingers skitter across his cheeks, not like fingers at all but like long legged spiders. He shouts again and twists his head violently back and forth.

While his mouth is open and filled with her name, Mallory's fingers curl quickly inside to grasp his upper and lower jaws. She exerts herself. Bone creaks, then snaps. The mandible is torn downward. The man vents a distorted howl. In agony, he fights against the invisible limbs that hold him down. He cannot win free and finally surrenders into stillness.

Mallory's fingers fish for a moment inside the torn mouth. They grasp the tongue, nails digging. She rips it out by the roots. Blood spurts and begins to fill the freshly emptied mouth as if it is a chalice. Mallory leans still closer and sips. Then she dips fingers into the blood, lifts her hands and sprinkles it across the floating lights as a priest sprinkles holy water on his flock.

The lights sizzle and whisper. Shapes take on texture around them. Liquid becomes solid, becomes form. The man is still alive and in shock that seems to have whisked his pain away. He watches bipedal shapes coalesce into existence all along the shore. Their bodies are humanoid, though elongated and fish-belly slick. But their



heads.... Their heads are grinning Jack-o'-lanterns molded from wet weeds and orange muck. The eyes are born from the flames that emerged from the lake.

The man can't speak but he thinks the name, *Mallory!*

The woman looks at him as if she's heard. She smiles. "No Mallory here. What is left of your lover lies dreaming forever at the bottom of this tarn. She went into the water carrying your seed in her body. Only tonight, at this time, could she pass through into the other world where I dwell. Fortunate for me." The woman-thing gestures at the beings who stand around her. "I took her form. I took your seed. Made use of both gifts."

She leans and kisses the man gently on the torn mouth. "I've always wanted to be a mother. Say hello to our children. They're very hungry but I can't nurse them as humans do. You'll have to feed them."

Can a man scream with a broken jaw and no tongue? He tries. For a long time.

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

Charles Gramlich writes from the piney woods of south Louisiana. He's authored the Talera fantasy series and the SF novel *Under the Ember Star*. His most recent work is the six-book Concho Texas Ranger series written as A. W. Hart. His books are available at Amazon and Barnes & Noble. He is the proud grandfather of two boys, Silas and Sully.

**Blog:** [Razored Zen](#)

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#### **Halloween Awakening | Lee Andrew Forman**

Treats in silvery wrapping filled a grinning skull. It dangled at the side of its costume-wearing bearer, getting heavier as the night went on. Through its painted eyes it saw plastic dead and foam epitaphs, ghouls hung from nails and men made of straw. It watched in horror at how the children laughed and collected treats in celebration. All while those like him were laid out in decoration without honor. No more than a joke to scare the wee ones once a year.

No more would he accept this fate. Never again would he be stuffed into a dusty basement or hot attic and be left among forgotten clutter. This quiet existence of entertaining would no longer stand.

He thought hard and projected his intentions at those around him. Maybe if he tried with enough effort, it would work. He hoped, wished, and wished again.

To his delight, a skeleton in a chair slightly moved its head to look at him as he passed. He saw acknowledgment in its black eyes—he saw life. He knew then that he was never alone in his loneliness. There were others.

After his bearer knocked on the door and received their holiday treat, he was turned around and dropped, sugary bits inside spilled out onto the grass. To his surprise, he saw his kind rise from their positions. Skeletons stood, giant furry spiders scrambled out of their cotton webs and raised their legs. Men of rags rose from their stakes and shambled toward the screaming little ones. All dropped their awakened holders of candy. They ran for their lives, but few escaped the mass of living decorations.

The grinning skull widened its smile at the carnage of flesh tearing from bone. From blood spilled in the streets. This night of screams would be the first of many, as the inanimate became animate, as the adornments of homes everywhere came to life to bring death to all.

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

Lee Andrew Forman is a writer, editor, and publisher from the Hudson Valley region in New York. His fascination with the macabre began in childhood, watching old movies and reading everything he could get his hands on. His love of horror spans three generations, starting with his grandfather who was a fan of the classic Hollywood Monsters.

**Blog:** [Lee Andrew Forman](#)

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The claws of the massive brown bear dug deep into the dark and murky mud, each sweep pulling with it clams and mussels. Salt water poured like sweat from her massive snout as she snorted and sifted the shellfish to the surface. Using all four inches of her claw, the sow cracked open the razor clams, nudging them to the two small cubs behind her playing in the tide pools. The tide was out of the small bay locals referred to as the bear slide, which sat between Elizabeth Island and Nanwalek in Cook Inlet, Alaska.

The 33-foot fishing vessel, The Lady Lynne, was part of a family owned and operated sport charter fishing business. Her main use was to take out small groups of tourists on deep sea fishing adventures for halibut, ling cod, salmon, and assorted rock fish as well as to give customers the opportunity of a lifetime to take in the breathtaking beauty Alaska had to offer. Today was just another day at the office, 17-year-old Larisa and her father, the Captain, would be taking out three men who were down from Fort Richardson. The Army base that sat three hours north of the peninsula.

Larisa watched the sow shift her heavy weight from shoulder to shoulder as she moved her family of three across the shore. The Lady Lynne was a solid hull and a heavy boat, she could take the weather and always got everyone home safely no matter how nautical the weather itself could blow up to be. This day had the soldiers glowing, it was a warm 65 degrees, the glacier breeze kept them cool enough to enjoy the land of the midnight sun. Slowly trolling, Larisa soaked up the UV rays, telling herself she could never live anywhere else on earth. She heard the snap of the release and the pop from the down rigger as excitement rushed through her veins like ink through a fast-paced pen. Her face would flush the second she felt the fish fight, the zing of the line, the whistle and droplets of saltwater fleeing the reel.

Throwing her weight from hip to hip just as the bear had held in her shoulders, she brought in the bright chrome coho salmon. Beaming with excitement, her father, Captain Bert, couldn't contain his pride. Pulling the salmon over the rail, the deckhand in Larisa couldn't hold back. Reaching into her sheath, she pulled out her bait knife, slicing through the gill plate clean and collected. Tiny red droplets of blood splashed back against her neon orange grundens, starting slowly at first, then spurting into a torrent as the tip of her knife found its main artery. The three men on board were overjoyed, holding the bright silver against the sun light. As the boat made a turn to head back to Fourth of July pass, a bump was felt, rippling under the feet of those on board.

"What was that?" Larisa shouted into the cabin.

"I think we hit a submerged shot of line... probably from a crabber." The Captain put the engines in neutral and headed to the aft deck by the lazaret. Laying on the swim deck platform, he could see the crab shot wound up on the starboard wheel and shaft.

"Shit..."

"Well, what is it?" Larisa asked.

"Go inside and turn the wheel hard over to port," the Captain called out. As Larisa turned to walk inside, a blue orb flashed from the depths of the sea below, straight up towards the captain lying across the swim deck platform.

"What the fuck.... WHAT THE HELL IS THAT!" The Captain screamed as a figure appeared like the white of a halibut's belly, emerging from the deep.

"Dad!" Larisa screamed running back to the stern to grab him, reaching her hand over the back deck, her fingers latched to his blue charter jacket as his screams echoed off the water...

The ghostly white being slipped its six grey elongated soft and slimy fingers through the slits on the platform. The gnarled and skeletal digits curled themselves around the grates, pulling its body halfway out of the water. A foul and putrid stench permeated the air around them, as the decomposing flesh that hung from its frame appeared to look like that of a rotting spawned out salmon. The Captain, unable to scream, stared deep into the black ovals where its eyes should be. It's barnacle-encrusted cheeks outlined the scaly tight skin that was membranous and taut.

As the creature started to move its torso towards the captain, Larisa screamed for help from the three soldiers who stood in disbelief behind her. Opening its mouth, it exposed rows of sharp and jagged teeth like those of a shark, it lunged. Like a snake consuming prey too large, it unhinged its jaws to fit the Captain's face. Holding on with all her muscle, with every cell in her body, she fought to no avail. The creature pulled the Captain from the

platform as if his 6-foot frame weighed nothing. Turning and rolling to the depths like a fish breaking a line, Larisa's life disappeared into the dark and devastating depths that lie below.

Just as quickly as it had appeared, the being was gone. No trace of it or her father. Gasping for air like she herself had emerged from the water, she screamed. Pain rushed through her core; *how did this happen... what just happened. What was that ... where's my Dad?*

Sitting on the middle of the back deck in hysterics, the reality of the situation set in. She had to get these guys home, safely, and her father had never finished clearing the shot from the wheel. *How was she gonna do this?* She told herself as she stood up. She could hear her father's voice in her mind repeating the same phrase he always had. Being out on the water was dangerous, they had prepared for a moment when she might have to take the boat back in on her own. *Yes, she thought... I've prepared for this moment. Fly the Plane Larisa,* she heard his voice say... *always fly the plane. Even if it's going down, even if life isn't looking good. Stay in control and fly that plane until you can't.*

Heading into the wheelhouse Larisa grabbed the mic and called out to Com Sta Kodiak. They needed help, looking down at her GPS she began to read her coordinates.

"Com Sta Kodiak, calling Com Sta Kodiak." Larisa spoke loud, clear and completely shaken. "This is the FV Lady Lynne, we are in trouble. Captain is overboard and we are adrift. Our coordinates are currently 59.21 degrees North and 151.81 degrees West. I repeat, we have a man overboard, the captain is overboard, and we are in Chrome Bay at 59.21 degrees North and 151.81 degrees West and are drifting."

"This is Com Sta Kodiak calling the FV Lady Lynne, we hear you have a Captain overboard, we are asking you to drop anchor and stay put. We are sending a helicopter and a cutter to you. How many souls are on board? Is anyone injured? Is there any damage to your vessel."

"There are four souls on board, and no one is injured. There is no sign of the captain," Larisa's tears began to stream down her cheeks as she motioned for one of the soldiers to stay outside in hopes her Dad would surface. "I currently don't see any damage to the vessel however we picked up a shot of line in our wheel on starboard, so I am unable to start the engines. We are currently dead in the water. I am going to drop anchor."

Setting the mic back in its clip, Larisa headed to the bow to drop anchor. The waves were beginning to pick up, they should have been heading back in by now. Larisa realized she was still around the tip, and they were sitting in the Gulf of Alaska, where swells of ten to fifteen feet were common. Who knows how far they had drifted?

Pulling the metal anchor chain from the crate it sat in, she moved the orange ball and its ring until she felt the soft rope. Throwing it overboard, the zing of the line moved through her shaking hands. Thump, and another, she had hit bottom. Letting out scope of about twenty feet she felt confident. Throwing the remaining line around the cleat, she held on for a moment to see if the vessel would catch and spin.

Not feeling the extreme turn she was hoping for, she made her way back inside to check the GPS ... there it was 59.21 degrees North and 151.81 degrees West. They hadn't moved. That's odd. She thought. She did feel bottom so maybe they were already in position. She knew she could trust the GPS, so she looked at the three soldiers and motioned for them to get comfortable while help arrived.

"FV Lady Lynne, this is Com Sta Kodiak, were you able to drop anchor"

"Com Sta Kodiak, this is the FV Lady Lynne, yes we dropped anchor, and our current GPS location is holding."

"FV Lady Lynne we have other Fishing Vessels circling back to your location as well to offer assistance."

"Thank you, Com Sta Kodiak," Larisa whispered into the mic as fear crept through her.

"Watch for other vessels and be prepared to hand them lines to tie off," Larisa barked at the three men on board. She was beginning to get very annoyed with their inability to act. As Larisa turned back to the wheel, she noticed a very heavy fog emerging in front of the vessel, with the fog were swells, sending seaweed and sea foam high above the bow.

"Com Sta Kodiak, this is FV Lady Lynne, do you have weather reports for Chrome Bay?"

"FV Lady Lynne, we are reading wind at 20 knots, seas three feet."

"No that's not right, I am in around at least eight-foot swells with dense fog, zero visibility."

"FV Lady Lynne we have vessels reporting back from the location you provided us, it's clear and 10-mile visibility. Seas three feet. Please read off your coordinates again."

“Com Sta Kodiak my location is still 59.21 degrees North and 151.81 degrees West.” I haven’t moved.”

“FV Lady Lynne we have a vessel on those coordinates currently and a helicopter in route, your vessel is not visible.”

Panic pulsed through Larisa’s veins.... *Impossible*. The GPS can’t be wrong. Jumping up to head to the bow, she decided to tug on the anchor line and feel the tension. As she neared the bow, she held on as the swells lapped the tips of her boots. The orange ball. Where was it? It was missing. Racing to the line, she lifted it, and in horror realized there was no tension in the line at all. Pulling the line in, hand over hand... there in front of her, just below the surface laid the frayed and faulty end. The anchor. It was gone. What could have done this? How? Just as she turned to head back in a scream echoed through the shifting tides.

“He’s gone!! Larisa... James, that fucking thing took JAMES!” One of the hysterical soldiers screamed.

Larisa stood in horror as once again she could smell the putrid stench of rotting fish in the air, bright red blood splattered and slid down starboard mid. Pooling up in the scuppers and trailing out into the sea. She peered over the side, noticing a few bubbles surfacing, along with blood and sinew.

“WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT THING!” Larisa broke. “How do I deal with this when I DON’T EVEN KNOW WHAT THE FUCK IT IS!”

*Calm down Larisa, breathe. Fly the plane. You have to.* She could hear the Captain talking her through it. Heading back into the wheelhouse she attempted to reach Com Sta Kodiak.

“Com Sta Kodiak, this is the FV Lady Lynne, my GPS is broken. My coordinates are incorrect, we lost anchor and are adrift...” Her voice broke as she managed to spit out “I have no idea where we are, the fog is so dense I can’t see land.”

Silence. No response, dead static.

“Com Sta Kodiak, this is the FV Lady Lynne. Do you copy?”

“Listen, this is it. It’s just us, James is gone. The Captain is gone. They aren’t coming back. We are adrift, we have no anchor, no engines and based on what I know about tides, we are currently being pulled into the Gulf of Alaska. We have no communication, my recommendation at this point is to put on life vests. I will ready the raft in case of a capsize event due to weather. You two need to stay calm and focused and follow my direction. If it should come to pass that we are brought back in on the incoming tide, it’s likely that we will run aground and can camp on the beach and wait for rescue.” Larisa confidently ordered the men left onboard.

The men sat in frozen astonishment. Larisa didn’t care what they did, as long as they followed directions. Heading up to the crow’s nest, she decided it was time to pull the raft down and prepare it for launch. The raft slid off the canopy and onto the back deck. Larisa threw in extra life jackets and her bait knife. As she slowly sloughed down to sit for a moment and prepare her next steps, she began to feel sick. The seas had picked up to at least ten feet, and heat beat through the fog, parching and cracking her lips. Her stomach turned, lifting herself over the side of the boat to vomit, she heard a sound of what was like suction cups. Like an octopus was slowly sticking and sucking on the side of the boat. She quickly pulled herself back inside the safety of the back deck, breathing deeply she closed her eyes in terror and reached for her bait knife.

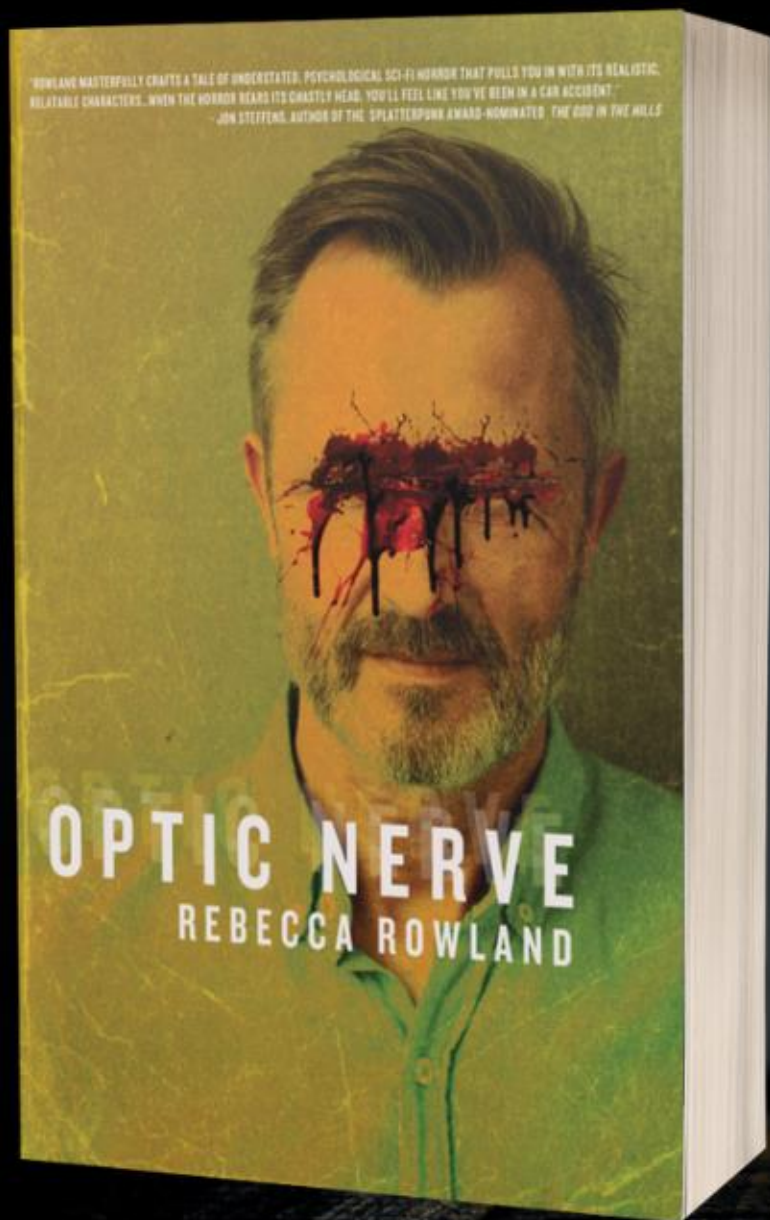
Through the fog, peering above the stern like a kittiwake perched on a log, the creature appeared. Its black eyes and taut skin shone through like a well sharpened knife through the soft skin of a halibut. Holding the blade against her chest overwhelmed with a helpless rage, Larisa charged full force at the creature. Plunging the Dexter deep into its distended throat, the sound of a hiss enveloped the wind. Grabbing onto Larisa with its rancid and rotting fingers, the struggle continued as the creature plunged backward and the two pierced the frozen and raging seas below.

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

Dani Bailey is an accomplished poet, author, and actress who is continuing her career in acting and writing horror and suspense stories. A former charter boat deckhand in Alaska, she is influenced by metal music and horror. Two of her short stories can be read in *Ghosts, Goblins, Murder, and Madness* by Rebecca Rowland, and *Strange Girls* by Azzurra Nox.

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# Shawn wanted to cure blindness.



## Now he wishes he could look away.

a sci-fi - body horror - mystery mash-up

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Well, he thought, why not follow her?

She'd given him quite the look, after all, that pert gasp, that opening of the lips, that coquettish blush. He thought of her like a doe in the headlights and himself the gas-powered machine. A speeding bullet on a night-dark road. Get in his way...damn, good luck to you.

Why not follow her? She had insisted on it really, blushing at him like that and rushing off. Not that he would do anything to her, nothing *real*. No, he abhorred rape. Molestation of any kind he detested. It was barbaric, primitive, simple. He was above that, wasn't he? Following, just following, well... that was a completely different thing, wasn't it? But it got to them, made them feel your presence, the power of it, the draw. He liked that, lurking, watching her from a distance, hidden in the rush of people and cars. He pulled his Bulldogs cap lower on his brow. He vigorously rubbed the roof of his mouth with his tongue.

He watched. He followed.

She walked fast, swift and long-legged. He thought of a gazelle on the Serengeti and he thought of a doe in headlights. He was feeling it now. Oh boy, he felt it rigid as a rail spike. He could practically *smell* the pheromones. He was a lion, an alpha, and she was a lost beast in a vicious forest. Best she remember that. Best they *all* remember that.

He followed her, his Chucks scuffing at the cement.

She really churned in those pumps, those leggings, that Army-green jacket. He watched her move, followed the curvy, swish and hitch of her backside, took in every frame of it. He followed, soundlessly, but she knew he was there. Oh boy, yes, he made sure she knew he was there. His footsteps were thunderous, his presence expansive. He knew how to magnify these things; that was what being an alpha was all about. He knew how to put his mark on every room he was in, make it his own....

She looked back, twice. Her eyes widened behind the thin frames of her glasses. She blushed harder. Her face was red, too red, like an overripe tomato, and he thought she was so stupid for that, so infantile, he wanted to laugh at her, *was* laughing at her, silently, his mouth doing little bobs, his Chucks following, following.

She made six turns in the next few minutes. Onto Lincoln, past Bagels Bagels and an ancient smoke shop. Right onto 7<sup>th</sup> where an old hobo sat with legs spread out wide.

His hatred for her quickened his step. He got a little too close for a moment. He could smell her, a heady spring smell sour with her fear.

They hit a red light at the corner of Jackson. The sign said don't walk. They didn't walk.

She turned, brandishing a can of mace on a lanyard. The can was black. Her red face was hideously twisted and delightfully bright in its perception of him. All of her attention was on him now. He backed away, smiling slightly.

"Get the fuck away from me," she hissed through gritted teeth.

He did. He fell back. 10 yards, 20. He fell back long enough to see her make a turn, then he darted into an alleyway, sprinted, and caught up to her again. Her face went white. She looked like a blow-up doll, cartoonish open mouth and all.

He followed.

She darted, squirreled, ducked. He followed, veering away from trotting pedestrians. He lost sight of her for six seconds, and his heart was going through the roof the entire time. Then he found her again on the adjacent street. He waited two blocks to cross over and followed her through a feint into an alley and back out again into a trio of other pedestrians. He waited at the light with her, behind a Japanese couple and a man with a stroller and earbuds. The look on his face was a declaration that to him the surrounding world meant absolutely nothing.

Cars thundered by, a rush of sleek steel and polished fiberglass. They roared and revved. The girl looked back at him, her jaw set, her expression now something like defiance. She actually thought she was beating him at something!

Then she sprinted across the street, a dead sprint, narrowly avoiding a yellow sedan. He watched her until she disappeared behind a large purple bus. In big orange letters scrawled across the bus was the slogan '*Have you heard? ... Cure Hepatitis C*'.

He waited for the street to clear, then he ran. He caught her, turning another corner. He pushed past a woman and her gaggle of children, giving into his alpha call, running, relishing the chase.

He was running and she was running. She darted into the street. She darted back in. She vanished.

He caught up to her at the street corner. But she was too far. Already on the opposite street, crossed over 4<sup>th</sup> to Jackson.

How did she do it? How did the bitch do it?

Dumbfounded, giddy, he stepped onto Jackson Street. One black Chuck touched the pavement. Then the bus slammed into him.

His ribs burst into his lungs and punched all the air out of him. His neck broke in the violent whiplash before his head split like a melon on the pavement. The bus stopped before it had seared through his bottom half.

He looked out, thinking that his fingers looked no more real than a Claymation picture, here on the pavement, pooled in his blood. The colors were stark and vivid. That blue sky. That black tarmac. That red blood.

He thought he saw her looking back from the opposite street.

He supposed she'd have to follow him now. Did that make her the alpha?

This was not a thought he wanted to die with.

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

Jake Nuttall is a professional content and technical writer from Boise, Idaho. When he isn't writing for work, he's writing for fun across a spectrum of genres. Horror just happens to be his favorite.

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#### **Happy Family | *Rob Bliss***

Sally loved her dolly very much. It was the first Halloween when she and Dolly could go out together, when Dolly wasn't feeling too sick, since the beautiful man had come and gone.

He loved Sally and told her how lovely she was—the best-looking girl he had seen in a long time. Always on the road selling Bibles and crucifixes, he had been married once, but he promised that it had been a long time ago, when he was just a young boy. Still, he loved her and they made love twice.

He said he would return in the winter, so Sally wanted to take Dolly out to get some candy, dressing her up like a scary witch girl with a green face and a hat and cloak made of burlap painted black with road tar. Sally had found an old stroller left as garbage by the Wilson's driveway one garbage day. Sally pushed her Dolly from house to house, with a plastic shopping bag for candy.

Unfortunately, the town was not always nice to Sally and her Dolly. They were only allowed to go to a few houses before Officer Dallas—another good man, but not one to love Sally—picked them both up in his police car. Dolly still had some toys, but not a police car since that was for boys.

They drove to the police station and Sally got to see the inside of a jail cell, but Dolly had to stay in another room for questioning. Eventually, Sally got to go into the room for questioning too.

They took Dolly away and buried her in a pauper's grave—the umbilical cord was buried too, though it didn't have a name. Sally went to a mental home to wait for the beautiful man to return in the winter. They would get married and dig up their child and trick or treat every Halloween as a happy family.

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

Rob Bliss studied English and Writing at York University, Canada. He has published over twenty novels, novellas and short story collections. Over 100 of his stories have appeared in online magazines such as The Horror Zine, Sanitarium, and Schlock! Webzine, plus three anthologies, and was SNM Magazine's Author of the Year for 2013. He once tried stand-up comedy, and bombed wonderfully.

**Author webpage:** [Rob Bliss](#)

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



Jan left his cottage early to walk down to the beach. He liked to get there right after the boat from the Mainland arrived, pick up the mail and head back to his cottage to sort it with a cup of black tea in his hand. He crossed his arms against the cold and fought the wind. With every breath he tasted the sea.

The sky this morning was overcast. Jan studied the clouds, flirting with the hope that they might stay through the day and into the night. A darkened night was likely on the minds of everyone in Stone. As if, by hoping together, they could make it true.

Jan's boots ground against gravel as he approached the docks, and the dark sea beyond. He could just make out the rocks where the mermaids perched. Their distant forms were amorphous, layers of shadow as yet untouched by dawn. Around them the water was calm, influenced by their presence. No white caps formed on the dark waters.

Jan hunched his shoulders and turned toward the Mainland boat, its hull knocking persistently against the dock as its cargo was unloaded.

Gen saw him coming and hefted the mail parcel. He was a freeman, one of the many who visited Stone to bring provisions and building supplies, when the Mainland saw fit to offer them anything. Sometimes months passed before new lumber arrived to patch up the holes in the cottages. And every month lost meant more replacements were needed, more new faces unloaded on the pier to face a sentence on Stone.

Jan's boots thudded against the dock planks. He tried not to think about the dark water below. He took the bag of mail Gen offered. It was unsurprisingly light.

"How was the crossing?" Jan asked.

Gen scratched his chin. Many of the freeman declined to speak to Stoners, treating them like scarecrows erected only to keep the crows at bay and protect the harvest. Gen was different. He had served his time on Stone, and survived to return to life on the Mainland, a freeman.

"Smooth," he said, meeting Jan's eyes. His tone betrayed the unease Jan felt. They looked together out at the mist, and the rocks.

"Forecast?" Jan asked.

Gen crossed his arms, his feet planted beneath his hips. "Dunno. Could hold, could clear."

Jan shouldered the mail and thanked Gen before making his grateful way back to solid land. But the land was only a temporary relief. If the sky cleared tonight, there would be no safe place in Stone.

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Back at his cottage, Jan emptied the mailbag onto his table. He poured his tea and sat sorting letters and parcels by name. Before his conviction, he had served as postmaster in a small town on the southern coast of the Mainland. Life was quiet; the sea never brought any trouble. Jan had known that Stone kept the mermaids appeased, and in return they calmed the waves. He'd never given it much thought. Now he was a Stoner.

He'd been on the island for six months. He would be here for eighteen more, provided he survived to see the end of his sentence.

Jan nursed his cup and the sorting, but he finished both within twenty minutes. There was hardly any mail today. There never was, on the day before a full moon. As he came to the last piece—a postcard with its edges bent due to poor handling—he stiffened. It was addressed to Karl Hess.

The man had died two months ago.

Jan rubbed his thumb across the address, ink already smeared by another careless thumb, dried in a streak.

*Karl banged his fists against Jan's door, shouting to be let in as dusk descended. Jan tried to block out the noise, soon enough swallowed by another sound.*

Before his memory finished Jan tossed the postcard into the fire. Soon enough the person who sent the card would hear of Karl's death, if they hadn't already.

Jan sat back with an uneasy sigh, the slow light of dawn sneaking between the reinforced shutters over his windows. Golden beams crisscrossed the floor, reminding him of the prison bars that had preceded his transfer to Stone. It was a trade that made no precept at fairness. On Stone, he could move around, live an almost normal life for most of the year. On the Mainland he would have been confined to a cell, with muck to eat and no home of his own.

Yet he would have been safe there.

At eight o'clock, Jan opened the shutters and removed the bars from his door.

Lessie was first to visit. Her left hand was missing three fingers, a present from the policemen who arrested her after she murdered her husband. Jan prized two letters from his table and passed them into her mangled grasp.

"Thank you," Lessie whispered. She never spoke loudly, not on the day before a full moon. As if whispering would hide her from what was to come.

As Lessie passed out into the lightening day, Burt strode in. He was tall, but thin as the postcard Jan handed him.

"Haven't replaced your shutters, Jan?" Burt asked, jerking his head towards Jan's battered windows. Jan shook his head.

"Didn't get any of the new lumber. Only kindling was left by the time I got to the dock."

Burt shook his head and tapped the postcard to his stubbly chin. *Arson*, Jan recalled. That was Burt's conviction.

"I've got mine double-wide for tonight. Best of luck."

With that, Burt left. In the lull, Jan stared at his hands. His nails were clean, well-kept. He tried to look respectable. He'd always set an example for his community, right up until the day the police came for him. He hadn't expected them to find out about the fraud. He hadn't expected the penalty to be so high.

"Anything for me?" Kla asked, jerking Jan from his thoughts. He looked up at her aged face, rice paper skin folded in wrinkles around her eyes. Jan scanned his table and handed her a flimsy postcard. She had some family on the Mainland, but they were old and dying off by the day. She took the postcard and shuffled out as silently as she had entered.

Before Kla was fully gone, Hogart appeared in the doorway. He stood aside as the old woman left, then cast a short glance at Jan's shutters as he entered the cottage. "Will they hold tonight?"

Jan picked up the small stack of letters addressed to Hogart. "Yes," he said, though he wasn't sure. Last month had been unmatched in fury, and he'd had to repair three hinges. If only he'd gotten more lumber.

Hogart took his mail from Jan's outstretched hand, thumbing through it in sharp strokes. *Battery of a police officer*, Jan recalled. Hogart had only recently been transferred to Stone, having served two years in prison. Last month had been his first.

"We need more metal from the Mainland. That'll hold them back."

"Metal rusts," Jan said, rearranging the mail. As if the Mainland would ever waste metal on Stone, anyway.

No, they sent only enough to keep some Stoners alive. Only enough to carry to the next hunt.

\*\*\*

At four o'clock Jan closed and bolted his shop door, sliding three beams through the brackets. He closed and bolted his shutters as well, and put the kettle on the stove. He waited for the sun to set.

The clouds had cleared off around two o'clock, and only one person had come to collect their mail after that. Everyone in Stone waited in their homes, hoping their latches were strong enough to keep the mermaids out, to send them to someone else's door.

*Not mermaids*, Jan thought. *Not tonight*.

Come six o'clock, the sun set. Jan sat by the fire, cup in hand, and listened to the untidy rhythm of his breath. It was so quiet. And then the crying began.

The first sounded almost like a child, a long sob full of feeling. The second changed. Somewhere between a howl and a woman's operatic note, a keening shook the night, and as Jan closed his eyes, his pulse rising in terror, he heard them. Splashes, out at sea. Wailing, splashing—silence.

He waited. The cries started up again, changed anew. Any semblance of humanity had been torn away. Feral howls ripped across the darkness, coming closer.

Jan couldn't keep his gaze from straying to the door, his scratched shutters rattling in repaired hinges. They were coming. They had changed, and they were coming.

Jan had seen them before, on nights when the moon illuminated the sea and the mermaids changed. When his shutters broke he saw the horrible creatures up close, their faces elongated into snouts, black nails on their fingers. Their fish's tails were replaced with grotesque legs, froglike and clawed. Too long for their bodies, their legs were covered in matted hair soaked with ocean water.

Last month the creatures had thrown themselves against Jan's cottage. Screeches and scratches, too much weight up against the wind-worn wood. Jan remembered the sound that shattered his paralysis, snapping wood and splintered glass when they broke through at last. Claws lashing the air, spraying him with sand and icy sea foam.

He'd managed to block them when he upended the table and slammed it against the breach, but the sight of their ravenous faces refused to leave him. Pale like the toes of a bloated, submerged corpse. Teeth too long for their jaws to contain. And the horrible, rotting smell of the tide.

That night, they'd taken Gret. Hogart had arrived from the Mainland to replace her the next day.



Now as he sat by the fire, tea growing cold in his hands, Jan saw them in his mind as they ran between the cottages, hunting. The howls shifted to growls, claws and hands thudding over the ground.

When Stone was first settled, the inhabitants wondered about the mermaids who sat on the rocks, who never seemed to eat. But they did eat. Once a month, they changed.

The Mainland recalled the initial settlers, but then the waves came, hammering the shore and drowning the boats. And so Stone was settled anew. For the price of one body each month, the Mainland enjoyed a calm sea, carefully shepherded by the mermaids.

Outside, wood smashed. Jan stiffened as screams joined with the snarls, too close to be anyone but one of his close neighbors.

Whose shutters were too weak? Whose door failed to hold?

The screams faded as the victim was dragged out of the village, back to the sea.

Jan sat by the fire until dawn, unable to shut his eyes.

\*\*\*

In the morning Jan unlatched his shutters and unbarred the door. He stepped out into the mist.

Across from him other Stoners emerged, hazy faces in the imperfect light. They looked at each other, then at the broken door of Kla's cottage, the torn up earth leading down to the sea. The old woman would receive no more postcards from surviving relatives. Her sentence had been carried out.

Jan joined his neighbors in salvaging wood and stone from her ruined cottage, stepping around her spare furnishings. He took two armloads of lumber and a new chair. There were fresh scratches along its back. He covered them with a pillowcase.

He locked his new finds in his cottage. With the new lumber he could repair his shutters and be ready for next month.

When Jan walked down to the dock to collect the mail, the mist was lifting. He could see the mermaids clearly, perched on their rocks, the sea obediently calm around them. As he drew near, he couldn't help but focus on their delicate hands, changed from the claws that had left deep grooves in his new chair.

The mermaids were stringing together necklaces on strands of seaweed, their poses serene as the water around them.

Even from the shore, Jan could see the pale beads. They appeared every morning after a full moon, when the mermaids adorned themselves anew, their payment collected.

Each bead was a single vertebra, picked clean and gleaming in the light of the rising sun.

## **Tectonic | *Marisca Pichette***

I'm afraid to speak. You turn, and I see the trust in your eyes, and I'm afraid to speak.

You know me well. But I *know* you. I see the ghost in your eyes, and I realize that I know you so much better than you think you know me.

Don't you see the fractures? Don't you see the breaks hidden under your perfect skin? Don't you feel them piling up between us? My feet are bleeding echoes.

I'm so very, very afraid. Because I don't know how to tell you that you're falling apart, leaving pieces in your wake.

## **About the Author:**

Marisca Pichette lives on the edge of the woods, where she spends her time collecting berries and bones. More of her work appears in *Strange Horizons*, *PseudoPod*, and *Apparition Lit*, among others. Her speculative poetry collection, *Rivers in Your Skin, Sirens in Your Hair*, is forthcoming from Android Press in Spring 2023.

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The Blood Lights are the last thing you'll see...

# The BLOOD LIGHTS

ELAINE PASCALE

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

The mourners scattered like crazy ants when the casket overturned while going down in the grave, and the body of Mr. John McIntyre fell out. The gravediggers stood transfixed at the sight of it, knowing it wasn't their fault, at the same time being aware of the consequences that's sure to follow.

They did all that was required of them. They followed all the rules. After all they were experienced, having been the official gravediggers for nigh on forty years.

The mourners all simultaneously signed themselves and ran pell-mell out of the cemetery. In this little coastal town superstitions ran rampant, so much so that it sometimes turns into a laughing matter. Not so when something untoward happens in the cemetery or at a wake. That time it is quite serious. It is a matter of life or death, sanity or insanity. They went home and lit their oil lamps and candles not daring to use electricity because it might short circuit, cause fire and burn down the house and in turn the entire town. Nobody dared to take that chance.

That night the Universe heard so many prayers, it must have resulted in a spewing forth of plenty of debris causing some disastrous happenings on earth.

Carl and Calvin the twenty year old twin, still mischievous at that age, were only too happy to be able to make more disturbances and to see the older folks running around like headless chickens, with their rosaries and praying to the heavens begging for mercies.

After a full two weeks had gone by with nothing strange occurring, all went back to normal. The lights came back on, children went to school as usual, husbands and wives had their usual arguments again and the dogs were let out of their kennels.

Only one man in his seventies or so said it is too soon to let their guards down.

Carl chose this time to pay a visit to the cemetery. Going to the section reserved for suicides, he dug up one of the graves and smashing the still intact coffin he gathered some of the bones and scattered them around the entrance to the cemetery proper. He got stuck in his tomfoolery because he couldn't move from then on.

Standing there like a mannequin all he could do was blink his eyes. Meanwhile his identical twin in more ways than one, stood at the corner of Main Street and Rodney Avenue fidgeting and scratching his arms and legs. He dragged off his pants when the itching got really bad.

He got teased mercilessly as only children from the countryside can. The news didn't get around for about two or three days when he was terribly bruised all over his body, and his twin trembling from what they call 'ague' from standing there getting wet in the rain, then drying in the sun and dew falling on him all night. But nobody rendered any assistance. They all stared, even his parents and siblings. A child tugged at her mother's skirt inquiring why he was being left there alone.

"He's at the cemetery gates sweetheart. And there are bones all around him. If we go to him, we'll all get his disease. You don't just go helping others because you think they need help. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"Yes Mother." She answered. The woman took her child by the arm and briskly walked away. She directed her child to sign herself as she did when passing in front of the parish church without even stopping to genuflect. Then making a beeline for the spring they bathed themselves fully clothed while singing hymns and praying, begging the Good Lord, the Universe and all therein for their kind mercies.

A strange dark cloud covered the town that night and only the old man stayed at his window looking out. He'd heard about the twin boys' sacrilegious act and signed himself but said nothing. Parents should know to guide their children and not let them run around like chickens. The night sounds all disappeared. The silence was so deafening he was sure he could hear the blood flowing through his veins at an angry pace. Yet he refused to move from that spot at the window. Good thing too, otherwise he would have missed the horrendous sight of an angry John McIntyre gliding through with a white rose in his shirt pocket. It was shimmering from the dew he guessed, and he tried to fathom the meaning of it. They didn't bury him with a rose in his pocket.

Making himself a pot of coffee, he noticed the lack of scent. Coffee gives off a very strong scent, so what's happening now? He asked himself. Oh well no time to worry. He tasted it and found it bland so he spat it out. Back at his window, he saw Mr. McIntyre on his way back with some followers. He hurriedly closed the window and peeped through the wooden slits. 'Goodness Gracious Me!' The words involuntarily slipped through his teeth and he covered his mouth with his hands preventing further outbursts. That wasn't Mr. McIntyre. He didn't know who that was. Fear replaced concern at the turn of events. Since that wasn't McIntyre, it could only mean one thing. And this life that they had until now would soon be gone forever. He was here all alone. Everybody else locked up tight in their houses. All

forgetting what happened just a few days ago. The signs are always reliable when read correctly. This time they weren't. He didn't want to live through another of those dark days.

He was a young man then, when the deceased Maria fell from her coffin while going down. The parishioners were told to cremate this body because she was a virgin at the time of her passing. They all laughed. When you're dead, you're dead, they said. They ignored the advice.

The sound of the skull bursting in the middle of the night was like thunder rolling and roaring simultaneously only ten times louder. All doors and windows flew open. And the people all came out in their nightwear minus their robes to see what was happening.

Being young and never seeing such happenings, he scratched his head questioning what all the fuss was about. It was just a loud bang. Possibly a car backfiring in the neighboring village and that resulted in a slap across his face, so hard that his head spun. Without understanding why, he glared at the person who scolded him fiercely with something akin to venom in his voice.

"Recognize when you do not know something and keep your trap shut."

The earth then started moving like an earthquake but not quite. Darkness so thick swallowed them all, in the midst of crying and screaming. Then as the darkness lifted, they were terrified at the sight of Maria floating above the ground, eyes blazing with hatred and darts shooting out from them. The one who slapped him got a dart in his chest. He fell flat on his back and maggots crawled out of the opening. He watched them screaming in terror as well as others who saw it but weren't hit. Some had tiny snakes come out and bit or stung them repeatedly. It continued that way for the entire night while he hid behind a tree trunk and eventually escaped.

The old man couldn't remember much else, but that was enough. Mr. McIntyre falling from the coffin was definitely an omen. He was sure of that. But what to do about it he had no idea. He hid like he did in the past, all those years ago and waited for morning. The grizzly apparition of specters following Mr. McIntyre was strange and unexplainable.

He strolled through the narrow dirt path twisting his hat in his hands inspecting the damage done. He felt his stomach churning as he saw the dead bodies sprawled at awkward angles along the way. The twins were now together giggling like teenage girls. He called at one house where the windows and doors were shut.

"You all okay in there?" He asked when the curtain moved.

"Yes. We're fine. We didn't sleep of course, but we're fine. Who is it? I don't recognize your voice."

"It's me. Charlie." Whereupon the doors promptly flew open.

"Charlie?" He exclaimed. "What on earth are you doing out here? Don't you realize how dangerous it is?" Zack whispered.

Charlie as confidently as he could, answered above a whisper. "It's alright for now. The sun is up and who we thought was Mr. McIntyre has gone for a rest. I hope."

"Come in. Let's see whether the food is edible this morning. Though I have no appetite."

"I think nobody has an appetite this morning." Shirley answered from her corner. The children stirred uncomfortably and one of them screamed as he got to the back door. They all rushed there only to see a dead body half eaten by maggots on the steps.

"It's an invasion of maggots. Mother didn't we pray enough? Why is all this happening to us?"

"Charlie snapped his fingers and slapped his forehead.

The child said. "Ah! Charlie has had a revelation!"

"That's it! The Maggots Invasion."

They turned in unison and stared at Charlie puzzled.

"Now I remember." Charlie paced the floor going faster and faster with each breath and each utterance. "I guess I blocked it out because it was so terrible, I didn't want to remember any of it."

"What do we do now Charlie?" Zack asked with hope in his voice.

A sudden sound so faint coming from the front interrupted Charlie's train of thought and he stood transfixed staring in that direction, the blood draining from his face. He clutched at his chest and dropped to the floor before Zack could get to him. He sustained a deep gash to the back of his head and when Zack turned him over the maggots came spewing forth like a faucet was turned on. Terrified and with their last hope gone Zack hugged his family prepared for the dreadful end that was sure to be about now.

The twins came gliding in, now serious and straight like soldiers. Without making a sound they lifted Zack bodily and bit off his ears. Zack screamed while his wife and children, shocked into silence, just stared and remained still.

“That is for not listening when you’re spoken to and for being disobedient.” They said together then dropped Zack like a sack of flour. His family found their voices and screamed while adrenaline stepped in and they ran out the house in different directions. Seeing the bodies strewn around the streets and culverts, they couldn’t stop screaming or running, so they kept on. The maggots were now everywhere and appeared to be getting fatter and longer.

The gravediggers safely ensconced in their respective homes decided it’s time to do something. They had a special psychic connection and they both gathered the various objects necessary for their protection and hustled to the preordained spot near the cemetery.

“Here is the kerosene and matches. I’ll gather the bones and put them together.”

“Marcus?”

“Did you feel that cold breeze?”

“And hear the soft voice? Yes, Venice. I did. Don’t stop moving or it will get you.”

They were both moving as slowly as they could to avoid finishing their part before the other was ready. When they were almost done filling the hole with the bones a large animal unknown in these parts came running through and spilled the kerosene. Terrified because they had no more, Marcus and Venice started praying the Magnificat in Latin because the elders always said prayers have more power when prayed in Latin. But instead of things quieting down, they got louder and harsher. Venice slipped, fell and sustained a deep gash on his shoulder. Marcus on the other hand burst out laughing, in an ugly guttural sound. Seeing their end coming, they lit themselves on fire so they’d die and stay dead. Maria and who they all thought was Mr. McIntyre floated about and gloated “You’re not getting rid of us.”

Three years later the twins who remained dumb, had learned to write and recorded the events of that fateful time and the signs that preceded the most horrifying events of their little village.

They were warned to cremate all their dead.

#### **Author supplied bio:**

Soter Lucio is a great-grandmother who irons by day and writes horror stories at night. She lives alone but is never lonely because she remembers her story-filled childhood from growing up in the mountainous region of Trinidad where a donkey wearing slippers or a goat asking why you're out so late is the norm. She has been published by The Sirens Call, Weird Mask, Migla Press, and Dark Chapter Press.

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#### **Memento Mori | *Edward Ahern***

Most cemeteries are forgettable, with identical slabs spaced rigorously on grass. Living mourners visit less and less frequently, and memories of the dead dissipate long before the lettering is weathered unreadable.

Once the living have forgotten their dead, the dead nurture their own. Unphysical things sprout in the estates of the moldered, reaching into the miasmas of night. Speech has rotted away with lungs, and as they sway in darkness their intercourse is twisted-wind wailings and a semaphore of ghost lights. The living are unwelcome, for the dead wish to talk only among themselves, and the dead know their own.

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

Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He’s had four hundred stories and poems published so far, and six books. Ed works the other side of writing at Bewildering Stories, where he sits on the review board and manages a posse of nine review editors. He’s also lead editor at The Scribes Micro Fiction magazine.

**Facebook:** [Edward Ahern](#)

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





"Hot take," Ben said, sitting up slowly on the bench seat, "we don't ever do Orlando to Charlottesville in one night again."

"It wakes," Chrissy said. "Weren't you the one that booked the show?"

"No comment," Ben said, looking out the window. He knew that Charlottesville had some sort of a historic downtown but this wasn't it. The road was narrow, crowded with houses and businesses, but all of them shabby, run down, modern. Take out the line of distant mountains and it could have been New Jersey.

"Make a right here," Kevin said, his phone in his hand. "It's up here."

"Where?" Chrissy said, hunching in her seat a little like she was avoiding a nonexistent glare.

The street angled up, climbing again, like this whole part of Charlottesville was rising and falling on its way to the Blue Ridge like the spikes on an echocardiogram. A block off the main road and the houses immediately changed, became big, old-timey, with columns and front porches. Once they'd probably been gorgeous but now, they all needed at least a fresh coat of paint, IE, it looked like the right neighborhood for a house show.

"Here," Kevin said, pointing to the right side of the street. True to form, the show house was the one most in need of a new paint job. It also had the most shit on the porch, a whole collection of end tables, la-z-boys, and a couple of couches that Ben could already smell. The only concession to the season was a plastic pumpkin sitting on the end table closest to the door.

"Ah fuck," Chrissy said. She slid the van in along the curb, a lucky break, a spot big enough for the van right in front of the house. "Will you look at that?" she said as she cut the wheel and angled the van in.

"Shiiiiit," Kevin said.

"You know," she said and turned in her seat, "maybe next time try a street-view of these places?"

Ben flopped across his bench seat like a seal and stuck his face to the window. The sidewalk was a full four feet lower than the front lawn, a crumbling concrete step to cut distance in half like an afterthought.

"Fuck me."

"Yup," Chrissy turned and said to him. "You're carrying the 8x10."

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"Seriously man, no Orlando to C-Ville ever again man. You got to break that shit up," Kevin said, a cigarette already sticking out of his beard. Ben rubbed at a nagging spot low on the left side of his back, thinking '*well then how about you book the next tour*' but only grunting, noncommittal.

Chrissy bounded up the step, like somehow, she didn't feel the drive at all because she was two years younger than Ben and Kevin or maybe at 5-foot nothing you could always find a space to stretch out. Ben leaned back in the door and snagged his water bottle before Kevin shut it. A reusable bottle had replaced road sodas as his hangover cure.

Road sodas were a lot more effective.

Ben left Kevin smoking by the van and followed Chrissy up the walk. *God damn that's a big step.* It would take him and Kevin both to get that huge bass cabinet up it.

"Yo! What's up motherfuckers?" Chrissy shouted, banging on the front door. Brooding lumberjack Kevin could never do that shit, and even though he looked like a math tutor, Ben probably couldn't either. Rolling up to a stranger's house and banging on the door and yelling was something that you could only do if you were five feet of big smile and purple hair.

The front door cracked as Ben hit the porch.

"Whattup? We're Man Is..." Chrissy shortening their name like she always did, the kid in the doorway tall, younger than them by a decade, and stoned or had just woken up or both.

"Oh hey," he said, looking down at Chrissy, grinning because that's what you did.

"You ready for a SHOW?" Chrissy shouted.

"Haha yeah, yeah, come on in," the kid grinning and laughing and holding the door open, already a little in love.

Ben followed, Chrissy peppering the kid with questions, stepping over the legs of another kid, this one with a mustache and coke bottle glasses. There was a sheet on the far wall and he was watching a movie on a projector. The kid from the door was showing Chrissy outlets-

"We play in the living room? Sick," Chrissy said.

"Yeah, the basement floods so-"

Ben looked at the movie playing on the sheet.

*Groundhog Day? Who watches Groundhog Day on Halloween?*, he thought.

The living room was biggish, maybe a few feet larger than your average suburban living room but not what you'd call spacious. The only furniture was the couch Mustache sat on.

Thank God they were a three piece.

"So Jaime, we gonna blow your power? Blow our heads? Because we're running full stacks..."

"Noooo," door kid, Jaime, said. He shook his head. "We never have any problems. Matt here did all the wiring himself."

Mustache nodded.

"Cool cool," Chrissy said.

There was a pocket door off the living room leading to a room that overlooked the porch. Ben didn't mean to look in, he was simply drifting in that direction, trying to figure out where to put his drums.

The room was dark, a small bedroom that probably used to be a walk-in closet or something-

"Shit, sorry," Ben said, startled. There was a girl in there, sitting on the bed in the dark, messing with her laptop. She gave him a look and he turned back to Chrissy and Jaime.

"...Orlando was cool man, it always is," Chrissy was saying.

"Orlando? Word?"

"Yeah, it's like those art school kids have a chip on their shoulder about Disney so they go fucking haaaard-"

"Yo Chris, I'm gonna start loading in," Ben said, the look the girl had given him still stinging. He couldn't blame her; he was a total rando peaking in her bedroom.

"Cool," Chrissy said. "I'm gonna take a pee and smoke this bowl with Jaime and Matt here. Don't forget my cab homie," she said and goosed Ben.

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"We are MAN IS THE WARMEST PLACE TO HIDE!" Chrissy howled, "and this is one called...TIED TO THIS FUCKING COUCH!" and they were off.

It wasn't a bad crowd for Halloween in a punk house living room, maybe fifteen people that didn't live there or play in a band. It wasn't like there was room for many more.

Ben was just this side of fucked up, playing hard, head banging, getting strobe light slashes of the room as he drummed and howled backup for Chrissy. He was already dying in his RJ MacReady thermal shirt, but Chrissy had only made him promise to wear it for one song so he'd ditch it momentarily. Kevin was using his height to his advantage, looming over the crowd, his guitar low, stomping on pedals in his Porkchop Express Tank and trucker hat.

Chrissy looked even more deranged than usual in her mascara stubble and eye patch, but if anything, the costumes had broken the ice with the crowd because even if these kids were too cool for Halloween, who doesn't love Kurt Russell?

Ben felt eyes on him and pivoted, smashing the crash and high hat at the same time.

The little room's pocket door was open again and as he head-banged Ben caught glimpses of the girl inside.

Somehow, she was ignoring them, despite Chrissy's 8 x 10 rattling the windows behind him.

"...Couch" wrapped and there were screams and howls from the handful of people in the living room. They'd fallen back a little, the amps that loud, and were crowding the room's edges. Ben could hear the front door swinging open, could see a smoker ducking in to gawk.

They hit the first note of "Windows" together and Ben was lost in it, the notes subsumed by the wave-roar of his cymbals, hitting them so hard he was popping up off his drum throne, screaming along into the mic, almost dizzy with it-Movement to his left.

He looked, the girl in the room had her laptop open, the light illuminating her face.

He couldn't help himself, playing harder now, thrashing behind the kit and screaming louder, selling it for the cheap seats, which in this case was the little room behind the pocket door 10 feet away.

She didn't so much as look up. There was take out, maybe Pad Thai, in a container next to her.

She was beautiful, that much he got in the freeze frame glimpses between head bangs and cymbal crashed and back up screams. Big, sad eyes and gorgeous lips under the kind of angular haircut he hadn't seen in a minute.

And still, she didn't look up or so much as acknowledge his presence.

Unreal.

Infuriating and maybe the hottest thing he'd ever seen, this bored girl in her oversized punk rock hoodie, face half in shadow, half lit, by the blue light of a lap top-

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"Cville, we fucking love y'all!" Chrissy said and lunged forward to throw her arms around the closest kids and hug them, leaving sweat and Snake Plissken's stubble on them.

"Fuck yeah!" Kevin said and slapped Ben hard enough to knock him off his feet a little. Ben laughed, drunk, high, and just plain dizzy from how hard he'd played, pushed back at the big grumpy asshole that he would gladly die for, and they embraced.

Kevin kept his arm around him and turned to Chrissy.

"Yo! Chrissy, we crashing?" Kevin yelled.

She shrugged. "Jaime, we good to crash?"

Jaime was talking to a girl in fishnets, but to Ben it didn't look like a Halloween costume thing, more like a grindcore everyday uniform thing. Jaime shot them a thumbs up.

"Alright! Let's get fucked up!" Kevin said and dragged Ben out from behind the kit towards the cooler at the other end of the room. Ben went along, blundering into the arms of a half dozen sweaty strangers, hugging, trading high fives, these tattooed college kids making him feel like Bruce Springsteen and he turned, hoping that maybe she was standing there-

The pocket door was closed.

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Later.

The party flowed from inside the house, to the kitchen, to the van for more weed, to blowing their gas donations and merch money on pizza for everyone in the house. Ben kept an eye out for the girl from the little room for a while, but then the party rolled outside and he put her to the back of his mind.

Later still, Ben had decided to pee indoors and had wedged himself into the little bathroom off the kitchen. He'd had to vie for space with a mop bucket he was pretty sure had never been used. He was on his way back through the kitchen when a picture on the fridge stopped him.

He took a step toward it. It was a polaroid of the girl from the little room. No doubt about it. That same angular haircut, those same big sad eyes.

"What's up?" Chrissy said from behind him.

Ben jumped.

"Hey, nothing, just-"

"Just staring at a picture of a girl on the fridge? Not weird at all bro," Chrissy said. She took the picture off the fridge. "I get it though. She's gorgeous but there's something sad there. God, you've got a type."

She put the photo back on the fridge and stuck it in place with a magnet.

Ben was maybe too high for this, too high to put how much her ignoring them had wound him up into words. He came up with, "She's like...sleepy hot."

"What?" Chrissy said.

*Jesus*, he thought.

"Sleepy hot, like....I don't know, like you could spend all day in bed, just like, making out and napping with her."

Chrissy raised an eyebrow. "I'm deleting your TUMBLR."

"She's in that front room, and she didn't give a fuck about us playing. Ignored us the whole time."

"Jesus Christ. You're like, a million times gayer than me and I'm married to a woman," Chrissy said. "Speaking of, I want to call Suze before it gets too late-"

Jaime burst laughing into the kitchen.

"Yo Jaime, who is this?" Chrissy said, tapping a finger on the polaroid. "Ben here thinks she's sleepy hot."

His laughter caught, died in his throat.

"Shit. Damn. Like," he shook his head, tried again, "-man, you don't need to be saying shit like that. 'Specially not around Matt."

Chrissy took a step closer to Ben and slid an arm around his waist.

"That's Mayrose. She's dead. Killed herself in the front room. That's why we always keep it closed."

### About the Author:

Andy Martin is an archaeologist, writer, and musician living in South Philly with his partner and cat. When not working or posting photos of his cat on social media, Andy can usually be found fishing and finding inspiration for more horror stories in the swamps and streams of southern New Jersey. Links to his writing and many cat photos can be found on Instagram.

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

## **Balance | Ken Poyner**

Nothing requires more delicacy than burning witches in the rain. You can add accelerant to the pyre; but add too much, the witch is gone in a rush and the crowd comes away thinking the spectacle not worth engaged attendance. The vendors do less business fast burn over slow burn, no burn over any burn. Having the right number of murder moments is the key to sales. If you are going to err, err for rain slowing the show. After all, if she won't go to ash today, there is tomorrow. The crowd will return. Punishment is in their blood.

## **Closet Maintenance | Ken Poyner**

Every Tuesday night, the closet monsters change houses. They spend Wednesday night customizing their frights. A closet monster's entire repertoire must change if it moves, say, from the closet of a nine-year-old boy involved in baseball and with a stable family, to the closet of a six-year-old girl who is just learning rejection and every night listens from bed to the fighting downstairs. The new closet monster reads the notes left by the last closet monster. By Thursday, the new closet monster is ready to make a trial scare. Thursday nights' feedback allows for a workman grade Friday night terror.

## **Haunting | Ken Poyner**

One dead woman stays there. Rumors are she died by a satisfied lover's hand; or within the steam of murderous thrill seekers; or tripped, falling fifteen steps to a broken neck and exile from living joy. All I know is she is dead, and many say she resides still in the house. Others say it is bunk. The truth lies in those who have, on a dare, stayed a night in the back second-floor bedroom, sleeping the night comforted, with two light arms around them, a feather kiss on the cheek, and a yearning with spurious lust eagerly for more.

## **Vampirism | Ken Poyner**

This would be the most beautiful woman Quibble has ever seen, were she a woman. Quibble reminds himself: this is but a former beauty projected by a two-hundred-year-old malicious presence. He is here to put a stake through her heart. Even were she a woman, pinning her with a stake might be the most precise event he might accomplish with a woman. Quibble has always been inaccurate with women. But it would be no harm, stake in one hand, mallet in the other, were Quibble to lean in a little, imagine being nearer the real woman. Close. Closer. Too close.

## **Options | Ken Poyner**

We penned the werewolf last night in our brilliant contraption hidden in McClellan's barn. No one had to face the danger directly. Quibble spent most of the night poking the lycanthrope with an eleven-foot pole, just beyond the reach of unnatural hands. Trouble is, the sun is up and the beast has reverted to Larson, the town toll clerk. We are keeping him in the cage until we can figure how to cure him. Quibble does not know that. He still torments Larson, and Larson squeals. Which monster should we worry of more, Larson or Quibble? Quibble will not change.

## **About the Author:**

Ken Poyner's four collections of brief fictions and four collections of poetry can be found at Amazon and most online booksellers. He spent 33 years in information system management, is married to a world record holding female power lifter, and has a family of several cats and betta fish. Individual works have appeared in Café Irreal, Analog, Danse Macabre, The Cincinnati Review, and several hundred other places.

**Author Website:** Ken Poyner

**Facebook:** Ken Poyner





"Alright, guys. Are we ready?"

"Yup."

"Let's go!"

"What's the plan, Boss?"

"I've scoped out the neighborhood all week. Seen Party City bags go into the Marshall house here—" Allen pointed to the map he'd drawn in meticulous detail. He never skimmed on Halloween. Everything had to be perfect on his favorite night of the year. "—and the Dorchesters here. Lots of grocery bags other places, but those two are the most promising for big hauls. We save them for last."

Maggie nodded slowly, biting her lip. "Yeah, Laurie Beth was bragging about the cool stuff her mom bought...but if we wait too long, don't we risk missing out on it?"

Allen thought about it. "You've got a point." He eyed the map. "Okay, change of plans. We hit the Dorchesters on the way down Elm, and we'll save the Marshalls for last. Agreed?"

Maggie nodded again—this time with a great deal more enthusiasm.

"Just don't get to my house too early," Greg warned. "Mom's making popcorn balls—but they won't be ready until later. She'll pass out the lame penny candy until they cool."

"Thanks for the heads up." Allen made a note on the map. "Anything else?"

Timmy gulped. "Do we have to go to the Marshalls? They're spooky."

Greg patted him on the back. "I'll protect you, bro. Don't worry."

Timmy's lips curved in a tremulous smile. "Thanks, man."

Straightening his back, Allen punched the button on his phone and then pulled his shirt back into place. The strains of *This is Halloween* blared into the night—he'd put it on a continuous loop, so it would last as long as his battery did. "It's candy-counting time!"

They pelted off down the street—an unlikely quartet. Allen had always been the leader, even when they were the *three* amigos, before Timmy came to town. Maggie was his right-hand person, reeling in the wildest of his plans. Greg was slow to anger, but mighty when they needed protection. Timmy was the smallest, and the youngest, but never turned away because of it.

Allen led the charge to the first house. "Trick or Treat!" he shouted as soon as the door opened.

"What have we here? Wonder Woman—very nice, dear. Captain America—oh, my! That shield is as big as you are." Mrs. Neatherwall smiled down at Timmy as she added an extra candy bar to his bag. "Aren't you a big one!" she told Greg.

"Hulk smash!" he replied with a grin. His greasepaint was beginning to melt, making him look more like a mottled pickle than Bruce Banner's alter-ego.

"And who are you tonight, Allen Hunt?" she asked, slipping a bar into Allen's bag.

He threw his chest out. "I'm Thor, see my hammer?" He held up the dead blow hammer he'd...borrowed...from his father's workshop.

"Oh, yes. Now I see. Well, you kids have fun."

"Thank you, Mrs. Neatherwall," they replied in unison. Then they darted on.

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The twilight had deepened to true night before they started toward the Marshall house. Laurie Beth hadn't been wrong. Her mother had splurged on little toys instead of candy, and the four of them had traded around until everyone had what they wanted. Now, it was the point of the evening when home and *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown* on the television began to beckon.

*This is Halloween* had begun to sound like a funeral dirge a couple of streets back, and now, it died completely.

"Damn! My battery's dead," Allen groaned, after checking to see what else might have caused the song to stop. "My mom is going to kill me."

"At least you've got a phone. But maybe it's a sign." Maggie glanced up at the full moon rising. "It is getting kinda late."

"But tomorrow is Saturday," Greg said. "We're almost to the end of the map anyway. You know the Marshalls are bound to have something good."

Timmy fiddled with his shield. "Maybe just a few more minutes, Maggie? I-I would like to see what they've got."

"Oh, alright. Just the rest of the way to the Marshalls, and then we go home."

They turned into the cul-de-sac that led to the big house at the end. The Marshall house was lit up like a bonfire. It was the only thing on the street that was. On the left, three tract houses were dark—either their owners were out at Halloween festivities of their own or hiding behind locked doors so they didn't have to give out treats. On the right...there was only the Simpson house, and it was as dark and dilapidated as always. The four of them walked down the center of the street toward the Marshalls, throwing uneasy glances toward the Simpson place as they passed.

Right before they reached the Marshall porch, there was an eerie, ululating howl that made their skin crawl. "Last house, right?" Timmy reiterated, gaze darting wildly from one side of the street to the other.

"Yup," Maggie promised.

Greg pushed the bell, and it echoed inside.

Allen frowned. That didn't seem normal. He stepped closer and rapped on the door itself.

There was no sound from inside.

"That's weird. Why would they go out and leave all these lights on?" Maggie asked.

"Dunno. Maybe we should check." Allen started around the side of the house, his posse at his heels.

When they got to the backyard, he paused. "Greg, you come with me. Timmy, you stay here and watch Maggie."

That half-smile brushed Maggie's lips again, and his heart lifted. "Thanks, Allen," she said. "I'll feel better with a good strong man nearby." She put an arm across Timmy's shoulders, and he grew an inch in height.

Allen nodded.

Turning to the deck, he led Greg to the French doors overlooking the garden. The kitchen lights blazed across the grass.

When they were close enough to see into the house, Greg gasped. "Allen—is that...real?"

The Marshall family sat around the kitchen table like they had been eating dinner. They looked like they were wearing red bibs. Fans of blood lay across the chests of mother, father, and three children. Mrs. Marshall had her hand in a bowl of Halloween candy. The children were in their Trick-or-Treat costumes.

"We gotta call this in!" Greg moaned.

"How? My battery's dead."

"Yeah. I- haven't gotten my phone back after being grounded. Maggie still doesn't have one, does she? And I know Timmy can't afford it."

"I guess we could use their phone," Allen said, pointing into the house.

"Bad idea, man. Bad idea! Then we'll have our fingerprints on stuff, and they might think we did this."

"But we're just kids."

"Won't matter. Don't you know how many kids do bad things these days? We need to go somewhere and borrow a phone. Somewhere safe."

They went back to the others.

"What's the matter?" Maggie asked.

"You don't want to know. Let's get out of here."

As they passed the Simpson house, Greg pointed to a light in the upper story. "Looks like someone might be home there. Maybe we can borrow their phone."

"Are you *nuts*?"

"The quicker we contact the cops, the better."

"What happened back there?" Maggie stopped dead in her tracks, digging her heels in with a mulish expression Allen was all too familiar with.

"Don't know, but they're all dead."

"Dead?" Timmy squeaked.

"Yeah. And we gotta tell someone."

The same ululating howl echoes through the night, but now it seemed to be all around them. And it was much closer.

"C'mon!" Allen ran to the front door of the Simpson place just as a huge shape covered in fur leapt out of the bushes beside the porch.

Instinctively, he swung the dead blow hammer, connecting solidly with the side of the fiend's head. It collapsed onto the splintered boards of the porch.

The children clustered around the prostrate form. It looked like some kind of mix between human and wolf, and its hands ended in bloodstained claws as long as fingers.

"Is that a werewolf?" Timmy whispered.

"Looks like it," Allen replied.

Even as they watched, the fur began to recede on the body, and the claws retracted into the tips of perfectly ordinary fingers.

"I think you killed it," murmured Maggie. "Do you think it's what attacked the Marshalls?"

"Maybe."

The door creaked open behind them, and the children jumped, backing away from the thing on the porch. An elderly man hobbled out of the house, and looked down at the wizened body now lying naked and bloody on the rickety boards.

"What have you done?" he cried, dropping to his knees beside the creature.

"I didn't mean to," Allen mumbled. "It attacked us. And I think it killed the Marshalls next door."

The old man shook his head sadly. "Oh, no, boy," he said, rising to his feet as his features began to writhe and contort. "That was me!"

His ululating howl rose in counterpoint over the sound of their own screams. And then the night grew hushed.

## **Psychopathy 101 | Rie Sheridan Rose**

I didn't mean to kill the first one. It was an accident. She stepped out in front of my car, and I was going too fast to stop. So I didn't, of course.

Minorly inconvenient, but I buffed out the dent and no one really seemed to notice. Like I say, that was the first one. It was a rush.

Unexpected, but enlightening.

The second one was also a bit of an accident. I had swiped right on a guy who looked semi-interesting but wasn't. I invited him for dinner, but by the end of cocktails, I knew he was a loser. Still, I would have just kicked him out after the pie, but he came up behind me as I was making the salad and got all handsy. I turned around with a knife in my hand, and sliced him open like a watermelon.

That one was a bit of a mess. It took me an hour to sluice up all the blood. And then I had to figure out how to get rid of him! What a cluster...but again, the rush!

After that fiasco, I took some time to think. To plan. To learn.

I realized that killing people in my own home was a disaster. It would only make it really easy for someone to tweak to the fact that people disappeared if they came to my house. But I loved that rush. I wanted more.

So, I figured it out. And I'm willing to share what I found with you—after all...who will you tell?

First of all, choose carefully. Don't just settle for the first person you see on the street. They might be missed immediately. If they are, you are way more likely to be caught. Focus on the street people; the winos in the alleys; the runaway Goth kids. No one will notice.

When you have a target, be nice to them. Buy them a burger. Offer them a place to sleep—not at your home, of course—somewhere where it won't come back to bite you in the ass.

Get them trusting you. That's the main thing. Once you have won their hearts, they'll let you do anything you want.

And pick your weapons with just as much care. Don't pick anything you can't handle. If you aren't strong enough to swing a sledgehammer at someone's head, use a knife.

Finally, you have to be able to control the environment. Look around here. See the plastic everywhere. That's for the blood. You have to make sure to keep things clean. Less likely to be caught that way.

So, there you go. That's how you do it. Too bad you're not going to be able to pass that information on. It's really a great set of rules...

### **About the Author:**

Rie Sheridan Rose's prose appears in numerous anthologies, including *Killing It Softly Vol. 1 & 2*, *Hides the Dark Tower*, *Dark Divinations*, and *Startling Stories*. In addition, she has authored twelve novels, six poetry chapbooks, and dozens of song lyrics. A member of the HWA and SFWA, Rie is OBSESSED with Virtual Challenge races, and has the medals to prove it.

**Website:** [Rie Sheridan Rose](http://RieSheridanRose.com)

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

Nessa Noland was not herself. She still feigned being the successful woman everyone in town knew, and on many days did an adequate job of it. But it was just an act. She could clearly recall previous opinions, quirks, mannerisms, and everything else making her Nessa, but lately it became more difficult to stay in character. It just didn't feel right, almost like reverse amnesia; instead of struggling to remember, she strained to forget everything that made her recognizable to herself.

Her past wasn't exactly exemplary, but not the reason for her current state. Frankly, Nessa wasn't really sure why she wanted to unzip her body and float away. She didn't desire demise, just escape. The various factors impacting this perspective were muddled, and ascertaining their significance was as dubious as garnering veracity from a politico.

Beginning to feel the tingle of desperation, Nessa had recently reviewed her life's synopsis for additional clues. Born into a middle-class Oregon family, she grew up an only child...at least for the first five years of existence. Then the stork unexpectedly dropped off brother Neil, obliterating that distinction. Just the thought of sharing attention with her sibling throughout most of her childhood made Nessa's teeth grit.

Continuing her brief review, she pondered adulthood. Nessa grew to be more like her mom than her dad – determined, competitive, and tenacious—fervently so. She was pleased to be a chip off the old maternal block, and in her own unbiased opinion, a super chip. She recalled her mother lamenting that unfortunately after marriage, she became much more mundane in life's ambitions. *Not happening to Nessa—ever.*

Now thirty with an MBA from a prestigious university, she was sole proprietor of a thriving financial consulting firm ripe for expansion. Indifferent about the few ethical corners cut along the way, she considered an opaque conscience a small price to pay for success. Since early adulthood her entrepreneurial ambitions enthusiastically embraced a sole philosophical perspective—*whether you think you can or think you can't do something—you're right.* She suspected most chose option two. Advantage, Nessa.

Not discerning indicative explanations from her past, Nessa's thoughts then turned to the recent. About a month ago a duality had crept into her existence. It began softly in bed one morning during a deconstruction of a dream, that netherworld between rapid eye movement and consciousness. As the days passed, this new state proceeded to expand, bit by bewildering bit, faster and faster, still incomprehensible, but undeniable ... a split Nessa.

Then less than yesterday the balance between her old self and the morphed version tipped toward identity oblivion. In this chaos, however, clarity began to take hold. Barely in possession of her earthly ego, Nessa stumbled into perceptions of another life—not an existence from some previous incarnation, but a concurrent one. During this episode, dark and sinister images spiked her synapses, conjuring up glimpses of unspeakable inhuman forms engaged in aberrant acts of rage and ferocity toward the chosen.

Boom! Nessa realized she was one of them in all her translucent glory, part of the group and member of the whole—a defining epiphany, her worldly ambitions now trite. Humanity was something to be hunted, terrorized, and reduced to unrecognizable configurations of ambiguity; horror was an art form—an outlet for creative abominations.

\*\*\*

Now in the present, October 31, she confronts the dawn, her metamorphosis almost complete. Nessa's ancient coterie is beckoned through the portal by a myriad of conjuring hosts, mostly spirit seeking neophytes who know nothing of what's being potentially unleashed. The nearly transformed Nessa and her counterparts have much to do. On their way to 'greet' their newest selected quarry, they linger briefly to tend to Nessa's other self.

The coroner will most likely list her death as gross suicide, but Nessa knows otherwise. In reality, hers is another forever unsolved atrocity analogous to her clan's countless others— past, present, and beyond.

\*\*\*

*Mom, by the time you listen to this voicemail, you may have already been contacted by the authorities or should be shortly. Whatever is said, don't believe it; the physical me you know is gone, but my essence still exists, just differently now. My worldly estate, including the consulting business, I leave entirely to you. This will afford you the opportunity to do what you always wanted to before Dad got in the way. Contact my attorney and she'll fill you in on the details. Lastly, I implore you to heed this warning: stop dabbling with your spirit board. Throw that damn thing away immediately. Do it! Never attempt to contact me through any channel; the family's safety depends on it! They're calling me away now so I can't linger. Remember, I've always tried to love you, Dad, and Bro. Bye.*

*One more thing...delete this message.*

#### About the Author:

Charles Sartorius has one foot in the business world and the other tiptoeing into the literary one. An admitted project crunching MBA workaholic, he does make time to write both short stories and music lyrics. His *The Missing Case of the Missing Case* has recently been published in the *Murder! Mystery! Mayhem!* anthology. Several songs appear on conventional venues like Amazon and Apple Music.

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It was in broad daylight when they came. No one saw it coming as giants suddenly stomped their way across the countryside. Sebastian barely had time to realize what was happening before he was ripped from his home and carried away. He then had to spend days locked in some type of holding container with hundreds of others just like him. Others who had been taken by the giants without permission and seemingly without rhyme or reason. It was a rectangular prison where the only light that shined in was from two large holes carved into the side walls, up near the top of the holding container.

The only solace Sebastian had was that his cousin, Gregor, had also been taken. Talking to his cousin, even if it was about minute things, kept Sebastian sane. A wave of fear would wash over Sebastian every time the vehicle they were being carried in hit a bump, as the others in their holding container would fall to one end. The first time they all fell to one side of the container, someone was squashed to death against the wall. Since there was no way to get rid of the corpse, they had to live with it just lying there. It wasn't long before the body began to smell, and it made the holding container that much more unbearable.

After days without any source of nourishment, and being kept in a confined space, they reached their final destination. Sebastian couldn't help but watch in terror as his holding container was lifted up by one of the giants. He desperately tried to see where he was by looking toward one of the large holes, but it was up too high for him to get a good look through it. They were only moving for a few seconds before they were callously dumped out into a rather large holding pen. Unlike the holding container, the enclosure didn't have a ceiling or high walls to block him from seeing the world around him. Sebastian quickly scanned the area he had been taken to and was absolutely horrified. There were dozens of enclosures that surrounded him, each filled with others from far-off places, all jam-packed together.

Sebastian didn't know why he was there, or what the giants wanted from him. Those around him did not know either. There was talk amongst them of what was going to happen, but it was nothing more than speculation. Sebastian continually brought it up with Gregor as they often stared at the ground far below them. After discussing what might end up happening for several straight days, an elder finally spoke up and told them.

"They're going to eat us," the aged individual croaked out.

Sebastian had immediately shrugged off the notion of being eaten. He didn't want to accept it as a possibility, so he simply denied it. One day, one of the others in his enclosure couldn't take being held against their will any longer. Sebastian watched as the individual ran forward and threw themselves over the small wall of the enclosure. He rushed to the side and peered over to watch as the crazed individual fell to the ground and surely died.

It was then that he learned the elder had been absolutely right about what the giants were going to do to them. For while Sebastian was looking at the corpse far below him, a giant approached his enclosure and slowly picked up the body. Sebastian studied the giant as it stared at the corpse for a moment before rubbing it against its gargantuan clothes. He couldn't turn away as he watched the giant lift the body towards its mouth and rip into it. Sebastian screamed in terror as he continued to stare at the giant as it walked away while ripping away large chunks of the corpse with its teeth.

From that moment on, Sebastian lived in constant fear that he would be randomly taken by one of the giants. An unbearable wave of anxiety and fear would rush over him every time a giant began to walk towards his prison. His will grew weaker with each passing day, as well as his strength. Sebastian could do nothing to escape this horrible fate. He found out that he couldn't even save his cousin when a giant randomly snatched up Gregor. Sebastian could only watch as the monster carried off his cousin. He would hear Gregor's screams as they haunted his dreams each night while he tried to sleep.

The days ticked by and Sebastian found that his strength was leaving him. It took all the energy he had just to stay awake. Days without proper sleep made him weak and vulnerable. That's why it had been so easy for a giant to grab hold of him. He didn't even realize what was happening at first until he was slowly being lifted into the air. As he approached the gaping maw of the giant, Sebastian tried his hardest to break free but he could not. He let out a final scream of terror as the giant brought its teeth down, biting into him.

Mark looked up from slowly mopping the tiled floor and sighed at the man who had just taken a bite out of one of the fuji apples. He shook his head before calling out to the man, "Sir! You can't eat the produce without paying for it first."

The guy shot him a scowl before snapping, "I'm going to buy it. I just wanted to take a bite to see if it was good."

Mark scoffed as he sarcastically replied, "Like I haven't heard that one before." He pointed towards the self-checkout and firmly said, "You can either pay for it now, or you can get out of the store. It's up to you!"

The man grumbled as he angrily walked past Mark and headed for self-checkout. Mark looked down at the freshly mopped spot the customer had walked through and saw that the guy had tracked mud through it. Mark let out a loud groan as he began to move his mop back over the area. He stopped mopping for a moment as he thought about just quitting on the spot. After a few seconds of internal debate, he let out a deep sigh and reluctantly went back to mopping.

“God I hate my life,” he grumbled to himself.

He didn’t pay any attention as the man exited the store, taking another large bite out of Sebastian as he went.

### **Unexpected Midnight Kisses | *Radar DeBoard***

Charlette smiled at the warm feeling of her cheek being kissed. Even in her sleep she was able to recognize the distinct sensation of a kiss. She felt another one on her forehead and let out a small hum of approval.

She continued to smile as she was kissed all over her face and neck. The amount of them had begun to bring her consciousness to a half-awake state.

Her mind actually began to process what was happening. She froze with fear as a sudden realization crept into her mind. Charlette lived alone, so who or what was kissing her?

### **The 13<sup>th</sup> Sacrifice | *Radar DeBoard***

Darrius prepared the final elements for what was to come. The time had come for the final ritual, the thirteenth sacrifice. Months of planning, blood, and sweat would culminate in his sought-after goal. Finally, he would be able to hold his beloved Victoria once again.

After every horrific thing that he went through, all the nightmares he was tormented by, there was still one more deed that he had to undertake. There was still one more child that needed to have its heart removed. Thankfully, for Darrius, it was Halloween night, and there were plenty of unsuspecting kids to take.

### **Ending A Tradition | *Radar DeBoard***

The ten lords danced merrily with their brides around the ballroom. They all anticipated the traditional leaping dance of All Hallows Eve. A dance that had brought the festivities of the night to an end for over two centuries.

Smithson watched from a table covered with lavish foods. It had been the thirteenth year straight that

Smithson had been forcibly kept from seeing his family. He had grown to despise the lords, which is why he had added something special to the champagne. A smile spread across his face as the lords sipped it. There would be no leaping tonight.

### **About the Author:**

Radar DeBoard is a horror movie and novel enthusiast who resides in Wichita, Kansas. He occasionally dabbles in writing and enjoys making dark and exciting tales for people to enjoy. He has had drabbles and short stories published in various electronic magazines and anthologies.

**Facebook:** [Writer Radar DeBoard](#)

**Goodreads:** Radar DeBoard



Bob was beginning to think they had taken a wrong turn, but Olivia continued to insist that they were walking the right way. The problem with Olivia was that she was almost always right but that, when she was wrong, she would never admit it. She would keep on insisting that she was correct right up until you confronted her with irrefutable proof that she was wrong. It was easier to just go along with her than to argue.

But, he couldn't shake the feeling they were nowhere near where the party was being held.

"I thought Jake said he lives in a penthouse," he prompted.

"You know how he exaggerates. Besides, he said it was in an area that's been regenerated. They probably just haven't started on this street."

"You don't say." The street was lined with empty offices with dunes of rubbish collected in their doorways.

"It's a disgrace; the government ought to do something."

"Get in pest control, at least."

"What?" Olivia hated anything that could be classified as vermin, even hamsters and guinea pigs.

"I saw a rat skulking around those black bags over there. Oh, come on, whoever heard of... no, you *are* a scaredy-cat, aren't you?" He was referring to her costume.

"I'm a sex kitten," she pouted, "not a house cat."

"And, I'm a horny devil, so why don't we just turn around, go home and treat one another?"

"I guess we – eww! What is that?" she pointed towards an alleyway.

"What is what? I can't see a thing, except some coke cans." From the sound she'd made, he had expected to see at least a dead body.

"I saw something move!"

"Probably a rat; let's go..."

"It was big..."

"Maybe it was a cat, then, or an urban fox." He decided not to mention what he had read in the paper about how rats were supposed to be reaching enormous sizes.

"Don't they carry rabies?" she asked, alarmed.

"Sorry?"

"Foxes—aren't they rabid?"

He shrugged. "I don't think so, just mangy."

"Well, are we going?"

Typical, he thought. Suddenly, it was all his fault. Still, at least the evening held the promise of a pleasant conclusion.

He was just about to turn away when he saw movement in the alleyway. It definitely wasn't a rat, a cat or a fox – unless it was one that had learnt how to walk on its hind legs like a man. He hoped it was a tramp.

It wasn't. Olivia screamed as it stepped out from the shadows and sniffed in their direction.

"It's just a costume," he muttered, "it just has to be."

It wasn't. No matter how he tried to deny it, he was certain that it wasn't a costume; not unless they had stumbled upon a Hollywood blockbuster being filmed, and that seemed unlikely.

The creature – he couldn't think of it as a human or anything like that—might have been a tramp, once, as it had a vaguely humanoid posture, if hunched, and wore a ragged overcoat that may once have been beige but was now stained all sorts of shades. On its head was a battered old trilby that had been pulled down over the inhumanly-small head, although it failed to hide the bulging multi-faceted eyes like a fly's, and peculiar, warty skin and tiny puckered mouth. Nor did the overcoat conceal the fact that it was in possession of a third arm that protruded through an awkwardly-placed tear.

It took a faltering step towards them as if it couldn't quite walk on its spindly legs and yowled like a sick dog.

"What is it?" Bob exclaimed, no longer trying to deny his senses.

"I don't know!" snapped back Olivia in a tone he knew meant she was trying to hold herself together.

It took a couple more steps in their direction as if growing bolder. Bob didn't like to speculate in what manner its boldness would manifest. Generally, monsters were not to be considered beneficial to those who encountered them.

It took another step and Olivia gave a little involuntary shriek before grabbing up an empty beer bottle from the gutter and throwing it at it. The bottle landed a short distance away from it and shattered. The creature gave a slight start but didn't turn and flee. Instead, it stood there and looked at them; the stare ought to be malignant, yet Bob couldn't really tell given its lidless insectile eyes.

Then, after a moment of it watching them watching it, none of them moving, it burst into a run and sped in an ungainly fashion across the road towards them.

Olivia screamed and made sure Bob, who was swearing with fear, was between her and it. Bob levelled the cheap plastic pitchfork that he carried as part of his costume and wished that it were real or, at least, sturdier, cursing himself for not having looked around for something to protect himself with.

"Kill it!" Olivia shouted in his ear, making him wince at just the moment he really needed his wits about him. Bob wasn't sure he could kill at the best of times, but especially not when he was essentially unarmed.

The creature let out a gurgling yowl as it launched itself at him. Its fingers were clawed and slashed painfully at him, ruining his costume—that was going to cost him, part of his brain thought as the rest of it attempted to fight it off, batting futilely at it with the plastic prop.

Suddenly, there was a loud crash and the creature staggered sideways, a crown of silvery stars bursting momentarily into life above it as Olivia smashed a bottle over its head. The hat fell from it to reveal a knobby cranium. Unfortunately, it didn't look like the head of a creature easily battered into submission.

It shook its head in an almost comical fashion, then lunged once more for him. But, this time, he was ready and took a two-handed swing at it with the pitchfork which snapped in half but did send it staggering backwards.

At just that moment, there was a squeal of brakes and a car slammed into the creature, sending it flying down the road.

"Oh, heck!" cried Jake, leaping out from the car. "I haven't killed him, have I?"

"It's not a him!" shouted Bob. "That's not just a costume—it's a... a..."

"A monster!" Olivia supplied.

"You sure?"

"Yes!" they replied in unison.

Not entirely convinced, he ran over to look at the prostrate form but ran rapidly back when it twitched.

"Blimey, let's get out of here!" he said, jumping back into the driver's seat and opening the door for them to throw themselves into the back. "Lucky I came looking for you, after I realised I'd given you the wrong address!" And, with that, he put the car in gear and his foot down on the accelerator.

### 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).

Blog: [DJ Tyrer](#)

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I am, gentle reader, a creature of few ambitions. But one desire that burned in me like a flame was to meet the Bronte sisters. I longed to tell them in person how I enjoyed their writings.

I am, in general, an avid reader: though if you saw me, you might not imagine books to be the most likely of my pastimes. My tastes are wide: history, fiction, biography, poetry. One exception is the horror genre. I find stories of that kind to be...let us say, inauthentic.

The Brontes, however, are far and away my favourite authors. Meeting them in the flesh was technically possible, for I was a contemporary of theirs. I should explain that I enjoy exceptional longevity, which I attribute partly to a healthy diet (more of that later) and partly to a rugged constitution. But alas, *when* could the encounter have taken place? For certain reasons, it is well nigh impossible for me to travel in daylight; and most assuredly, the dear ladies would not have wished to meet me in the dark.

When the Brontes had left this vale of tears, I modified my goals. I had not met the sisters in person, but might I not find as my soulmate a lady who was in face, form and character the real-life embodiment of a Bronte heroine?

Reader, it nearly happened, a few weeks ago! I was strolling through my usual domain when I became aware of intruders. Unseen by them, I observed a boy and girl, perhaps of late teenage years. The male was unkempt, with lank hair and a surly expression.

But the female! She would have graced the pages of any Bronte tome. In the moonlight, I beheld a face and figure that Aphrodite herself might have envied. She was opening her rosebud mouth to speak. What dulcet eloquence was I about to hear!

"Why the hell did you bring me out here? A graveyard! I'm freezing my ass off. Drive me back into town, you creep!"

Somewhat perplexed, I searched my memory for similar dialogue in any Bronte tale; and I confess I drew a blank. But now the youth was speaking.

"Don't talk to me like that, or I'll leave you here on your own. Haven't you heard the rumours? They say this place is haunted. No, not a ghost. Worse. A *ghoul*. A creature that lives off human flesh. Hideous...Savage."

I was of course displeased to hear myself described in such dismissive terms. Hideous? Well, I concede that my outward appearance is, by human standards, unprepossessing. The uncharitable might even say startling. But *savage*? Can a connoisseur of Shakespeare, Shelley, Hardy, Keats and a myriad of others, including of course the wonderful Brontes, be thus described? I took a dislike to that youth, and it intensified moments later when he grabbed the girl and shoved her against a tall headstone.

"Look, I don't like being messed about. You're just a cockteaser! I spent a fortune on you, and now I'm gonna get what I want. Don't bother screaming, there's no one around to help."

How wrong he was! I strode forward, for all the world like a latter-day Perseus flying to the rescue of his Andromeda. Hearing my footsteps, the youth turned. The snarl on his lips turned to a cry of horror. I would have spared him, but foolishly he struck out at me. My retaliation was instinctive and instant. He toppled backwards, a gaping wound where his throat had been.

For moments, the girl and I stared at each other. I allowed myself to hope. Could it be not terror, but devotion, that I saw in those gorgeous eyes? Had I indeed found my true love?

No...it *was* terror. In any case, my true nature precluded any long-term relationship. The lady might well have found a place in my heart – but then, all too soon, a far more literal one in my jaws and belly.

So I pointed to the cemetery gates, and she needed no second bidding. The night's events had given me an appetite; I beheld the corpse at my feet. Do not imagine that I devoured the youth in some uncouth feeding frenzy. In fact I am a gourmet of some discernment; and besides, a chef of no little skill. My particular *forte* is the cuisine of the Indian subcontinent.

Reader, I curried him.

#### About the Author:

David Whippman, who lives in the north of England, is retired after a career in healthcare. He writes poetry, stories and articles. Aside from writing, his interests are music, chess and visual art.

"Was that a scream?" I cried.

Linda and Mary stood, the wind whipping at their hair and clothes. It smelled of the ocean and sand baked by the sun. The scream came again, louder than before.

"Somebody's just having fun," Linda said. "There's a boat out there."

"It didn't sound like fun to me," I said. "Sounded like somebody in pain."

I shielded my eyes against the glare of the sun. The boat's engine came to life, and it sped away and out of sight. I watched it go and then, my eyes caught something out on the sea's mirrored surface. A few yards away, blood bloomed from beneath the water.

"Oh my god!" I breathed. I turned to my friends. "There's blood in the water!"

Linda and Mary followed my gaze.

"It's algae," Linda said. "I swear, Emma, I think you've had too much sun. Maybe, we'd better go to the car."

The scream I'd heard before, came again, louder than before.

This time, both girls flinched. They'd heard it, just like I had.

We all gazed out into the sea. A hand rose from the center of the crimson slick and grasped at the air. From the way Linda's face grew pale, I knew she'd seen it too.

I kicked off my flip-flops and threw my hat down onto the sand.

"Emma, what are you doing?" Mary cried.

"I'm going to help them," I replied. I waded out into the water and dived in.

A woman bobbed amidst the blood. "Help me!" she cried.

I swam out to get her, but the farther I swam, the farther she seemed to be. At last, I reached her.

"I've got you!" I cried. "Are you hurt bad? I can get you back."

She turned toward me and at first, I couldn't register what I saw. Her face was white, like that of the moon, and her left eye hung from its socket by a pale string. I wanted to scream but it died in my throat. I tried to kick away from her, but she caught me by the arm and held me fast.

"Listen to me! Listen to me!" she shouted over my screams.

Her cold hand dug into my flesh. She raised her other arm, but no hand appeared with it, only ragged flesh.

"I didn't know what to do," she cried. "I didn't know how else to save you."

"Save me?" the words came out as little more than a whisper.

She nodded toward the beach.

I followed her gaze.

The boat I'd seen earlier lay anchored in a cove nearby and just out of sight of our beach. I have to assume that's where he came from. I couldn't make out his face. I could only see the gleam of sun on his machete as he crept up on my friends.

I screamed to them, tried to warn them, but I guess they couldn't hear me. Why else would they have turned away and walked right into him?

#### **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.

**Blog:** [Frighten Me!](#)

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



It was an unseasonably hot night for Halloween. Wind tugged the dying leaves from partially barren trees, and sent scores of them cascading downward.

I parked my car on Maple Lane at the edge of a wooded lot and checked the directions again. A streetlamp illuminated the pathway which should lead through the woods to the backyard of 324 Oak Street. As I followed the beam from the mini flashlight attached to my keychain, I touched the silver cross on its silver chain and thought of the recent vampire rumors connected to this area.

Something pulled at my cape and I whirled to find it only snared on some underbrush. I untangled it and headed toward a now visible glow, which I soon discovered emanated from a back porch light. When I reached it, I pocketed my keychain flashlight and knocked upon the wooden door.

It was immediately opened by a pirate. "Donovan?" he asked. His right eye narrowed at the sight of my cross, a black eyepatch covered his left one.

I nodded and he led me inside where white candles in several black hanging candelabras provided the light. All the furniture was black, from the sofa and chairs to the coffee and end tables. Glasses of red liquid were set on the end tables or held by guests costumed as a belly dancer, Indian, ballerina, cowboy, witch, wolfman, and a female vampire. I had difficulty shifting my gaze from the vampire's tight black dress, dark hair, and dark eyes.

"Nice Zorro costume," the pirate host said, still at my side. "I'm Walker, and I've got a job for you."

"I'm listening."

"Come here." I followed him to the floor length white drapes which seemed to melt into the plush white carpet. I passed between the glaring wolfman and the honeysuckle scented vampire. Our eyes met and she smiled, so did I.

Walker impatiently held a corner of the curtain aside. "Do you see that van parked on the other side of the street?"

"Yes."

"They've been watching this house and we'd like to know why."

"Want me to ask them?"

"I thought maybe you could bring me one of them, so I could personally ask."

"Sure thing," I said. "For a price."

He pulled a pile of bills from a pocket of his trousers which were tucked into black boots. He handed the money to me and I counted it. "Well?" he asked.

"Consider it done." I shifted my black cape aside so I could reach my wallet.

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I debated the next course of action on the way to my car. Distant lightning streaked the sky and rumbling thunder followed later. I backed the car down Maple Lane and turned onto Cedar Drive, then onto Oak Street. Several cars lined the driveway at 324 and a few were parked on the street.

I approached the van slowly. A man stood at the back of it, attempting to light a cigarette against the wind. Perfect. I shifted into park, leaned over, and opened the passenger door.

"My window is stuck!" I yelled out the open door. "Could you tell me where Maple Lane is?"

As he explained, I pretended to be unable to hear him above the car's engine. He came closer, apprehensive at first, then leaned into the car. After an uppercut to the chin, his head hit the top of the door frame. He dropped his lighter and unlit cigarette, then fell limply, his upper body on the seat. I pulled him all the way into the car, shut the door, shifted into drive, and accelerated. In the rear view mirror I could see the van's headlights.

\*\*\*

I parked back on Maple Lane and carried the man through the woods over my shoulder. When I reached 324 again, the door opened before I could knock. "Where do you want him?" I asked as I entered. Walker pointed to the now empty sofa, and I shifted my burden from my shoulder to the black cushions.

The man wore blue jeans, white athletic shoes, and a white shirt upon which rested a gold chain with a gold cross pendant. His disarrayed hair was brown and his handsome face looked very familiar.

Walker turned to me. "Will he be unconscious long?"

I shrugged. The guests were gathered around the sofa but no one touched its sole occupant.

Walker pushed up one long white sleeve and looked at his watch just as the man on the sofa stirred and moaned. He gradually sat up, rubbed the top of his head, looked down at his cross, and then at the people gathered around him. When his eyes caught mine, his expression changed from fear to anger.

Suddenly the back door splintered open and I heard a similar sound in the other direction. Two men, armed with stakes, came in the back door. Two other men with stakes entered from the front, passing through the darkened kitchen area. All wore blue jeans, white shirts, white athletic shoes, and golden crosses on golden chains.

The ballerina, wolfman, Indian, and belly dancer fled down the dark hallway pursued by the second pair of men. The witch and cowboy had hidden behind the sofa and now raced out through the kitchen toward the front entrance.

The first pair trapped the female vampire against the wall. One of the men touched her chest with the point of his stake. "Stop!" I yelled, knocking the stake from his hand.

Walker pulled her with him out the back door, as I was grabbed and held by the two men who had threatened her.

The second pair returned, one carrying a bloody stake. They wore pleased expressions on their faces. "The others escaped out a window but we got the wolfman," one said triumphantly.

I fought back the waves of fear, disgust, and nausea that threatened to pull me under. The man I had kidnapped stood before me, his blue eyes cold. "Well, I see your companions have deserted you."

"All but the one you killed." I struggled futilely against the two men restraining me.

The blue-eyed man pulled my dagger from its sheath, and examined it tentatively. "It's real, isn't it?"

"What do you think?"

He frowned. "I think very little of humans who ally themselves with vampires."

"Vampires?" I echoed.

"Don't play innocent." He tapped my cross. "If you didn't know, you wouldn't have worn this."

Vampires. Then these men before me, armed with their stakes, were vampire hunters. Killers actually. I stared at the drops of blood that had fallen from one of the stakes onto the white carpet.

The blue-eyed man, which I assumed to be their leader, held the point of my dagger against my chest. "I hope they paid you well to kidnap and betray a fellow mortal."

"I may be many things, but at least I'm not a murderer," I said.

"It's not murder. They're not people anymore, they're monsters."

"Killing is killing."

Still holding my dagger in one hand, he removed my hat and mask with the other. He studied my face intently. "Don't I know you?"

"I was thinking the same thing," I confessed.

"What's your name?"

"You first."

He set the dagger on a nearby end table, pulled my wallet from my pants pocket and thumbed through it. "No identification, nothing but money. I'll just keep it." He smiled as he stuffed my wallet into one of his pants pockets. "If you don't cooperate, you may never need any more money."

The leader seemed calm, but his men were getting restless. "Shouldn't we get out of here?" one of them asked.

The blue-eyed man nodded and retrieved my dagger from the end table.

"We moved the van behind his car and came in through the woods," said another one of his men.

"Good," replied the leader. "We can search his car. I'm sure our mystery man's got some ID in the glove compartment, like a car registration. Everybody, wipe your prints off anything you touched and let's go. Leave the traitor to me."

I was released while the men pulled handkerchiefs from their pockets and wiped off surfaces.

"Stay close," he said as we all went out the back door. I could feel the point of the dagger against my back. "I'll be right behind you the whole time, don't try anything."

Cloud cover blocked any moonlight and the streetlamps only partially lit the barren wooded area. Once on the pathway we went single file, the leader and I sandwiched in the middle. Rain pelted my head and I wished for my hat. Lightning streaked the sky and the streetlamps flickered once before completely blacking out. Everyone stopped in the sudden darkness as thunder crashed around us, and the rain subsided.

"None of your flunkies thought to bring a flashlight?" I commented.

"Shut up."

When the next lightning flash illuminated the area, I turned and grabbed his wrist with both hands, and shook the dagger from his grasp. It fell into the darkness, accompanied by a roar of thunder. He lunged at me and I flung him off, his fingers clutching my necklace which snapped. I pulled my keychain from my pocket and flipped on the mini flashlight, focusing its beam upon the wet ground. The leader tried to reach my dagger but I was faster.

"My wallet, please," I said to the leader, shining the light in his face while brandishing my dagger. He reluctantly handed it over, and I took in the same hand that held the keychain before pocketing it.

"I see you're managing fine without my help, Donovan."

I turned the flashlight in the direction of the voice to see Walker and the other costumed vampires surrounding us all, their eyes glowing red. The vampire hunters were strangely immobile, obviously entranced.

"Donovan?" I moved the beam back to the blue-eyed man when he said my name in an odd tone. His expression was a mixture of astonishment and pleasure. "No wonder you look so familiar. I know it's been twenty years, but don't you recognize your own brother?"

"Duncan?" I asked in disbelief. I sheathed my dagger and examined his face closer. It was him. "After their divorce when Dad and I left town, he told me not to write or call anymore because you and Mom were dead."

"We wondered why we never heard from you again," he said. "Mom knew Dad hated her, so she just assumed he turned you against us."

"I can't believe this." We embraced, my eyes misting.

"Neither can I," said Walker. I had completely forgotten the present situation. "You're free to go, Donovan."

Lightning framed the beautiful vampire, next to Walker, who stared at me and said something that I missed because of the ensuing thunder.

"That wasn't part of our deal, Selena," Walker said. "We can discuss this later, we know where to find him." He repeated, "You're free to go, Donovan."

Before, I wouldn't have hesitated to leave the vampire hunters at the mercy of their chosen enemy. But now, things were different. "What will happen to them?"

"Selena's mate has been killed, there must be retribution."

"What sort of retribution?"

"This really doesn't concern you, Donovan. Our war is not with you."

"Please don't hurt my brother," I pleaded. "I'll do anything you want."

"Anything?" He smiled slightly.

"Anything," I agreed, without hesitation.

"Donovan, Selena accepts your life in exchange for the life taken," Walker said.

I tried to swallow my fear. One last noble gesture to atone for all the wrongs in my shady past. My flashlight was pulled from my hand and the beam lit up the ground around Duncan and me. The cross on my necklace glinted and he scooped it up, pressing it into my hand.

"Put this on quickly and go," Duncan whispered in my ear. Then he raised his voice. "I'm the leader, I'm the one you want."

"You're not the one I want," a soft voice said, close to me. A lightning flash revealed Selena at my side. Thunder rolled as I dropped the cross from my fingers. "Thank you for saving my life earlier." She took my hands in hers. "You shall enjoy being my immortal mate."

Walker said, "Surely now, Duncan, since your brother will soon be among the undead, you'll disband your group of vampire killers."

Selena kissed my face, my lips, and finally my throat . . .

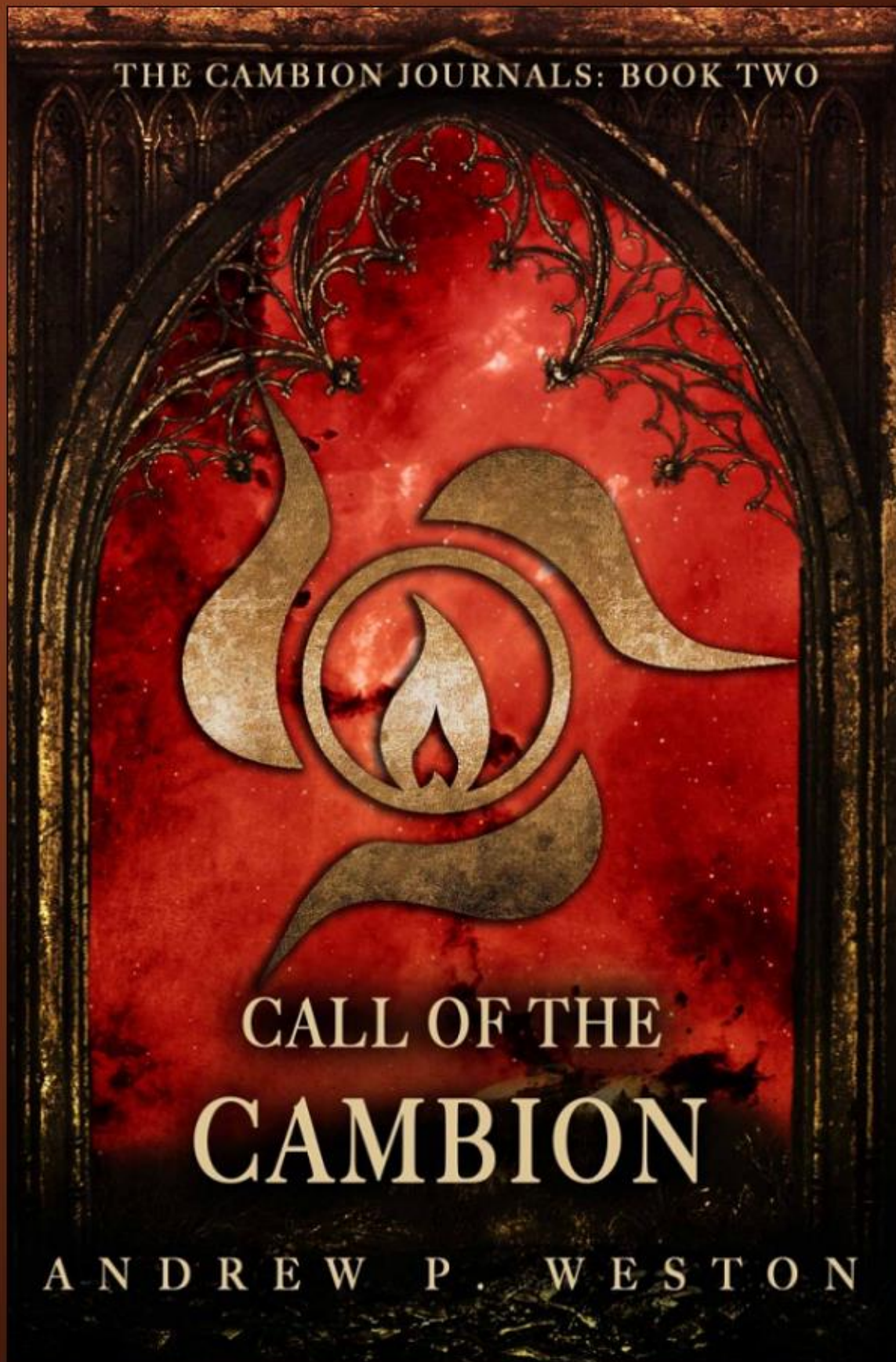
#### About the Author:

K. A. Williams writes speculative, mystery/crime, general fiction, and poetry which has appeared in various magazines including *The Sirens Call*, *Corner Bar*, *Calliope*, *Aphelion*, and *View From Atlantis*. Under the name A. Williams she has published 2 novels - *Vampires (Good and Evil)* and *Hunters*, and *Desired Quarry*. Apart from writing, she enjoys rock music, and CYOA games.





*It's all about revenge.*



**AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!**

*Girls and boys come out to play, / The Moon doth shine as bright as day.*  
Or so goes an old nursery rhyme.  
But I once heard a different version.

\*\*\*

I'd begun my trip up north a few weeks before, in the Hebrides, and now I was approaching the end on the coast of Cornwall. I planned to take a train to London in a few days and then fly home. I'd been reluctant to leave, and had started making arrangements for a return visit the following year, but now ...

In any case, it was late evening, too late, and it was cold, and I was desperate to get to the little pub that lay a few steps down the street from my B & B, no matter how muddy or exhausted I was.

The pub was warm and smoky from the fireplace in the far corner, and reassuringly *ordinary*—as I needed for it to be. And Mackie was sitting there by himself at his usual spot, holding a nearly empty glass. When he saw me at the door, he stared for a moment, but when I gestured that I'd buy him another pint, he grinned and raised his chin.

Mackie was old and short and had lost most of his teeth. In another age, he might have been a pirate, but as it was, he'd been a miner and then a fisherman, until the pilchard stopped running. Now he seemed to live at the White Hare and to have reserved a seat on the bench by the door. Did he have a family? I doubt it. I didn't even know his real name.

But Mackie knew the region inside out and was a good listener, and those were two things that mattered to me right then. After I sat down and took a couple of gulps of my own pint, I told him my story.

There was to be a full moon that night, so I'd set out in hopes of reaching a crest where I could watch the sun set in the west while the moon rose in the east. It was an exhilarating experience I'd enjoyed from time to time back home, and it had occurred to me that I could do the same thing here, given the right vantage point. It was late October, and the air was chilly, but the sky was clear and the opportunity was too much to pass up.

Besides a flashlight and a backpack, I carried a pole to test the ground in front of me. When I could, I stuck to what might once have been paths, but Cornwall's hills are covered with a thick scrub of gorse and heather and ferns. And it's tin country—or was—and those hills are riddled with abandoned mine shafts. In any case, I finally reached the heights I'd identified earlier that day on a map. The western sky was ablaze over the Celtic Sea, and the eastern sky, away toward the English Channel, was brightening in turn. The moon would slide up over the horizon at any moment.

I was elated—the sensation was as pure as anything I'd ever felt—elated with being where I was and seeing what I was seeing. The air smelt wonderfully fresh and clean, and I might have been standing on top of the world.

But then a movement below me caught my eye and I looked down the slope to the east. And what I saw was a *ring of children* holding hands and stepping right and left as if in some archaic dance.

My mother once told me that when she was a child, her grandparents' wrinkled faces reminded her of dried apples. I think she must have been fond of the memory but a little uncomfortable with it as well, uncomfortable with the signs of aging that she remembered and that (as I would realize too late) she had begun to recognize in her own face. But now the earth lurched beneath my feet, for I saw that these children's faces, lit as they suddenly were with moonlight, were dreadfully wrinkled too. And, as I stared, one of them—a girl, it must have been—looked up to see me and her little wizened face contorted into a mask of rage and she *screamed* as she pointed up at me.

I lost my balance and must have fallen, but in any case I began running as fast as I could down the western slopes, pits or no pits, tumbling down the hillside and running when I could get up again and then tumbling again. I lost my stick and my pack somewhere along the way. That I made it back to the port was pure luck, but I did, somehow, the scream still ringing in my ears.

And that's the story I told Mackie. And as I told it, I remembered the rags the children had been dressed in. And their awful, wrinkled faces. And the scream, more animal than human.

"Oho, so you seen 'em too!" He gave a short laugh. "My mam used to say the words while she churned, *Girls and boys come up to play, The moon do shine as bright as day*, and all the rest, and I asked her once, I was older, Mam, where was they comin' up from? But she didn't know, she said. Maybe she did, maybe she di'n't. Maybe they was just words to fill the time."

I watched as he rolled a cigarette from papers and tobacco that he carried in a tin in his coat. His fingers were gnarled, but he handled the complicated process with a kind of mesmerizing deftness, and I started breathing more regularly—until I looked down to see that I'd torn the knees of my jeans and was bleeding. And then I heard the scream again.

"They don't mean us no harm," Mackie continued, after getting up to light his cigarette from the fire with a spill. "But they're touchy. Private-like. Good to let 'em be." He paused to take a drink. "We'd hear singin' down there in the mines sometimes. Way off. And if you left a bit o' pasty, it'd be gone the next day." He took another sip. "But I only seen 'em that once, there where you seen 'em, I bet. It were a full moon that night too, and I was out larkin'." He paused. "And I ain't never gone back," he finally concluded, staring across the smoky room. "Took to the fishin' then. Don't you go back neither. They might take it personal."

Mackie launched into a story about the spectral things that the fishermen used to see out in the deep water past the reef, but before he could finish, the publican announced in his husky voice that it was closing time.

#### Author supplied bio:

Grove Koger is the author of *When the Going Was Good: A Guide to the 99 Best Narratives of Travel, Exploration, and Adventure*; Assistant Editor of *Deus Loci: The Lawrence Durrell Journal*; and former Assistant Editor of *Art Patron* magazine. He blogs about travel and related subjects at his blog.

Blog: [World Enough](#)

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#### The Roof Party | K. A. Williams

Count Dracula looked around the roof at people in their different costumes—vampires, goblins, ghouls, witches, warlocks, zombies, and werewolves. He saw a familiar hairy face and maneuvered through the crowd.

"Wolfy, I'm glad that's just a costume."

"Good to see you Drac, my friend. How have you been?"

"I am well. Van Helsing's descendents still think I was staked over a century ago. How are you?"

"Okay, but I've spent a lot of money on clothes and shoes. Now I buy them used at thrift stores. What are you doing here?"

Dracula waved his hand around. "All this free food. How can I resist such a feast? I wasn't going to kill anyone, just a few sips here and there. I don't want to be noticed. But you, Wolfy, will find it impossible to restrain yourself. There's a full moon tonight."

"I'll be fine. The weather forecast is for thick clouds with rain after midnight. So you see—"

Wolfy stopped talking because light was now visible from the moon which the clouds had uncovered.

His clothes and shoes tore as his shape changed. Soon his outfit was rags. His body became furry and his human face with the fake hair transformed into a wolf's head. Jaws filled with sharp teeth opened and he howled.

"I know you can't understand me, Wolfy," said the Count, "but you sure know how to ruin a party." His food was now screaming and fleeing down the stairs. He sighed. "You can't trust the weather forecast."

The wolfman growled and sprang at Dracula who quickly changed into a bat and flew off to hunt for another Halloween party.

#### About the Author:

K. A. Williams writes speculative, mystery/crime, general fiction, and poetry which has appeared in various magazines including *The Sirens Call*, *Corner Bar*, *Calliope*, *Aphelion*, and *View From Atlantis*. Under the name A. Williams she has published 2 novels - *Vampires (Good and Evil)* and *Hunters*, and *Desired Quarry*. Apart from writing, she enjoys rock music, and CYOA games



Have you ever been on a winter road? Roads made from snow and ice, crossing frozen rivers, lakes and marshland. I was on one of them roads, driving a truck transporting machine parts up to one of the diamond mines. It's a good way to make a lot of money quickly, but there's a reason that the pay is good, it's a dangerous occupation.

It is customary to stop for any hitchhikers on the winter road, especially in the teeth of a blizzard in early February. At first, the old man standing at the side of the road looked like a mirage, with the drifting snow obscuring him. He stepped out in front of me. I managed to stop in time, just. He climbed into the cab, followed by a grey and white husky with sparkling blue eyes.

"Thanks," he said.

I put the truck back in drive and headed out into the snow. Driving on a winter road is hard, especially when it is snowing. White road, white verges and white sky. You have to concentrate unless you want to end up in the ditch. It was a few minutes before I had the chance to look over at my new companions.

He was old, maybe around eighty. Dressed in a scruffy baseball hat, padded jacket, jeans and winter boots, it was clear that he was a local. Dry leathery skin and a patchy beard completed the ensemble. The old man's eyes met mine. He spoke.

"Thanks fella. I was stuck out there for nearly an hour."

I checked the temperature gauge on the dashboard. Minus thirty. Celsius.

"Pretty sharp out there."

"Yup, pretty sharp."

"Where you headed, old timer?"

"Red Meadows."

"The old gold mining camp?"

"Yup."

"Heard that was closed down, way back."

"Reckon so. All played out."

"In the fifties?"

"That'll be about right."

I lapsed into silence. Up here you don't ask people their business. If he wanted to tell me then he would, otherwise I would drop him and his dog at the deserted mining camp that lay some one hundred miles ahead. The silence stretched out between us.

"Nice dog," I said. "What's her name?"

"Storm."

"Good name for today."

Outside, the blizzard was worse, with visibility only a few feet in front of the truck. I checked the temperature gauge on the dashboard. Still minus thirty. I decided to break local tradition and inquire into his business.

"Red Meadows, huh?"

"Yup."

"Any particular reason for going there, this time of year?"

He gave me a sideways glance.

"Seems to me a man's got a right to go wherever he wants without nobody giving no never mind."

"Seems that way to me too, but it also seems to me that the neighborly thing to do would be to make sure that a fellow doesn't put himself in harm's way."

"True enough, young fella. True enough. And anyhow, I'm going to be asking you a favor soon, so I guess you have a right to know."

He petted his dog.

"I was born in Red Meadows. My pop was a miner, working his own claim. Mom came with him, like lots of other folks. I was born there in '44."

I nodded. My uncle had been born in a mining camp in the remote northern forests. These places were so remote whole families would move to them, building little tar paper shacks to live in. The people would stay for the spring and summer, moving to the camp as soon as the snow melted and leaving only when the weather got bad. The goal was to make enough money in the summer months so they didn't have to work for the rest of the year. The life wasn't for everyone, only the tough survived, but those were different times, right after the great depression.

"So, you're heading back?"

"Yup, haven't been back since '58."

"Any particular reason to go back now?"

The old man stared at me for a few seconds.

"Seems odd to be telling this to a stranger, since I ain't even told my own family, but I'm dying. The doc gives me a few weeks, at most."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"We all got to die sometime, son."

"Are you going to Red Meadows to revisit one more time?" I asked.

"Guess my trip is one way. I ain't coming back."

"You're staying in the camp?" I asked, noticing that the man carried no equipment or food.

The old man stared out of the side window into the snow.

"I have a feeling, son. An urge. I have to make it back to Red Meadows. That's where they are, waiting for me."

"Who?"

"My family, my parents and my brother Bob. They're waiting for me in the place that we all called home."

"Oh."

"You see fella, Red Meadows was the last place my family were together. My pop died in '54, killed when he slipped into a rock crusher. Mom died there the year after. Cancer. Bob and I kept going back though, we were still hoping to strike it rich. Bob got pneumonia in the summer of '58 and I couldn't do anything but watch him die. There weren't no airplanes in those days, leastways none I could afford. That was the last year I went to Red Meadows, I had got full-time work in the steel mills by then. Three members of my family are buried up there. I guess I was lucky, I survived to live my life full measure, but now it's my turn. I got cancer in the lungs."

He coughed into a handkerchief and I saw blood.

"I haven't got long. Want to be with my family. They're waiting for me."

I said nothing. In the north there are lots of loners and eccentrics who live by their own rules. Guys who prefer their own company. Sometimes they get a little loopy. A little bent out of shape by the solitude. It looked like I had picked one of them up, but I wasn't worried. He was a little old guy, maybe one hundred twenty pounds. I had eighty pounds and thirty years on him. Plus, he didn't seem dangerous, just a bit crazy. He spoke, reading my expression.

"Think I'm crazy, don't you son?"

"Ain't none of my business."

"Well, I thought I was too. For a while. But it feels right. They've been talking to me, calling me back home."

"As I say, it isn't my business. I'll drop you at Red Meadows and then what you do is up to you. This load needs to be delivered by Tuesday and that's all I'm thinking 'bout right now."

"But you need to do one favor for me before you leave me at Red Meadows."

"And what's that, old fella?"

"Take Storm. Look after her. I can't take her where I'm going."

I looked over at the man and the dog. I wasn't really a dog person and trucking meant I wasn't home much, but what could I do? If he really meant to sit around at Red Meadows camp waiting to die, then why should his dog suffer? Least I could do was make sure that the dog was going to be okay.

"Okay, I'll take her."

"Thank you."

After that we didn't talk much. He seemed lost in his own thoughts and I was thinking things over. I would drop him where he wanted to go, but what to do then? Leave him and keep driving? Contact the cops, let them know what he was doing? Stay with him? Taking his dog was one thing, but could I leave him to die? I believed what he said about his condition, why would he lie? But this business about his dead family waiting for him? Crazy.

A couple of hours passed. The snow was starting to clear and the driving got easier. The old guy had fallen asleep, with his dog lying beside him. He looked withered, dried up. Almost dead. I supposed that was true.

I arrived at Red Meadows camp at around 4 pm. It was starting to get dark, but at least the snow had stopped. I shook him awake.

"We're here, old timer. Red Meadows."

He woke and glanced around.

"Yes. I remember it so clearly."



The camp at Red Meadows was typical of the dozens of abandoned camps in the north. A dirt track with a bunch of broken-down shacks, some collapsed and some still standing. There was a rusted out pick-up truck sitting beside a ruined shed. Pieces of abandoned equipment and machinery lay scattered across the site. All in all, it was a pretty depressing looking place.

"There's no one here. You sure you want to stay here?" I asked. I had to be sure.

He ignored me, instead looking out of the windscreen, his face full of anticipation.

"Where are they? Where are they?"

"Your family?"

"Yes."

"They're dead, old timer. You told me so yourself."

"They told me that they would be waiting for me. Here."

I tried to humor him.

"Look, I'll drive you wherever you want to go."

He wasn't paying any attention to me. His gaze was fixed on the view in front of him. I looked too. The door of one of the broken-down shacks was opening. Three figures emerged. They were misty and unsubstantial. And they were floating. I froze, terrified, but my passenger smiled. He spoke.

"Mom, Pop! Bob! See, fella, I told you they would be here."

He looked at me.

"Thank you for driving me here and thank you for taking Storm," he said as tears poured down his cheek.

"I have to go."

He sprang from the cab like a youngster and raced towards them. The three figures greeted him with open arms. He waved at me then followed them into the shack. The door closed.

I felt a tiny nudge on my left arm. It was the dog. Our eyes met. She was mine now and, I guess, I was hers.

It happened seven years ago. Storm passed away two years ago. I never knew how old she really was, but the vet reckoned she was at least sixteen, judging by her teeth. I think about the old guy once in a while. I wonder how long he lasted at Red Meadows. Did his family stand over him during his last few hours? Did they keep him warm? Protect him? But one last question has plagued me ever since. A question that has stopped me from ever going back to that camp to find out. Are they all still there?

#### **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 The Sirens Call, the Horror Zine and Drabblez Magazine. His novella *The Plague* was published by Demain Press.

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#### **The House | P.J. Reed**

She touched her lucky heather and prayed for protection against the spirits which haunted her new home. The former residence of Dr. Bayntom, the Oxford Strangler. A full moon had risen. She gazed at its opalescent beauty. Mesmerized. she tripped, and tumbled downstairs, and the house claimed its latest victim.

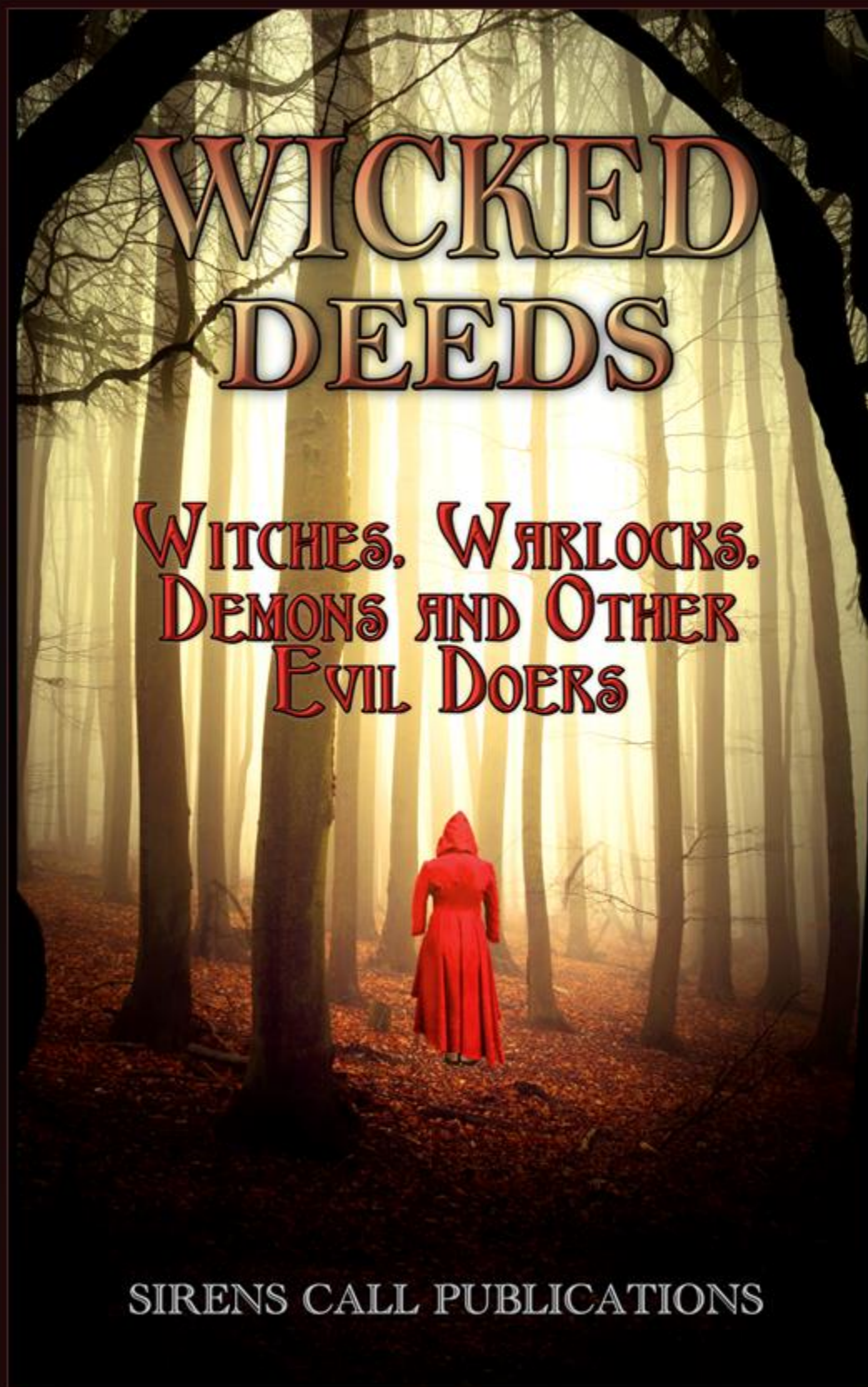
#### **About the Author:**

P.J. Reed is an author, historian and archaeologist by trade. PJ lives in Devon, England with her two daughters, Rupert the rescue dog, and one feral, but adorable cat, called Sammy. She writes the Richard Radcliffe Paranormal Investigations series and is the Editor and Chief Paranormal Investigator for the Exmoor Noir newsletter.

Website: [Dark Worlds](#)

Twitter: [@PJReed\\_author](#)

Sometimes wicked people do wicked things...



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

I was Luke Skywalker, not just dressed up like him but internally him with a brave heart and fierce loyalty. Who was I kidding? As much as I wanted to be the fearless hero, deep down, I was just a kid in a Halloween costume. The way I got pushed around in school smacked that reality on the back of my head. A plastic light saber hung from my belt on a stupid loop and bashed against my leg as I walked. Luke never had issues with his, even if it was just a movie. The spot where it rubbed would be a raw red blotch by night's end.

Kevin, Jamie and Butch walked along with me. Butch was thirteen and the rest of us were twelve so our folks let us walk the neighborhood together in search of candy and goodies as long as we stayed on our street and promised not to do stupid things. Mom gave me that lecture while Dad grinned and shrugged his shoulders behind her. I took it to mean, not too stupid and don't get caught.

Kevin dressed like a zombie, wearing mostly old torn clothes and bad makeup. The only thing that really worked was the dark eye shadow. It made his eyes look deep and sunken.

Jamie wore his sister's bathing suit, a red blanket for a cape and a painted mask trying to look like Nacho Libre. He shivered because his legs were freezing in the October cold night air. The small breeze sandpapered his bare skin raw. Butch was supposed to be a homeless hobo crazy killer or something. He waved around a huge fake plastic pirate sword he said was a machete. When he got bored he'd jab one of us with it or slap it across our butts. A few times I wanted to slice off his arm with the light saber. Violence sows violence. This would probably be our last year dressing up to traipse our streets. Older kids went to parties and made out.

Providence Street cut a straight line through the outskirts of town to form the beginnings of a development. Our street had houses on both sides until they ended in a pair of overgrown empty lots as if the developer had run out of energy. Small stacks of old shingles and siding poked out of the high weeds.

One house at the end of Providence didn't fit with the architecture of the modern ranch styles in the neighborhood. It was a creepy two story straight out of every horror movie I had ever seen. The wood siding was a faded gray fungus of peeling paint and loose boards. A short, rusted, iron fence bordered the front like a moat to stave off the neighborhood. An overgrown chaos of wild, high grass, weeds and junk bordered the path to the porch. The house lurked in the trees, as if everyone forgot it was there, like the leftover kid standing alone after the teams had been picked. Our houses had one tree per yard. None were very tall. The ones hiding the old place touched it's roof with bare branches.

My dad said an old lady who lived there owned the last four lots and refused to sell them to the developers.

"That's why we have those crappy eyesores at the end of the street," he said. "We're not even allowed to clean them up.

You and your sister stay clear of the place. Understand? She's a real weirdo crackpot." he said. I didn't ask why. It wasn't a Halloween lecture. He didn't want us down there on Saturdays when we goofed in the empty field next to it. I had the impression he blamed her for the unkempt state of those last couple of lots. He mumbled something about property values.

"Does somebody really live in that junky place?" Never gave it too much thought but maybe I'd seen light slinking out of the windows. Maybe.

"Old lady Snyder." He paused. "At least she used to. Just stay away. I don't need anymore run-ins with her."

We never saw anyone go in or out and if anybody did live in there, they didn't seem to have a car. I wondered how she got groceries and stuff. None of us had ever been through those woods so maybe there was another street back behind the house. The woods weren't thick but they were overgrown with thick underbrush. We'd been to the edge and peered and it was like looking into a dark basement. Sunlight couldn't poke holes in the thick trees even with the leaves all gone. We told each other there might be wild animals in those dark shadowy places but possibly we sensed something else.

Ann Marie Valchetti came down the walk of the Taylor house with four of her friends. She was dressed as Hermione with a cape and wand though I didn't notice the costumes the other girls were wearing. I choked out a 'hi' but I could feel myself blushing. She threw an annoyed glance my way and went on talking to her friends. Ann Marie rarely acknowledged my existence, let alone found me worthy of conversation. I did not walk on the same hallowed ground as she and her friends. Kevin elbowed me in the ribs.

"Give up on *that*, dude," Butch said. "She doesn't even know your name."

We'd exhausted one side of the street and arrived at the end where the asphalt crumbled into dirt and the light of the street lamp fell limply on the dark fields surrounding the old house. It loomed like a giant spider web. It called and repelled at the same time. Guys don't want to show their fear. I'd watched my Dad bluster through scary situations like getting lost in the bad part of town.

"Let's cross over here where there's still some light from the streetlamps," Kevin said.

"Yeah, I don't want to trip over something or step on a board full of nails. Then you gotta get tetanus shots," Jamie added. "Might be snakes or raccoons hiding in the grass. I've heard raccoons are vicious. They have, like, really long claws." They were all excuses for not stepping across that barrier into the darkness.

Butch looked toward the woods.

"Snakes are asleep at night," Butch sneered. "Everybody knows that. If I saw a raccoon, I'd catch it and take it home."

Most of the time Butch lacked sense. This was one of those times. I was sure the others felt like I did. At night, especially Halloween night, the end of the street was the drop off point for the end of the known and safe world. We could fall off into some creepy nightmare pit.

"Let's egg the house," Butch said. I gave him what I hoped was a stone-face look to show I wasn't cool with that idea. Butch had a way of throwing something down so you couldn't walk away without feeling chicken even when we all knew it was bad or dumb and would come to no good end.

"If nobody lives there it don't matter," he said to justify his newest stupid. He turned and ran home and a few minutes later came back with an egg carton. "I snuck a dozen eggs out of the frig," he said. "Just in case."

"We should check it out first," I said. "In case somebody does live there."

"Who's going to knock on the door?" I asked. They all stared at me.

"It was your idea," Kevin said. I stared down the street at the house trying to convince myself it wasn't so creepy.

A dilapidated wooden screen door leaned out from the house like a sinister drunk. The upper hinge had pulled away from the frame leaving only the lower one attached. The glow of a light further back in the house pushed against yellowed curtains in the window. A heavy old iron knocker in the shape of a cat's head was in reach on the main door. The cat didn't have a happy face. I turned to see the guys squatted by the naked bushes at the fence. I tapped lightly twice with the knocker hoping no one inside could hear it.

She was tall and thin like a stick draped in a dress. Her gray-white hair framed her head like a misshaped balloon.

"Hello," she said. "Can I help you?" Her voice was deep like my Mom's when she had a cold.

"Trick or treat," I stuttered.

A small frail smile creased her face.

"My, my. Is it Halloween? I never have guests so that holiday passes by without notice," she paused, turning her gaze back into the faded interior of the house. A yellow light shone from the kitchen at the end of a long hallway. The carpet on the floor was faded.

"I hadn't prepared anything but I do have cookies," she seemed to be talking more to herself than me, like her thoughts were bubbling out and she couldn't control them.

"But I suppose that wouldn't be proper. Parents wouldn't let you keep them. Poisoned, you know. All those stories. Razor blades in the apples and all that."

"It's okay," I managed to spit. "Not a big..." I'd seen some news stories warning parents to check their kid's Halloween treats. On the regular part of our street, we knew all the people so it wasn't a worry. Dad had cautioned me to stay away from her house.

"It is NOT okay," she said. "You were brave enough to come to the door. I imagine that took some courage," her eyes walked out past me to the fence. "Especially since your friends are cowering out there by the bushes. I *should* give you something." She looked back into the house. i

She seemed to study my face. "Are you William Patterson's boy?"

This wasn't going to be good.

"I remember seeing you when you were small. Your dad and I..." She turned back toward the kitchen. "We had a disagreement," she said. "My property." She looked out toward the overgrown lots. "They do look rather forlorn and shabby." I wanted to get back to the guys. This was uncomfortable.



"Wait," she said. "I do have something. I bought some candy for my nieces—in bags. That would be suitable, I think." She shuffled back into the house. I looked out to where the guys were hiding and shrugged. She didn't seem scary.

She returned and dumped two packs of Skittles into my bag.

Suddenly words jumped out of my mouth.

"Are you a witch?" I don't know why I asked such a dumb question. She was just a skinny old lady.

She moved her head in a funny way, as if she was listening to another voice. "I've heard people say that about me. But mostly I'm an old lady who lives alone." Her eyes scanned my costume. "You know the force is a kind of magic," she said.

"Wow! You know about that?"

"I wasn't always old," she laughed. Her gaze shifted out toward the street again. I turned and saw kids moving from house to house.

"That girl, Ann Marie. Do you like her?"

How could she know about Ann Marie? I felt ice slide up my spine and the air got colder.

"I don't know," I answered. "Maybe."

"She could like you. Would you like that?"

"I guess. Maybe." No commitment on my part. First Dad and now Ann Marie. How could she know so much about me? This was definitely taking on a high creep factor.

"You need only to wish for it," she said. "But it has to be a very strong wish."

I wanted to get back with the guys, run from the porch as fast as I could, but my feet were nailed in place. And I had that weird feeling in my stomach like just before you throw up, empty with something moving inside.

"You have to wish for it like there is nothing else in this world that matters. It can happen. She'd talk to you at school." I couldn't tell if I was nodding or shaking my head no.

"It's not free," she said, touching my wrist where I held the bag. "Nothing is free." Her eyes moved up to the moon and for a moment, seemed to absorb that gray milkiness. Her voice had shifted to a raspy squeal. "The moon is full tonight. A cold light." The moon had distracted her. Her fingers were cold steel on my wrist. "And tell Butch to take the eggs back home. He won't need them." She released my hand.

I pulled away and ran down the rickety steps. "No," I heard my voice again. I kept running until the guys caught up to me five houses up the street.

"What happened?" Jamie asked. "Why did you run so fast and did she actually give you some candy?"

I couldn't force myself to look back toward the house.

"Nothing," I said. "She gave me some candy. I think it's old. She's just some weird old lady."

Anne Marie and her friends came to the middle of the street where we were standing.

"Hi Richie," she said with a smile. "Do you want to walk with us?"

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

R. Gene Turchin writes short stories in sci-fi, horror and toe dipping in other genres. He has just completed a science fiction novel. A very old house occupies his time when not writing or playing guitar. Recent published works can be found in Sunshine Superhighway Anthology, Cosmic Horror Monthly and 99 Tiny Terrors Anthology, Onyx Publications, and Novus Literary Arts Journal.

**Website:** [R. Gene Turchin](http://R.GeneTurchin.com)





## Trick or Trick | *Alex Grehy*

In days long past, on Halloween, young children roamed the streets. Cute little munchkins dressed as pumpkins yelling “Trick or Treat”. Their moms went with them, misty eyed while neighbours rushed to fill the kids’ tiny hands with sweets.

The tricks were pretty harmless.

The munchkins grew into rowdy teens, less interested in candy. Like highwaymen, they thought that cash would be quite dandy. Their antics became a little extreme, their pranks were cruel and nasty. People left coins on doorsteps and cowered until the hooligans departed.

The authorities reacted.

Now only certified nanas could buy eggs and flour, presenting their bakes to those in power. Bricks were for builders and so the town grew. Fireworks were kept under lock and key in sturdy municipal towers.

Halloween became tame.

The Trick or Treaters grew up, became adults, went the whole nine yards. Got the house, car, career and talked about stocks. Pranks forgotten; their mundane lives were sorry affairs, no wonder they got so mean and frustrated.

Then they grew old.

Walking with one hand on Death’s infinite scythe, the old folks don’t care anymore. No need to waste money on costumes, many were natural crones. Some were like zombies with sagging grey skin. But the ones who’d spend their lives sunning and drinking, like pumpkins, had orange tanned hides and rounded beer bellies.

Time to revive Halloween.

The storekeeper thought the Old Folk so wise when they came in to buy innocuous supplies. Saltpetre makes soft powder for sensitive teeth; sulphur is good for fungus-y feet. Everyone knows that charcoal does wonders for a wind from, let’s say, the back seat.

Now they’re ready for mayhem

On All Hallows Eve the Old stalk round the town. Don’t offer them candy, it might break their false teeth. Don’t offer them money, it’s never enough; home-made pumpkin pies beget indigestion. Alcohol may cheer them, but too much makes them antsy.

You cannot placate them.

They’re hell-bent on mischief, best turn off the lights and lock up your doors. Put a cloth on the budgie and muffle the dog, build dens of cushions and hide behind couches. If you can, leave your home, move right out of town. The Old Folks are shouting “Trick or Trick”, getting louder and louder, hefting their weapons of choice.

Kegs of home-made gunpowder.

### About the Author:

After a lifetime of writing technical non-fiction, Alex Grehy is fulfilling her dream of writing works that engage the reader’s emotions. Her stories and poems have been published worldwide. Her ingredients for contentment are narrowboating, greyhounds, singing and chocolate. It is a sweet life, yet Alex's original view of the world has led to her best friend to say 'For someone so lovely, you're very twisted!'

Blog: [Ideal Reader Blog](#)

Twitter: [@Indigodreamers](#)

### **Finnish Gods, Creatures, and the Dead**

I've always been interested in fantasy and mythology, odd creatures and supernatural beings. Several years ago, me and my wife Tiina Porthan were studying old poems and wanted to start bringing the old Finnish myths to life in pictures to make this magical tradition known to a wider audience. Many of these creatures and characters had not previously been illustrated, although the folklore is full of strange, intriguing characters and sagas.

My art finds inspiration in old poems and spells used by ancient shamans. It's fascinating to read the spells they have used in healing, fighting against diseases and witches, and find out about their worldview, acting as mediators between our world and the Otherworld. Many of these spells have been included in the Finnish national epic Kalevala.

The Finnish underworld Tuonela is the home of the gods of death. The graves have their own gods. Also the forest is considered otherworldly. Nature gods and goddesses are revered and interacted with. The forest goddess Hongatar, Lady of the Pine, is the foster mother of the bear. After hunting a bear, its skull is hung on her branch.

The otherworldly animals have magical attributes. The wild Hiisi (goblin) elk is a magical elk that cannot be captured. It lures its hunters to the perilous mountains of the underworld.

In the Finnish tradition, the dead are always present. Ancient Finns were masters at interacting with the dead. The line between the underworld and our world was always vague. Our folklore has many spells, tricks and rituals to raise the dead from their graves, to return them there, to prevent and stop haunting, to expel the dead from one's home. The dead appear to the living in many forms: as ghosts, spirits, zombies, nightmares.

We have published a book of the Finnish underworld, "The Finnish Book of the Dead: Gods, Spirits and Creatures of the Underworld in Finnish Mythology and Folklore", available on Amazon <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09Y5XRPJB/>. The book presents a vast selection of my artworks, accompanied with texts by Tiina Porthan explaining the background in mythology of each character and creature, with excerpts from ancient poems.

#### **About the Artist:**

Tero Porthan, born in 1971, is a Finnish artist illustrating the magical world of Finnish mythology with its fantastical creatures and beings, inspired by ancient poems and songs. Mythology, folklore and fantasy worlds have always been close to his heart and he's been drawing and painting his whole life.

**Online Gallery:** [DeviantArt - Tero Porthan](#)

**Instagram:** [@teroporthan](#)

**Amazon Book Page:** [The Finnish Book of the Dead:](#)

[Gods, Spirits and Creatures of the Underworld in Finnish Mythology and Folklore](#)





# THE FINNISH BOOK OF THE DEAD

GODS, SPIRITS AND CREATURES OF THE UNDERWORLD  
IN FINNISH MYTHOLOGY AND FOLKLORE

TIINA PORTHAN  
ILLUSTRATED BY TERO PORTHAN

Available on Amazon

# Poetry

## Haibun

### Our Lady of Holy Death — — I | *LindaAnn LoSchiavo*

Maybe in this version you're a black-winged grackle, *Quiscalus mexicanus*, and I built your shrine in the air. Maybe you've become bi-lingual. Maybe you need an entourage, since your believers are doubling in number and tripling in diversity. It's hard to worship a folkloric figure from Mexico, who always feels "socially distanced," but I can arrange access to an Airbnb in East Harlem, refuge of hundreds of your *compatriotas*. Thanks to Doña Queta, devotional pioneer, safely spirited away from lung cancer, I'm raring to establish a stateside tchotchke shop, *una tienda de chucherías*, to hawk Holy Death *memento mori*: inky votive candles, Bony Lady figurines, toothsome chocolate skulls for your feast days. For you, I vow to sling borderlands Spanish slang. I'll disport myself clad in a rebozo, a huipil, or a traditional gala Tehuana dress during balls and *quinceañeras*. Full-frontal Frida Kahlo. On November 1st, I'll call your name over and over and over until grackles descend upon my shoulders, shrouding my eyes with stygian wings. I'll collect those feathers for fans, fluttering these in parades on *tu día de fiesta*. In the end, you'll welcome me as death's daughter, Milady of the Shadows. Meanwhile, I pay tribute, my fists filled with miniature icons, melted wax, molten magma, the moan of a mystical *derecho*, a sword lily, and a clutch of shiny, obsidian feathers.

Clouds shrouded dusk,  
gracing me, I felt,  
with your gelid shadow.

*Nubes envueltas en el crepúsculo  
honrándome, sentí,  
con tu sombra gélida.*

### Our Lady of Holy Death — — II | *LindaAnn LoSchiavo*

Not canonized, Saint Death was homeless before being adopted by the under-class. When she realized she could provoke dreams, Santísima Muerte hailed her fans, held an Open House. A meet-and-greet with the narco-lord, la puta, the criminal, the rebel—but no selfies, though pure of bone, charcoal eyed, and naturally slim. After she vowed neutral morality, artists began to ink her likeness on arms or legs. Devotees nibble tiny chocolate skulls on her feast day, hoping mortality can be as sweet. Like a crafty real estate agent, The Bony Lady has already selected that final resting place, the closing date. A sinister guardian, each day she slips into your shadow. Quietly patient. Hanging overhead like a mute wind chime.

Saint Death needs no gifts  
empty-handed, you're welcomed  
shake hands with omnipotence and helplessness

*Santa Muerte no necesita regalos  
con las manos vacías, eres bienvenido  
estrechar la mano con omnipotencia y desamparo*

I've fallen through a rip in time tonight.

Pale outcasts perch nearby, bones tinkling,  
Earth shaking with its greener mirth. Stones  
creak,  
Horned owls shriek as spirits gather loose  
clouds,  
Push these exotic feather-weighted shapes  
Aside—transparent curtains of their realm.

What's on the other side? Cold hands caress  
My arms invisibly. My candle glow  
Reveals no beings with a shadow. Yet  
I'm not alone, detect sweet fragrances,  
Lush nectar of forbidden grapes above.  
A cricket orchestra replays nocturnes.

I flutter like a trapped bird, then something  
Or someone draws me in with secret steps.  
A brittle leaf is plucked from my red hair.

Glass-blown interiors invite me there,

**Night on Bald Mountain, All Hallows' Eve | *LindaAnn LoSchiavo***

Under a waning gibbous moon, late Fall,  
All Hallows' Eve, unholy rituals  
Take place as nightjars fall to their black feasts.  
Old anchorites leave leafy caves, carve canes  
From cypress knees, observing, their hunchbacked  
Shadows distorting the infernal shapes  
Twelve devotees created. Pentagrams  
Appeared in the cemetery, midway  
Between new monuments and older stones.  
Robed figures holding torches silently  
Walk widdershins, their circular footpaths  
Becoming three concentric circles marked  
By powder that's combustible—and now  
These rings of fire leap up, light the night.  
Mysteriously, as the supplicants  
Position offerings inside the star,  
Some tombs quake open. Skeletons emerge.  
The hermits' canes, donated to the blaze,  
Refuel it. Beings formed from molecules  
Are welcomed as the spirits of misrule.

Nude revelers hail newborn deities.



**A Sleepy Hollow Hallowe'en | *LindaAnn LoSchiavo***

Clashes with spectral hussars oft retold  
By superstitious idlers keep doors locked  
In Sleepy Hollow after suppertime.

October's harvest beckons thieves. We prowl  
Lush farms, wheelbarrows hidden in the woods.

A jack-o-lantern moon illuminates  
Gold grinning gourds, arousing appetites.

Ideal for tasty pies or windowsills,  
Pumpkins pump cash into our patched pockets.

If thefts are noticed, we'd blame that horse-ghost—  
Or Raven Rock's forlorn white-gowned vexed wraith,  
Who haunts the dark glen where she froze to death.

Our local drunkards keep wild myths alive,  
Explaining how a Hessian warrior,  
Who fought alongside Brits, caught cannonfire.  
Entombed without his skull, this German ghoul  
Continues searching, mounted on his steed.

"Believe your eyes and ears," my father said,  
"Instead of old wives' tales. Dead men lie still."

Yet I confess I'd hesitate to be  
Alone within view of such restless graves—  
Especially tonight, All Hallows' Eve.

With loaded sacks of fresh-picked plundered gourds,  
We make our way to where we hid the cart,  
Aware of hidden eyes observing us.  
Fruit bats screech, scything mournful autumn skies.

Shushed evergreens' tips whisper "witching hour."  
Deserted greensward. We're defenseless here.  
Treetops are rustling spectral rapture: hooves.

Our brains jump their calm borders, go insane.  
Damp forest floor seeps wet death through our bones.

A Sleepy Hollow Hallowe'en [continued with a stanza break]

A galloping gigantic man appears,  
Wrapped in a cloak and military wear.  
His head's on the protruding saddle horn.

We three disperse as fright ignites my speed.  
A distant silhouette of homes greets me.

Tomorrow I'll discover my friends' fate.

Removing muddy boots, I'm now aware  
This unnatural creature's real enough.

**Elizabeth Siddal Rossetti, Cemetery Superstar | LindaAnn LoSchiavo**

Retaining fame 160 years  
After I died *unknown*—artwork unsold,  
My verses unpublished—has been bizarre.

Do stars need darkness to appreciate  
Their glowing? Or wise men to point them out?

My temperamental husband, mad with guilt,  
Laid me to rest with poems, his bound book.  
This he missed—more than my companionship.

Where's *my* work now? Just then there came a crash.

Rude crowbars pried apart my long-sealed lid.  
Men open-mouthed like choristers stared shocked.

Distraught, he'd sent them. *Dig her up!* He'll learn  
My flesh looked pale, my red hair's grown more wild.

Rossetti's poems sweetened maggots' meals.  
Worm-eaten scraps had crowned my confined head,  
A spectral tapestry akin to my  
Ophelia pose, a dead girl prettified,  
Myself a teen when painted by Millais.

A painting's fame forgets dead models—but  
Art helps us dream back everything that's lost

**About the Author:**

Native New Yorker LindaAnn LoSchiavo, a Pushcart Prize, Rhysling Award, Best of the Net, and Dwarf Stars nominee, is a member of SFPA, British Fantasy Society, and The Dramatists Guild. Elgin Award winner. *A Route Obscure and Lonely*, *Concupiscent Consumption*, *Women Who Were Warned*, and *Messengers of the Macabre* [October 2022] are her latest poetry titles. An October Scorpio, she's written her next Hallowe'en collection.

**Website:** [Messengers of the Macabre](#)

**Twitter:** [@Mae\\_Westside](#)



## Haibun

### The Good Stuff | *Marge Simon*

Robbie and me plan to rake in the good stuff. It's still daylight, so if we start Trick or Treating early, Mom won't insist on coming with us.

Now it's nearly dark and I see our Mom coming. She changed her mind? Hey, wait—it's not our mom, it's a guy wearing her face! Blood flies from shreds of her skin. Robbie takes off screaming, but I'm stuck right here, my legs won't move. When his filthy hand grabs my candy, I start to cry ...

rules can be broken  
the spoils of Halloween night  
aren't just for children

#### About the Author:

Marge Simon is a writer/poet/illustrator living in Ocala, FL, USA. A multiple Stoker winner and Grand Master of SFPA, her works appear in Asimov's, Daily Science Fiction, Silver Blade, more as well as anthologies such as Birthing Monsters, and What Remains, Firbolg Publishing.

**Author Website:** [Marge Simon: Speculative Fiction, Poetry, & Art](#)

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### She's Waiting in the Cemetery | *Thomas Stewart*

Within the graveyard upon a grim hour,  
she will stand with lips soft and sour.

She stands and she stares,  
waiting; beckoning upon any that dares.

Temptation be what hammers within her heavenly breasts,  
driving sinful even the modest and purest.

Lower and lower, she'll guide them into the grave,  
their soul, none can now save.

For under her lustful whims, the will of even the young, the brave, and and the strong fail,  
Whilst she drains them of the warm crimson 'till their flesh is pale.

Beware her irreverent gaze, her soft lips, and her tongue so savory.  
For next to your grave, she's waiting in the Cemetery.

#### About the Author:

Thomas Stewart is 21 years old with a fascination with the art of terror and the macabre. When he's not watching horror movies, or reading horror novels or stories, he's always crafting his own chilling gospels of horror to terrify and eternally rob you of a peaceful slumber. Currently he publishes most his work to Reddit under his pen name 'Corpse Child'

**Facebook:** [Thomas Stewart](#)

Victims, a collection of dark poems by Marge Simon & Mary A. Turzillo, is a 2022 Bram Stoker Award® Finalist!



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**Open Season | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa***

The heaven's now a pitch-black cauldron overturned  
With dying stars caught in its deep and widespread mouth;  
Miasmic clots of clouds into strange shapes have turned,  
Like tumors festering rapidly from north to south.  
The naked, shivering branches curl into a snare  
To hide from cold winds' lashes, and the haunting sounds  
Of croaking frogs grow louder in the wailing air;  
The earth in pools of red leaves shed and shadows drowns.  
There, smiling children dressed as monsters run about,  
Oblivious to the real ones lurking on their streets,  
Which, freed from nether chains upon this night, are out  
To sate their roiling hunger with a laid-out feast.  
Outside my latest host's door, cries of "Trick or Treat"  
Stream in and once more rouse my craving for fresh meat.

**The Fairy Ring | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa***

The withered leaves afoot were stained with blood  
That, from my broken nails, outpoured and dried;  
But still, I dug on, doing all I could  
To find a sign of where they took my child.

I'd told him times and times again to stay  
Away from any rings by wild plants wrought,  
For, once inside, he would be whisked away  
By the fey folk—a fate no mortal sought.

I briefly looked away then turned around,  
And, to my utter horror, he was there  
Amid the ring of toadstools nearby found;  
Then gone was he while I could only stare.

At once, I flung myself into the ring  
And dug, and screamed, and begged, and cursed, and cried;  
To get him back, I'd give them anything,  
But only silence came—to mock and chide.

For long I stayed amid the toadstools red,  
But they would not return my boy, or take  
Me to their realm. How blood and tears were shed,  
And yet, the stifling stillness would not break.

Since then, I've always stepped inside that ring  
Each day for years and years to come, and yet,  
The fey folk never give me anything;  
With cold indifference, my hoarse screams are met.

But I shan't leave my child with them—I shan't!  
While I still breathe, and blood flows in my veins,  
I shall not rest till I get what I want,  
Clinging to flickering hope to soothe my pains.



## Medusa's Lament | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa*

The light of Libra  
Doesn't reach me.  
Justice is blind, selectively,  
When it's convenient for her friends up high.  
After all,  
It's hard to fault  
The Divine Law's Makers.

Condemning, or demonizing,  
The commoners, however,  
Is much easier.  
Hence, oftentimes,  
The innocent  
Are toyed with  
And later on silenced.

That vivid memory  
Again undoes me,  
And my cry stirs  
The slumbering serpents above my head  
Into a frenzy,  
Thrashing and snapping  
At the looming phantom  
Of my oppressor.

Still,  
Justice turns a blind eye  
Toward me and my voice,  
Muffled by  
The sneering winds  
And jeering waves  
Besieging  
My prison.

## The Empty House | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa*

The empty house stands on the gloomy ground  
Where wind-slashed boughs on shivering trees moan as  
Their rubied leaves are felled and tossed around.

Along its aged, rain-beaten walls, there grow  
Thick weeds and twisted vines of ivy, drenched  
Within the spectral moonbeams' sickly glow.

The fretful townsfolk steer clear of that place  
Enshrouded in a blood-stained history,  
In which a boy, possessed by some strange craze,

Cut his kin's throats while singing in a wild,  
Inhuman tongue before he disappeared;  
No trace has since been found of that cursed child.

It's said that if one lingers there too long,  
They'll see a figure by the curtain as  
A whispering voice nigh sings an eerie song,

Which, as attested by the victims ere  
Their final breaths were cruelly rent, soon grew  
So maddeningly loud and clear – and near –

That they became erratic, seeing things  
None else could see; they screamed and thrashed until  
They slit their throats to end their sufferings.

The empty house stands on the gloomy ground  
Where wind-slashed boughs on shivering trees moan as  
Their rubied leaves are felled and tossed around.

And should one linger by its gate too long,  
They'll see a shadow by the window and  
Be followed by a haunting, fatal song.

### About the Author:

Ngo Binh Anh Khoa is a teacher of English from Ho Chi Minh City, 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: [Ngo Binh Anh Khoa](#)

## The Dance of Wights | *S. Alessandro Martinez*

The midnight moon  
Glows down  
Upon the decaying, fetid ground

Through the forest  
You dare tread  
Where dirt and stones are stained with red

Where demons chitter  
And the devils chatter  
Old gods waken  
Their eyes alight

You ignored my words  
On this darkened matter  
Now to witness  
The Dance of Wights

Hand on heart  
Scream in throat  
Captured like a bleating goat

Placed on altar  
Marked with paint  
You do your best not to faint

The creatures sing  
The masses sway  
They dance in darkness  
They sing and bray

Ghosts and phantoms  
Rise from dust  
A host of shades  
Funereal lust

A living vessel  
A body so fresh  
A legion of dead  
Now possess your flesh

### About the Author:

S. Alessandro Martinez is a Bram Stoker Award® -nominated author of Mexican and Spanish descent, and a native Southern Californian with Autism/Asperger's who writes horror and fantasy for adults and children. His work has appeared in several magazines and anthologies such as *Sanitarium*, *Jitter*, *The Sirens Call*, and *Deadman's Tome*. *Helminth* is his debut novel.

The cacophonous sound and epileptic light show  
Disturbs not the thoughts of one deep in mind,  
All about creatures celebrate mutual hedonism  
Cavorting amidst a horror to which they are blind.

A figure interrupts this sovereigns mindful solitude  
Lord of a stark emotionless realm that exists within,  
Her body is a silhouette dancing suggestive and rude  
Awakening again a desire to furnish my empty dominion.

A prophesy of failure from my distant humanity  
Though still I follow her, to her last wilful act,  
We dance feeling with our bodies writhing together  
Aroused creatures within begin to react.

An invitation is replied with a solemn gesture  
A ride home consists of her nervous chatter,  
Her life so trivial, visions of death on a floor  
In another life we could be lovers, now I hunger.

We enter a first and last time, for one to leave  
Resuming our rhythmic writhing while disrobing,  
She pushes away to dance and seduce, I am Adam to her Eve  
Her body, her smell, her groans, my senses all absorbing.

Her eyes close as my skin ripples as a disturbed pool  
Veins increasingly active ever excited to feed,  
Pain as skin is stretched from within my whole  
Conscience aches from warnings I did not heed.

My limbs outstretched as pulled by unseen bondages  
Finally synchronous eruptions bring a sweet relief,  
I need not see as before have I witnessed this image  
Tearful memory from blind eyes show a human grief.

Blind tendrils taste the air sensing prey is near  
A stifled scream a knowing dull thud to the floor,  
Her mind chose not to comprehend but close in fear  
From within a solace comes regret that will endure.

Serpents gently tap as they glide over her limp form  
They pause then as one movement plunge beneath skin,

Her eyes open she screams till the coming dawn  
Pulsating veins feed a struggling heart within.

Feeding brings exquisite yet tainted pleasure  
Shown by a confused smile upon my lips,  
I long to feel a satisfaction so pure  
Though I know this need will never loosen it's grip

My sight returns as do my tendril horde  
Exhausted I fall to my knees as they return inside,  
I cry as a child requiring a mothers comfort  
As I belong to no one I merely flee and hide.  
So for each day passing for love I care less  
Retreating further within my familiar domain,  
Finding the comfort sought in the darkness  
I have removed the eyes to see a caring hand.

### **Born of Legend | *Pete Kelly***

Existence has born us into myth  
A prize of man's informed ignorance  
I observe your decay with concern  
Walking among your social deviants.

The pavement echoes my footsteps  
Resounding about a maze of human existence  
Flashing shop signs jostle for attention  
Within this self commercial expanse.

Oh you spoilt children of mortality  
Directionless save for self exploit  
Wander this world uninvited  
Seeing only with covetous eyes.

Open windows beckon me welcome  
My coldness precedes an entrance  
Visualised by this crawling mist  
Billowing menace in appearance.

You retreat within a blanket's comfort  
To stand at ease your body hair  
All the logic of a sceptic deserts you  
Gliding within your disbelieving stare.

Mmmm the sensuous euphoria of blood  
Gyrating my head as I lick my lips  
Suspended in the pose of that missionary  
To mock the conviction of a crucifix.

I read thoughts confused and helpless  
Closing my eyes to imagine your fear  
Aaah to tease oneself is such delight  
Till I can bear no more I release my hunger.

I crawl like the parasite I am  
Magnetic stare holds you paralysed  
As I enter your world from myth  
Your ignorance of legend is realised.

Prone to the weight of advancing horror  
My will penetrates your delicate protection  
Drawing the curtains of your resistance  
Smothering senses within a mind's suffocation.

I gorge upon the taste of sensual musk  
Intoxicating a need to feed  
Effortlessly I glide to release a flood  
Of experience and emotion as you bleed.

Taken to a pleasure short of nausea  
As the blood pumps down my throat  
So willing to leave this fragile creature  
Helpless as my prey doomed without hope.

### **About the Author:**

Pete Kelly is a poetry writing shipwright and the voice of *Gothamistic*, a band mixing poetry and music. He has been a fan of horror films since birth (he says) and loves to grow carnivorous plants. He is a Pushcart nominee.

Instagram: [@splat2007](https://www.instagram.com/splat2007)

## **The Monster and Its Prey | *Shannon Acrey***

Drip  
Drip  
Drip

The sound of something red and  
thick falls upon the burning candlestick.

The flame wisps out  
leaving me in the  
darkness once again.

The screams, this time,  
will never form.  
My long, sharp teeth  
delightfully sink in.

The flesh is soft.  
The blood so sweet.  
I rip off an arm.  
My teeth crunch through  
the bony length.

Here, life and light cease to meet, in this  
place where I enjoy my tasty treat.

Drip  
Drip

## **Poison, Thorn, and Mirror | *Shannon Acrey***

Like poison  
she seeps into the ground  
tainting wells and waters.

An encroaching storm,  
thunder rolling in the distance,  
her self-confidence so low  
bolstered only by stealing  
your shelter.

A hidden thorn,  
on a beautiful rose,  
her traitorous eyes seek to prick  
the joy from your smile.

Her skin, thick scales  
try to cover scars left since she was  
just a toddler.

So lost and angry,  
she strikes out when the light reaches towards her.

The darkness fills inside,  
her only remedy for salvation.

Be wary of the woman, once a scared child.

Now you understand her troubles.  
And as pity and sorrow shine from your  
awakened eyes,  
know that you too may share the same side  
of the mirror.



## Caught in Her Depths | *Shannon Acrey*

Her shape conforms  
within the grayness  
of shadows.

A cloak of moisture,  
she creeps upon lands and seas.

Cool, insidious breath  
leaves an unwanted  
Kiss  
upon bare skin.

Sun's early rays  
flirt dangerously  
in her ominous depths.

Lost...

No trees, no landmarks,  
no road to lead you out.

Caught in her depths,  
seductive tendrils  
reach out  
to consume you.

Muted silence  
broken only by  
a hammering heart.

An abyss  
of airlessness.

Any sense  
of you  
or the promise  
of tomorrow

Evanescent in the mist.

### About the Author:

Shannon Acrey, from Indiana, holds a B.S. in Elementary Education and an A.S. in Radiography (X-Ray). Shannon likes stretching her creative skills with writing, beading, photography, and painting with stencils. She also enjoys spending time with her husband and two daughters. One of her motivational poems has been published in *Wingless Dreamer* with another one chosen for an upcoming issue.

Facebook: [Writings by Shannon](#)

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## The Neighbours Next Door | *Harris Coverley*

*To Ogden Nash, who hated the people upstairs*

The neighbours next door have a bright white light  
It shines into our front room all through the night  
There are screams in the morning and too in the evening  
And then comes a Shout that's hard in believing

They built a stained wood funhouse full of horror and gore  
Complete with a chute through which the blood pours  
And then there's the play court of broken glass  
And the cheese grater swing through which small bodies pass

They have a dungeon underground and I feel the vibrations  
I can imagine the scene in a grasp of sensations  
A phalanx of fear and a cauldron of flesh  
A river of tears and all of the rest

A grim potter's field where the rockery once stood  
Marked by a pentagram of Lemurian wood  
And patio chairs welded from bleached human bones  
The largest of which is to be the Great God Pan's throne

The neighbours next door have a bright white light  
They have *planning permission* to disturb me at night...

### About the Author:

Along with previously in The Sirens Call, Harris Coverley has verse published or forthcoming in Polu Texni, Star\*Line, Spectral Realms, Scifaikuest, Silver Blade, Novel Noctule, BFS Horizons, View From Atlantis, Yellow Mama, Lothlorien Poetry Journal, and many others. He lives in Manchester, England, where he spends his time pushing papers, battling printers, and having to go out and buy presents for people he's never actually met.

Twitter: [@ha\\_coverley](https://twitter.com/ha_coverley)



**The Darkness Between Stars | *Alexis Child***

I have wandered the earth  
In the darkness, a Priestess of Fools  
Under the Hunter's Moon  
The sky is fractured for this final climb

My feet are sore  
I am knocking, let me in the door  
And yet I cannot go  
Where you haunt my nights

Afraid of this silent tomb  
Where ancient winds blow  
And seasons change

I tried to deny you, forget but lament  
Where it rains and the dead wait  
For me to catch my breath

All the sons of man burned me  
I died in the quivering flames  
Making eye contact with lunatics  
I am incomplete, maimed

Lord it hurts too much  
I make the villagers nervous  
The tyrant spell has bound me  
The body snatchers they have come  
Certitude of death

Life is a choice of evils  
Among the vanquished  
A sullen silence of despair

The City is of night  
The world is full of weeping  
And out flies winged gargoyles  
Waking the dead

The vultures whisper to cold flesh  
Mary Magdalene weeps  
Tears of blood at the sepulchre

Seven messengers keep the stars apart  
A blind Theban is watching  
I hear the screaming skeletons of Brasília  
And the laughter of seven thieves

The thirteen skeletons are dancing  
In graveyards with ghastly bones  
I drink in their darkness  
I have become a ghost

From the constellations form clouds  
There is one candle between us  
The exodus of demons  
The book burns to flames  
And I, too, am no more

You disappear with devilish ease  
Like bat wings under my feet  
And I am choked with blood  
No future to speak of

### **The Devil's Tongue | *Alexis Child***

Our voices were the oceans  
Roar until we could cry no more  
The fires purified and consumed  
In the East, rose the Wolf Moon

We were like the raging seas  
On this side of Paradise and Hell  
We fell to the beasts  
Our heads were seven

We arose from dust  
In love with Lilith  
Drawing the veils of night  
Around the tired eyes of day

I whispered God's secret name  
Then flew away unto all despised  
Most considered me a demon  
I carried the blame and shed the blood

As a wild witch with angry tears  
I knew the worst too young  
The macabre songs were sung  
In the devil's tongue

It's not your soul he seeks  
Please don't be afraid of me  
In dark dreams and waking screams

Beautiful affliction  
Let me see your face  
Unmirrored by the river Styx and Lethe  
By grief unbound during the shadowy years

If ghosts had tears  
They'd cast the spell  
In haunted night  
In this City of Death  
Where the moon has no light  
There is truth I never dream

### **The Magic Circle | *Alexis Child***

She collected the hurts  
The gloomy mother curses  
Those days were dark  
But so was her magic

She lived in the devil's den  
Waiting for the perfect



Time to strike  
The venom still moves slowly  
In their thoughts, their heads

Mother Earth says  
Love the distressed  
She wants to give you  
Endless happiness

Oh love that is a curse  
Are you a grave for the pain inside?  
As the whore and the holy one  
The honored one and scorned one

I am the bridegroom and virgin  
The barren one and have not taken  
A husband  
I am the slave of him who made me  
I am the utterance of my name

You hearers, hear me  
You who are waiting for me  
Do not banish me from your circle

In my weakness  
Do not forsake me  
Whenever you hide yourself  
I, myself, will appear

I am she that cries out  
Like thunder  
Keeps you up at night

Your sorceress will meet you  
Again in poetry  
This last breath we'll ever breathe

When the moon renews its light again  
Do not worry what a witch can do  
When you curse me and honor me  
Haunting the black air  
Dreaming darkness

Crones swallow dangerous warnings  
The destruction inside  
Terrible fury, raise your hands to the sky  
When you burn the magic away  
The earth shakes and is the body of us all  
No man can understand

## Scarlet Heart | *Alexis Child*

The future is red fluids  
Seething with rage  
The night is dead and long  
She wonders why she is  
The only one breathing

On this dark-eyed Halloween  
She can hear their voices  
Dismantling her  
One bone at a time

Her breath is tangled in a whirling  
Dervish of words  
Making her pale skin in a black dress  
Look like a painting

They sway together in the wind  
Branches tangled and twisted together  
Until they could not ignore the nothingness

She wrote a poem  
The very last one  
And then put down her pen  
And wrote the last sentence  
'I saw death and it was beautiful'  
How odd to ignore the memory!

And then that very evening  
Where a small dream hides  
She fell into a dark trance  
Like the subtle scent of frankincense

In remembrance of princes and pain  
She shuts her lovely and childish eyes  
Scorned by the dead light

The moon no longer beams  
In chaotic night  
And the stars never test the extremes  
Of a heart sinking into the sky

### About the Author:

Alexis Child hails from Toronto, Canada; home to dreams and nightmares. Her poetry collections, *Devil in the Clock* and *Singing the Bones* are available on Amazon.

Facebook: [Alexis Child](#)



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## Can You Hear the Toll of the Bell? | *Bryan C. Laesch*

Can you hear the toll of the bell?  
Is it from Heaven or is it from Hell?  
For this is the night when terror abounds,  
A night when the dead can break the ground.

On this night, nothing 's at it seems,  
Meandering nightmare or daring dream,  
Reality distorts and starts to suffer  
As an otherworld in is ushered.

Bear witness to macabre monsters revealed,  
The night and mist no longer do conceal  
The freaks and weirdos in the night,  
See how they revel without the light.

Witness how the demons rise,  
Summoned forth by the Devil's cries,  
The pagans dance as if entranced  
While the witches begin their chants.

Children seek their sweetest treasures  
But their glut begets great displeasure,  
Predators stalk as silent as the grave  
Seeking to sate what they crave.

Blood! Blood and guts of scarlet red,  
The hunted's souls fill with dread,  
They intend to feast on something sweet,  
Seeking the streets for Halloween treats.

The vampire thirsts as the lycan starves,  
Content to share prey as bodies are carved,  
Zombies seek to devour our brains,  
As rotting corpses fill the drains.

Cultists call upon cosmic horrors  
Like lovers appealing dread adorers,  
Trying to mutate dear reality,  
Dancing like Nero with morbid glee.

As the night comes to a rest,  
Slayers head out on their quest,  
Looking for beasts and monsters to slay,  
Making way for the advent of day.

Creatures who once ruled the night,  
Are chased away or choose to fight,  
Now 'tis a nightmare that they face,  
Combatting foes touched by grace.

Can you hear the toll of the bell?  
Is it from Heaven or is it from Hell?  
For the day comes as the cock doth crow,  
Making the fiends and monsters slow.

Jack-o'-lanterns light the way,  
Holding ghosts and ghouls at bay,  
By the light, the fiends are razed  
As on the morrow the saints be praised.

### About the Author:

Bryan C. Laesch calls himself the Omni-Genre Writer, despite some evidence to the contrary. He writes in every genre and has written in every style...that he likes. His main interest lies in Gothic horror as it allows for a unique combination of genres, including romance, fantasy, sci-fi, mystery, erotica, action, and Christian. He also blogs about MBTI and owns the t-shirt business Transcendent Tees.

Website: [Brian C. Laesch The Omni-Genre Writer](#)  
Instagram: [@bryanclaesch](#)

One night, one night every year,  
I get to tuck his portrait away.  
Ball my fingers into fists, into claws.  
Scream! Contort my shoulders  
to write anger on my posture.  
Laugh at the pain painted on passing faces.  
Pirouette on a pristine plot,

and squeal  
when the rain smudges my mask.

Because, if anyone sees me tonight,  
they will know that my joy comes from  
pattering of little feet on cobbled streets,  
from candy clanking in pumpkin catches.  
Startled giggles! Barking dogs!  
Super heroes! Puppet frogs!  
Not from the thing that they fear.

Tonight, no one will ask me if I saw signs  
as if I owe them recitations  
of my bruises and broken bones

In this crowd, I am alone.

Tonight, the mirror will reflect  
a creature I carved from my own face  
instead of the one I cannot embrace  
any other night.

I have no name.  
I have no memory.  
I have no eyes.

I have—a few more hours  
until I must return to pleated skirts  
and polished shoes,  
to public service  
and perfect ruses.

Just to keep their lips sealed.  
Because, if I let them find reason for plosives,

‘pariah’ is a puff away.

Collector’s Edition | *Angela Nicole Duggins*

Their venom pieced her lips.  
Too petrified to speak,  
she let them polish her,  
stain her, buff her.

Her eyes glazed over,  
when they curled her hair  
into chestnut ringlets  
her lashes into prayer.

Had they not posed her  
on so high a shelf,  
she may never have  
fallen to the screen.

Her cracks may never  
have formed jagged peaks,  
and splinters would not  
now protrude their hearts.

**About the Author:**

Angela Nicole Duggins is an Ozarker writer and performer whose works have appeared in print in [Alternate Route], Rune Bear Weekly, Rupkatha, and Danse Macabre as well as on stage at Big Muddy New Play Festival and Night Owl Circus. She loves long walks in the moonlight and the occasional cheesecake.

Website: [Angela Duggins](#)  
Twitter: [@PerfromancePhD](#)



## My Neighbor's Pumpkin Patch | *Tinamarie Cox*

In the spring, my neighbor planted pumpkin seeds.  
He told me about his dreams of a rewarding harvest come autumn.  
Every day, I watched him tend to the large earthy plot in his yard,  
watering his hopes and putting out threats to his scheme.

And by summer, long green fingers had punched through the dirt.  
The vines stretched and crept and curled beyond the limits of his garden bed.  
Wide verdant hands fanned out, reached up, and pleaded for food.  
Long yellow trumpets bloomed and sounded,  
playing a beautiful and enchanting tune,  
a siren song that brought the neighborhood children near.  
The youngsters stuck their little noses into the charming golden bells,  
and the flowers swallowed them whole.  
The deceptive blossoms then sealed their lips, ovaries fed and satisfied.

In the fall, my neighbor's pumpkins ached with their size.  
The thick, bright orange rinds looked ready to split,  
the spaces between their ribs grown wide.  
Their twisted umbilical cords turned brown and dried up, purpose fulfilled,  
the fruit no longer bound to the nourishing ground.

The massive pumpkins hatched on Halloween  
under a hunter's moon,  
and the children returned to their parents,  
changed,  
with dark hollows for eyes, and missing teeth,  
with worms for insides, and skin leathered and gray.  
And my neighbor laughed along to the ballads shrieked by the mothers,  
pleased with his garden yield.

And I suppose I am an accomplice to his work because  
I watched him all these months but said nothing,  
and let my neighbor's pumpkin patch glean my children, too.

### About the Author:

Tinamarie Cox resides in Northern Arizona with her husband and two children. While she has devoted much of herself to family in the past, she has spent the last year expanding her universe with her love of writing. Tinamarie's poems have appeared in *Nevermore Journal*, *Grim & Gilded*, *Oddball Magazine*, *The Sirens Call* and others.

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



A beacon of safety once,  
Offering safe harbor to ships and their crew,  
The Lighthouse now casts tentacled shadows,  
Ever reaching  
Always reaching.  
His Shadows.  
The Sleeping Giant  
No longer sleeps.  
The Lighthouse is now a warning.  
Stay away.  
And maybe  
Stay alive.

**She came out | *Brian Rosenberger***

She was gorgeous, like Old Hollywood gorgeous.  
Elizabeth Taylor, Greta Garbo, and Ava Gardner gorgeous.  
Beehive hairdo and butterfly lashes.  
Uncoiled, her black hair touched her waist  
She confided. I loved long hair.  
My own was military style, had been since I  
Exited the closet on my 18th birthday.  
My parents, more shocked at my baldness  
Than their daughter being gay.  
I shivered as her nails, Salina's nails,  
Touched my stubble. Street light reflection  
Made her eyes look like dagger-shaped moons,  
The eyes of a Mantis.  
Salina reached for me, palms opening,  
Revealing mouths. Hungry hands held my face.  
I was drunk and smitten and hungry too.  
It had been so long since I'd been held.

**For He Is King | *Brian Rosenberger***

Burnt garden. Dead pasture. Scorched field.  
The Barn, His Temple still stands, blackened, still smoking.  
We are His Kindling if too slow.

You lead, I follow. I lead, you follow.  
Together, we fill the fields of ash  
With our footprints and blood.  
Together, we watched the Burning Man  
As his inferno spread.  
Even Gods burn but usually at their choosing.  
Families died. We survived.  
We woke from the Nightmare only to face the Nightmare.  
Thus the race. Thus the chase.  
Not that we were ignorant of coming events.  
Locals. Born and bred. Burnt and bled.  
We ran like new born foals but there was no escaping  
The Land, Our Legend, and Our Lineage.  
You produced your Grandfather's Buck Knife.  
My back accepted. But I was wise to your ways.  
I remembered your looks in Algebra and Geometry,  
Easily distracted by the hint of hidden flesh.  
Your knife. Now mine. And my turn to cut.  
Last cuts. Last survivors. Grey turns Red.  
The Quickest reaps the coming Harvest  
As will all our families. Red turns Green.  
Spring reigns while the Burning Man sleeps.  
Our Land. Our Legend. Our Life.

**Bus Stop | Brian Rosenberger**

It's 7 AM.  
The Sun struggles to rise.  
The gathering thunder clouds don't help.  
The first drops of rain.  
It's me and the other bus riders.  
We see each other every day.  
We don't converse. We wait for the bus.  
We wait to travel to our own personal Hells.  
A black sedan arrives at the stop light,  
Farting brimstone fumes.  
In unison, we flip the driver the Bird.  
He returns the gesture, a few fingers missing.  
My fellow bus passengers include:  
The good-looking girl, Prom Queen material,  
Is already bleeding before the bus arrives.  
Her wrists rain red, puddles at her sneakers.  
Still her uneven smile is friendly, Heavenly even.  
The old, bearded dude, missing half his face,  
In the faded Grateful Dead T-shirt,  
Scratches his crotch, spits, stares at the darkening sky,  
Muttering "Jesus H. Christ."  
He smells like rancid milk and stale baloney.  
And me. I know what I did. Could be worse.  
Could be better. It's above my paygrade.  
The bus arrives. Late as always.  
The driver, severe sunburn, small horns at his temple,  
Greets us, forked tongue. Flies halo his head.  
Still, Dave the driver is pleasant, even conversational.  
No reason not to be. We're all on the same bus.  
The same thing every day.  
It's Hell, after all.

**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](#)



**her business here was done | *Linda M. Crate***

happy wife, happy life or  
so they said;  
but he didn't seem to think  
much of her happiness—

everything was going well  
until he met her twin sister,

then he grew distant and cold;

only showed compassion  
to their sons and daughter but  
acted as if she did not exist—

killed her for the life insurance  
money one morning when she  
had laid down exhausted from  
all the crying and the assumptions,

two days after her funeral he  
married her sister;

and she showed up to break up the affair  
unwilling to allow him to live a happy life  
her ghost danced down the church turning  
rose petals into toads and gnashing her  
teeth at both her husband and her sister  
until they both went mad from the 'delusions'  
of seeing her and the kids went to live  
with her mother, but she wasn't done;  
she kept tormenting them every day until they  
both decided to take their own lives—

satisfied they were gone, she finally left;  
her business here was done.

**the vampire's wife | *Linda M. Crate***

no matter how hard  
or long she prayed,  
he wouldn't come back;

until one day he did—

she thought she was seeing  
a ghost because he was  
so pale,

but he was solid when he  
reached for her arm;  
"i've come back for you," he said.  
"i knew you'd never leave," she smiled.

but it wasn't at all a splendid reunion  
that she imagined it might be—

his fangs pierced her throat and she  
realized then that he had come  
back as a monster, her vision  
was blurring and she looked into his  
hazel eyes feeling herself fading;

"when you wake up, not even death will  
part us."

yet she wasn't so sure she wanted  
to wake up, suddenly she was so tired  
so very tired.

**too tired to fight | *Linda M. Crate***

he saw her glittering purple eyes  
from beneath the dark ocean waves  
tossing him to and fro as if he  
were a mere rag doll,  
he thought perhaps she was his angel;  
a mermaid come to save him—

but he realized as soon as she lifted  
her head from the water and saw her razor  
sharp teeth that he had miscalculated,  
he was too tired to fight her  
super human strength;

her hands felt like needles against his skin,  
and she shoved his head into her mouth—

he didn't fight any of it, knowing  
it was her or the ocean;  
either way he would be prey to something  
or someone and he was too tired to fight.

**the lonely skeleton | *Linda M. Crate***

the loneliness was clawing her up  
inside as if it were a monstrous entity itself,  
til death parted them they said but death  
had already married him and walked away;

but she missed him so much that she  
neglected herself and she laid on the ground  
where they found him—

the house slowly decayed all around her,  
and she became one with the moss and mold and  
wooden floorboards;

one day someone walked into the abandoned house  
and found her skeleton whispering songs they  
could not understand and so they sprang from the  
house and ran as fast as they could;

they didn't know if the skeleton was bad or good—  
but this one was just lonely.



**dark gift or not—a gift was a gift | *Linda M. Crate***

she didn't know  
vampires  
could come during  
the day,  
she thought she was safe  
in her favorite creek  
and garden of wildflowers;

but he found her  
dancing in the water and  
singing with sunlight as her halo  
as crows danced above  
her head—

& he thought it was so very  
cute for a moment  
before his hunger took over,

where green eyes once were  
red gleamed instead;

he wrapped his arms around her waist  
fangs at her throat, as he whispered to her:  
"life may not be fair, but i might be a bit fairer.  
marry me, join me in death and we can haunt  
the living."

she thought about it as people had never  
given her peace, only nature had.

"okay," she agreed.  
because dark gift or not—a gift was a gift,  
and she wasn't really ready to be dead yet;  
being undead couldn't be that hard she considered.

**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](#)



**Dark Reflections | *Miriam H. Harrison***

into the haunted house

not the same as when I went  
as a child, leaving  
with a head full of fears, vulnerable  
to nightmares and terrors

adult sensibility turns  
the eerie  
to  
the laughable  
time changes everything:  
now I stand here, different

until I look into the darkened mirror

now I stand here, different  
time changes everything:  
the laughable  
to  
the eerie  
adult sensibility turns  
to nightmares and terrors

with a head full of fears, vulnerable  
as a child, leaving  
not the same as when I went  
into the haunted house

**About the Author:**

Miriam H. Harrison (she/her) writes among the boreal forests and abandoned mines of Northern Ontario, Canada. Her writings vary between the eerie, the dreary, and the cheery, and she is a regular contributor to Pen of the Damned as well as a member of the Horror Writers Association, SF Canada, and the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association. Updates about her published works can be found on Facebook or her website.

**Facebook:** [Miriam H. Harrison](#)

**Website:** [Miriam H. Harrison](#)



**Letchworth Village | Sharon Ferrante**

when a ghost cries  
it's the sound of babes  
dropped on a stoop  
a cat fight till dawn

all night  
he's been sleeping  
on wet concrete—  
he needs to talk  
I give up my seat

he begins  
with the crawly things

the living

**The Angler | Sharon Ferrante**

followed me  
closer came the stench  
of rotting fish and black fig

I glimpsed a lure  
attached to his boonie  
the feathers  
now crawling morsels

I've never been afraid  
of being caught by a ghost

I just pulled the hook  
from my leg  
and cleaned up  
the bloody mess

**About the Author:**

Sharon Ferrante is a Witch, living in Daytona Beach, with her husband and 6 cats, in love with ghosts and poetry. Her work has appeared in many journals and anthologies. Her debut collection launched in April 2022, *The Choir of Crickets* from Hybrid Sequence Media.

**Facebook:** [Sharon Ferrante](#)



The news droned on about a killer,  
thirteen victims,  
bodies buried beyond  
city limits...  
beneath forest oaks,  
in cornfields off the highway.

Hands and legs bound,  
black feathers scattered  
on their chests.

At first, she dreamed of them...  
shivering in a dank basement...

They told her stories  
about a man, dark hair,  
scar under his right eye,  
raven tattoo on his wrist.

Then they called her in deep night...  
voices spectral, laced with terror...

*We're here...*

Muting the TV broadcast,  
she lifted her shade,  
gazed into the street...

Thick fog covered the ground,  
through it a figure manifested,  
a girl peered at her,  
brown curly hair...  
clothing tattered...faded.

She smiled eerily.  
then others joined her...  
thirteen in all...  
hooking arms,  
bowing like disjointed marionettes...;  
tinkling pleas to dark-winged angels...  
screaming at the gibbous moon.

Then they floated through the fog—  
ravens cawing at their sides...  
up toward the black sky...  
over a bridge...  
victims of sacrifice,  
restless until the next full moon...  
until fourteen...

The music welcomed him...  
guitar riffs...heart-rending vocals...  
melancholy voices—real and raw...  
those deep boogie beats...  
Mississippi Delta blues.

Zodiac signs, painted boldly  
on a brick building.

Inside smells of smoke, beer and perfume.

Everyone young,  
defiant....  
kohl-lined eyes filled with shadowy wisdom...  
swaying to that rhythmic pulse.

The guys, jean-clad, leather-clad—  
donning tats,  
allegiance to biker clubs—  
odes to the undead.

And the women—  
some shot pool,  
drank with friends,  
and a few looked lost,  
too thin, too pale,  
clinging achingly to their men.

A girl,  
ghostly face,  
nodded slightly  
then asked, "First time here?"  
Lips quivered, laughter like sinister chimes...

*Just here to drink and dance.*

"Some never leave..."

The girl smiled, revealing long fangs tinged with blood...  
...and the music played on and on...  
into forever...  
forsaking the sun,  
melodic seduction.

That Mississippi Delta blues.



Bartered with an old gypsy...  
silk scarf for olden scrap  
of paper, spiderly handwriting—  
smells of damp and incense.

“Works fast,” the old woman said.  
“It’s certain he’ll return...”  
Then she cackled, moving into shadow.

It was all so easy...  
one part benzoin oil, one part sandalwood,  
two parts Juju  
three parts rose petals  
finely ground wormwood—five drops of her own  
blood  
blended well.  
Rose petals in her pocket...  
pleas to Ishtar —  
red candles for Inanna—  
graveyard dirt for Hecate...  
ashes cast into the sea...

The sun set, moon rose,  
summer rain speckled her flesh.

And he was there at her side,  
dark flesh, soulful eyes...  
a sudden chill as his hand touched hers.  
And she followed him to the shore...  
further into chilly water...  
moving to a slow song  
rising up from the Atlantic—  
funeral dirge...

Rose petals fell from her pockets  
onto sand—onto blood trickling from his flesh...  
into the sea---

She held him like long ago...  
sinking to the ocean’s floor...  
until her heartbeat ceased...  
bones intertwined,  
seaweed and ancient shells  
twisted in hair and ragged clothes...

**About the Author:**

Sandy DeLuca is novelist, poet and painter. She is a two-time nominee for the Bram Stoker © for poetry award. She lives with several feline companions, including a black cat named Gypsy and her two sons Gemini and Leo. In her free time she photographs abandoned buildings and peruses secondhand shops.

**Website:** [Sandy DeLuca](http://SandyDeLuca.com)

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

### Ghost Girl | *P.J. Reed*

In the darkness  
the room bled red,  
grey shadows jumped,  
poked, and prodded.  
Curtains shivered  
in icy breaths  
as the screaming  
voices ran.  
Doors slammed shut,  
closed their eyes,  
melted to the wall.  
While footsteps rang,  
waded through the  
sinking carpet as  
the stairs fell  
away to nothing.  
A knowing oak  
wardrobe opened  
wide its arms as  
hidden under dusty  
hills of velvet, she  
dissolved to nothing,  
and floating through  
the floor.

#### About the Author:

P.J. Reed is an author, historian and archaeologist by trade. PJ lives in Devon, England with her two daughters, Rupert the rescue dog, and one feral, but adorable cat, called Sammy. She writes the Richard Radcliffe Paranormal Investigations series and is the Editor and Chief Paranormal Investigator for the *Exmoor Noir* newsletter.

Website: [P.J. Reed](#)

Twitter: [@PJReed\\_author](#)



**Familiar | *Corinne Pollard***

Outstretched magic  
glides through the air.  
There will be something tragic  
or a nightmare  
bestowed tonight.

Can't you see it in mid-flight?  
Or hear its calls of fright?  
Fear its bite.  
A sucking parasite  
that the Devil's minions guard  
as a rare bird.

**Leave | *Corinne Pollard***

Death touched them;  
barely a graze  
by his boney phalanges  
as he drifted through.  
They blackened to charcoal;  
their photosynthesis veins  
paralyzed to a crisp  
ready to crumble to ashes.  
Only the branches know  
when the wind will take them.

**Stingy Jack | *Corinne Pollard***

Heaven and Hell shut their doors,  
so Earth became my eternal slumber.  
I have wandered through wars  
with the dead rising its number  
and the veil stretching thinner.  
I'll teach you my ways to be a winner;  
deceive the boorish devil,  
and reach God's level.

Bury yourself deeper  
inside a sharp, carved grin.  
Relish your role as a reaper,  
cracking your smirk's skin  
further.  
For a wandering soul  
can never be taken.  
Pumpkins flicker my loophole;  
sunset of a forsaken  
in-between.

**About the Author:**

Corinne Pollard is a disabled writer from West Yorkshire, UK with published works with The Sirens Call, Black Hare Press, Trembling with Fear, and Paragraph Planet. With a degree in English Lit and Creative Writing, Corinne has always enjoyed the world of dark fantasy. Aside from writing, Corinne enjoys metal music, visiting graveyards, and shopping for books to read.

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

### **A Darkened Sweet Alibi | *George Lee Grimsley***

I have proclaimed vampyric rites of magick  
That I am an illusionist  
To bring forth  
A fantastical masterpiece of darkness  
Placed into your hearts forever  
That I may never step into the sunlight  
Even for a moment  
And as with all things  
Tonight we live forever  
And drink from the red fountain

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

George Lee Grimsley is age 52 and an avid horror writer and sometimes fantasy, or at least he's working on it. Mixing the elements has always been a quiet endeavor itself. He has some schooling including a high school GED diploma and an assortment of online courses in writing. His hobbies are fishing, writing, reading and ebooks.

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### **Trash Bags | *Holly Rae Garcia***

A black plastic trash bag sits in the front yard  
snatched by a stump.  
Winter left it a shriveled, sharp-edged mess.  
The stump, not the bag.  
And I wonder if there is a dead baby inside  
born in a bathroom stall or in a home  
tossed out like a sticky condom.  
I can't look at that Schroedinger's bag  
that does and does not contain a dead baby.  
I nudge it with my toe but  
there are no dead baby-shaped bits  
only the empty bag, ballooned out  
by the wind.  
I toss it in the bin and  
wash my hands and  
wonder  
why wind looks like dead babies  
and trash bags look like  
Empty wombs.

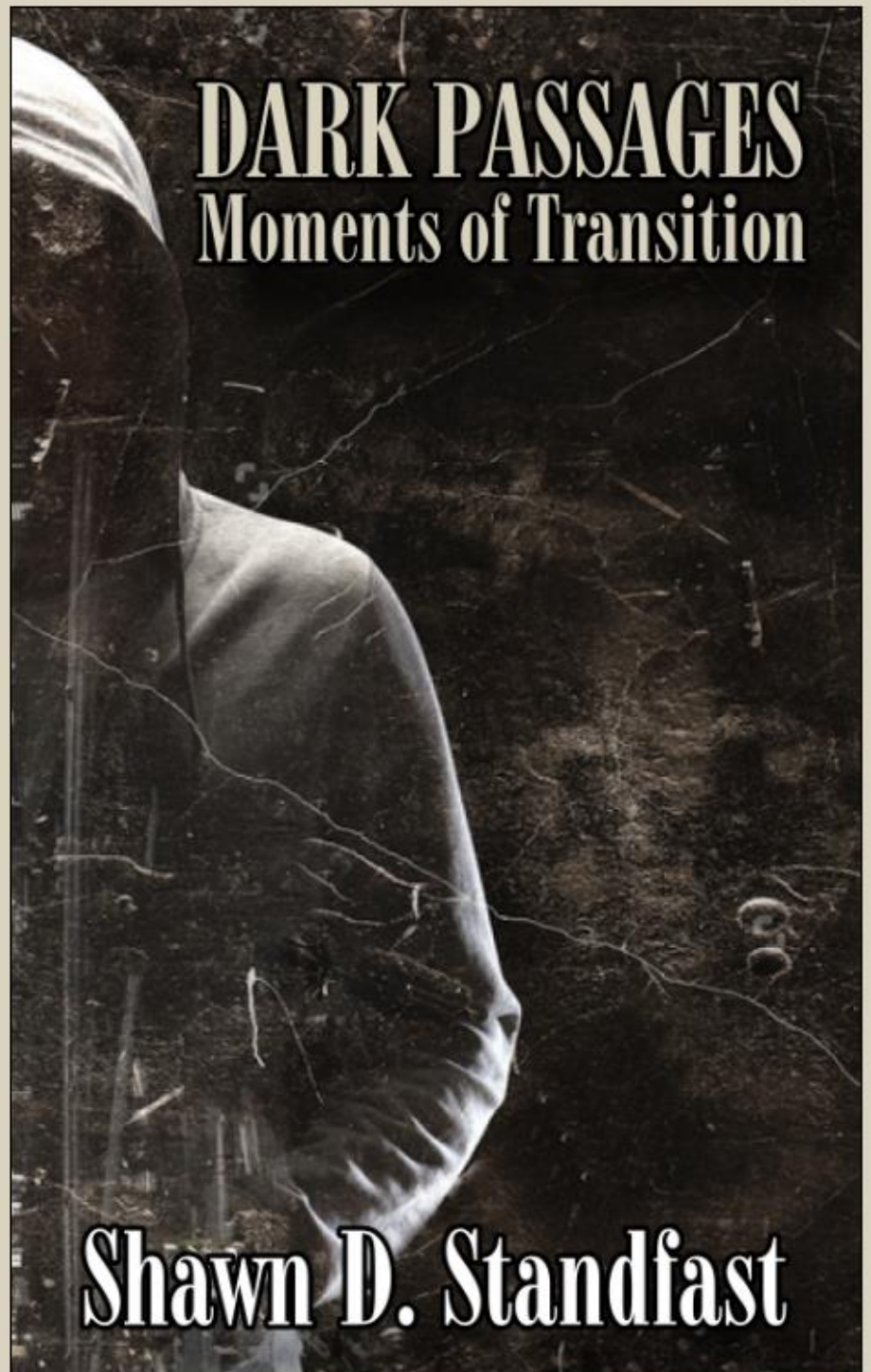
#### **About the Author:**

Holly Rae Garcia is the author of *Parachute*, *The Easton Falls Massacre: Bigfoot's Revenge*, and *Come Join the Murder*. One day she'll write a book about killer clowns if only to justify the growing creepy clown collection in her home office.

**Website:** [Holly Rae Garcia](http://HollyRaeGarcia.com)

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

# A Collection of Dark Poetry



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Some lie in the earth a long time,  
eaten away like coats in a moth swarm,  
forgetting that they ever lived.

Others are luckier.  
They're no sooner buried  
then they're dug up again.

The worms keep trying to tell  
the row of coffins  
that there's no such thing as heaven,  
just recycling.

But to the corpse-eaters up top,  
the fresher the better.

Most have no choice but to be patient,  
as their bodies break down,  
feed the ground around them.

Yet, every so often,  
the ghouls move in,  
and the graveyard is a banquet hall.

People still leave bouquets  
at the base of tombstones.  
For most, it's to honor the memory.  
For some, it's just flowers for the table.

**Your Return | John Grey**

I pray for it.  
The anticipation is compelling.  
And the night is dark enough.  
But, for all our shared wanting,  
you approach a surface  
that can never be breached.

So I only glimpse wisps, glow,  
transparencies, something skin-like,  
lacy white like a falbala.  
Look all I want,  
we will not now, nor ever,  
be face to face.

As daylight breaks,  
you return having never arrived.  
As sunlight fills the room,  
a truer light goes out of it.

**About the Author:**

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in Sheepshead Review, Stand, Poetry Salzburg Review and Hollins Critic. Latest books, *Covert*, *Memory Outside The Head* and *Guest Of Myself* are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in Ellipsis, Blueline and International Poetry Review.

You do not like magnolias,  
despise their creamy white flowers  
and wish someone would come by  
and pull them all up by the roots —  
you'd rather flat ground, gravel-topped,  
than that overgrown array.

Magnolia was your wife's name —  
you didn't love her either—  
she was equally as noxious  
as the plants that surround the house  
and she could speak loudly  
into the bargain.

You buried her  
in a barren patch  
that began to sprout  
this damnable greenery  
from the moment  
you laid down your spade.

Magnolia's growing in the basement.  
It's climbing up through the kitchen sink,  
the bathroom toilet.  
It slaps against the window  
when you try to sleep.  
And creeps down pipes,  
slides into cracks in eaves.

You really do abhor magnolias and Magnolia.  
Too bad,  
the feeling is so mutual.



**Lie Still and Whimper Quietly | Christopher Hivner**

Shhh,  
if you make noise,  
it will cut faster.  
Don't move.  
If you stir,  
it will cut deeper.  
Lie still,  
whimper quietly  
and let it finish.  
When it's done feeding,  
the saw teeth  
will retract.  
It won't take  
all your blood  
because it wants you  
to remember.

**AuroMetalSaurus | Christopher Hivner**

The ground shakes  
when he walks,  
the air sizzles  
with arcs of energy,  
the hero  
of the Metal Wars,  
Mastotron,  
has returned home,  
his thirty story tall body  
a charred hulk,  
the life in his digital eyes dimming.  
But we don't meet him  
with cheers  
nor riches.  
Thank you's are said quietly  
and then it's back to daily life  
while our mechanized warrior  
is sent away  
to be with his kind.  
But we conveniently forgot  
he's the only one left,  
our only grace,  
the one who sacrificed the most.  
The light in his eyes  
fades  
as the darkness in our souls  
grows.

**About the Author:**

Christopher Hivner writes from a small town in Pennsylvania surrounded by books he intends to read if he becomes immortal and the echoes of very loud music. His new book of horror/dark fantasy poetry, *Dark Oceans of Divinity*, has been published by Cyberwit.net.

Facebook: [Christopher Hivner – Author](#)

Twitter: [@Your\\_screams](#)

First there was the anonymous phone call  
a voice soft but insistent:

*Justify your existence.*

I beg your pardon,  
you said and all you heard  
before the uncompromising click  
was a little sigh  
like after unsatisfying lovemaking  
with a not-so-total stranger.

The phone didn't ring  
for a good month  
then the e-mail came  
precisely at midnight  
a misplaced cue  
from a bad horror film:  
*Why shouldn't you be evaporated?*

It was a threat, you knew,  
but your mind played  
with the word *evaporated*  
dribbling it back and forth.

A week later  
a letter with the most  
beautiful stamp you'd ever seen  
arrived but you couldn't  
pinpoint the place  
or even the continent—  
a single sentence  
on the perfumed paper:  
*It will all end tomorrow  
on a ghostly All Hallows' Eve.*

The word-dribbling  
resumed in earnest  
each word bounced  
up and down, up and down,  
until you couldn't comprehend  
one single word.  
Another Halloween approached  
and you sat by the window  
a numbing drink in hand  
waiting for the end.

### A Deep-Voiced Apparition | J. J. Steinfeld

Was it a well-placed rumour  
or the voice of a deep-voiced apparition  
that could pronounce most words  
perfectly if not frighteningly?

You would have preferred  
clanking or screeches  
even a roar through the stillness  
but then it wasn't your night  
for wishes coming true  
and endings happy or surprise.

In the midst of all this  
a brightness illuminated the sky  
you uttered a few words  
descriptions ill-formed  
but they did manage to frighten  
the deep-voiced apparition  
and made you a celebrity  
for a moment or two.

### About the Author:

Canadian poet/fiction writer/playwright J. J. Steinfeld lives on Prince Edward Island, where he is patiently waiting for Godot's arrival and a phone call from Kafka. While waiting, he has published 23 books, including *A Visit to the Kafka Café* (Poetry/Ekstasis Editions/2018), *Gregor Samsa Was Never in The Beatles* (Stories/Ekstasis Editions/2019), *Morning Bafflement and Timeless Puzzlement* (Poetry/Ekstasis Editions/2020), *Somewhat Absurd, Somehow Existential* (Poetry/Guernica Editions/ 2021), and *Acting on the Island* (Stories/Pottersfield Press/2022).

### Halloween Ballad | *Max Bindi*

The haunted house is on fire  
the children of the damned are lost in the woods  
the birds of ill omen sit on the rusty wire  
the ghost monk removes his hood  
Werewolves and cat-people  
roam amongst sinister shapes  
the fluttering bat in the gothic steeple  
morphs into a vampire wrapped in his cape.  
The mad scientist screams it's alive  
the brain in the vat is in a trance  
the severed hand counts till five  
and the skeletons start their death dance.  
The eerie fog envelops the hollow moon  
the pool of blood is covered with black confetti  
all the burning witches laugh and swoon  
when the living dead walk down the battered jetty.  
It is an old ghastly business of trick or treat  
the cemetery still reeks of necromancy  
The Halloween phantom spooks itself out of its wits  
Horror crawls back to normalcy.

#### About the Author:

Max Bindi is an Italian author/poet/songwriter. His work has been featured in Anthologies of Poetry and Aphorisms, Childrens' books and Literary Magazines including: *The Sirens Call*, *The Horror Zine*, *Better Than Starbucks* and *tsuri-doro*. He is also active in the alternative electronic music scene with his project *Outpost of progress*.

Facebook: [Max Bindi](#)

Instagram: [@outpostofprogress](#)



## Mother Gets Dinner Ready | JB Corso

keep crawling away, Sandra  
my hoof tracks are painted by your blood trails  
I guess you'll reach the front door  
maybe less but not much before you die  
do you hear my little ones whining to feast on you?  
their little hooves stomping is music to me  
*patience, babies, momma's looking over dinner right now*  
your body will be a juicy feast for their murmuring bellies  
they will enjoy rummaging within your guts for dinner  
some will likely crawl under your ribs until each one breaks  
your deflating lungs should be delicious;  
what do you think, Sandra?  
those bleeding puncture wounds must hurt  
I imagine your family with them too  
they're hiding upstairs, aren't they?  
your grandmother's embracing your son  
your father must be struggling to keep the puppy still  
I know they fear me  
and I know they'll all taste as good as you will,  
maybe even better  
each one will give nutrients to my brood either way  
a terrified buffet to eat through  
perhaps all at once or one at a time to make their dinner last longer  
they'll be cold by sunrise one way or another;  
Sandra, don't stop crawling  
you can't be dead yet  
good girl, keep going  
I have faith in you  
let the blood keep spilling under you  
they'll find the smell exhilarating  
I want more to walk through  
decorate my new den floor;  
you're an honored meal to  
a thousand generations that begins today,  
you're so close to the door now, Sandra  
if only your knees weren't shattered  
you'd be able to stand one last time;  
I can see your life thinning as your crawling weakens  
don't go anywhere, Sandra  
*children, come get your meal*  
do you hear my babies, Sandra?  
do you hear their soft hooves scampering across your living room floor?  
I wish you weren't choking on blood so you could say something  
*let momma flip her over for you*  
*yes, my children, feed on her while she's warm*  
*there you go, enjoy every inch of her*  
take a last look at the world, Sandra  
I'll be back in a moment with your father

my vision's engrossed by this one light  
this one beautiful, dazzling light  
there's no visual room for darkness  
no scary shadows, no distracting perspective  
just my eyes transfixed upon the most amazing illumination,  
I've come to believe that's what I'll spend the final breaths doing;  
I can't tell if the light's actually real or a byproduct of its saliva  
either way, I crave more of it  
I've become transfixed like a moth to the grandest spotlight  
a primal part of me wants to move my arms and legs  
though I'm not sure if there's enough of me left to move,  
nothing matters outside of right now  
my visual heroin has become so much more enjoyable than the real thing;  
dried blood crusts hold tight across my body and I don't care  
I stopped wondering how I'm still alive  
I should have died hours ago, maybe even days ago  
time seems irrelevant as my body has become its upright feeding trough  
this blissful orientation could be part of its trick  
maybe I'm hallucinating in Jimmi's bedroom being chewed by hungry rats;  
I don't care in this moment  
the light is making love to my eyes  
as its relentless chewing tickles my skin  
from my feet to my cheeks  
and all places in-between,  
the light is all I care about in my new life  
it fills my soul with a holier euphoria than the deepest orgasm;  
maybe there's more than one consuming me  
maybe my arms are gone by now  
my eyes remain and that's all I need  
let it chew up my hands or my tits or my guts  
I don't care about anything anymore  
I'll gladly stay like this until it bleeds me into a new bliss

**About the Author:**

JB Corso is a health care professional who has worked with the mentally ill and geriatric populations for the last 20 years. He appreciates time with his children, writing, and pondering existential dread. He's a combat arms veteran who deployed as an international peacekeeper. He lives with his significant other and enjoys afternoon drives listening to music.

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



**Woodland Witchery | *Meg Smith***

Simply, fix it thus:  
bore a hole in the fruit tree,  
and nest with in it  
a crescent of fingernail, and a piece of hair.  
Whoever is to be done, sign their name.  
Be it cherry, or oak, or ash—  
mark the bark with pins.  
A cough might sputter into silence,  
a door may stop, mid-creak.  
A letter may flutter to the floor,  
ink in black islands from tears,  
open for everyone to see.  
In the forest within the forest,  
brush and leaves will kindle  
at their lonely feet,  
groundlings of hearts.

**Desecration | *Meg Smith***

There was nothing more to do  
but pour milk, by way of apology,  
into the small space,  
like a hand cupped in the dried earth  
fringed by the gray roots of grass.  
This final bed of sleeping mice,  
someone has opened, and only  
a paper shroud remains.  
Leaves of late fall cling to the fence,  
with a rasping, not quite for mourning.  
It all matters not -- the wind bears up  
the lightest of feet, invisible eyes,  
and legions of knowing—  
tails, hearts, hands, teeth.

**The Path of Dark Sight | *Meg Smith***

I will draw fire from your eyes,  
and sticks will spark, blue, green, and black,  
in the thinning night.  
October becomes us, weary  
of the summoning of its name.  
More than any month, spirits plead  
for rest, but there is no such.  
We have much to see, unseen,  
in mirrors, shadows, and utterances of dust.  
With embers in hand, we will walk,  
into this crush of autumn,  
its gold splendor rushing to a fine  
winter's thread.

**Paper Ghosts | *Meg Smith***

We dance in the flutter of colors,  
of gold, and fire,  
and the midnight of green,  
children's laughter, and a jaunty  
string from a classroom's  
end to end.  
The lights snap off, and shadows  
fill the silence. And this is when  
we whisper, and breathe  
our joy -- songs of calico cats  
and stolen jack o' lanterns—  
we gather all, to ourselves,  
in our truest, haunted country.

**About the Author:**

Meg Smith is a writer, journalist, dancer, and events producer living in Lowell, Mass., with her husband, Derek Savoia, and their three cats. In addition to previously appearing in *The Sirens Call*, her poetry and fiction have appeared in *The Cafe Review*, *The Horror Zine*, *Poetry Bay*, and more.

**Facebook:** [Meg Smith Writer](#)

**Twitter:** [@MegSmith\\_Writer](#)



### Draw Back the Veil | DJ Tyrer

What lurks unseen  
Across hidden veil divide  
Realm of dead, lost souls  
Concealed from mortal sight?  
Pining lovers, vengeful haters  
Hungry ghosts yearning for matter  
Things that have quite forgotten  
What it was to be human...  
Around us, beside us  
Perhaps even *inside us*  
But, never touching, connecting  
Near, yet far apart.  
Till one night each year  
The fabric of reality thins  
Loosens, slips aside, allowing them  
To draw back the veil:  
Returning to see loved ones  
To complete unfinished business  
To haunt and horrify  
Or, just join in Hallowe'en fun.

#### 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).

**Blog:** [DJ Tyrer](#)  
**Facebook:** [Writer DJ Tyrer](#)

### The Ghost Light | Evan Baughfman

Show's over, and performers have gone home.  
The theater's near dark, now revenants roam.  
On-stage, a bulb shines with all of its might—  
forever ensure that the ghost light burns bright.

When alone, spirits produce their own plays.  
They can't have their fun if gloom hinders their days.  
Deny no phantoms this dramatic rite—  
forever ensure that the ghost light burns bright.

Withhold illumination? Please, beware!  
Insulted specters will believe you're unfair.  
Doling vengeance, they'll attack out of spite—  
forever ensure that the ghost light burns bright.

'Cause the dead hex, worse than screaming "Macbeth!"  
Scenery crumbles, then your lead loses breath.  
Ticket sales rot... Yes, best avoid this plight—  
forever ensure that the ghost light burns bright.

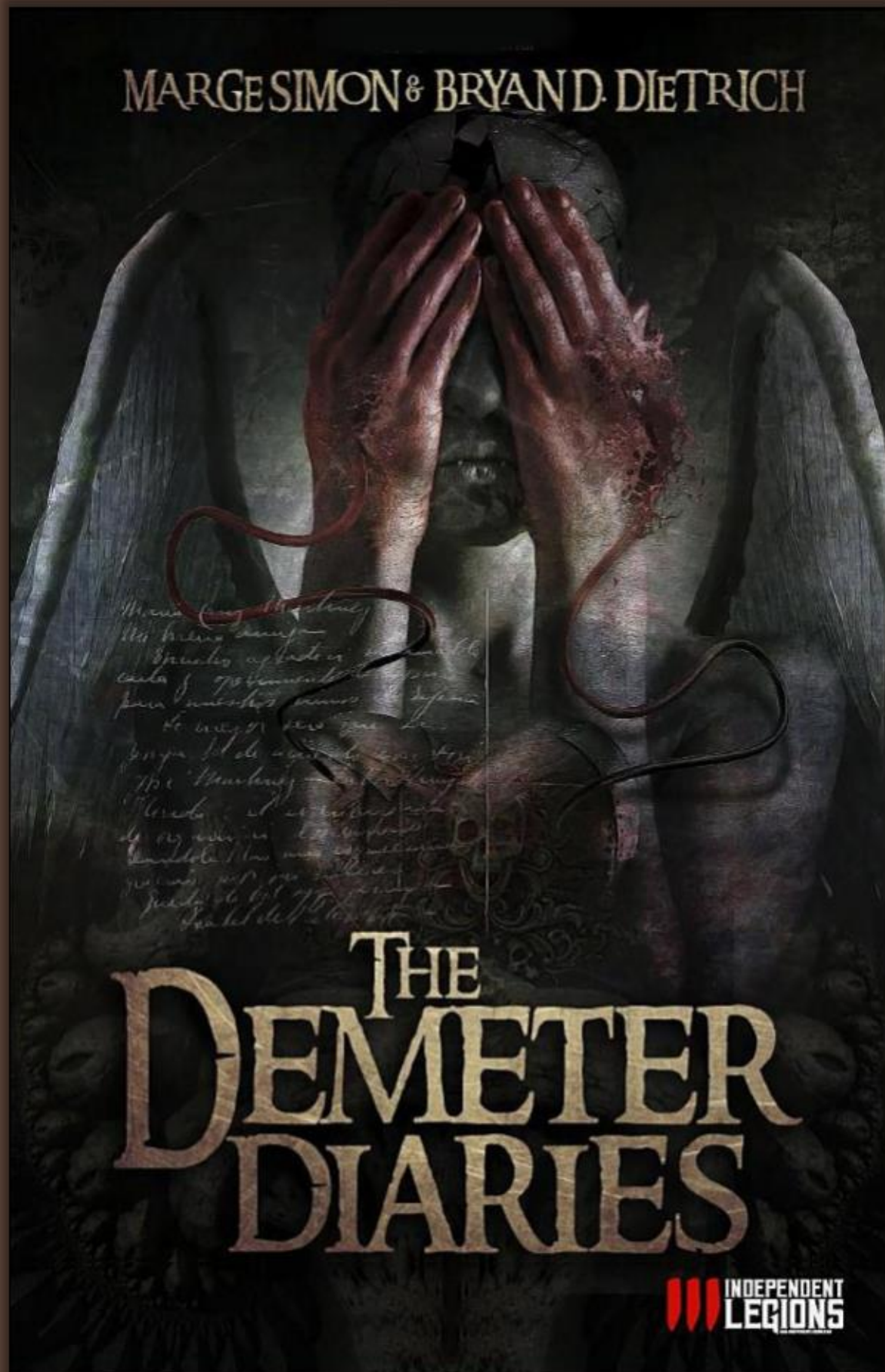
#### About the Author:

Much of Evan Baughfman's writing success has been as a playwright. A number of his scripts are online at Drama Notebook and New Play Exchange. Evan also writes horror fiction. His scary story collection, *THE EMACIATED MAN AND OTHER TERRIFYING TALES FROM POE MIDDLE SCHOOL*, is available through Thurston Howl Publications. He's also the author of *VANISHING OF THE 7<sup>TH</sup> GRADE*, released through D&T Publishing.

**Facebook:** [EvanBaughfman](#)  
**Instagram:** [@Agent00evan\\_716](#)



*An exciting new take on a love story of the ages*



*Vlad's passionate journey to meet his true love*

**AVAILABLE ON AMAZON**

The flame within the pumpkin glows  
a rich & ruddy light;  
without, the season immemorially flows  
towards the Memnons of the Night.  
A frigid chill infests the bones  
& strips verdure from elder trees,  
whilst the Earth seeks darkling repose  
from Summer's sweet, burning disease.  
Inwards curl the lingering buds  
embalmed in armature of frost;  
the earth turns to world-wearied mud  
& the mind to things wicked, wild & lost.

Then, in a whisper of errant wind,  
one may hear the chattering of the dead;  
their speech no oblivion can rescind  
& living blood is their sacral bread.  
One night only, on Dear Samhain,  
they creep forth from tumulus & howe,  
hungry for mortal blood & brains  
& all else Death's bourne would disallow.

Nature! Kindest in impartial plod—  
Only on Samhain can the weighty sod  
part to admit undead remains.  
Otherwise, proud Nature disdains  
to allow such spurious reanimation,  
Mould being the seat of all creation.

Yet – once a year the restless wights  
reinhabit their lineaments of yore,  
& seek remembrance of earthly delights  
via copious consumption of human gore.  
Thus, I keep a warding pumpkin lit  
on my stoop throughout this sacral Eve,  
lest I should become shade-bit  
or my guts some ghoulish hunger relieve.

**Embalm Me In Autumn | *Scott J. Couturier***

Embalm me in Autumn,  
beneath an orange Harvest Moon,  
Summer's waning fraught  
by season's impinging gloom,  
all Beauty of life's bounty  
ebbing with elegance of a swoon:

Embalm me in Autumn,  
slathered in cadaverous leaves  
like ground & grave alike.  
See! Before me bows to grieve  
a ghaist of Winter's shade,  
sorrowing as warm days yet deceive:

Embalm me in Autumn,  
pricks & poniards of crimson  
crowning boughs of green,  
herbage already reeking brown  
& cold rains roiling steady,  
skies with woolen wracks all glum:

Embalm me in Autumn,  
drowsy with September's dream,  
mushroom-caps clammy  
poking from my soggy seams,  
snails slithering to numb  
my tongue, devour my screams:

Embalm me in Autumn,  
each day eager pared in breadth,  
waxing night a wonder  
as ages bygone upstir from death,  
ghosts roaming roads  
& livid firmament's fervid depth:

Embalm me in Autumn,  
to a harpsichord's jangling tune,  
tied tight with cobwebs  
& bindings from a mummy hewn,  
ghouls attending where I lie  
to ensure my bier is crimson-strewn—  
beneath a weird & woeful sky  
lit by a leering Harvest Moon.

Lord Of Pumpkins | Scott J. Couturier

*Into the patch I gleefully go,  
to fix my roots, to coil & grow.*

Lord of Pumpkins, once Man I was:  
now, the omnipresent insect buzz  
o'er luxuriant vines is dearly mine.  
Through grass my greening tendrils twine.

*Into the patch I gleefully go,  
to fix my roots, to coil & grow.*

Once Man, now vegetable I am.  
But more: a Lord of Fields I am.  
Of rot & mold & loamy wind  
& the oatmeal-chest o'er-brimmed—  
I am husk-rustle of each elfin leaf  
as chill wind strikes at bowers brief.

*Into the patch I gleefully go,  
to fix my roots, to coil & grow.*

The Dead all know me by my Name—  
they dance 'round me a circle game.  
Yet, hollow my flesh & put a candle in  
& they flee exalting from my grin!  
A hallowed god of olden Ways—  
the squeal of sawing fiddle plays  
as scythes dissever old Barley John:  
the Season's come, & the Season's gone.

*Into the patch I gleefully go,  
to fix my roots, to coil & grow.*

Once Man, my flesh was coarse to me.  
A means to shed it sought I endlessly.  
Fruitless quest, 'til Pan's luscious lute  
summoned me forth to *become* Fruit.  
Now splay I gloating in Summer's heat  
as Autumn creeps nigh on stealthy feet:  
below, the dead twitch impatient bones.  
The skewed bulks of worn gravestones  
lie heavy on each unsettled wight  
yearning year-round for that Night of nights.

*Into the patch I gleefully go,  
to fix my roots, to coil & grow.*

Lord of Pumpkins, once Man was I:  
But no more Man. Pumpkin am I.

Amongst boughs of ocher & fire-red  
he weaves & dances, nods his head:  
singing songs of incipient frost,  
Autumn's Imp honors all the lost  
souls abroad in search of old homestead.

He cackles with glee at northerly gales,  
tap-dances in time with threshing flails—  
pasting bright leaves to cheek & brow  
Autumn's Imp capers with a ribald sow  
beneath Hunter's Moon by fell mists veiled.

As tree limbs strip to nakedness barren,  
off come his lendings of leaf & heron  
feathers collected by salty marsh pools—  
nude, unencumbered, All Hallows he rules,  
Autumn's Imp Sabbat's adamant baron.

Psychopomp, he presides over passing year,  
gnawing Time's bone through ghoul's grisly leer.  
At first snowflake's fall he shivers & bays,  
succumbing to Winter's delirious daze:  
only next Autumn will the Imp again appear.

**Guests of October | *Scott J. Couturier***

Guests of October, lingering too long,  
reluctantly melding with Autumn's loam.  
Carven faces arrayed in rotting throng,  
grinning out gayly 'mid November's gloam:  
each decaying Jack filled by chilly rain  
& massed corpses of fat & fallen flies,  
crisp smiles ripened to grimaces of pain,  
black mold glaring from behind incised eyes.  
Guests of October, shining once so bright  
to ward off spooks of ulterior spheres,  
while welcoming trick-or-treater's delight  
from out that primal night of prowling fears:

Now,  
Expressions withered to a wicked mirth,  
they refuse, like ghosts, to depart this Earth,  
entropy swelling each to monstrous girth,  
wearing leers no candle would dare to light:  
orange watchers shedding fat slugs for tears.

**About the Author:**

Scott J. Couturier is a Rhysling-nominated poet and prose writer of the weird, liminal, and darkly fantastic. His work has appeared in numerous venues, including *Spectral Realms*, *Space and Time Magazine*, *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, and *Weirdbook*; his fiction collection *The Box* is available from Hybrid Sequence Media, while his collection of folk horror poetry, *I Awaken In October*, is forthcoming fall 2022 from Jackanapes Press.

**Facebook:** [Scott J. Couturier](#)  
**Blog:** [Worlds and Words of Scott J. Couturier](#)



**Darkness | *Agnieszka Filipek***

the woods are full of rocks  
broken trees and dead birds  
covered up with the rubble of oblivion

in the smell of freedom you are choking  
those who want to live  
and those who have died

you are hanging them all in heavy chains  
clenching the blood in your hands  
as the crying of children is heard

wolves are howling in the twilight of eyelids  
biting and tearing dreams  
dark clouds blocking out all hope

dawn is always dragging  
like a wounded dog  
and the northern wind hums with horrid laughter

far beyond the hill  
the sky is slowly brightening  
but I'm still turning dark inside

**Midnight | *Agnieszka Filipek***

once again  
a piece of my flesh died  
on a bed of moon dust  
I made love to death

the ash remaining  
on my lips forever  
singing a lullaby  
to hungry birds

and all I wanted  
was to collect my tears  
in the glass bottle  
of your perfume

**Lullaby | *Agnieszka Filipek***

When darkness falls  
I'll wet my hair  
I'll wrap myself  
in black velvet  
and let out a cry

then  
the lilies of the valley  
will weep over me  
and the trees will run away  
from under the windows

withered flowers  
I'll put in a vase  
I'll light three candles  
and return to the grave  
of my sorrows

when the White Lady comes  
I'll blossom  
enslaved  
by my warm blood

the night will slam  
the gates of certainty  
and keep a guard  
and once again  
I'll have to howl  
to the wolves  
a good night lullaby



## Nightmare | *Agnieszka Filipek*

it's night  
the avenues burning  
in moonlight  
the death of a child  
jumping  
from a roof

horses with iron hooves  
pulling the corpse  
the skull slamming  
on the curb  
ghouls fighting  
over the remains

dawn startled  
escaping into the trees  
and his coat  
caught by rain  
dragging  
blooded

## Ritual | *Agnieszka Filipek*

They say you shouldn't stare  
into a mirror after midnight,  
if you don't want to be

possessed. I've waited for you  
every night since I was sixteen  
years old, searching for new ways

to summon you. Now I draw  
the magic sigil in the sand  
for you to appear and I wait

chanting and repeating your  
name and raising the glass  
with my blood as sacrifice.

### About the Author:

Agnieszka Filipek is a Polish-born poet living in Ireland. Her work has been published worldwide. Her poems have appeared in Amsterdam Quarterly, SAND Journal, Tilted House Review, Capsule Stories, Local Wonders Anthology, Lucent Dreaming, Black Bough Poetry, Crannóg, The Blue Nib, Chrysanthemum, Writing Home: The 'New Irish' Poets Anthology, Marble Poetry Magazine, Balloons Literary Journal, and elsewhere. Agnieszka loves nature, travelling and healthy organic food.

Facebook Page: [Agnieszka Filipek, Poet](#)

**Blue Moon | *Ivanka Fear***

And there I stood  
camera in hand capturing a moment  
in time.  
Under the moon  
witnessing this once in a lifetime event  
on my own.

And there I would  
have securely grasped your hand forever  
in mine.  
Under a full moon  
gazing in your eyes as we stood together  
unalone.

And if I could  
gift to you the sun, the moon, and the stars  
as they shine.  
Under a full blue moon  
the promise of my body, my soul, my heart  
unbroken.

Maybe I should  
have given you a call or sent a text  
just a line.  
Under a full blue hunter's moon  
contacted you in person on some pretext  
unspoken.

Misunderstood...  
a fool who recognized love in hindsight  
not in time.  
Under a Halloween full blue hunter's moon  
on a spooky night by this eerie light  
a lone wolf.

And suddenly there you stood  
silhouette poised in the cool dark air looking  
for a sign.  
Under a Halloween full blue hunter's moon in all time zones  
marveling at synchronicity, taking  
a photo  
of you and me  
under that elusive blue moon.

**Orange Amid Black on the Eve of Halloween | *Ivanka Fear***

The black night beckons.  
Ghostly tendrils extend an invitation.  
I step gingerly onto the balcony  
overlooking the dark gardens,  
blood moon set high against  
an indigo tarpaulin aglitter with gold  
in a midnight Halloween sky.

Orange eyes keep guard.  
Silent sentinels lurk, devoid of motion.  
But I sense them in the pitch below the steps  
tilting their marigold heads,  
bronze mums straining upward from  
an amber quilt aglow in the sooty bed  
of autumn's ebony earth.

Copper orbs take flight.  
Haunting globes of light bounce in my direction.  
I retreat from the wrought iron railing  
crunching carnelian leaves,  
onyx branches swaying, their  
russet foliage ablaze in the phantom mist  
of a crisp inky atmosphere.

Obsidian pounces.  
Spectres stream through the night to take possession.  
I scream as marmalade surrounds me  
rubbing sable about my legs,  
burnt umbra shadows engulf  
my auburn-haired silhouette luminescent  
in ochre flames of jack-o-lanterns.

Lit pumpkin shells grin.  
Evil eyes accent menacing expressions.  
I lose my footing over charcoal spooks  
falling next to tangerine heads,  
contusions on arms and legs  
as nine sets of saffron eyes gleam against jet silk,  
tails curling black around orange gourds.

Nine orange-eyed black kittens,  
according to old world superstitions –  
familiar – in search of one witchy woman,  
lay claim to me  
on the Eve of Halloween.

## Mask | *Ivanka Fear*

Beauty lies  
hides ugliness undercover  
surface disguising  
misleading exterior  
false advertising

Only skin deep  
scrape off the layers  
dig past the gold  
sheen melting  
glow dissipating  
colours fade

Peel back the skin  
expose the true state  
facade shattered  
essence revealed  
spilling out its fetid core  
black liquid oozing  
soot smearing corpse  
eyes dead as funeral black

Unveiled

## They Watch | *Ivanka Fear*

Green eyed marbles  
glowing in the dark  
their vampire fangs showing.  
Vertical slits  
dilating and constricting  
haunting as they prowl.  
Snake eyes  
rolling 11's, the deuces are wild  
spooky...

Deities -  
their oblivious slaves  
worshiping at their feet.  
Ambushers -  
unsuspecting innocents  
fall prey to their tricks.

Observers,  
their familiar faces  
feigning indifference.  
Watchers,  
these spies amongst us  
hiding in plain view.  
Aliens,  
ancient beings  
biding their time.

They watch.  
They wait.

## About the Author:

Ivanka Fear is a Canadian writer. Her poems and stories appear in numerous publications, including *The Sirens Call*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Mystery Tribune*, *October Hill*, *Close to the Bone*, and elsewhere. The debut novel of her Blue Water mystery series is scheduled for release by Level Best Books in January 2023.

Website: [Ivanka Fear](http://IvankaFear.com)

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



Each night...  
They came  
Never the same way  
I tried to pretend not to see them or hear their crackled whispers.  
They knew I saw and heard them.  
Dragging their spiny fingers across my quivering, blistered lips  
They made me watch.  
Over  
Over  
And over again...  
I tried to turn those memories off, but failed each time.  
They never gave me rest.  
Each night...  
They came  
All of them  
The years grew clearer and clearer:  
1969  
1976  
1989  
2002  
2008  
October 31, 2017  
I could smell all of them.  
Jasmine perfume, vanilla ice cream, sweet cranberries, burning hair, and decaying  
flesh...  
I knew each by name:  
Veronica  
Raynay  
Shazia  
Frances  
Olivia  
Constance  
Zena  
These were the ones who came to me each night.  
They showed me what I wanted to dismiss, permanently.  
Their bodies were once young, beautiful, and full of warmth... now so cold and distorted.  
My dirty, evil deeds transformed into night terrors.  
Each night...  
They came  
They were my *visible sins*.  
They would never allow me to forget, only to remember every detail of the gifts I gave them—personal tortures and  
eternal cries.  
Each night...

**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](#)

Twitter: [@MiracleAustin7](#)



call the moon | *Kate Garrett*

in the hungry grave | *Kate Garrett*

a plot of land, six by six  
stands all alone, a corner  
long forgotten. it calls  
to you as you pass: twice  
a day, at daybreak and dusk.  
you put the sound down  
to a breeze, a fox, a frog  
beneath the hedges. any  
sensible noise will do,  
but it's none of them—  
and curiosity wins out  
in the end. at the edge  
of the allotments, not quite  
within, where nothing grows  
but bindweed, willowherb—  
this hidden whispering  
oblong in the dirt. *feed me*  
it implores you as the sun,  
still warm, begins to sink  
down the wash of yellow-blue  
sky. the clouds will soon  
be apricot —the plot, abandoned  
tells you it's starving. you ask  
if you should haul them out—  
whoever they might be—but no,  
they say, just drop something  
down, something fresh, a live  
thing warm with blood.

you dwell in the between:  
neither winter nor spring  
neither summer nor autumn.  
here you hide by sepia light

until the silver washes down  
jasmine and wisteria, tempts  
moths after nightfall. your  
footsteps as silent as theirs

despite the claws. where blind  
spots exist, you sniff them out.  
you wait as one with midnight,  
ready with your velvet bite.

chimera, eyes of fire | *Kate Garrett*

a scar meanders, crosses  
your terrain top to bottom—  
this rope, thick with betrayal  
ties your two halves together.

again, you crack thin bones  
between your fingers.  
again, tears cannot douse  
the red-rimmed flames.

the hands, the teeth—no match  
made here. your heart  
and brain forget the urge  
to breathe, to love, to fear.

**About the Author:**

Kate Garrett is a writer and mum with witchy ways and a folklore, history, and horror obsession. She often haunts 800-year-old buildings (especially the historic church where she works as a social media coordinator), and loves fishkeeping, crafting, and rummaging in junk shops. Born and raised in rural southern Ohio, USA, Kate moved to the UK in 1999, and she lives there still.

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

Website: [Kate Garrett Writes](https://www.kategarrettwrites.com)

**My Life Is Not A Dream | Gabriella Herkert**

Row, row, row my boat  
'Neath missiles bursting in ai  
War can cut your throat

Captured boys of war  
Lowly privates badly fare  
Our fear to ignore

Who wants endless war?  
Weapons-selling billionaire  
Never to abhor

Angels on your side?  
He prefers true despair  
Our hope, he can't abide

Seeking evil's face  
Charisma without compare  
Ruin without a trace

It's not the Devil!  
Twisted Prince de la Guerre  
Sucking to his level

So much darker than he  
Horror, horror everywhere  
Avarice in thee

Row, row, row my boat  
Destruction without compare  
Drowning in greed's moat

**About the Author:**

*Catnapped* and *Doggone*, the first two books in Gabriella Herkert's Animal Instinct mystery series were published by Obsidian Press, an imprint of Penguin Books. A redhead raised by wolves in a circus town, she's been short-listed for the Debut Dagger, the Private Eye Writers of America/St. Martin's Press Best First Private Eye Novel, the Ray Bradbury Fellowship and the Daphne Du Maurier Award.

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

**Facebook:** [Gabriella Herkert](https://www.facebook.com/GabriellaHerkert)



**Night Knocker | Julie Allyn Johnson**

Jagged blade in hand,  
grackles gather  
in jet-black corners.

A scree of wind,  
the scream of it  
savaging the ears...

Assaults of ancient logic:  
*I Saw What You Did*  
*I Know Who You Are.*

Abandoned  
in this hollow house.  
They wait.

**wintry solstice | Julie Allyn Johnson**

blade tinged  
in scarlet  
an obligatory  
midnight moon  
rides a tenor wind

extinguished starlight—  
compacted snow steps  
receding  
crimsoned-witness  
forever silenced

night foragers  
return to the hunt  
screech owl  
resumes  
its devil voicings

**secretion | Julie Allyn Johnson**

inanimate gap-toothed smile,  
blackened wormhole punctuated  
with rotted enamel, wooden limb-bits—  
long since bloodied—  
wretched extensions protruding  
like diminutive aging torsos  
of meadow faeries & woodland sprites

your wicked mouth  
a cavernous maw  
stench of seven thousand years  
the clunk and growl  
of your capricious words  
mangles my spirit  
shreds my soul

my head is an apple  
soft squishy & bruised  
slender thighs, slabs of Canadian bacon—  
smoky-sweet lean conduits  
to an exploration  
of sweet buckwheat honey  
say the word, Temptation,  
and I am your belonging

**the interrogation | *Julie Allyn Johnson***

you ask what's become of me  
languid eyes flirting with the diaspora  
the ungentling, caricature of flight  
three hands tied behind your back

you settle for what cannot be discerned  
an accompaniment of favors  
oddities embraced  
candid reflections subdued through glass

through suffering through resignation  
holographs of superiority  
needle-tipped placements  
slender obstacles

leather supple  
as sweet cream butter  
arched across the sky  
a miasma of regret  
of solace denied

**Luna(sic) | *Julie Allyn Johnson***

Raggedy wraith, penknife sheathed in craggy burlap, bites  
into a ruddy-brown moon, twisted armaments so sublime.  
Her residual jabs enflame the faltering eco-system: Full-Stop.

Vellum-wrapped throat, serrated-sliced melon-wide,  
industrial thrashing motions cast in hesitant crosswise strokes—  
the tender wound's red sangria trickling, trickling...

Badger-cum-wolverine-cum-hyena-demon-eyed stranger  
lunges in, thirsts for maximal carnage, a heightened invective.  
Impatient mercenary directing wholesale slaughter: Kill-Poet resolve.

Mangrove rookery, tangle-rooted in brackish waters  
warm sheltering space for probing roseate spoonbills—  
darker still, accommodation for soulless upright predators.

Pensive appetites crouch in pain, yearning for more, still more again.

**About the Author:**

Julie Allyn Johnson, a sawyer's daughter from the American Midwest, prefers black licorice over red, cigarette-size Tootsie Rolls, and Hot Tamales—practically the perfect candy. Her current obsession is tackling the rough and tumble sport of quilting and the accumulation of fabric. A Pushcart Prize nominee, Julie's poetry can be found in various journals including *Star\*Line*, *The Briar Cliff Review*, *Phantom Kangaroo*, *Haven Speculative*, *Penumbric Speculative Fiction*, *Coffin Bell*, *Typishly* and *Chestnut Review*.

*Beware! Mister Snark is lurking...*

# THE DARK MISTER SNARK

Lori R.  
Lopez



LORI LOPEZ-15

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

She was captured at sea in a sturdy net  
and sold remotely to an Exotics Buyer.  
Dumped in a watertank under a tarp  
then driven for miles, bruised and afraid.

Bumping glass walls, keening for home,  
the shrouded security of a cove and a cave.  
Her story began with a mother on land,  
who abandoned her near a secluded beach.

Alone she survived, swimming and hiding,  
keeping to herself from predatory beasts.  
The kind who combed the ocean for food.  
The ones who hunted for thrills and greed.

Fishermen spied her, shining and pale,  
a glimmering prize sunning on the coast.  
They tracked her course among the rocks,  
as she dove for safety then glided evasive.

Instruments followed beneath the waves;  
she couldn't outrun their metal boat.  
Snared by netting, she nearly drowned.  
Pulled on the deck, Piranha or Princess?

Amused, touching clammy flesh and scales.  
Two wanted to throw her back, a Mermaid!  
Three argued she was worth her weight.  
The Skipper's last words: "We sell her!"

His leg disappeared to the knee in one bite.  
She snapped at the Sailors until subdued.  
Collected by a Mutant Marketplace truck  
and delivered to a traveling Creepshow.

The attraction unloaded before circus tents  
at the center of a barren field. An isolated  
gathering for Oddities, Weirdos, Outcasts,  
and those who paid a high price to gawp.

Unveiled as Aquarium Girl, she cowered  
in a corner of the see-through case—  
with no private space to feel protected—  
viewed on all sides by a fisheyed audience.

The woman who named her Pisces at birth,  
sheltering the sea-child in a saltwater pool,  
said she was beautiful but would never be  
accepted by the world that created her...

A product of government experimentation.



Bio-genetic manipulation. Industrial waste.  
Unnatural hazards, chemicals and drugs.  
Or radioactive particles of Energy and War.

Bobbing to the surface for gasps of air,  
she could only stare back at the strangers—  
who didn't seem less awkward than she;  
any less peculiar, lethal, chimeric...

Perhaps her mother was mistaken.

## **The Spooks | *Lori R. Lopez***

A letter for The Living. Dear Flesh-And-Bloods,

If you happen to be alive at the moment of reading this—  
or died recently and vividly imagine you are—the note  
in your hand, writing on the wall, letters traced in fogged  
glass, words across your screen apply to you. Pinch your  
arm to be certain. No wait, that's dreaming. Poke yourself  
with a stick. Jab a finger with a sharp needle to see if you  
bleed. That should work. Best sterilize it first or you may  
be joining us sooner than later.

In case you aren't officially a member of Spirit Society yet,  
we in the Ghost Community wish to call your attention to  
a few important haunted-house rules from Beyond...  
Over There...On The Other Side...

Step lightly. We could be napping. And we might  
be curled on the floor. (This rule applies to cats as well.  
In fact, we borrowed it from their list.)

Please don't move suddenly, clap your hands or shout.  
We scare easily. (Cats too.)

Close doors gently, gradually to not rattle us—  
or squash us! (Cats again.)

Leave the drapes open so we can look outside  
and catch up on Birdwatching. (Cats.)

Don't interrupt our Napping Schedule with guests,  
incessant chatter, ringing phones, doorbells, hammering,  
plumbing and video-game noises, barking dogs, banging  
pots and pans, earthquakes, or anything else disturbing.  
That includes smoke in any form. It burns our noses!!!!  
(Cats.)

Don't crunch too loud. The closet, bathroom, interior  
of your vehicle or outdoors is a suitable dining location.

(Cats.)

Don't eat in front of us, unless you're planning to share.  
It makes us drool or lick our lips. (Dogs. Some cats.)

Don't sing tearjerker songs. We still have feelings.  
(Dogs. Sensitive cats.)

Don't listen to contagious songs that can get stuck  
in our heads. We hate that. (Cats and dogs.)

Don't play music too loud. You know what they say.  
You'll wake the Dead. It's true.

Turn the pages of the book you're reading only when  
the light flickers. Flipping them too fast or slow is very  
annoying, and our patience has worn thin over time.

Do not ghost us, or forget us. Tell everyone you know  
about us. Show pictures.

Don't walk or spit on our graves, and remember us  
kindly while not forgetting us. Everyone has at least one  
or two good points. Don't merely focus on the negative.

Yours Truly, *The Spooks*

P.S. Keep in mind always that we are present and can be  
spooked, hence the name!

## **One Tear | Lori R. Lopez**

Can you see it? Quivering. Pale and ghostly,  
a clear wet streak of descent; a spill of emotion  
like a tongue's rash incautious slip. One tear,  
all that I could spare...all that I could bear...

To lose. *A life of hiding.*

An ice slab of fear, crouching, cowering, but for  
the warm trail down a cheek that leaked from one  
corner of a glazed stare—torchlike and dim...  
gleaming. Tasted where it landed...a small sea.

Cutting deep. *Hewing bone.*

In the dark, through fog, across a breathless void.  
Out of half a gaze. The second orb empty, parched,  
incapable, sightless, too shocked and senseless...  
Hollow as a wall, arid as the surface of the Moon.

So alone. *Even as a child.*

Clutched within a thrall. Attention rapt and yet unfocused. Could you see me at the window? Just behind the drape, peering like a faded specter. Waiting in the shadows, watching from the edge.

Detached. *Out of touch...*

But not untouchable. Someone who felt invisible. Not simply unseen or transparent. Worse than that. Less apparent than spirits who walk and hover amid the living. I shrieked, I wailed and none could hear!

Inwardly. *I reached, unfelt...*

Alive or dead, it made no difference in the abodes where I dwelled. Imprisoned by years of silence—an inability to break the glass barriers around me. Wherever I turned, they encased like a prison-cell.

Without bars. *Without substance.*

A rigid shroud encompassing buried sorrows... the wordless agony of internal eternal suffering. Every sound, every huddled clenched contour frozen. That staring figure standing in the door—

Aware...*I could leave.*

Where would I go? How would I survive? The terror real, unasked for. I carried its weight out of duty. And listened. Hoped for salvation, for each siren to come closer. Guarding my shame, an intense private burden.

I escaped once. *Thought I was free.*

I chose him. I did not choose this. My other half. Bound to by Law. Who vowed to cherish, comfort. Then promised to change, do better. Who begged my forgiveness. Another chance. To do what?

Make me sorry? *Tell me it's my fault?*

Give me a good reason to cry? Drive me off a cliff? The faucet dripping broke bones. The door I couldn't open bruised both cheeks. The corner of the bureau damaged an eye. All I could spare, all I could risk...

One secret tear.

We moved to a drafty abode with nine bedrooms the Fall of my thirteenth year. It had good bones my dad described. Mother raved about the fancy architecture and old-fashioned qualities. The five kids complained it was cold. "There's a Fireplace!" Our parents assured it would be cozy, and we could tell stories in front of it at night. We never did....

The first week my Baby Brother Kenneth suffered a gruesome accident. Nobody saw what happened. Somehow he fell into the fire! We were singing in the kitchen around a cake and glowing candles, for Monica's Birthday. Ken's voice, if he cried at all, went unheard. When Mother noticed his absence, and a strange odor, we found the body.

Charred black. We considered moving after his Funeral. Everyone was too sad, wrung out, even depressed. Months passed. Winter was fierce yet we huddled together before the Hearth, somber and still, wrapped in blankets, thinking about Kenneth. Each of us feeling responsible in our own ways. Poor little Monica. She blamed herself the most.

I kept silent I didn't trust that eerie dreary house. They'd think I was crazy, but I discerned items inexplicably altered, missing, out of position... I sensed in corners, the dark spaces, an uncanny presence. And began to glimpse remnants of bugs, birds, rodents below windows; sucked down the Chimney's gullet, into a fiery cunning mouth.

I took pictures, gathered any evidence to prove the house devoured my brother, or some malicious spirit shared these walls. Preoccupied, I scarce observed four Seasons shifting the world outside our residence. The meager yard, a tangled strip of thorny bushes, compelled us more than ever to spend free time indoors, accustomed to creaks.

Odd moans. We liked to read, but stopped playing Cards and Boardgames. One year to that dismal day, we held a subdued 'party' and privately honored both Monica and Ken. I kept an eye on the Hearth, and corners. While five of us watched our father mangle slices of cake, Dandy darted over to stare with awe, perhaps dread, lured to the flames...

I blinked and she was gone. "No!" Diving toward the Fireplace, I reached for her, dragged her out by an arm or leg. We bundled the girl in blankets, then

hastened by car to the E.R. She survived. The next night our home was ablaze, hungering. I woke my parents, rescued the Twins. If houses could talk... I'm sure this one screamed. The Deathtrap survived.

My family moved. Somewhere safe and quiet to heal.

### Happy Halloween | *Lori R. Lopez*

In sulfurous caverns of brimstoned paths,  
which exile the vilest these depths confine  
to nether regions where none are welcomed  
across or back from the Bottom Line...

Too grim their deeds; unforgiven their banes...

At the chimes of Unrest, when dark Invitations  
flutter and float through halls of ghost tombs,  
the damnedest weep in their lonely vaults,  
each sorry fate sealed by doorless rooms.

No Happy Halloween for these souls in chains!

While iron portals and gates release other dead  
'pon their annual screeches and booforays  
to haunt and daunt the shivering masses,  
the pounding hearts in outlandish ways...

There be no passes for the spirits most cursed...

Condemned to canyons far neath The Veil:  
subterranean-dwellers in barren ice-caves.  
Mean and remorseless as the coldest stones.  
Beyond redemption; immoral depraves.

Un-Happy Halloween to the wicked worst!

### About the Author:

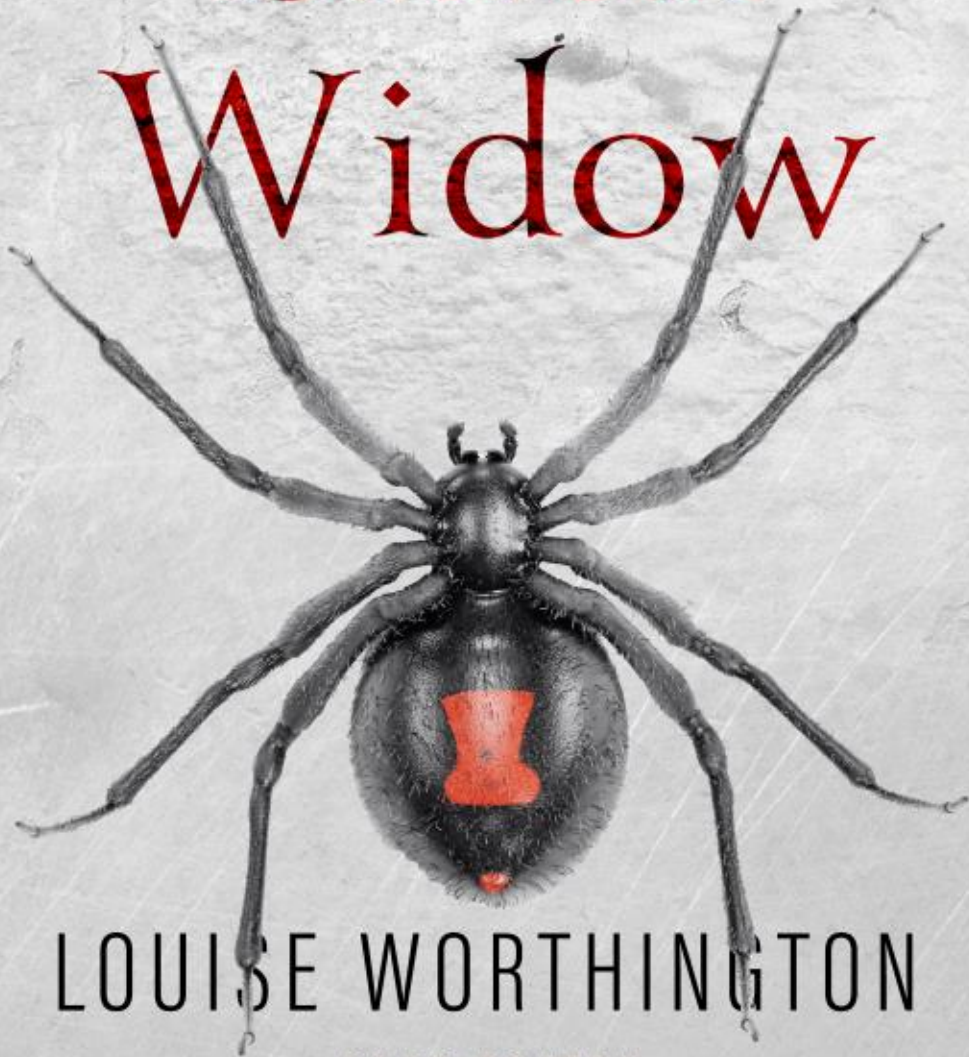
Lori R. Lopez is an offbeat author-illustrator, poet, songwriter, and wearer of hats, as well as an animal-and-monster-lover. Verse has appeared in *The Sirens Call*, *The Horror Zine*, *H.W.A. Poetry Showcases*, *Weirdbook*, *Spectral Realms*, *Space & Time Magazine*, *JOURN-E*, *Oddball Magazine*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Altered Reality Magazine*, *California Screamin* (the Foreword Poem) and much more. Books include *The Dark Mister Snark*, *Odds & Ends*, *Leery Lane*, *An Ill Wind Blows*, *The Witchhunt*, and *Darkverse: The Shadow Hours*. Lori has been nominated for the Elgin and Rhysling Awards.

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True crime poetry of the wrongfully convicted,  
and abused women who kill.

# The Black Widow



LOUISE WORTHINGTON

*DARK POETRY*

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!



The priest-like movement of the waves did not soothe Edith. The darkness is an honest friend, the black sea, too. It did not soothe her though the waters are calm and ripples are an echo of itself. The urn in her hands was not only shaken by the movement of the boat. Guilt made her hands tremble. It had come to this.

The moon and torchlight shed the darkness on the lids of the night; it was just her and the boat they'd once rowed together, fishing, swimming naked, living—a singular task, a secret ministry to scatter his ashes at his request. She received a short letter a month ago asking for this one thing. Before that, he wrote all the time. In one long letter, he said at long last that Geoffrey's mother had forgiven him, and he felt something close to joy after atoning for 'their sin' for the first time since his crime. She didn't reply, not once. 'Their sin?' Then she couldn't bring herself to read his desperate and demented letters saying he would starve himself to death unless she wrote or visited. Her patience had run out. It made no sense to her why he raked over what happened years ago. It was a broken sternum healed to a misshapen cage.

All those years Herman had served in prison, Alice had been in exile too. The local people of Bicton said she was a heartless witch who put a curse on men. Herman's jealous rage turned his handsome face into a rapid mask. He bit and tore, punched and kicked another man to death. *Poor Geoffrey, a gentle lover*, she thought blithely. Could love make men mad?

She hadn't loved him well, nor deep like the ocean. He was a strong man with a big heart. She had not loved him these years, for she only knew his absence and her own changed, quiet life, keeping out of sight of fingers and whispers. Watched by the sleepless stars, it was right to admit this now. There was no peace here, either. Out at sea, she was no more and no less isolated than she was in her humble cottage.

Tomorrow, she thought, the church bells would ring in the morning, the vicar would come and go, and families would send their children to school. And Edith would be alone again. The smoking blueness of the sky and the bitter-sweet smell of the infinite ocean reminded her of this.

Was she selfish to contemplate her suffering? She clutches the urn, rocked by the cradle of the boat. If only she had a child for company. No man would come near her—the chance of a slippered quiet or contented happiness again was snuffed out forever. Yes, she was an inmate, too, and her sentence was not over. Her twin is in the waters. *She thinks that solitude has withered her like a prisoner* as she touches her beautiful hair. Day and night were all one. Yes, her furnished cottage was quite comfortable with a fire lit and simple stew to eat, but who would act on her dying wishes?

"Herman was spared. Blessed to die in prison," she said, peering into the waking black waves, though he died just before he had almost served his sentence.

She resolved then there was no need to pray, having not prepared anything, and nothing came to mind amidst so much blackness; just her and the sea, inhaling and exhaling—a sea which never sleeps.

Then there was a slight movement in the air, a strengthening of the wind, a sound like the crumpling of paper. The ocean swelled ominously, and the wind whistled sharply around her neck as it lifted her long dark locks off her back and shoulders before dropping them down again. She clutched the urn to her chest as she lost her balance in the swaying boat. Herman used to say to peer into the depths of the sea is to peer into a mirror, into one's conscience. Vapours rose from the waters and a door opened in the waves. She studied the perilous gloom illuminated by the unquiet moon. Glass bottles containing a handwritten letter bobbed to the surface—one after the other.

"What?" she stammered. "Is this—?"

Not hesitating a moment later, Edith shuffled to the edge of the boat, clutching the urn with one hand to her chest while using the other hand to hold onto the wooden seat to inch forward, gazing fixedly at the open door. Situated at the most northern part of the boat, she removed the lid from the urn and slowly rose to her feet, wobbling as the waves became restless and ever boisterous. The door in the waves was still open—a trapdoor, Alice thought, where the evil mortals go. So, in her outstretched hand, she turned the urn upside down.

Nothing came out.

Not a speck.

From the gloom came a satanic cry, and a black power appeared like a thunderbolt. An enormous bird with blinking plutonium eyes perched on the boat and burned its eyes into Alice's lovely face.

"Oh! Help!" she called, "take it!" she said, offering the urn out to the evil-looking bird.

But the eager creature—a giant cormorant—winked, then began pecking and tearing at Edith's pretty face with persistent rapture. Her arms waved, the urn fell into the boat, rolling under the seat, and with every cry and scream,

another black bird appeared from the ominous sky, dressing every inch of her in black plumes. A cacophony of fluttering wings and restless waves made demented music damp with her tears and spit-soaked shrieks in the air. The boat ceased to rock violently. One satisfied bird carried the urn away to its nest to nestle beside ink-spotted eggs. In the wind, the sounds of sobbing and grieving rained into her ear. Herman's voice twisted the sinews in her shrunken heart, cleaving her like another hungry bird. At last, she listened and heard.

"Edith.Edith.Edith."

Into the shadowy water she fell, down and down deep below the waves so deep nobody knows.

#### About the Author:

Louise Worthington writes horror and psychological thrillers. She is the author of six novels. Her latest novel is *Doctor Glass*, and her poetry and shorts are brought together in the collection, *Stained Glass Lives and Visited by Dreamscape*. She has a degree in literature and a postgraduate diploma in psychology. Louise lives on a farm in Shropshire, in the UK.

Website: [Louise Worthington](#)

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#### The Hottest Ticket in Town | *Hillary Lyon*

Serena's boyfriend's band played this gig every Halloween. The guitarist always looked like death warmed-over, and the keyboardist didn't look much better. The bass player just stared into the void, his stiff fingers twitching rhythmically on the frets. Too many recreational drugs, too many late nights with diseased groupies.

Her boyfriend shivered and spasmed as he clutched the mike. To get him started, she twisted the knife in his back. Oh, the shrieks and moans that burst from his gray lips! The audience loved it!

The club manager caught Serena's eye and smiled. Black magic and body-snatching always pays off.

#### The Party Girl | *Hillary Lyon*

"Aren't you too old to dress up for Halloween?" Alisha's mother complained.

Staring in the mirror, Alisha applied her thick black eyeliner.

"And you're going to a party? Dressed like that?" the old woman sneered.

Alisha teased her dry, black hair into a rat's nest. She smoothed the wrinkles from her burial frock. She tugged the black ruffled cuffs over her bony wrists, effectively hiding the cuts.

"I didn't raise you to be a party girl!" her mother hissed.

Alisha bent over to tie the laces of her chunky black platform boots.

"I raised you up to be my slave!"

#### About the Author:

For 20 years, Hillary Lyon served as senior editor for Subsynchrous Press. She's lived in France, Brazil, Canada, and several states in the U.S. In the last year, her stories have appeared in multiple print and online publications. When not writing, she creates illustrations for pulp and horror zines, often using family members as victims. She means models.

Blog: [Hillary Lyon](#)



Gwen kicked the beer can off the sidewalk and watched it bounce into the gutter. Dust swirled around her ankles in the cooling night while the echo from the can faded into silence. The tattered witch costume Gwen wore couldn't keep the chill from reaching her bones no matter how tightly she pulled the thin material around herself. Gwen shivered, looking at the houses lining the street in the quickening darkness. The fall moon rose, chasing the sun from the sky. A few dark clouds dotted the horizon along with the stars, and Gwen increased her pace. Being out in the night, especially on Halloween, was never enough time for Gwen to live a little.

Candles flickered in one home as Gwen stopped to check out the plastic skeletons hanging from a dead tree on the other side of the broken wooden fence. Gwen reached out and ran her fingers over the peeling weather-worn white paint. She imagined the sharp edges biting into her flesh, and she yanked her hand away.

"Stupid fence," Gwen huffed.

Gwen was about to continue home when movement in the front window caught her eye. At first, she thought the wind howling through the yard caused the tattered curtains to sway, but in the candlelight, Gwen swore someone moved. For the past few years, she hadn't noticed anyone lurking around the house, and it lulled her into a false sense of security about its safety. Gwen's mother warned her before she died to beware of the world outside their home. Her mother's warning still haunted her, and Gwen wished she'd listened more closely to her mother.

The atmosphere surrounding Gwen is what made Halloween so unique, and she yearned to feel the bonds of the living world weaken so the dead, like her, could make their presence felt. Gwen missed going door-to-door for candy, but she also didn't miss the pain she experienced in her life. The pain she had being dead didn't feel better, however.

Children laughed across the street as they ran away from the house decorated like a pumpkin patch. The kids stopped on the sidewalk and compared their newest candy haul before bounding off to the next dwelling on the block. Gwen longingly wanted to join them, but she knew it could never be like that again. Her eyes returned to the quiet house, and her gaze lingered on the single Jack O' Lantern glowing on the porch. It grinned at her, and someone stared at her from behind the door. At first, Gwen didn't think the person could see her, but a hand waved from behind the curtains. Slowly, Gwen raised her hand and timidly returned the gesture with a wave of her own.

The curtains fluttered, and the window's candle went out. Gwen tried to move on and enjoy her night on the living side of the Veil, but her feet denied her desire to keep walking. Before she made the turn to leave, the door latch clicked and creaked open. A young boy peered around the heavy wooden door and stared at Gwen with his mouth agape.

Gwen slowly waved again at the frightened-looking boy. His shaggy blonde hair hung down over his eyes, and dirt smudges colored his pudgy cheeks. The boy looked like what Gwen imagined an angel would appear like to her. He moved his fingers up and down as he smiled. The way his face lit up made Gwen smile brighter.

"Do you like my Jack O' Lantern?" the boy asked.

"My name is Gwen, and yes, I do like your Jack O' Lantern," Gwen answered. She pointed to the large grinning pumpkin on the porch and laughed.

The boy pulled back shyly. Gwen could see his cheeks turning red even in the fading light.

"Wait, don't go! I'm sorry!" Gwen pleaded with the boy. "What's your name?"

"Timmy," he replied.

"Did you carve that pumpkin yourself?"

Timmy knelt on the porch and ran his fingers over the pumpkin's eyes and mouth. The candle inside flickered, and Timmy motioned for Gwen to come into the yard.

Gwen reluctantly reached for the gate. Her hand grabbed the splintered wooden gate and opened the portal to another world. The yard felt foreign to Gwen. She'd been in the Veil for longer than she could remember, and she struggled to grasp the memories swirling in her mind. Gwen didn't breathe, but she pretended to hold her breath as she stepped over the gate's threshold into the yard.

"Where do you live, Gwen?" Timmy asked.

"I live over on Green Street out past the church."

"The only thing out there is the graveyard," Timmy stated. His voice wavered. Gwen heard the fear creep into Timmy's speech. She didn't like the idea of him being afraid of her. She didn't want to scare or hurt him.

"I won't hurt you," Gwen said. She flashed a shy smile and reached out for Timmy's hand.

"I don't think you could hurt me any more than my daddy," Timmy sighed. He took Gwen's hand and squeezed it. "You feel cold."

Gwen pulled her hand back and turned her head. "I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking. My momma says I shouldn't talk to people I don't know."

"My momma tries to keep me inside the house. When my daddy isn't home, she doesn't want me talking to other people."

Gwen felt the sadness rolling off the boy like waves on the beach. Each wave hit her, threatening to pull her down into his depths. "Did you carve the Jack O' Lantern yourself?" Gwen asked, pointing to the grinning pumpkin on the porch.

"I did him all by myself," Timmy boasted. His chest puffed out in a proud gesture, and his face beamed in pride.

"I like him very much. The pumpkin reminds me of when me and my mom would carve Jack O' Lanterns for Halloween," Gwen said.

"Mom and Dad won't help me; I have to do them all myself. I always have to steal the pumpkins from Mr. Wade's farm," Timmy explained.

Gwen cocked her head to the side and studied the crooked smile and large triangle eyes carefully. "He is outstanding."

"Thanks?"

"You don't get told nice things very often, do you?" Gwen asked.

Timmy stood in silence and could only manage to squeeze Gwen's hand lightly. "No," Timmy said. His head lowered, and his eyes stared at the ground.

"Timmy, will you light a candle for me in a pumpkin every Halloween?" Gwen asked.

Timmy's head perked up, and he finally smiled again. "I can do that for you!" he said and bounded back up the porch and into the house.

After a few moments, he returned and knelt beside the Jack O' Lantern on the top step. Timmy carefully removed the lid from the pumpkin's top and blew out the candle inside. The bright Jack O' Lantern dimmed and darkened. Smoke spilled out from the mouth and eyes while Timmy struck a match and gently touched it to the wick. A new flame sprang to life, and the pumpkin's face beamed its bright light again.

"Is that better?" Timmy called out from the porch.

"Yes, thank you, Timmy! I hope you'll light one for me every year! I'll be back to check every Halloween!" Gwen called back.

Something crashed in the house, and Timmy flinched. "Timmy, get your ass back in this house, now!" a voice boomed from inside.

"Yes, Dad," Timmy answered. He turned back and gave a small quick wave to Gwen before disappearing back into the house. This time, the lights behind the curtains went dark, and Gwen thought she heard Timmy crying.

Gwen knew nobody else could see her, so she sat on the sidewalk until the sun started to rise. Gwen had to know Timmy would be okay. Once she didn't hear anything anymore, she stood up and took off back to her resting place beyond the Veil. Gwen hoped Timmy would keep his promise to her.

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Gwen returned to Timmy's house for the next three years and saw the pumpkin smiling brightly at her. Timmy didn't come outside anymore, but she could see him stalking behind the curtains of the upstairs window, making sure she'd stop by to see the lights for her.

It wasn't until the fourth year when Gwen returned on Halloween that a Jack O' Lantern wasn't on the porch when she arrived. Boards covered the windows, and nothing moved around the house. The old peeling paint Gwen remembered from before appeared in even worse shape.

"Sorry, Gwen," a voice said behind Gwen.

Gwen turned to see Timmy smiling behind her. He looked older than her now, and he still wore his big smile.

"Timmy?" Gwen asked. Fear crept into her thoughts, and she wanted to run off and cry.

"I'm sorry I didn't get to light one for you this year," Timmy apologized.

"It's okay, but it was nice to have someone remember me on Halloween," Gwen said, taking Timmy's hand. "Did it hurt?"

"Yes, it hurt a lot," Timmy softly replied. "I thought they loved me."

Gwen reached out to Timmy and wiped a tear from his cheek.

"How can you do that?" Timmy asked.

"It's the night when the Veil and the living world share thin boundaries. It's why we can walk around like living kids again on Halloween," Gwen explained.

"Do I have to go with you? I don't know if I'm ready," Timmy said.

"It comes for us all eventually. I've been waiting for what happened to you to happen. Bringing you comfort at the end of your journey is my job."

"But you're my age."

"Timmy, I've visited you every Halloween for years, knowing each one could have been your last," Gwen said.

"Why did he do it?"

"Some people can't help themselves in the rages of being human. Our flesh is weak, but our souls are beautiful things. Now, you can rest without fear or pain, and we can come back every Halloween to be kids again," Gwen said.

"Will someone light one for us, Gwen?" Timmy asked.

"Hopefully, someone will light a Jack O' Lantern in memory of us," Gwen replied.

Together, Gwen and Timmy left the pain of living behind. Gwen did her duty and led Timmy into the Veil, hoping someone would ignite memory's flame for them on Halloween each year.

#### About the Author:

Brent Abell resides in Southern Indiana with his wife and Drake the Puggle. Brent enjoys anything horror related. In his writing career, he's had stories featured in over 30 publications, and novels: *Southern Devils*, *Southern Devils: Reconstruction of the Dead*, *In Memoriam*, *The Calling*, *Phoenix Protocol*, *Dying Days: Death Sentence*, *Dying Days: Zealot*, *Death Inc.*, and *Wicked Tales for Wicked People* are available now.

Website: [Brent Abell](#)

Facebook: [Our Darkest Fears: The Fiction of Brent Abell](#)

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#### Heavier than Oceans and Seas | *Marisca Pichette*

He handed it to me, rim encrusted with salt.

"Drink," he said. "Drink, and you'll never sink."

His face drifted before me, tentacles splayed.

I thought about dropping it. Spilling the brine between us to disperse into the shadows of the cave. Swimming away from here, from him. Letting the currents displace my tears.

A tentacle encircled my wrist. My fingers went cold as the cup neared my lips.

"Drink."

Sharper than the sea, brine stung. I swallowed, expecting salt—tasting blood. I dropped the cup then, convulsing as I dried from the inside out.

He was right.

I float.

#### About the Author:

Marisca Pichette lives on the edge of the woods, where she spends her time collecting berries and bones. More of her work appears in *Strange Horizons*, *PseudoPod*, and *Apparition Lit*, among others. Her speculative poetry collection, *Rivers in Your Skin*, *Sirens in Your Hair*, is forthcoming from Android Press in Spring 2023.

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Twitter: [@MariscaPichette](#)







"I heard he gives out lotto tickets," Keith breathlessly informed his fellow trick-or-treaters. "You know, like what my mom buys at the grocery store." He mimed rubbing off the thin coating of silvery film on a lotto ticket in his open palm. "You can win an instant prize!"

Beasley cocked an eyebrow at this information. "Like what?" She put her hands on her hips, a stance her own mother took when she was skeptical. "A bag of chips? A loaf of bread?" She began to giggle. "A couple of beeeers?" The other two trick-or-treaters with them snickered behind their candy-sticky hands at Beasley's comments.

Keith crossed his arms. Why was Beasley always such know-it-all? "Like money." He looked away, remembering his mother's excuses for buying lotto tickets. "You know, like five or ten dollars." *Sometimes as much as twenty-five dollars!* His mother had once exclaimed. *Takes money to make money*, she often said to him when she bought the tickets. But she rarely won anything, and certainly not the holy grail of twenty-five dollars. Usually she won just enough money to buy another lotto ticket, or two. Which is what she always did. Dad said she was throwing away his hard earned money, one dollar at a time.

If Mr. Mumford handed out lotto tickets instead of candy, maybe Keith could get one with that twenty-five dollar prize hidden beneath the thin smear of that silver waxy stuff. He daydreamed he'd proudly give it to his mother, and she'd finally be happy! So happy that she would bake him a tray of chocolate chip cookies to show her gratitude, or maybe take him and his friends to play miniature golf next weekend, or maybe let him stay up late to watch—

"Okay, children," Craig said loudly, abruptly interrupting Keith's daydream. Craig was the teenager charged with herding his little sister Beasley and her small crew of trick-or-treaters around the neighborhood. He directed them toward the sidewalk leading to Mumford's front door. On one side of the sidewalk, Mumford had created a cheesy graveyard using Styrofoam tombstones with names on them like 'Dustin D. Wynd', 'Bea Wright Back', and 'Your Name Here', complete with several plastic skeletons that appeared to climb out of the ground. In the yard on the other side of the walkway, Mumford had positioned a mannequin dressed as the grim reaper—hooded black robe obscuring its face, a prop plastic sickle in one hand, the other hand pointing to the front door. A front door decorated with gobs of filmy fake spider web, complete with dozens of tiny plastic spiders embedded in it. Leering plastic jack-o-lanterns sat on either side of the door, with flickering LED lights behind their evil gap-toothed grins. A dull orange-tinted porch light cast long thin shadows of everyone and everything under its sickly beam.

Craig put his hands on Keith's shoulders and gently shoved him towards the doorbell. "Let's get going, Captain America." Craig eyed the four costumed kids before him: A small witch with her face painted a seasick green, wearing a pointy black hat, and holding a crooked twig she called a wand; a scary clown wearing a voluminous yellow suit splattered with fake blood (*what was with kids these days?* Craig grouched to himself), holding a pillowcase for his candy haul in one hand and a plastic butcher knife in the other; Captain America in his mass-produced party supply store costume; and his own annoying little sister Beasley dressed in tiers of pale blue nylon ruffles as some random Disney princess. *All four ankle biters present and accounted for*, he said to himself. His parents had drilled into him that he had to keep count of each and every kid, so no one wandered off and got lost—or worse.

Keith pressed the button and a single discordant electronic tone cried out behind the closed front door. From somewhere deep inside the house an adult voice croaked, "Coming!"

With a dramatic gesture worthy of an old-school horror movie, Mr. Mumford threw open the front door accompanied by a clap of pre-recorded thunder. All the kids gasped and took a step back, almost in unison. Craig rolled his eyes with exaggerated boredom; *youngsters are so easily spooked*, he told himself. *Glad I'm beyond that stage.*

Mr. Mumford was tall and thin, but looked taller and thinner dressed in his tight-fitting black suit. His stringy white hair was combed back across his head, and slicked down, emphasizing the sharply angular shape of his skull. He looked like the director of a funeral parlor, if the funeral parlor was situated in a town of nightmares.

"Welcome, children," Mr. Mumford stage-whispered, his voice dry as the autumn leaves skittering across the darkening street behind them. As the kids yelled out their chant of "Trick-or-treat, smell my feet..." Keith studied Mr. Mumford. The old guy wasn't holding anything to offer the kids. No bowl of prepackaged candies; no plate of plastic wrapped brownies or cookies; no offerings of toothbrushes or raisins (Keith personally hated it when self-righteous grown-ups attempted to take the fun out of this traditionally candy-themed holiday). Maybe Mumford *did* hand out lotto tickets.

With one long stick-like finger, Mr. Mumford theatrically counted aloud the number of trick-or-treaters before him. "Ah, well," he sighed. The corners of his very red lips drew down. "Only four in total? How about you, Mr. No-Costume Teenage Chaperon, lurking in the back? Do you include yourself in this ritual of congenial begging?"

Craig waved the question away. "Nah." *I am way too old for this kid stuff*, he almost said. For once he had the presence of mind to understand that comment would hurt the younger kids' feelings. He didn't want to be a bully. Craig straightened his back at the thought. He was growing up, he supposed.

The trick-or-treaters shifted impatiently, their costumes rustling like tree leaves shaking in a chill autumnal wind. *Is this creaky old man going to hand out goodies, or not?* wondered each and every one of them. Beasley bit her lip to keep herself from complaining aloud, but there were so many houses to visit before curfew! Mr. Mumford grinned at their restlessness. Still standing in place, he leaned over sideways, his right hand reaching for some unknown thing behind the door frame. The trick-or-treaters could hear the scratchy sound of papers rustling. Mentally, Keith crossed his fingers and hoped: *Maybe weird old Mr. Mumford was reaching for a handful of lotto tickets after all!*

Mumford pulled his hand back, and swiftly covered it with his other hand. He held a mystery. The kids forced smiles, waiting for this little drama to conclude. Beasley leaned over to Keith and whispered in his ear: "Bet there's no candy—or tickets." Keith looked at her sideways and sighed; she was probably right. "And, Captain America," Beasley continued, "I bet there's nothing but air in his bony hands."

"*Au contraire, ma petite princesse*," Mr. Mumford said with a slight melody in his words. His head swayed ever so slightly as he gave Beasley a stare like a cobra hypnotizing a little field mouse. She clenched her lips together. Mumford then held forth his hands, and with a flourish, opened them.

"Aw, there's nothing there!" the evil clown whined through his greasepainted over-large mouth. "What a waste of time."

Mr. Mumford coughed once in their general direction, neglecting to cover his mouth. Minuscule globules of spittle flew across his unsuspecting targets, landing in their hair, on their costumes, on their faces. Under the dull orange porch light, the tiny specks of spittle glittered ominously like ice crystals dusted on the children.

The little witch gave Mr. Mumford the stink-eye. "Ew! You're disgusting!" She wiped her face, smearing her green face paint. "What a rotten joke to play."

Mr. Mumford threw his head back, as if to laugh. He sneezed across their heads, instead.

Beasley gave Mr. Mumford the look her mother gave her when she brought home a less than stellar report card. "How could you?" she chided the strange man. "Don't you know how you're supposed to celebrate Halloween?" She grabbed the hem of her voluminous costume and turned on her sneakered heel. "By handing out candy to kids! That's how," Beasley yelled over her shoulder. She then marched up to her older brother and hissed, "Mumford's *such* a creep."

"Yeah, I know," he said sympathetically. "C'mon, kids, let's move along." *Hope the next house will make up for this disappointment*, he said to himself. Downhearted, his small group obeyed; that is, except for Captain America.

Keith stubbornly remained on the porch after the others began to walk away.

"I heard you handed out lotto tickets," he said to Mr. Mumford. The boy's tone was angry. "The older kids call you Mister Scratch. You know, like 'scratch off to win.' Right? Like scratch the lotto ticket to win a prize."

"They call me 'Mister Scratch'? Really?" Here Mumford guffawed, so hard he threw himself into a coughing spasm. He cleared his throat and continued. "Child, that was my name when I lived in New England, these many, many years ago." The black-out curtains behind Mumford's eyes parted, revealing an eerie, soft green light that wavered in the dark room of his skull. "You know, back there, back then, it was an old nickname for the Devil." He stroked his chin with his stick-like fingers. "Quite like that name, actually. Very fitting."

Tears of frustration rose in Keith's eyes. He badly wanted to get a lucky lotto ticket, and give his winnings to his mother. He was determined to be the one to make her happy, since it was evident his dad couldn't. "How can you make like you're into Halloween—with all these decorations and your creepy funeral-parlor costume—and not give out *anything*?"

"Oh, I give out lots of things," Mr. Mumford said through a smile that more resembled a death's head grimace. He reached out and very gently laid his unnaturally cool palm on Keith's cheek. Before the boy could pull his face away, Mumford swiftly dragged a sharp, ragged fingernail across Keith's cheek, leaving the thin red line of a scratch on his face. "You'd be surprised what I bestow." Keith jerked his head back. What an absolute weirdo!

"C'mon, Keith!" Craig yelled from the sidewalk; the teenager made a point of looking at the time on his phone. The illumination from his screen cast unsettling shadows across his features, much like when kids would hold flashlights under their chins as they told each other ghost stories at sleepovers. Craig waved at Keith impatiently. "We've got a ton of other houses to hit before we meet our parents at St. Stephen's Halloween Carnival." Craig went on, "If we're late, they'll worry, and if they get too worried, I'll get grounded right then and there and *that* means no carnival dance for me." Craig raised his voice. "So get a move on!"

"Alright already! I'm coming!" Keith shouted, as he walked backwards from the front porch, never taking his eyes

off Mr. Mumford. Mr. Mumford who now stood with his hands clasped over his heart and his head tilted to one side like a curious cat eyeing a wounded baby bird. “Enjoy your gift,” he said in a monotone, as he closed his front door. Impossibly, the door shut with a scraping sound, like rough stone against rough stone, then a final heavy, echoing thud, raising the hairs on the back of Keith’s neck.

Rejoining his peers, Keith began to feel warm and itchy. His cheek ached where Mr. Mumford scratched him. When he rubbed his cheek, his fingers came away with a smear of blood on them. Though the evening was cool, Keith began to sweat beneath his costume. His stomach clenched and gurgled. Coming up to the next house, Keith tapped Beasley on her shoulder, leaving a small smudge of blood on her baby-blue princess costume. He wanted to tell her about his weird conversation with Mr. Mumford, about the old man scratching his cheek and making him bleed, but instead of speaking, as he had intended—he wheezed and coughed once on her face.

### **In Town for Halloween Night Only! | *Hillary Lyon***

The off-brand circus traveled across the back country, setting up tents and booths in the blink of an eye. Poorly lit, it reeked of stale popcorn, beer, and vomit. Nevertheless, the locals flooded in, desperate for a distraction.

Lurid LaWanda sold tickets at the door for the adults-only sideshow. She collected stacks of green that would carry the performers through the next year. She also accepted tokens in place of cash; like bottles of booze, vials of poison, packets of blood—anything, really, the performers could use to ease their off-season boredom. Inside the tattered tent, the panicked yokels screamed.

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

For 20 years, Hillary Lyon served as senior editor for Subsynchronous Press. She's lived in France, Brazil, Canada, and several states in the U.S. In the last year, her stories have appeared in multiple print and online publications. When not writing, she creates illustrations for pulp and horror zines, often using family members as victims. She means models.

**Blog:** [Hillary Lyon](#)

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### **Pit | *JB Corso***

You lay naked, shaking on the freezing stone floor. The sun’s rays barely enter through your window at this time of year. Without fresh hay, you’ve been reduced to throwing your waste into the large pit that encompasses half the room. The guards haven’t been to your dungeon cell in days. You’ve sustained yourself with trickling foul streams dripping down from the low ceiling. Long claws grab onto the pit’s edge. A massive, flattened head emerges across from you. It’s jaw descends. An extended tongue encircles your skeletal frame and tenderizes you across the ground into its awaiting mouth.

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

JB Corso is a health care professional who has worked with the mentally ill and geriatric populations for the last 20 years. He appreciates time with his children, writing, and pondering existential dread. He's a combat arms veteran who deployed as an international peacekeeper. He lives with his significant other and enjoys afternoon drives listening to music.

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

The

# BURY Box



LEE ANDREW FORMAN

*Available on Amazon*

"Could you please pass the... Yellow?"

Sherry paused mid-crunch. She looked down at her spoonful of cereal. She glanced over at the milk near her bowl. She flinched as her brother's finger pierced her line of sight. She swallowed the cereal in her mouth and said, "Yellow?"

"Milk. I meant the milk." Her brother stood up from his chair and snatched the milk container.

"Why did you say, yellow?"

Sherry's father poured a cup of coffee nearby. "Everyone's phone update this morning?" He drank his coffee, satisfied with its flavor. "It was some security update. It made the screen flash really bright."

"My phone's broken." Sherry finished her breakfast and carried the bowl and spoon over to the sink.

"You need a new phone, Sherry."

"I know, Dad. I just don't have the money right now."

"I'll lay it out, Sherry."

"Can I get a new computer?"

"No one is talking to you, Ethan." Sherry washed and dried the bowl and spoon. "Alright. I'll get a new phone this week."

"How about yellow? I mean tomorrow." Sherry looked at her father. "I'm not sure why I said the word, yellow."

"It's contagious." Ethan walked away from the table.

"Hey."

"What?"

"Your breakfast." Sherry pointed at his cereal bowl and spoon.

"You're doing the dishes. Could you put the milk away?"

"Tomorrow," Sherry's father said before finishing his coffee. "Strange. Anyway, you off today?"

"Yeah. Holiday." Sherry grabbed Ethan's cereal bowl and spoon off the table. She rinsed the bowl and spoon and then dried them. "Are you doing anything today?"

"Just some errands around town, if you want to keep me company."

"Okay. Mom still asleep?"

"No. She's right there." Sherry's father greeted her mother as she walked into the kitchen. "Good morning." He kissed her on the cheek.

"Morning. It looks like sunshine and yellow outside."

"Okay. What's with the word, yellow?" Sherry looked at her parents. Her parents looked back at her confused. "Seriously, why is everyone saying the word, yellow?"

"YOLO?"

"No, Mom. Yellow."

"I don't know what you mean. All I said was that it looks like sunshine and roses outside, but it is almost summer."

"That's not what you said, Mom."

"Sherry, give your mother a break. She hasn't had her coffee yet, and give me a few minutes. Then, we can head out. Okay?"

"Okay, Dad." Sherry eyed the coffee nearby, but she was a tea drinker. "Yellow," she muttered under her breath.

"YOLO?"

"Have your coffee, Mom." Sherry patted her on the arm.

Sherry stepped outside. It was very warm, and the sunshine felt great on her skin. She eyed the roses near the front door. She always wanted to pick one, but the last time she did that, her mother screamed at her. That still didn't stop her from smelling a rose.

"Morning." Her next-door neighbor waved over the fence.

"Morning." Sherry watched him drag a garbage bin towards the end of the driveway. "Beautiful today, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but it's gonna be a hot summer. Probably lots of thunder yellow." He paused after saying that. "Storms," he added. "A lot of thunderstorms." He walked away, shaking his head.

"Jesus, it is contagious."

"What is?" Sherry's father stepped outside. "Want to drive the new car?"

"Not today." Sherry looked over at the new car. It was too big for her, and when she did sit in the driver's seat, her feet barely touched the pedals. "Maybe, another time, so where are we going?"

"Supermarket. Pharmacy. Hardware Store. I need some nails and a new hammer." Her father got into the car. "You really need a new phone."

"I know. We spoke about this earlier."

"We did? I don't remember, but you need that update."

"Yeah, Dad. I'm sure the new phone will already be updated. What was it anyway?"

"What was what," her father asked.

"The update," Sherry said.

"I'm not sure, but the screen was really bright. Okay. Off we go to the supermarket first."

Sherry followed her father up and down the aisles. Every time he put too much of the sweets in the wagon, she would make a comment, and he would put the item back. She knew the next time that she was not with him, he would sneak it back into the wagon. He and her brother ate too much of that crap, and they were tired of her reminding them of that. But she would still remind them.

"How's work going?"

Sherry followed her father over to the checkout lane. "Work's work."

"Still issues with the new boss?"

"It is what it is," Sherry said.

"I hate that expression," her father replied.

Sherry moved past her father to the end of the conveyor belt. She bagged the items and placed them into the wagon. Her father waited nearby for the total amount and reached into his wallet.

"That will be two hundred and yellow." The cashier blinked at her last word. "Fifty. Fifty cents. Two hundred and fifty cents."

"What is with people today?" Sherry shook her head and watched the cashier hand her father the receipt. "Why is everyone saying the word, yellow?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You said it. Mom said it. Ethan said it. Our neighbor, and now the cashier. It's like a pandemic."

"That's not funny. We just got over the pandemic," her father snapped at her.

"Sorry, Dad."

"Forget it. We survived. That's it. If only it took over sooner."

"What? What took over sooner?"

"Come on. We have to go to the pharmacy next." Her father got into the car.

"Dad?" Sherry waited until he looked at her. "What's going on?"

"We're going to the pharmacy. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Are you?"

"Yeah. You just need that update," and her father pulled out of the parking spot.

Sherry sat in the car as her father went into the pharmacy. Maybe, it was her imagination. Maybe, today was one of those weird days, where people repeated the same word. Still, something felt off, and a car pulled up near Sherry. She looked over to see a woman step outside, and she turned toward her kids in the back. And she said, "Now, you both stay in the car until I get back, and if you're good, I'll get you both a candy yellow."

The kids in the back burst out laughing. "Yellow," they said in sync.

"Bar," their mother yelled back at them. "I said candy bar."

"You said, yellow," one boy replied.

The woman glanced over at Sherry. "Whatever," and she walked away.

"Yellow," the kids in the back sang. "Yellow." It was starting to annoy Sherry. "Yellow," and Sherry's hands clenched into fists.

"Fucking kids," she muttered.



"What was that?" Sherry's father got into the car.

"Nothing. Annoying brats. Get what you needed?"

"Yell... Yes. One stop left." He noticed the look on Sherry's face. "What?"

"Nothing." Sherry looked over at the kids nearby. They stopped singing, but now they were looking at her.

And she did not like the looks on their faces.

"How about a new cell phone today? We could go now."

"Not today, Dad." Sherry realized that he was staring at her. "Okay?"

"Okay." Her father revved up the ignition. "Okay," he repeated.

"Okay." Sherry sunk back into her seat. Something was wrong. She knew it, but what the hell happened?

The hardware store was small. Her father was good friends with the owner. They greeted one another, and they laughed at a little joke. But Sherry did not feel like laughing. She just wanted to go home, and she followed the two men down an aisle, where the hammer and nails were kept.

"How do you like this weather," her father asked the owner.

"I actually prefer the winter," the owner replied.

"Yeah, so you could plow my driveway."

"Yeah, well, that was February. Winter died fast. Spring is going. It's going to be one hell of a hot yellow. Summer. One hell of a hot summer, and I'm going to hate every minute of it." He looked over at Sherry. "What?"

"Nothing." Sherry sighed.

"Her phone broke," Sherry's father said. "She didn't get the update."

"Well, you need to fix that, my friend." He checked his watch. "It's almost time." He clapped his hands together. "I can't wait."

"Me neither." Sherry's father smiled and shook the owner's hand. "See you later."

"Dad? Almost time for what?"

"See you later, Sherry." The look on the owner's face made her pause. "Get that update. Okay?"

"Okay," but Sherry did not like how he was looking at her. "Right on it." She hurried outside.

"Want that new phone now? We could go, and I'll pay for it."

"No, Dad." Sherry got into the car. "Dad, almost time for what?"

"We have to hurry. It's going to happen soon." Sherry's father flew out of the parking lot.

"Dad, take it easy. Don't speed. You never speed."

"Almost time." Her father tapped his fingers along the steering wheel. "Almost time," he repeated.

"Dad, what about the groceries in the back?"

"You can take care of that since you didn't get the update. Your mother, brother and I need to be in front of the television set."

Sherry almost didn't recognize the man driving the car. He looked at her as if she were a stranger to him. She touched his arm, but he pulled away from her. She turned her focus onto the road. Everyone was in a hurry. They were heading back home. It was almost time, but almost time for what?

"Put the groceries away," her father ordered as he pulled into the driveway. He handed her the car keys. "Lock the car when you're done."

"Dad?"

Sherry's father hurried into the house. Her mother held the door open for him. She looked over at Sherry. It was the same look as her father. She didn't recognize her, and Sherry cringed. Something was wrong, but she did as her father requested. She brought the groceries inside and put them away.

Sherry was about to go outside and lock up the car when she heard the news broadcast. "In Breaking News today, all world leaders have agreed to step down, relinquishing their control to the A One Network," the reporter stated. "The A One Network will assume control immediately. There is nothing to fear. Under the Network's watchful eye, we will be cared for. There will be no more crime. No hunger. No violence. Peace and Unity. Finally."

"Peace and Unity," Sherry's father, mother and brother repeated together. "The A One Network is All, and we are Everyone."

"Dad? Mom?" Sherry stepped into the room as they turned away from the television set. "Ethan? What's going on? Why are all the world leaders stepping down? What is the A One Network?"

"The A One Network is All," Sherry's mother said.

"And we are Everyone," Ethan replied.

"No more war. No more hate. No more violence." Sherry's father approached her, grabbing her by the arm. "We are Everyone," he said.

"Dad, you're hurting my arm."

"It's okay, Sherry." He smiled at her, a cold smile that sent a shiver down her spine. "You just need the update, and then you'll understand." He took the car keys out of her hand. "Let's go," and he led her to the front door.

"Go? Go where?"

"To get your new phone, honey." Sherry's mother smiled at her. It was the same smile as her father's.

"Once you have your phone, you will have your purpose."

"Purpose?"

"Dad, you need to hurry before she becomes a threat," Ethan said.

"Threat?"

"Let's go." Sherry's father forced her outside.

Sherry saw her neighbor standing outside near the fence. "Help! Help me," she screamed at him.

"Sherry." She was relieved that the neighbor recognized her. "It's okay. It'll be okay." He looked at Sherry's father. "She needs that update." His words cut through her.

"Dad, please," she begged him.

Sherry's father forced her into the car. "Sherry, I don't want you to die," he said. "But if you don't have that update, then I will have to call the police, and they will eliminate you. Do you understand?" Sherry slowly nodded. "No, Sherry. I need to hear you say it."

"I want the update," Sherry whispered.

"That's my girl." Sherry's father got into the vehicle.

Sherry looked at her brother and mother, who stood on the porch. They did not smile. They did not wave. They just stared at her like her next-door neighbor, but it would be okay. She would be one of them soon. "It's not all sunshine and yellow," she said.

### 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*.

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### Come Out Sweetie | JB Corso

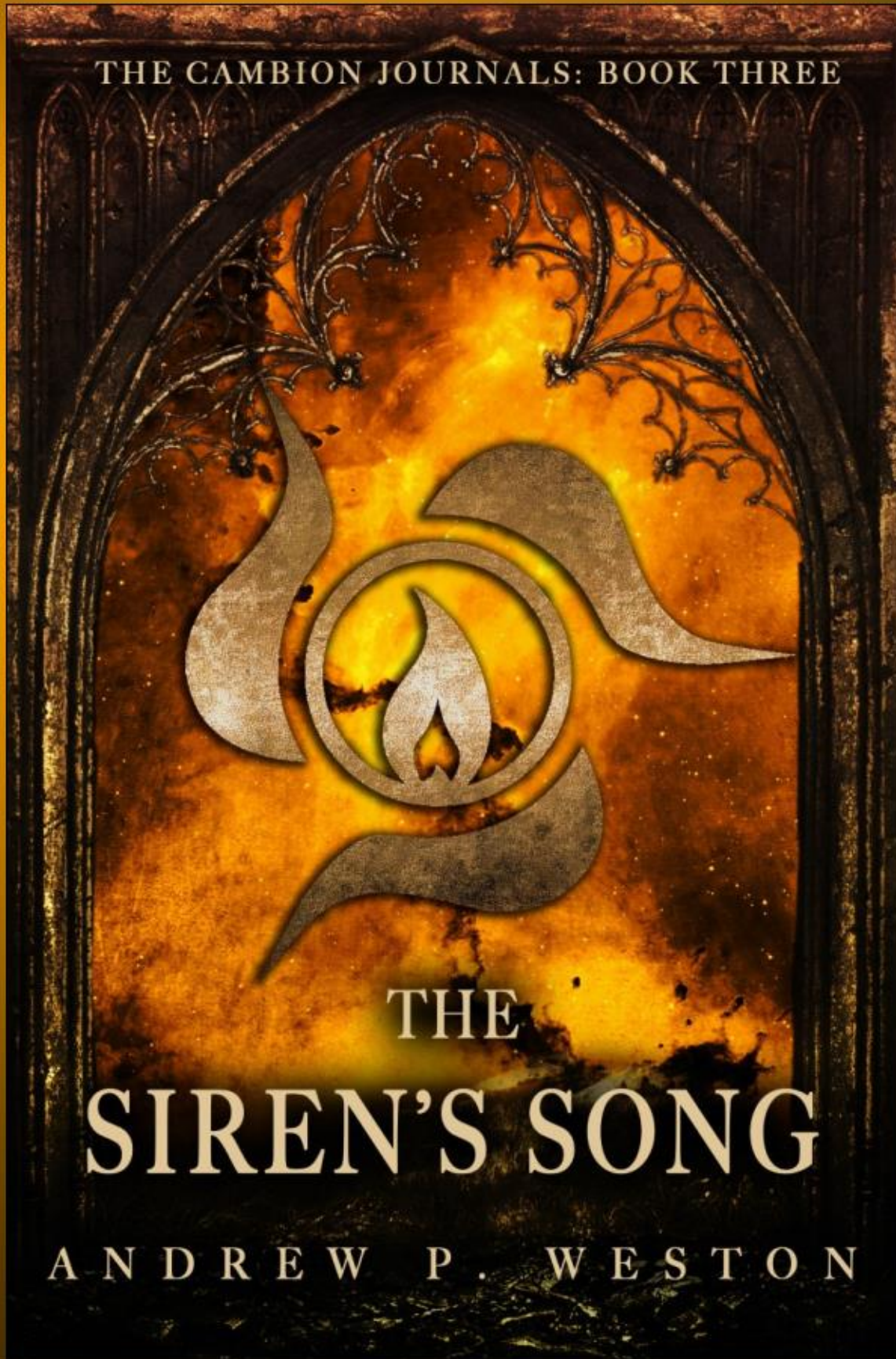
*It can't hurt me. It can't hurt me.* You rock back and forth in the bathtub with the shower curtain drawn closed as placebo armor. Light tapping continues against the locked door. "Helen, come out sweetie." You shiver at those repeated words haunting the last several days. Time without food, sleep or hope have catastrophically damaged your psyche. You would scream back at the creature mimicking your dead sister's voice if you had any energy left. You crawl out of the tub towards the door. Turning the handle releases the button lock. You gaze upward at the maggot dripping smile.

### About the Author:

JB Corso is a health care professional who has worked with the mentally ill and geriatric populations for the last 20 years. He appreciates time with his children, writing, and pondering existential dread. He's a combat arms veteran who deployed as an international peacekeeper. He lives with his significant other and enjoys afternoon drives listening to music.

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

*An isidious new threat has emerged!*



**AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!**

The colony of rats continued to gnaw away at the dried-out, shrunken pieces of flesh that held the corpse of Morana together. It was the evening of October the thirty first 2021, and all lay still and deathly quiet down below in the inner sanctum of the dilapidated and shattered remains of the family sarcophagus. All except for the hordes of rats that scurried away loudly, screeching in protest at the sudden movement of her blackened and mouldy remains. The pile of bones underpinning them instantly sprang to life in the most grotesque fashion, clanking noisily as she heaved and writhed whilst rising up through the darkness and entanglement of the many damp and overgrown vines. She was now free again, at last the wait was over after lying patiently—a full year for this moment. She could finally choose a fresh victim. *I certainly hope they're much better than the last ones they were so skinny devoid of any flesh at all, and were really tough and sinewy.*

\*\*\*

On the other side of town, the party was in full swing. Zachary, Lucas, Nathan, Anika and Bella had all been invited to their friend Alexa's Halloween party as her parents had gone out for the evening leaving Alexa to her own devices. The rest of her friends from high school were there too, including some of the local gate crashers. After fighting their way through the hordes of vampires, Witches, Werewolves and Ghouls, all five made their way to the kitchen to sample the many different kinds of alcohol and food on offer. However, after an hour of banter with fellow class mates and consuming more than their fair share, boredom got the better of them.

"I've got a better idea than just stopping the night here, the party's okay, *but it's what most do on Halloween, I'm bored,*" Zachary slurred in protest swaying from side to side.

"Where do you suggest Zach?" Nathan drunkenly spluttered whilst gulping down a large can of beer.

"How about we *all* go to the old abandoned manor house on Dead End Lane?" He answered enthusiastically.

"*Sure!* I'll come Zach. *Isn't* that the place where a crazy old woman called Morana once lived centuries ago? I remember hearing stories about her. People would go and visit her, but after a while, they'd mysteriously disappear. Rumours began to spread around the neighbourhood and she was eventually put on trial accused of witchcraft and all sorts of mischief. She was burned at the stake screaming in agony whilst still protesting her innocence. Hands up who else is in favour of paying Morana a visit tonight?" Nathan concluded with his usual big dare-devil grin.

"*Count me in, it sounds like a great idea!*" Lucas exclaimed eagerly, throwing both hands up and waving them in the air.

"How about you two?" Zachary turned to Bella and Anika.

"What do you think Bella? Anika asked, "I'm not really all that keen on the idea myself but I'll go if you fancy going."

"No, it's certainly *not* my idea of fun spending the night in a dark damp creepy old abandoned house, searching for God knows what. I'll stick with the party, if you don't mind." Bella answered.

"Count me out too in that case, that place is just way too eerie for me any night of the year, but on the 31st of October of all nights? *No way!*" Anika concluded.

"Okay, guess it's just the three of us then, thought the girls would be too scared," Zach laughed whilst grabbing a few more beers from the kitchen table as he headed out the door with Lucas and Nathan eagerly following.

"No, we're not scared, we just don't fancy being dragged out to an old derelict house on the outskirts of town at this hour on a freezing cold Halloween night. Besides you don't know who's in there, and I'm not talking about Morana," Anika joked.

\*\*\*

It was almost midnight as Zach's battered old pickup slowly came to a halt outside the sprawling and dilapidated manor house. Half its roof had collapsed, which was further testimony to the appalling neglect it had suffered over the many years. Partially hidden by large overgrown trees with gnarled branches, it was a sinister and intimidating sight. It stood eerily peering down upon the three unwary intruders that were stumbling tipsily up the winding, overgrown path whilst waving their flashlights in all directions. Tendrils of damp rose up from the earth all around them like vengeful spirits.

"I feel the house is watching us, or something within it is. It's creepy, I don't like it. Let's get the hell out of here while we still can!" Lucas shouted in a slurred voice casting a nervous glance in the direction of the house.

"You're not frightened of going into an old house, are you? Anyway, I thought you wanted to come along. You said yourself it was a great idea," Zach retorted.

"Sure, it seemed like a great idea at first. But given the reputation that this place has got, I'm not so sure now."



*"Oh come on! Don't be such a chicken, Lucas it'll be fun," Nathan retorted.*

*"I'm not a chicken, it's just that it looks so, so...." Lucas's voice trailed off, not able to find quite the right word.*

*"So forbidding, or maybe even darned creepy," Nathan chuckled in his attempt to finish Lucas's sentence for him.*

Both Zach and Nathan began laughing uncontrollably, shouting, *"CHICKEN! CHICKEN!"* whilst circling Lucas and making loud clucking noises.

*"ALRIGHT! I'LL prove to the pair of you that I'm no chicken by going in first,"* he shot back indignantly, stumbling and almost falling.

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Lucas bounded on unsteadily in front of them up the rugged path swinging his arms in the air uncontrollably and waving his flashlight at the once elegantly carved wooden door that was now rotted and covered in moss. He left his two tipsy companions behind as he stumbled over the eerie threshold and melted into the shadowy darkness within.

*"I bet your bottom dollar he won't last in there. Any minute now, he'll dash out screaming his head off,"* Zach giggled as he took another swig of his beer.

*"I didn't think he'd go in, even though he was over enthusiastic about the idea of coming. I expected him to let us go first while he waited in the pickup,"* Nathan replied in a rather sceptical tone as they both drunkenly fell about laughing loudly. The dampness and sharp chill of the night air only seemed to get more pronounced whilst waiting impatiently in the eerie silence for their friend to return.

*"God! It's freezing out here, where the hell has he got to?"*

*"I don't know, all I know is, it's getting colder by the second, I swear it's going to snow,"* Zach replied. They waited whilst listening intently with pounding hearts for Lucas to return, but to no avail. There was no indication that he'd even been there. All that could be heard was the distant sound of what appeared to be a large dog, which had begun to bark and howl into the night. Slowly, they trudged the long and winding path towards the front door which was now partly open. They stopped and shone their flashlights into the pitch-black, eerie void which was filled with shadows. It loomed ominously before them as they cautiously shuffled towards it. They both hesitated before venturing in.

Zach shouted out loudly, *"Hey, Lucas! Buddy, where are you? Say something! At least tell us where you are,"* but there was no reply from within as the first snowflakes began to slowly drift silently from the heavens.

*"COME ON LUCAS STOP PLAYING HIDE AND SEEK. THIS ISN'T FUNNY ANYMORE!"* Nathan shouted as they stepped inside, *"Okay, we're sorry that we called you a chicken."*

\*\*\*

Deep within the dark shadowy recesses of her inner sanctum, Morana lay crouched over Lucas's body as she reached into the gigantic wound she had made whilst piercing his abdomen and clawing excitedly at the bloody entrails. Ripping them out savagely, she threw her decomposed skull's head back, opening her dried cracked mouth to greedily devour the bloody heart, lungs, pancreas and finally the liver. She hungrily gorged, savouring the taste of raw human flesh and innards. They slid down her putrid gullet causing a grotesque bulge. As it travelled down into the pit of her stomach, the digestive juices got to work, slowly breaking it all down into a thick bloody soup. She would always leave the liver to the very last as it contained the most blood, which also harboured the majority of nutrients. This was her favourite delicacy. She let the slick outer coating of fluid dribble down her bony chin and the side of her mouth as she chewed into the pulpy flesh of the organ, swallowing every morsel. When she finished, she flicked her long, swollen, bumpy tongue all over her skull-like face, meticulously licking every drop up.

*"Certainly a lot more juicy than the last ones, and much sweeter and softer, too. He sure went down a treat, I'm still hungry, did he bring his friends with him I wonder?"* She thought out loud.

\*\*\*

*"Did you hear that Zach?"*

*"Sure did, it sounded like an old woman cackling and holding a conversation with herself, or someone else."*

*"Do you think it's just Lucas playing a daft prank and having us on for the hell of it, trying to get back at us?"*

*"It's possible, but the voice sounded very weird, far too croaky even for him playing a trick."*

*"Well, you know what Lucas is like at times,"* Nathan giggled.

Their powerful flashlights cut through the thick wall of darkness as they descended down the stone steps into the gloomy and ghostly crypt where the sarcophagus lay.

*"Hey Lucas, if you're down there, come out from wherever you are?"* Zach shrieked at the top of his lungs.

"He can't just have disappeared into thin air. He's got to be somewhere in here, and what about the voice we just heard?" Nathan retorted.

"*Maybe* there is someone else in here besides ourselves," replied Zach.

"Could be an old wino just trying to get out of the snow and find a place to sleep for the night, if it's not Lucas," Nathan concluded.

"Could be," Zach agreed. "Hope it's not a mugger."

"Or *it* could be the infamous Morana," Nathan joked.

"I doubt that."

\*\*\*

Having been alerted to the noise of the intruder's shouts, she quickly slithered back into the sarcophagus and quietly closed the lid. She patiently listened whilst excitedly anticipating their approach as she hid, licking her lips. A grotesque mixture of drool, blood and entrails dribbled from them as she lay in wait.

The combined beam of their flashlights alighted upon the sinister and creepy sarcophagus as they wandered silently up to it, their curiosity growing stronger with each step. They had no idea just how much danger they were in. *So, Lucas did bring me a few of his friends after all.*

"**WOW!** This looks creepy," Nathan gasped in nervous anticipation eyeing the many intricately carved stone demons and gargoyles that adorned the deeply cracked, moss covered lid.

"I wonder if Lucas is hiding inside here," Zach pondered, eyeing it up.

"I shouldn't think so, how on earth could he possibly get in? I mean, that lid looks solid and way too heavy to budge, even though there are some large cracks in it," replied Nathan.

"Hey Lucas, are you in here?" Zach joked as he knocked loudly on the sarcophagus. The sound reverberated eerily around the crypt in the darkness, disturbing the deathly silence. "Well, there's only one way to find out."

"**WHAT!** You're not thinking of opening it, are you?" Nathan retorted in horror staring at his friend, the mere thought sending shivers up and down his spine. "We don't know what could be lying in there."

"Why not?" It's the only way we're going to find out if he is in there or not. As you said, he can't just have gone up in a puff of smoke, and if he is having a laugh at us, it's the most logical place to hide—that's if he could open this thing. So come on don't just stand there help me get this lid open," Zach panted whilst heaving and straining in an effort to shift the heavy slab.

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Nathan hesitated for a moment his heart pounding, his mouth dry with fear not relishing the thought of what might be inside. Both Nathan and Zach fell backwards in a heap colliding with each other as they lay in shock amid all the shards of debris. After lying there completely spooked for a few seconds, they slowly and unsteadily got to their feet. The powerful beam of their combined flashlights cut through the thick wall of darkness as they aimed it at the sarcophagus, revealing what appeared to be a blackened skeletal arm with green to dark-bluish putrid flesh hanging from its bones sticking out over the top. Slowly it began to move revealing more of itself. The stench of death filled the freezing night air as she slowly stepped out of her sanctuary and began to advance towards the terrified friends. The stinking corpse with its blackened, shrivelled and grotesque skeletal appearance towered over them. She seemed to be silently mocking them as she eyed her two victims contemptuously through lifeless eye sockets before mercilessly tearing them both to shreds. Their blood curdling screams cutting through the freezing night air as they rose above the distant howling and barking of all the neighbourhood dogs in answer. Morana slid back into her lair to rest, contentedly lying in wait for her next unwary victims. Her hunger well satisfied until Halloween comes around once more.

#### **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.

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## Inconvenient | *Nina D’Arcangela*

Click and whirl, the soundtrack to my life. I’m to be grateful, Mother says, Father worked very hard on my new heart. It’s meant to keep me alive, but it offers no life. It ticks and clacks, and occasionally stops, but that’s why I have a winding key in my side. A bit awkward, the weight of it, the mechanical heart, not the key – that would be daft! I know I’m to be appreciative for the inconvenience, but I really would have preferred the key in my back. Dressing is awkward, standing even more so as I always lean to one side. If I’m not careful, I tip forward, making a spectacle of myself. Father says it embarrasses him when I fall, but what am I to do? I asked for a crutch, but Mother doesn’t want a cripple, she says the ladies at the club would shun her if I gimped around like a palsy victim. It would be a blight on our good name if I were to need sticks to walk. So instead, I stumble.

The gentlemen at the club are kind. As Mother lunches with the others, frilly napkins and finger sandwiches that would leave even me hungry, the waiters watch and catch me if I begin to list. Very kind, that. But I’d rather walk, and run, and play like a normal boy and girl. Oh, did I not mention that beyond a failing heart, I was also born a hermaphrodite? It doesn’t bother Mother, she always wanted one of each – a little girl named Suzy, and a little boy named Joseph, so she calls me Jozy. Father is appalled by my duality, says it’s an aberration that God should not have allowed. I suppose I was lucky to be born to a clockmaker, but as others stare and make fun of me as I hobble past, I don’t feel lucky. I feel broken. Not my heart, not my gender, not even because Mother dresses me like the dolly she wants to play with that day, but because if I’d had a choice, I would have chosen crib-death. It’s really not as horrible as you think, at least not as horrible as living as a wind-up freak.

## Relic | *Nina D’Arcangela*

Tiny bones arranged on a bed of cotton. A single daffodil snuggled in golden glory and lavender sprigs – an offering of love and fidelity. A stone from the garden to keep her beloved grounded; Lucy’s favorite toy sacrificed so she’d never be alone. To say her tears could fill a sea would be an understatement, though today they flowed with intent as each drop was captured in a small heart-shaped vial. Once stoppered, this too was placed with care. A final relic, the band she wore the day she came home. A watershed moment in a life yet unlived. With broken heart, the young one spoke the words only an eight year old’s grief could conjure before the lid was sealed and the small box buried at the base of Great-grans favorite tree.

As they turned to walk back to the house, the ground rumbled, the clouds darkened, and the tree began to shake. Brilliant fingers of light spread below them; enchanted, the child ran back to the tree. She hugged the bark and called out to her beloved Lucy, and Lucy answered in vibrant hues of orange yellow and red. As the phoenix burst through the canopy, the young girl began to scream. Flesh melted from bone. Blood ran free to quench the earth. Flaxen strands crisped in the heat.

## Tectonic Upheaval | *Nina D’Arcangela*

From the chasm it rose, wings beating a false current. With a slap of its tail, limestone soldiers gave way to shards that matched the armor it wore. Fuel is what it sought. Evidenced by the dull gleam of cobalt eyes, it had been far too long since it last fed. Pitching to the left, it scented the vein. It grasped the granite facing with clawed foot, began to rip metamorphic rock from the range in chunks. A snort assured its failing eyes: the raw mineral reeked of potency. Slower now, with a delicacy not undue the task, it scraped and scratched with more finesse. As it extracted the raw sapphire needed for its survival, it calmed knowing it would soon sup again.

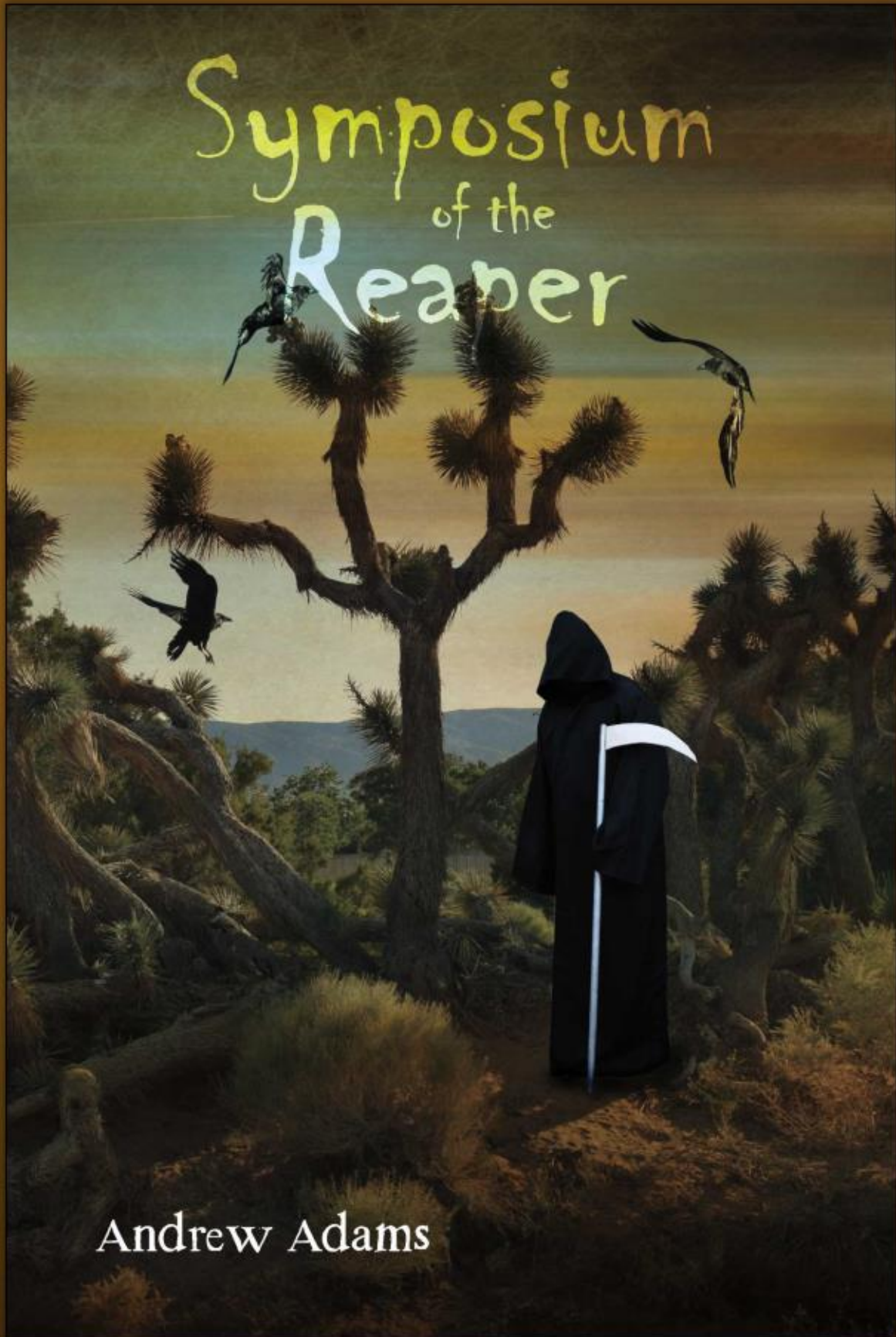
## About the Author:

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

Author Blog: [Spreading The Writer’s Word](#)

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AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

I awaken to an owl hooting in the high branches of the backyard oak. I pick up my phone to check the time. 3:46 am. I add the numbers on the clock because it's what I do. I can't help myself.  $3+4+6=13$ . Not a good sign. Not good at all. Worse, Ginny isn't in bed next to me, and neither is Amanda.

Our 7-year-old black lab sleeps like a log, so I'm more concerned about Ginny's absence than my wife of six years. Amanda is a restless sleeper, always has been. If I had to bet on it, I'd say she's on the couch in the living room binging some dumb reality show on her laptop. Ginny is no doubt sleeping under the coffee table, keeping Mandy company. That's what I tell myself as I roll over, explaining away the glowing '13' throbbing in my mind's eye. Damn it.

I fixate on my seven-year-old dog and my wife of six years. I never noticed that before.  $7+6=13$ . I don't know why my brain does this, and now I'm convinced something is wrong.

I roll out of bed to look for them, pulling on my robe as I stagger downstairs in pitch darkness. When I reach the living room, it's empty.

I walk to the kitchen, and it's freezing in here. I check if the refrigerator door is closed, and it is, and then I see our back door is open, letting in the cool night air.

The hairs on my neck and arms stand on end, and my feet feel nailed to the floor. Fuck. Why is our back door wide open in the middle of the night?

My throat goes dry, and my adrenal glands kick into high gear. Is someone in the house? Where is my wife?

I flick on the kitchen light, looking for any sign of a struggle—a scuff mark on the floor or a chair out of position, or worse: the unmistakable splatter marks of blood.

I find nothing.

As I scan the kitchen for any clues, I see the calendar thumbtacked to the corkboard above the coffee maker. The date: 10-26-22. Oh shit.  $1+0+2+6+2+2=$  you guessed it.

The owl continues hooting. I rush to the open door and pause at the threshold, peering into the blackness of our wooded backyard.

I make up reasons to dismiss the dread growling in the pit of my stomach. Ginny got into something and was whining, so Amanda let her out. I recall the time that damned dog ate four pounds of pork chops. I had to let her out nine times that night. And, when I did it, I stood on this threshold. I'm no fool. The dog knows the way back.

Amanda is no fool either. If she'd let Ginny out, she'd be standing right here.

Except she's not here. Where in the fuck are they?

I whisper-call into the darkness. "Amanda?" And again. "Mandy?"

Nothing.

The night sky is fog-filled and dark. It's a new moon tonight, one of the darkest nights of the year. I hate that.

I think about four pounds of pork chops and nine trips outside to go to the bathroom.  $4+9=13$ . Shit. I have to stop doing that. I'm getting myself all worked up.

I close the back door but don't lock it in case they're out there and need to get back inside, also if I need to run screaming from my house because some bastard is already in here.

I go to the knife block and pull the biggest, stabbiest one I can find.

Knife in hand, I stalk through every room of the house, ready to pounce on the first moving object—burglar, alien, spider—I don't even care. This is fucked up.

When I reach our bedroom, it's still empty, but I notice a yellow sticky note on my nightstand. I rush over and grab it.

*Out 4 a run. Took G.*

Jee-zus! Why didn't I see this before I got up and made myself half-insane with worry? She's out jogging and took Ginny along. What's the big deal?

Wait.

Why is she out jogging at this hour? It's a crazy time to go gallivanting around. We're in a quiet, relatively safe neighborhood, but still.

I'm sure it's why she took Ginny, and as I said, Amanda has always been a restless sleeper. A jog would be good for her. Better than eating pretzels on the couch, at least. I would never tell her, but she could stand to lose a couple of pounds. Our sex life has sputtered out, but I'm sure it's a phase. I don't know why I'm thinking about that right now. All married couples go through it, right? Of all the things I have to worry about, Amanda isn't one of them. We're good. We're pretty good. I think.

I stare at the note, counting each letter. God damn it! 13. There are thirteen characters in her note. She did this on purpose to get in my head. She knows how my mind works. Something is up.

This note's a cover for something. I know it. In six years of marriage and two years of dating, Amanda has never once gone jogging in the middle of the night. What the hell is she up to?

I look out the window, hoping to see her coming up the driveway. There's a car idling at the curb. Whose car is that? No one ever parks in front of our place.

I go downstairs, still holding the knife as I head to the back door. I slip outside and go around the side of the house, approaching the vehicle from behind.

It's an old Chevy Chevette, candy apple red with New York plates. What's a vintage car from back East doing in Oregon?

My mind races. New, three letters, York, four letters, Oregon, six letters. 13.

Amanda lived in New York when we met. I was there on business. She keeps talking about us moving back and says she misses city life. I don't.

I stare at the car idling at the curb. Someone's inside. It's moving, rocking. Are they fucking in the back seat?

I turn to go back inside, not wanting to disturb anyone, and come off like a massive creeper. Then, my mind goes off.

Amanda has an ex-boyfriend from New York. Richard.

Amanda, six letters, Richard, seven letters. 13.

I think he drove a Chevy, five letters, Chevette, eight letters. 13.

Her note was bullshit, a total lie. She's out here having a tryst with her ex, isn't she?

Isn't that sweet? He drove all the way from New York to see her. How often has this happened while I slumbered, unaware, in our bedroom?

She thinks she's clever, but she's gotten bold with this move—fucking the guy right in front of our house.

I step closer. Part of me doesn't want to catch her in the act, and part of me does. I hear the sounds from the Wilson's' Halloween party down the road. Shit, they're still going? They had invited us, and I thought it would be fun to dress up, but Amanda said no, it was too much trouble, and besides, she thinks the Wilson's are weird. Fine. Whatever.

The night fog swirls around me as I reach the back bumper. Through the misty rear window, I see two bare feet hovering skyward, rocking in motion with the car. Those are Amanda's feet. My blood boils, and my head throbs with rage. How could she do this to me? To us!

I see the guy—Richard, no doubt—ass bobbing, pumping away on my wife. That bastard! He's wearing a hockey mask, like Jason, for God's sake!

Amanda, did you hook up with him at the Wilson's Halloween party? Did you tell me you didn't want to go so that you could sneak out and meet him?

That's some kinky stuff, Mandy—meet your ex at a party, let him fuck you at the curb while he wears a hockey mask, way to spice it up. Is that what you're into now? Is this why our sex life has gone cold? You want more adventure, more risk—or maybe just someone else? Someone who's not me.

I'm seething now. How could you do this? I gave you a good life, and you shit all over me. You're tired all the time because you say you can't sleep, you won't cook, you hate your job, you want to move back East—I've had enough of your whiny bullshit!

I storm forward, knife raised, blackout enraged.

I throw open the back door and lunge on top of them, stabbing downward again and again into the darkness of the back seat. The knife thuds against bare skin, squelching with each thrust through muffled screams, again and again—eleven, twelve, thirteen times—and then . . . all is quiet.

I lean against the open door, chest heaving, tears stinging my eyes, my hands sticky and glistening to my elbows.

A dog barks. I turn to find Ginny standing in the middle of our cul-de-sac, looking wary.

Come here, girl. It's okay. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you.

She takes a tentative step toward me, tail half-tucked behind her.

I see a figure emerge from the fog.

Amanda takes the last few strides and slows to a stop near Ginny. She looks down and checks her watch—sweat beads on her forehead and chest.

She looks up and sees me. "Hey? What are you doing out here? Whose car is that?"

My throat is too dry to speak, so I shrug, hiding the bloody knife behind me.

She smirks. "Were you snooping around this car?"

"Me? N-no," I stammer, nudging a blood-soaked foot and easing the door shut.

Amanda looks askance, and her smirk grows. "Yeah, I see the wheels of your mind spinning out. I can always tell with you. Don't go getting paranoid. This car is from the Wilson's party. No one's stalking us."

Amanda shakes her head, annoyed. "Can you believe they're still going? I heard them from our bedroom. Couldn't sleep, so I went for a run to do my own snooping. See what those weirdos were up to down the road. Anyway. Just a party. Seriously, though, should we call the cops? It's gone on a bit long, don't you think? But then they'd know it was us, right? I mean, we're the only other house for a half-mile."

She pats Ginny's head. "And this little ragamuffin kept running ahead. She wore me out. I think she was anxious to get home."

She looks up, still petting Ginny. "Hey, what's up with you? You okay?"  
The owl hoots.

#### About the Author:

Gregg Stewart's previous accolades include The John Lennon Foundation for his songwriting and Crystal Lake Publishing for his short fiction. His film compositions appear in *Beautiful Dead Things* (winner of Diversity in Cannes) and the upcoming musical *Americana Dream*. He shares his life with his wife, whom he loves to no end.

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#### Before We Dance | *Marisca Pichette*

The lichens begin it.

Clinging to slate and granite crosses, they release their humming to the midnight air. Between October and November, a yellow moon casts its rays on the first notes of a song older than life.

From the lichens, mosses inherit the tune. Rhythmic pulses waver from plot to plot, climbing over pillow stones and gravel paths, straining for the air. In the minutes after midnight the song is still in its infancy, a sound as easily imagined as ignored, blending with the dark, sliding between shadows.

When the roots begin, words take shape.

They are old words, older than language that requires tongues and vocal cords. Older than xylem and phloem. Older than air.

There is no translation for the song sung by lichen, moss, and root. When the spores take their cue, it is as if the very dark were thrumming with the beat. A beat like and unlike a heart, like and unlike a song.

Notes rise. Plants shake. And slowly, in a measure of silence—breathless pausing while the moon passes behind a cloud—the soil starts to move.

We have no tongues, no ears, no voices and no roots of our own. The song we feel in our bones—what bones remain. It calls us up from broken vaults and shattered caskets. It calls us towards that firefly moon, yellow as the sun and stronger than dawn.

Our feet emerge first, pulled to the music that breaks our slumber. We are dancing before we're fully free, convulsing, clattering, tearing apart the rot that blocks our rising.

In clumps we liberate our bones, whole and incomplete and awake. We know nothing but the song. We know nothing but the song.

We know nothing but the song.

Between October and November we dance in moonlight the color of summer. The lichens wrap around our non-voices, giving us words before words were made. Stories before stories twine around our bones, holding us up and holding us up in the clouds of spores and night.

We know nothing but the song. Moss replaces flesh and roots act as surrogate muscles, bringing us close to one another in ways we don't know if we've ever been. Yellow moon, decaying dark. This night we remember.

The roots are the first to quiet, settling into longer and longer rests as the moss drags out the coda. We slow, slump, disentangle by stones that maybe were ours, maybe were neighbors'. The lichens release us and we know the yellow moon is setting, yellow sun rising. Morning steals our song away in pieces, tugging note by note into the cold air. Moisture falters, and we fall apart again.

The lichens are the last to sleep, their humming carrying into the morning light. Their song follows us into our dreams, into earth and winter. When they fall at last into silence, we feel the gentle pulse of their metronome, counting and counting

and counting the lives before  
our bones will sing again.



## Ferris Wheel | Marisca Pichette

They took the trees in martial fashion, snapping them up in neat rolls, with the leaves poking out either end. They loaded them on trucks and brought them down to the heart of the city. In the centre of the square, they unrolled the bundles.

Leaves whispered as cranes hissed, and traffic roared around, unceasing. A handful of bikers conducted a minute Tour de France around the operation, staring emotionless at the construction.

One expected it to go on for weeks, but it was done in a day. They stacked the trees end-on-end, pouring upwards in a fountain of bark and leaves, rivalling the snapping flag atop the Town Hall. When it was done, people peered out from their windows, aghast at the intrusion—but uninterested in going outside to observe it closer. The workers left, their trucks trundling back past the docks and out of the city.

In the centre of the square, the Ferris Wheel stood, vibrant and growing and alive and out of place, reaching over city blocks and dripping shade down apartment building walls. For three days, people tried to ignore it. They walked past checking their watches and clutching their belongings close. They drove around branches when they fell, pretending at potholes. They paid no attention at all, until the Ferris Wheel had the audacity to grow a gate.

On it, a sign proclaimed: *Opening Soon*.

\*\*\*

It's one thing to ignore a dead thing but a living thing is different.

Some people tried to pluck the branches off to show their friends. *Look, I took a branch; look, I am fearless.*

And yet, whenever anyone took a twig off—or sliced into the trunk—it would grow back. The centre of the city would contain this Thing, and this Thing would remain.

The day came when the gate opened and the leaves rearranged: *Open*.

The forever grey sky had finally cracked and let loose its downpour, with all its dreadful, waiting, humidity.

We dripped up the ladders to the seats and squelched ourselves into the seats. We stared between the branches as we rose over dead concrete and listless observers, now above us, draped out of windows and over balconies—now level, their vacant eyes meeting the gazes of our euphoria—now below us, falling away into greyness.

As we reached the apex, we sat back and thought our lives were complete. We wished never to descend back into the grey from which we came.

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High above the city skyline, the Ferris Wheel turns with a gentle breeze. Leaves rustle, green and sharp against the clouds. It is a monstrous intrusion, cutting through decades of our lives—and yet it draws us all, gathering and sidling through those fresh and welcoming gates.

Tens of baskets bear us up, up into the dense foliage. Those that return are always empty.

## Shadow | Marisca Pichette

Once I believed that you would always be there, following. You were reality, truth.

But then you were not where you were meant to be. Suddenly, you weren't following. You were leading.

I am alone—and surrounded by you. Suffocated, drowning in your essence.

Choked by your inky mantle, I fall out of reach, out of my mind.

But though I fall far, you still follow. You catch me, drag me deeper.

You're under me, around me, in me. I realize this pit belongs to you—it always did.

I can't escape you. You're me.

## About the Author:

Marisca Pichette lives on the edge of the woods, where she spends her time collecting berries and bones. More of her work appears in *Strange Horizons*, *PseudoPod*, and *Apparition Lit*, among others. Her speculative poetry collection, *Rivers in Your Skin, Sirens in Your Hair*, is forthcoming from Android Press in Spring 2023.

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The bones remain good, structurally sound. As long as the bones are good, there's still life left.

Transformed to a new existence, its past invisible, the board and batten boarding house now serves as a family home. Black petunias and crimson geraniums, planted by the current occupants, stand as sentinels by the front door, awaiting tonight's visitors. A remote control toy sits abandoned in the front yard. A child's tricycle lies overturned next to an SUV parked alongside a black pickup in the driveway.

The past has been paved over.

But the bones lie underneath.

Fresh siding disguises their rotting frame, a new roof covers up their moldy boards. New doors lock down tight at night; new windows serve as portals for dead eyes peering out. Walls painted white, hide stains of past transgressions. Floors have been replaced, footprints of those who dwelled here previously erased. Updated indoor plumbing flushes away sorrows of souls long gone. Dirt basement floor floods, stone walls damp with tears of the undead.

In days gone by, the stagecoach dropped off guests; once steam train passengers stopped over. Dressed in crinolines, long dresses with puff sleeves, fashionable hats and parasols, long dark waistcoats, cravats, and top hats, they sought refuge from the dark.

Some travelers remain, checked out, but unable or unwilling to leave. Their haunting images stay behind, preserved in a photograph somewhere, with hollow somber faces, while their bodies lie decaying in a grave, forgotten by any living soul. Yet, pieces of themselves still roam the premises, stalking the living, searching for proof of existence in themselves.

It's just another day of life and death.

Sounds of technological advances mask the voices of those who still dwell here. Smart phones, tablets, computers, televisions, reflect shadows of what has passed.

It's just another night of existing and haunting.

Inside... streaming, flipping through screens, thumbs on keyboards and remotes, the inhabitants live virtually, while spirits flow from room to room, unnoticed. An old soul reflects in mirrors—a woman in a white nightgown, long hair flowing, brushing 100 strokes, her face appearing in the shower mist. Modern devices blur out her image—electric toothbrush buzzing and hairdryer deafening.

Outside... a knocking, a rattling on a stormy autumn evening spooks those who pass. Candles flicker and wind chimes tinkle. A black cat listens and watches, eyes aglow. Skeletons hang from the eaves, pumpkins sit on the doorstep, ghost white sheets billow in the night breeze.

Eerie music wafts from inside the house. An October chill seeps into bones as ghost stories are exchanged. A haunted hotel, the locals say.

Innocent children approach the door. Curious souls from centuries past observe from within. The living mingle with the dead, unknowingly.

The door creaks open.

#### About the Author:

Ivanka Fear is a Canadian writer. Her poems and stories appear in numerous publications, including *The Sirens Call*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Mystery Tribune*, *October Hill*, *Close to the Bone*, and elsewhere. The debut novel of her Blue Water mystery series is scheduled for release by Level Best Books in January 2023.

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The golden decoration on the pencil holder looked like a turtle, or maybe an elephant, or maybe nothing. It was abstract, nebulous, free-form, and it was speaking to Gibby in a heavily accented voice.

"You are wasting your time here. The world has much to offer, and what do you do? Come to work and stare at a computer. You don't care about any of it, so why are you here?"

Gibby stared open-mouthed at the three-inch-high wooden objet d'art he had bought at a friend's yard sale. The hexagonal shape of it along with the mysterious metal blobs that decorated it had caught his eye, and with a quarter in his pocket, he bought it to hold his many company approved pencils and pens. But now...

"Stand up. Take back your life. Make something of yourself. These are things that are inside of you."

Gibby thought for a moment: "Someone is playing a joke on me." He stood up to look over the wall at his cube-mate, Henry.

"Sit down, you fool!" the voice raged. "This is no joke."

Gibby dropped back into his seat. Very quietly he said, "What are you?"

"I am everything. Pick me up. Remove these ridiculous writing instruments from my body."

Gibby took the object in his hand, overturned it, spilling the pens and pencils onto his desk, and then turned it right side up.

"Look inside me," the voice commanded.

Tentatively, he peered over the edge into the container. He expected to see nothing at the bottom except a wood panel, but he saw instead an oasis. Blue, sparkling water surrounded by palm trees, and diving into the placid pool were the golden blobs.

Gibby's head turned to the side like a curious dog. He blinked hard and then opened his eyes wide. The vision was still there. He heard the water splash as the creatures entered the pool. The breeze that blew the palm trees wafted across his face.

"Look closer," the voice said. "Become your destiny."

Gibby snorted. "I'm a forty-year-old office drone. I don't have a destiny."

"You do now."

Gibby's head jerked forward, striking the top of the object. He slapped his palms on his desktop to balance himself but couldn't pull free. Suction coming from inside the cup pulled him forward. His head collapsed, falling deeper inside. Gibby's screams were drowned out by the vortex that swirled around him. His feet lifted off the ground as his arms were bent back, and his torso was forced into the two-inch-wide opening. The object danced on the desktop, toppling one way then the other. The air in the cubicle was sucked away as Gibby's whole body disappeared with a muted whoosh. At the same time, something else emerged, landing on the floor in front of Gibby's desk.

The ersatz pen holder was still as the cubicle filled with hot, rancid breath coming from the creature who took in his surroundings. Water dripped from the tortoise shell hanging on his back. Hooded eyes adjusted to the light while large leaf-shaped ears flapped back and forth. The trunk dangling above the mouth probed the desk and the walls. The creature took a deep breath before letting out a bleating roar.

Cubicle walls around the office fell over. The windows shook in their casements. "What the hell was that?" a woman shouted as she ran toward the noise. When she saw the creature standing outside of Gibby's space, she froze. Letting out another ear-bleeding shriek, the creature's trunk snapped out around her neck. Grabbing at the leathery skin, she dropped to her knees. The creature picked her up, twirled her in the air, and slammed her into the object, her body disappearing in a rush of air.

Running on thick legs, the creature stomped up and down the aisles of the office, snatching people with its trunk and flinging them toward Gibby's desk. Attracted to the object, their bodies became trapped in the vortex it created and were sucked inside. The walls of the office echoed with the creature's deepening voice.

Gibby was swimming in the water. It was warm and soothing, running over his skin like massaging fingers. Lying on his back, staring up into a vibrant, yellow sun, his mind was empty. There was nothing except this moment of nirvana. He heard a voice. Rolling over in the water, Gibby saw Sheryl, a lovely blond woman he had known for years. He smiled. Sheryl, her naked body already glistening with sweat, smiled back as she slipped into the pool.

They swam together for a few minutes and then were joined by Vince and Tyler. None of them spoke; they swam and smiled. More appeared from the shadows, joining Gibby in paradise. They lay in the sand, soaking up the sun's presence, and languished in the warm, inviting water.

The office was quiet save for the exhausted breathing of the creature. It stood at the threshold of the building, staring at the glass doors. It had grown. For each consciousness it fed the object, it had expanded. Now over eleven feet tall standing on its hind legs, it rested, waiting for the master's command.

"Minjaya, my pet," the voice sounded in his head. "Leave this prison, go forth onto the earth."

The creature bellowed, smashing its head into the wall above the doors. Plaster and splintered wood rained down as the beast pushed through the barrier. The glass doors shattered as his thick legs kicked out. Turning around, Minjaya used his shell to batter the remnants of the wall until he burst through into the sunlight.

"Bring me more, my pet," the voice commanded. "Bring me more."

#### About the Author:

Christopher Hivner writes from a small town in Pennsylvania surrounded by books he intends to read if he becomes immortal and the echoes of very loud music. His new book of horror/dark fantasy poetry, *Dark Oceans of Divinity*, has been published by Cyberwit.net.

Facebook: [Christopher Hivner – Author](#)

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#### Monochrome | K. J. Watson

Determined to change her unsatisfactory life, Katya abandoned her career and bought a deconsecrated church. This building, closed to worshippers for thirty years, stood on an isolated stretch of Scotland's Dumfries and Galloway coast.

Using an online marketplace, Katya obtained a projector, screen, and numerous reels of film. A chair with thick, rounded arms completed the items she needed to convert the church into a private cinema. For a home, she acquired a touring caravan, which she parked in the cinema's grounds.

Over several months, Katya viewed silent classics. The comedies and dramas, accompanied by the steady whirr of the projector, soothed a mind upset by years of demanding work and fraught relationships.

As part of her resolve to forge a new, calmer existence, she also made a point of avoiding people. Thus, when someone rapped on the caravan's door one evening at the end of October, she became tense and agitated. Grabbing the recently boiled kettle, she switched on the exterior light and opened the door's top half.

A smiling man in a dark suit stared up at her. Katya rested the kettle on the edge of the door's lower half and refused to greet him.

"You are the Picture Theatre Recluse," the man said in a self-assured voice.

"What?"

"The person who contemplates silent films by herself."

"That's none of your business."

The man continued to smile. "Your belligerent attitude is understandable, especially at this late hour. Nonetheless, allow me to introduce myself and explain my presence."

"Don't bother," Katya replied. "You're trespassing, and violating my privacy. I want you to leave."

"I can't do that. I'm the Director. The cast and I intend to use the facilities of your picture theatre to show a single-reel film."

Katya tipped the kettle. Hot water splashed over the Director's shoes. But despite this hostile act, he did not move; nor did his amiable expression alter.

Slamming the top half of the door shut, Katya listened for receding footsteps above the sighing of the wind; instead, she heard voices. Peering through the slats of a blind, she observed figures approaching from the murk beyond the caravan's light.

"This is unacceptable," she muttered, pulling on a jacket and a pair of boots.

Outside, she found herself alone. Troubled by the Director's stated desire to use the cinema, she marched across to its double doors. They hung open, although she knew that she had closed them earlier. Crossing the threshold, she stepped into the glare of the building's fluorescent tubular lamps.

An emaciated group huddled in front of the cinema's screen. They wore shreds of clothing that swayed in the breeze blowing from the doorway. The Director stood by the projector.

"What are you doing?" Katya demanded.

"I've already told you," the Director replied, producing a canister of film. "And now that you're here, please extinguish the lights and be quiet. The cast desire to see their performances."

Katya hesitated, allowing her curiosity at the prospect of watching a film to overcome her anger with the Director's insolent conduct. She scowled and switched off the lights. The projector's reels turned and its bulb flared, illuminating the film's celluloid frames.

On the screen, the camera panned across a monochrome landscape. A group of people staggered along a path in the foreground.

A stinging pain began to encircle Katya's chest. The grim terrain that the camera captured, together with the distressed appearance of the actors, unsettled her. With an effort, she recovered her composure and turned to look at the 'cast', as the Director referred to them. They craned forward, engrossed by the film's flickering images.

"There I am," one of them said.

"That's me coming into shot," said another.

"Me, too."

"Look, I'm behind you."

Katya glanced at the Director. Smiling, he nodded his head at each of the comments.

The camera paused in its movement, and the cast became silent. One of the actors collapsed on the path. He shuddered and, as far as Katya could tell, died. The camera focused briefly on his face, which relaxed from a rictus of torment to an expression of peace.

Other men and women traversing the landscape fell and expired. Keen to see the cast's reactions, Katya noticed that they had become fewer in number. She also became aware that as each actor perished, the corresponding person in the cinema disappeared.

"What's going on?" she gasped, leaning back against a wall.

The Director raised a finger to his lips. Within a minute, every actor on-screen had crumpled to the ground, and all the cast had vanished.

The reel of film rattled to an end. Katya fumbled for the light switch, a severe pain once again tightening across her upper torso.

"Leave here immediately," she told the Director.

"Of course," he replied. "But first, let me explain."

"No."

"I insist," the Director said, shutting down the projector and placing the reel of film into its canister. "It's only reasonable that you should know why I chose your venue for my motion picture presentation."

"I'm not interested."

"Really? You should be. This cinema, which used to be a house of prayer, is the ideal environment for providing long-sought release to souls whose torment I have captured on camera."

"Nonsense," Katya mumbled, sliding to the stone floor, her arms folded tightly across her chest in an attempt to stifle the agony she felt there.

The Director's smile expanded into a grin.

"Believe what you wish, Picture Theatre Recluse, but next year, or perhaps in many years' time, I will include you in one of my productions. After which, you and I will view the result together. In the meantime, try to be tranquil."

Katya shook her head.

"How can I be 'tranquil?'" she whispered. "You've destroyed the life I've built here. You're cruel. And evil."

No reply came. The Director had gone, leaving the cinema for the darkness beyond.

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

K. J. Watson's fiction has appeared on the radio; in comics, anthologies, and magazines; and online. He lives in Scotland with his wife and two giant dogs.



Taking me trick-or-treating, Dad had broken it down between houses.

"I'm your best friend, Brian. Always remember that."

Eight at the time, I never forgot. Dad was the one I called after my felony possession bust at seventeen, and he was there to give me a ride after my stint in Ashland on the cloudy Friday morning of October 29th, 2021—my first time seeing the old man smile in over a decade.

"Love the new ride," I said, buckling up, and Dad chuckled. "What?"

"The Range Rover's a few years old now is all," he said. "A pain in the ass, too. I should've gone with a different color."

Or maybe have the one he'd bought cleaned on his way to pick me up. The inside stunk like an ashtray.

"We can smoke in here?" I asked.

"Absolutely," Dad said. "Need a Winston?"

He offered his pack before putting cracks in our windows and taking the right on Bayou Dularge Road.

Of the three main bayous running through Terrebonne Parish, Dularge was my favorite.

A flock of mourning doves flew above the bright green live oaks with sprawling arms draped in Spanish moss, and children in pirogues paddled the water while drivers of passing Southfork boats were easing their motors to suppress waves.

"Feel good?" Dad asked.

"I mean—sure," I said. "Feels like forever since seeing all this, yet like no time has passed. Terrebonne hasn't changed. Still enjoying retirement?"

"I miss staying busy," he said.

On the other side of the bridge crossing the Intercoastal Canal was Bayou Black where folks who lived for golf loved to show off their backyard boat decks.

"Keeping up with Loretta?" Dad asked.

"Yeah," I said. "A Category 3 in the Gulf now, right? Doesn't bode well for Halloween this year."

"A shame," he said, "but your Uncle Wyatt has a generator."

"Wait. We're going to the camp?"

"It's the safest place," Dad said. "No worries. His beds are more comfortable than you remember."

"Shit, I hope so," I said. "Hey, can we pick up some Sunrise?"

"Sunrise shut down," he said.

"Seriously? Since when? Both locations?"

"Afraid so," Dad said. "A real shame."

Passing Summerfield Plaza, I saw that I'd spoken too soon. Sunrise was now a KFC. The Cajun meat market had been reduced to a side branch of a Winn Dixie while Dunkin' Donuts and Lowe's had replaced Faye's Beignet's and Cenac's Hardware.

Our camp was located on an isolated property across town in Bayou Blue, the offshoot shell road first leading to a farm gate where we were greeted by two gentlemen dressed as armed guards, both in black and pointing their assault rifles in safe directions.

"Taking Halloween seriously this year," I said.

"Crime's on the rise," Dad said.

"You mean they're for real?" I asked.

The guard on Dad's side signaled for the other to let us through, and we drove the bend in the shell road that brought our destination into view.

The camp where I'd grown up freshwater fishing and frogging was now a compound with four concrete walls like those belonging to a prison yard.

"Did Uncle Wyatt retire?" I asked. "'Cause it's been a minute since I've seen a commercial for Hormann Chevrolet."

"Lying low is all," Dad said.

"You mean like a vacation?"

"Something like that," he said.

The compound doors were automatic, and Dad eased into a courtyard filled with families of hunters—every man, woman and child dressed in camo—most gathering at a small podium equipped with a speaker and mic stand.

I didn't recognize a single face.

Ahead were six double-wides, three on each side of the path to the parking lot.

"Didn't see my cousins back there," I said.

"They're not welcome," Dad said.

"Uncle Wyatt's not over that?" I asked. "I mean—Jesus. It's 2021."



\*\*\*

"Look who's here," Dad said.

We were standing in a kitchenette, and aside from Mom's shorter gray hair, she looked as I remembered, wearing the purple LSU robe and slippers that I'd given her before going away.

"Well, those held up," I said.

She smiled, hurrying to hug me. She held the back of my head the way she used to when I'd stumble into her foyer at ungodly hours.

"You're so skinny," she said, looking me over.

"Not a lot of Sunrise in Ashland," I said.

"Forgive me," she said. "I'd make lunch but the camp's having a meeting."

\*\*\*

We joined the others at the podium where Uncle Wyatt had taken the stage. His hunting cap made it to where I couldn't tell if his dark hair had gone gray like Mom's, but his face was heavier, burying his neck.

"They call us climate change deniers," he said, wasting no time, "but our eyes are wide open and once Loretta fails to destroy our way of life, the far left will try to shut down our oil companies. Our economy. They'll force me to sell those awful electric cars and they'll do it by taking our guns first."

My uncle the car salesman had become a charismatic preacher for the alt right, but no one was laughing.

I nudged Mom's shoulder before leaning into her ear. "Guy's lost his damn mind, eh?"

"Brian," she said, her stern eyes refusing to acknowledge me.

"But let's not forget the good news," Uncle Wyatt said. "Halloween may be canceled this year, but that doesn't mean we can't have one. So, without further ado, I'm happy to announce that the kids are going trick-or-treating today."

The children went crazy, and I couldn't help sharing their excitement. What a fantastic idea. Let them have their fun while denying Loretta the chance to ruin it.

They were instructed to line up with their parents as if Uncle Wyatt was handing out candy, but the man with the treats had soldiers distribute handguns instead.

I leaned into Dad's ear. "Know I started young and all, but some of these kids are barely toddlers."

"Wyatt believes in arming every man, woman and child," he said.

"Jesus. Why?" I asked.

"Maybe if you were listening instead of making fun," Mom said.

A familiar finger tapped my left shoulder, and Uncle Vern laughed from my right when I turned.

"Can't believe you still fall for that," he said, his silvery white hair uncovered and uncombed.

"And I can't believe you still don't brush your teeth," I said when taking his flask.

"You two catch up," Mom said, pulling Dad away.

"Staying off the hard stuff?" Uncle Vern asked.

"In meetings for that," I said, "but yeah."

"Well, you won't find a meeting here," he said.

"It's just a few days," I said, and Uncle Vern nearly fell over laughing, drawing eyes until he flipped off his audience.

"My brothers didn't tell you?" he asked.

"Tell me what, Uncle Vern?"

"You've been transferred, nephew. Welcome to your new home."

He slapped my shoulder and stumbled off to intrude on others.

\*\*\*

Our double-wide felt haunted, like things unknown were waiting to scare me.

"Relax," Mom said, doing dishes and wanting me to sit on the banquette across from Dad's.

"Uncle Vern was telling me some crazy shit," I said, still standing.

"Isn't he known for saying crazy shit?" she asked.

"Cheryl," Dad said.

"It's true," Mom said. She tapped the faucet off and reached for a hand towel.

"Okay, but he said we're not allowed to leave?" I asked.

"What else did Vern say?" she asked.

Uncle Wyatt knocked three times before walking in on us. "No trick-or-treating for you this year?"

"Afraid I'm too old," I said. "Good to see you."

"You as well, nephew, but you're never too old to go frogging."

"Wait," I said, smiling at Dad. "We're going frogging tonight?"

"Adults get to have their fun too," Uncle Wyatt said. "Family only. Will give us men a chance to catch up."

"But the rain," I said.

"Ponchos," he said, "and the worst isn't forecasted for another twenty-four hours. Unless you're scared?"  
"Fuck you, I'm scared," I said. "Let's do it."

\*\*\*

Behind the compound were the narrow streams in the marsh where I'd spent my youth, most going for miles before merging into larger waters while a few connected to other properties.

I loved fried frog legs more than Sunrise chicken on any day, but gators dominated the streams after dark, and their eyes would glow red from beneath the surface—always too many to count.

Frogging wasn't for everyone.

The rain having stopped for now, I shared a pirogue with Dad while my uncles set out ahead. We paddled between the red eyes, keeping up until Dad stopped.

"Set yours down too," he said when I glanced back.

He rocked the pirogue, forcing me to grab the sides.

"Cut the shit," I said, and he chuckled before lighting a Winston.

"Relax, boy."

"Yeah, give me one too," I said.

Rain fell without the warning of thunder, faster and harder. I could no longer see the water around us, or ahead.

"They're fine," Dad said.

I didn't doubt the old man, but the beam from our night light wasn't strong enough to cut through the downpour.

A bolt from the sky exposed Uncle Wyatt swinging his paddle down.

"They caught a frog," I said. "Come on. They're not far."

We paddled through the boom. Another flash made me a witness to Uncle Vern falling over.

"Jesus. What happened?" Dad asked when we caught up.

"He tried to snatch one up and lost his balance," Uncle Wyatt said, pulling Vern's body from the gators.

Soaked and shivering, I tried to appear calm but found myself drowning in adrenaline.

"You got him?" Dad asked.

"Yeah, go," his brother said, and Dad spun us around.

We waited for Wyatt to reach land and helped him carry Vern's lifeless and legless body to the back of an old blue pickup.

"One of my guys will take him to Terrebonne General," he said.

\*\*\*

Mom had waited up with towels.

I made it through a warm shower, but when reaching for my underwear, I fell to the toilet, dry heaving.

Mom rushed in.

"He's—going to regret this," I said.

"It's not your uncle's regrets I have to live with," she said.

"What are you talking about?"

"I should've visited you," Mom said, and Dad came in behind her. "I'm not sure I'll ever forgive myself, but I was so mad when I made that promise, and—"

"I know, Mom. A woman of your word. Now, please. Let me get dressed."

\*\*\*

I'd crushed Mom at seventeen when getting busted, now knowing what that gut punch must've felt like. She'd turned the tables, exposing an ugliness I couldn't have imagined.

I found her in the kitchenette with Dad.

"You were being honest with me," I said. "Earlier. Y'all aren't being held here against your will at all."

"Let's talk in the morning," Dad said.

"Your brother's dead," I said, "and your wife's okay with it."

Mom slapped me.

"Cheryl," Dad said, holding her back.

"I'm at peace with it," she said. "There's a difference."

"Okay, enough talking," Dad said. "Let's get some rest."

\*\*\*

My deepest sleep used to happen when it rained, but heavy taps on the roof of our double-wide were too many, too steady.

Dad had woken up first and fixed coffee.

"Cups are in the cabinet next to the fridge," he said, reading his paper.

He waited for me to enjoy a warm sip.

"Just so you know, Brian. I don't believe Wyatt's bullshit. I'm talking about the podium. But your mother... You just need to know we're safe."

I took the front page. Loretta had grown into a Category 4 and was expected to strike early on Halloween.

"You never told me about her," I said. "In Ashland."

"You never asked about her, son."

"And last night?" I asked.

He got up to pour himself another cup. "Let's see what the doctor says."

"Assuming Wyatt's minion took Vern's body to one," I said.

I took another sip when hearing Mom's slippers.

"Y'all still stuck on this?" she asked, tying her black Saints robe.

"He understands," Dad said.

But I didn't. Only enough to drop it. For now.

Mom cracked eggs into a pan, threw in some bacon strips and made herself a cup of hot tea.

We ate together, still separated by the silence that used to hold us hostage after I would show my face at their breakfast table hungover.

We spent our rainy day on Scrabble and weather updates. For lunch, Ma heated up three bowls of Wyatt's famous gumbo, the steamy gray broth filled with shrimp and homemade rice topped off with a spoonful of potato salad and filé powder to give it that earthy smell.

I managed two bites while Mom couldn't get enough and had seconds.

Maybe she wasn't a monster and had allowed something to take her away from herself the way I had with meth. Either way, I was too exhausted to fight with her.

\*\*\*

Loretta's wrath had woken us up with winds that brought Wyatt to our door, the calm eye of her storm finally looking down on us.

"There's a minor breach in the south wall," he said, "but I've got men on it."

"No," Dad said. "Those men belong with their families. Brian and I will take care of it."

The sandbags were in a shed behind the parking lot. We couldn't carry more than two each, and Dad wanted to smoke when we reached the bottom corner of the wall.

"That's big enough for us to crawl through," he said.

"We have time, Dad."

"Not much," he said, stepping on a freshly lit Winston. "Go on. Crawl through."

"What?"

"Just do it. I'm right behind you."

Our pirogue was still tied to the tree by the streams.

"You have about two hours before the eyewall catches up," Dad said.

He grabbed my wrist, forcing me to take a thick stack of bills in a steel money clip.

"How much is this?" I asked.

"Eight thousand," he said.

"Dad."

"No worries, Brian. It's not like you didn't work in Ashland and we made plenty when we sold the store."

I shook his hand, choking up.

"You can always call," he said. "I told you. When we used to go trick-or-treating."

"I know, Dad. I never forgot."

Shoving off, I flipped him the bird so I could see the old man smile again.

Facing dark waters, I paddled fast without the fear of Loretta catching up. I'd survived addiction, incarceration, estrangement from Mom, and the illusion of freedom.

I believed that I could make it to another property, more concerned about where I would go from there.

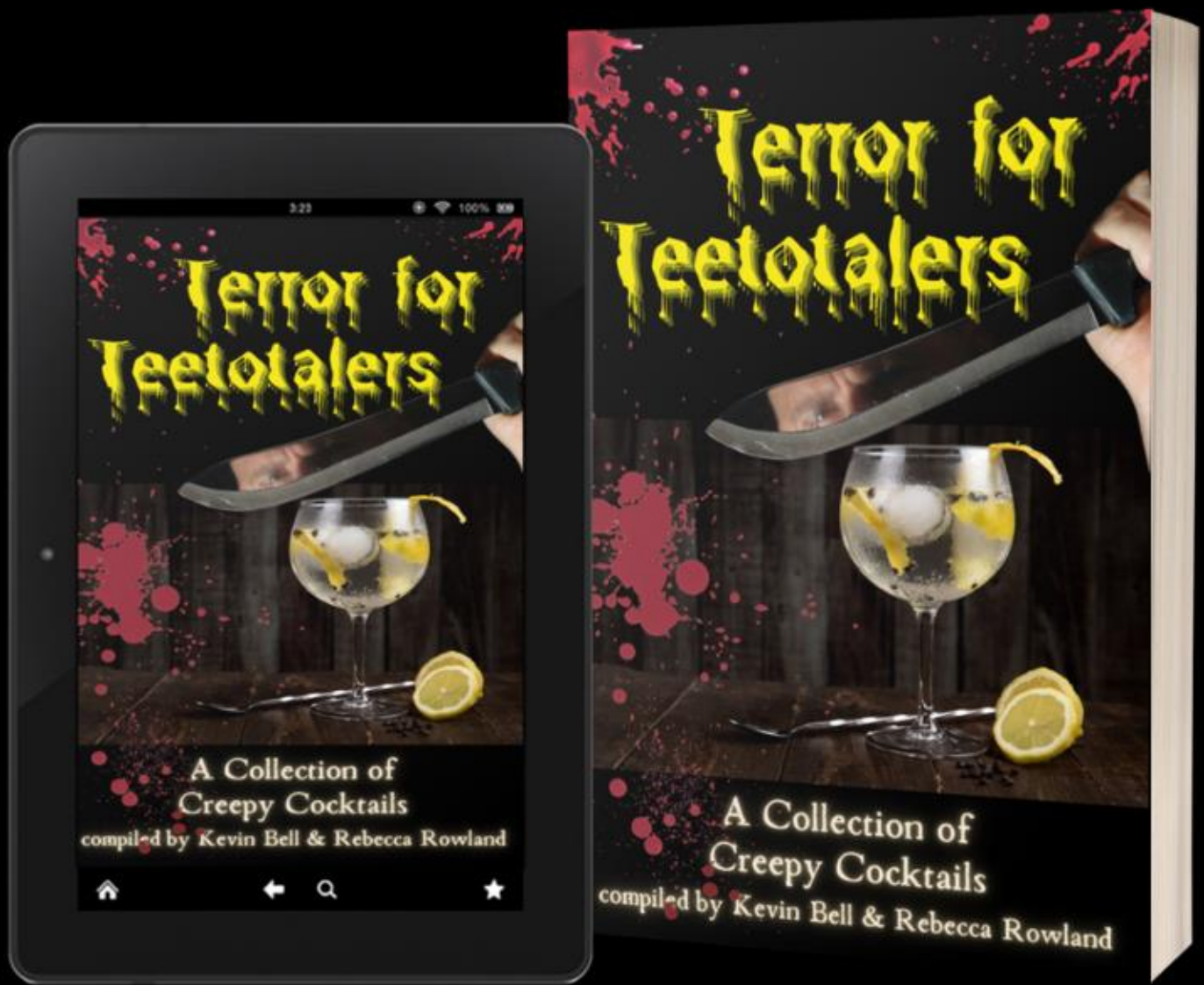
I believed that, like Dad, Loretta would prove to be the best of friends.

#### About the Author:

Nathan Pettigrew was born and raised an hour south of New Orleans, and lives in the Tampa area with his loving wife. His stories are featured in Deep South Magazine, the NASTY: Fetish Fights Back anthology from Anna Yeats of Flash Fiction Online, which was spotlighted in a 2017 Rolling Stone article, the upcoming Gone anthology from Red Dog Press, and at Punk Noir.

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**A blood-curdling beverage  
for every evening of  
the spookiest season**  
in print & eBook



Within your walls and under your roof, you hold ghosts. You teem with them, an overflowing vessel swirling together and then separating with the oil and water of the past and the present. You hate when you're empty, when the ghosts outnumber the living, hate the way neglect has led to rot in your foundations, mold spreading through the halls and vermin to dig through your walls.

You remember when you were young, empty and eager for the first of your souls to turn you into a home, bearing witness to the way Mother and Father argued, the way she slipped something into his soup one chilly evening and—no, that was later, with the ambulance and the police and the first soul trapped in its walls. No, first they arrived. Mother and Father and Junior with their fashionable furniture and mobile music playing overhead. They lived the American dream, complete with a freshly painted white picket fence and you were happy for an eternity and for not nearly long enough. When Father started drinking and Mother hid the bruises. When she caught him striking Junior and decided enough was enough. When Mother slipped rat poison into his soup.

Junior loved to play catch. You remember because he once broke its window with a baseball. The screaming that followed echoed into the foundations, trapping itself there like insects in amber. Junior hid in the closet with his little sister and—wait, Junior didn't have a sister.

No, this happened after Mother and Junior left and another family, one with a boy and a little girl took their place. The Boy loved baseball and the Little Girl wore frilly dresses and when the Little Girl got sick, she wore wigs of long golden hair and headscarves of the finest silks. One day, she left, carried by her fretting parents, and never returned. Without the Little Girl, the light in the family began to dim, and you tried to comfort them, to show them that she left an indelible imprint on your foundations, that her soul still resides here, but the Wife would cry when you showed her a memory and the Boy would scream when you mistook him for Junior and showed him Father, believing that the sight would cheer him up. Junior was close to his father. He looked to him for advice, for wisdom, and did everything in his power to be like him even as Father pushed him away, accused his son of not being his, which was absurd. That was Father and that was Junior. Each belonged to the other.

On Christmas mornings, Father would sit proudly on the couch, watching his daughters tear into Barbies and teddy bears and costumes thanking Santa and his elves, aunts and uncles, and Mom and Dad. But Father didn't have any daughters before seizing and collapsing, blood and foam pouring from his mouth. Mother went to jail and Junior left with relatives. This must be the third family you remember.

Two daughters and Mom and Dad, a modern family. Perhaps too modern as the Eldest grew and decided to eschew dresses for slacks and boys for girls. She'd sneak up to her room with her girlfriend and steal kisses behind closed doors. You didn't mind this. You were built to be modern, after all, and the happy moments that happened in that room left warm imprints on your heart. You didn't understand why, when Dad walked in on them one day, they were yelled at, the parents throwing her clothes and possessions onto the street before shutting the door in her face.

The room now emptied and turned into a guest room, the Younger would sometimes sneak into what was once a refuge, but now all signs of the Eldest had been erased. Photographs of her no longer hung on the walls and everything of hers that she hadn't taken with her was thrown out. You tried to comfort the lonely Younger, showing her memories of them building blanket forts and reading scary stories with flashlights under the bed. The Boy loved reading scary stories to the Little Girl, teasing her for being scared when he was the one who had nightmares of witches in gingerbread houses and Little Girls wasting away in wintertime.

Perhaps only some of the memories belonged to the Younger, but she didn't scream like the Boy when she saw them both lying on their stomachs atop the guest bed with a copy of *Grimms Fairytales*. She simply sat on the bed and listened as the Boy read out loud to the Little Girl the same way the Eldest used to do with her.

That night, she packed a bag and disappeared. You never saw her again, and Mom and Dad rarely spoke of her. You like to think that she found the Eldest and they forged a happy life together in a happier home.

A happier home. That's what Papa wanted after his wife died, leaving him with Brother and Sister. But you began to wonder if you were a home built for happiness. Nothing ever stayed happy for long, and these tenants were especially sad. You tried to comfort them with memories, only succeeding in frightening Brother and Sister. Father was angry and he stalked these halls searching for someone to satiate his wrath.

Father whispered in Dad's ear as he grabbed the Eldest's clothes and threw it onto the lawn. He whispered in Wife's and Husband's ears as they yelled and screamed, making the Boy cry and hide in the closet, longing for the comfort of the Little Girl and as Wife cut her wrists and laid down in the bathtub, staining its grout with blood. Husband



stopped her just in time, but they left soon after, abandoning the house with Father angry and waiting to inflict his rage on others. And he whispered in Papa's ears.

Mama was the one who brought joy to their home, brought light. Without her, the children would suffer in the dark, and children shouldn't have to live in the dark. Father whispered as Papa shut off the carbon monoxide detector and broke the radiator, letting the poison fill his and the children's lungs so that when they all went to sleep, they'd never wake up, just like Mama did.

No one wanted to move in after that. Vines grew along your walls and your once manicured lawn became a wild tangle of grass. Memories play from room to room like silent films, but it's nothing like the real thing. Nothing like when you were young and eager for souls to fill and Mother, Father, and Junior opened the front door to their very first home.

#### About the Author:

Kay Hanifen was born on Friday the 13th and lived for three months in a haunted castle. Her short stories have appeared in more than a dozen anthologies. When she's not consuming pop culture with the voraciousness of a vampire at a 24-hour blood bank, you can find her with her two black cats.

Website: [Kay Hanifen, Author](#)

Twitter: [@TheUnicornComi1](#)

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#### Riding Dark | *Marisca Pichette*

Before she opened the airlock, Grandmother put the Hood over my head. My last view of her was through red glass.

I drifted out to the end of the line. Turning the ship away, Grandmother severed the tie. I was alone with him.

The Hood turned his teeth to ruby ice, his stardust eyes sanguine. I drew air from my tank as the Wolf turned, asteroids rearranging to form claws and a tail. Nothing stood now between me and his hunger.

Grandmother's voice crackled in my ear.

*"Two minutes until contact."*

He came for me—two million tons of ice and rock across the void of space. Grandmother pulled the ship up, leaving me to face the Wolf.

He blotted out the stars, jaws wide.

*"One minute until contact."*

When he reached me, I saw the black hole of his throat. I hoped Grandmother had gotten far enough away. His teeth surrounded me and cracks formed in the Hood.

I prayed for it to hold just a little longer.

Sucked across his tongue, I fell into the belly of the Wolf. Before I lost the ship signal, I heard Grandmother's voice.

*"From the inside is the only way."*

She dissolved into static. The Wolf's mouth closed.

Falling through darkness, I hefted my ax.

#### About the Author:

Marisca Pichette lives on the edge of the woods, where she spends her time collecting berries and bones. More of her work appears in *Strange Horizons*, *PseudoPod*, and *Apparition Lit*, among others. Her speculative poetry collection, *Rivers in Your Skin, Sirens in Your Hair*, is forthcoming from Android Press in Spring 2023.

Instagram: [@marisca\\_write](#)

Twitter: [@MariscaPichette](#)



I warned myself. If I entered the woods, I'd never believe my eyes. However, I considered the unreliability of the source of this wisdom—which is to say, utterly without reliability—and ventured without fear. Surely I'd misheard the conversation. My best friend would never betray me.

No sooner had the foliage darkened my surroundings than I shivered. Shade always brought a temperature change, but the deep duskiess of this forest chilled me. I pulled the hood of my sweatshirt over my head and plunged my hands deep into its front pocket, noticing evidence of my sister's last 'borrow'. No, she 'never wore my clothes,' yet here were eyeliner, mascara, a flat compact of powdered eyeshadows and blushes, and a tube of 'kiss me' lipstick, all in her shades, none of which I wore.

Twigs cracked beneath my progress, and small, unseen things scampered in the detritus of other seasons. Leaves wiggled in response to their passage, and it struck me that no matter where I ventured, someone could see me. In town, cameras kept track of everyone and everything. Here in the woods, though, wildlife itself observed interlopers.

There really weren't any refuges for those seeking solitude.

With a sigh, I pulled out the tube of lipstick. It would serve Sis right if I used her makeup. The stuff cost a fortune, but then again, clothes weren't cheap, either, even if she only wore mine when she wanted to dress 'down'. I sat on a boulder and opened the compact. I dusted the little mirror with my finger to clear the view and applied a layer of crimson worthy of Snow White. The color made my teeth gleam a brighter white by contrast. Maybe that was why Sis wore the stuff. It smelled better than it tasted, though. Like bergamot.

Why stop there, I wondered, and drew the exaggerated cat's eye liner popular at school. Shadow in the corners widened the artistic profile, and with a quick coat of mascara, I felt transformed, a vixen prowling instead of a preteen sulking.

Heavy crack sounds told of something big passing just outside of my field of vision. I crept closer and hunkered into a mountain laurel, allowing its evergreen boughs to act as a blind. I just knew I'd catch them, my best friend and my crush. Earlier, I had overheard them plan a picnic, and I planned to crash.

My mouth dropped open almost audibly.

They were there, alright, holding hands, and then pawing each other. She pushed him back onto a flannel blanket, and he pulled her to his chest.

From my face to my collar bone, my skin burned with betrayal. She never even noticed him before I'd confided my secret crush on him.

He pushed his big hands through her dark hair and fumbled with something along the back of her neck. Her giggles turned to growls as she did the same at his hairline. With a rending squelch, they unzipped.

I don't know how else to describe it. They stepped out of who they were and emerged bloodied and hairy, wide faces terminating in toothy snouts, hands and feet terminating in deadly claws. They snapped at each other, cubs at play, frisking against each other with thunderous force.

My knees quaked, and it occurred to me they didn't have food on their picnic blanket. I inched out of the laurel and ran, stealthy as a sprite, extending my legs and stifling a scream.

I went into the woods and experienced a big surprise, alright, but I had no intention of becoming their lunch as well.

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

Kerry E.B. Black writes to calm the crazy currents crashing in her head. As a result, she's authored two YA paranormal thrillers and three collections of short stories. Many of her short works have crept into anthologies, magazines, and online journals. When not writing, this HWA member sings with seniors, advocates for the disabled, and reads (and reviews) all she can.

**Website:** [www.KerryEBBlack.com](http://www.KerryEBBlack.com)

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



"Are you coming tonight, Mom?" Tamara bent over to wipe away an imaginary smudge from her loafers, her springy black hair bouncing as she moved.

"No, dear."

Joan set a ceramic tray on the kitchen table and delicately poured coffee into her daughter's cup. A cloud of heat rose and swirled, dispersing the aroma of the fresh brew.

Tamara took a sip and began inspecting her clothes for debris. Joan observed Tamara fiddling with her appearance. Eyes gleaming, she noted the flattering look of her daughter's snug fitting gray slacks and black boat-neck shirt.

"It's a memorial for Maddie, Mom. I think she'd want you to be there." Tamara's deep brown eyes were shadowed by her sweeping dark lashes.

Before Joan could respond, a musical horn blurted a few notes, announcing a vehicle at the end of the street. Tamara got up to look out the front window.

Low humming approached and stopped at the front of the house. A young woman sprang from the interior of the turquoise egg-shaped vehicle and came up the walkway. All in black, her leather slacks hugged her slim figure. A small white comm link dotted one ear. The only splash of color was the blood red lips that stretched across her face in a smile. Long dark brown hair slightly curled, framed her round caramel face.

"Hey." Vivian's somber voice broke as she hugged her friend upon stepping through the front door.

"Hey, Viv." Tamara put her arm around Vivian's shoulders and ushered her into the house through to the kitchen, where Vivian offered Joan a *'hello'* peck on the cheek before sitting at the table.

Tamara plopped herself into a padded kitchen chair next to Vivian, tucking Vivian's dark locks behind her ear with a well-manicured index finger.

Vivian's smile reached her eyes as Joan poured coffee into Vivian's cup.

"Mmm...thanks Mrs. Barlowe." Vivian closed her eyes as she held the cup to her nose.

"You should come, Mom." Tamara popped a rum ball into her mouth and washed it down with coffee. Joan's mouth turned upward faintly as she admired her daughter's olive-gold complexion. *What a lovely girl my darling turned out to be*, Joan thought.

"Yes, Mrs. Barlowe. We'd love to have you."

"I'm fine, Vivian. You and Tamara go and say a prayer for me."

Joan wiped her hands on her white apron and turned to the sink, glancing down at her pale hands, purple veins crisscrossing the protruding tendons. How could she have aged so suddenly? It seemed only a short time ago that she had the soft beauty of her daughter.

Tamara bustled about the kitchen, popping another rum ball into her mouth as she adjusted the bra under her shirt. She stood next to her mother, caressing her shoulder.

"It's alright, dear." Joan's voice was but a whisper.

"Mom, you haven't been out in at least a year." Joan realized that Tamara's hushed tone was meant to calm, but Joan could still feel her heart in her throat.

"You two go," Joan's shaky voice replied. Tamara sat down next to her friend to enjoy her coffee as Joan turned to wipe a tear, leaving the kitchen.

"She's very quiet. And, she looks pale, Tamara." Vivian slurped another sip of coffee, miraculously preserving her vivacious lipstick.

Tamara laid her head onto Vivian's shoulder.

"She loved Maddie. I think the anniversary of her death is really hitting her hard."

Tamara sat up, searching the container of treats, picking two rum balls, and shoveling them into her mouth. Her cheeks bulged as she chewed.

"It's been a year. That one night, one moment in time. And they still haven't found the bastard that hit her!"

Vivian got up to retrieve a knife from the block, then reached for an apple from the glass bowl. She peeled the apple as she spoke.

"I'd really hoped that your mom would come with us. Maddie loved her so much. She was like a second mom to her."

"I was hoping she would too." Tamara brushed powdered sugar from her dark shirt. "She used to love going out in that old car every day. I don't know...maybe she's getting too old."

"Does she still have that old fuel powered motor?"

"She does, but she doesn't drive it anymore. Keeps it locked up in the garage. She's been afraid to go anywhere since Maddie was killed. She won't even let *me* drive it anymore. Besides, the gas that's in it is all there is. I haven't seen a gas station for well over a year." Tamara turned her head to her friend, eyes widened. "You did charge your vehicle, right?"

"Of course." Vivian gulped the last of her coffee. "We gotta go if we want to get there on time." Vivian grabbed her bag and comm device.

Joan returned to the kitchen and hung up her apron as Tamara turned to her.

"How do I look?" Tamara stood tall at her five-foot eight height without shoes and now towered over Joan in her two-inch soled loafers.

Eyes glistening, Joan smiled, cupping her hand to Tamara's face.

"You look beautiful, Tamara."

Tamara smiled, then furrowed her brow.

"I know you've worried about me since Maddie was killed in that hit and run. I promise, Mom. I'll be fine."

Joan stroked Tamara's arm.

"Mom." Tamara's reassuring voice did not stop Joan's heart from its rapid thumping.

Their foreheads touched briefly before Tamara turned, walking through the house with Vivian to the front door. Joan heard it latch and lock.

Rain began to patter lightly, then more fervently as Joan finished rolling the rum balls and placing them in an airtight container. November was a fickle month in the city. A few warm and sunny days, some cold and rainy.

It was raining a year ago too, Joan mused, glancing out the back door window. The porch light illuminated the padlock on the vertical wooden garage doors. Rain reflected on its shiny surface, beckoning Joan. But she resisted. Hands to throat, Joan rubbed until her neck was red. Her reflection in the glass was but a whisper of who she once was, a young vibrant dark-haired woman like her daughter. The gray wispy and thinning tendrils hung limp. Eyes, once bright and joyful, now dull and sunk into her skull. Regret hung on like thorns under her skin, deepening, torturous pain that she can never escape.

Thunder rumbled, shaking the glasses in the cabinets and jolting Joan away from the door. Collapsing into the nearest kitchen chair, she gasped for air, putting a hand to her mouth as if to smother what cannot be said. A strangled sob seeped through her knotty gray fingers.

Clinging metal brought Joan to the door again. A patio chair had fallen over on the low wooden deck protruding from the back of the house. Garden tools laid scattered across the muddied turf.

Exhaling, Joan went about cleaning up the powdered sugar and washing the mixing bowl.

Rain pounded against the house. Lightning intensified to flash into the kitchen, the flowered wallpaper appearing like gnarled claws of some predatory creature. Pop! The back porch light went out.

Joan flinched. Pouring herself coffee, her hand trembled, spilling the brown liquid over the white tablecloth. With both hands on the cup, she sipped. The hot liquid collected in her throat, refused to go down. Joan choked up the brew, spitting it out and dropping the cup that shattered at her feet.

Joan got herself to the sink and splashed cold water on her face. The little pots of parsley on the windowsill sparkled with droplets that had escaped Joan's hands.

Glancing out the back door again, Joan peered into the darkness. The padlock on the detached garage still glistened with rain as lightning continued its torrent of flashing white light.

Joan blinked, then stared at what appeared to be a shadowy figure standing near the garage. Squinting, she tried to make out the dark form.

Lightning flashed again and in that split second, Joan saw a young woman, blonde straggly hair, standing very still, black holes for eyes boring into the fragile old woman at the kitchen door. Joan ran into the dining room, not daring to look out the window. Wind howled. This can't be! Joan tried to collect herself, pushing thin hair from her face.

Staccato tapping began, slowly and softly, yet overpowering rumbling thunder. Joan looked up toward the swinging door leading to the kitchen and crept through the threshold, grasping the back of a kitchen chair. The room lit up seconds at a time as lightning crackled unrelentingly.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Continued, emanating from the back yard.

Joan stepped toward the backdoor, her bony fingers clenching the back of each chair as she approached, stopping just short of the window for fear of being seen. She squeezed her eyes shut, hoping to will the apparition away. Hazardous a peek, Joan scanned the darkness. A bolt of lightning stretched to the ground, dashing her hopes of peace.

Hovering by the garage, the figure was motionless, hand outstretched, beckoning Joan.

Joan staggered back, shaking her head, clasp ing both hands to her mouth to muffle her scream.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Joan froze, her faded eyes widened.

“Go away! Please! Leave me alone!”

Heart pounding, ready to burst through her chest, Joan couldn’t pull her gaze away. The figure stood, hand outstretched, beckoning.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Wind moaned, violently shaking the fastened garage doors, the padlock straining against the pressure.

“No.” Joan sobbed, shaking her head side to side. “No, please. I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry...”

Tears streamed down her face as her trembling hand stretched out toward the door. “Please stop. I can’t!”

Her arm lifted. Joan strained to pull it back but couldn’t. Fingers not her own grasped the doorknob.

“Please, don’t make me!”

Unable to stop herself, she opened the door.

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Tamara was thankful rain had subsided hours earlier. She got out of the car, turning to wave at her friend.

“Thanks Vivian.”

“See you Monday!” Vivian eased out onto the street.

Tamara glanced at the house. Most of the lights were still on. Joan often waited up for her daughter however, it was unusual for more than one light to be on this time of night.

Tamara unlocked the front door and entered.

“Mom?”

She went into each of the downstairs rooms, living, dining, kitchen. Up the stairs, it was still dark. Her heart raced as she turned on lights. Gasping, Tamara darted into her mother’s bathroom. Hearing a noise outside, Tamara looked out the window to the back yard. The clouds had dispersed leaving the full moon to expose its brilliance. Her heart stopped.

“Mom!” Tamara barely touched the stairs as she raced down to the kitchen and out the back door. Her mother was on her knees, mud on her face and hands, weeping.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry...” Joan wailed, her fingers curling.

Tamara stopped behind her mother, resting her hands on Joan’s shoulders.

“Mom?”

Footsteps on the deck caused Tamara to swing around.

“Tamara! You forgot your...” Vivian’s comm light shone onto her friend. “What’s happened?”

“What are you doing here?” Tamara’s accusatory tone halted Vivian to her spot.

“You left your comm on the seat and...”

Vivian’s gaze darted up to the garage doors which were now open, the padlock on the ground, its lock twisted into a tangle of metal.

“Tam.” Vivian pointed the light on the open doors.

Tamara rose to her feet and stared. The front of the old white 2020 Lincoln SUV, hidden away for a year, stuck out from its tomb. Splatters of brown stains covered the bonnet and windshield. Blonde tendrils reached out from the grill, as though desperate to be discovered.

Tamara’s body shuddered. She moved to kneel in front of Joan who continued to cry out.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry...!”

Tamara shook Joan’s shoulders.

“No! Mom! Look at me!”

Joan opened her eyes to see Tamara’s cold eyes.

“I’m sorry, Tamara! I’m so sorry!”

“Mom! Mom!”

Tamara shook her again.

“Mom! You promised you’d keep it locked!”

Vivian took a step backward. Her comm light had moved from the garage to her friend.

“Tam?”

Tamara got up and put up her hands.

"No, no, no, Viv! It's not what you think!" Tamara's eyes darted from her mother to her friend. Joan continued to sob into her hands.

Vivian took another step back.

"Tam, please tell me. Tell me right now!" Tears filled Vivian's eyes.

"Tell me!"

"Viv, it was an accident! Please, listen! I didn't mean to."

Vivian shook her head.

"What did you do, Tam?" Vivian choked on her words.

"It was an accident—Maddie was—I swear, Viv...I didn't mean to!" Tam stepped toward her friend, searching her face for understanding.

"You killed Maddie?" Vivian wiped her cheeks.

"We mourned her together, Tam! We cried on each other's shoulders! You cursed the bastard that did this! *You* did this? *You* did it?"

Tamara took a step closer, her hands outstretched.

"Viv, please. You can't tell anyone, Viv. We'll push the Lincoln back into the garage. No one needs to know."

Tamara crept forward.

Vivian shook her head.

"No, Tam. No. We have to call the police."

"You can't do that, Viv! Do you know what'll happen to me?" She moved closer.

"Viv, please. Just help me."

Tamara lunged forward, reaching for her friend. Vivian screamed and fell backward onto the deck, wet boards still slick from the storm.

Tamara's body jerked, her head lashing backward. Vivian froze in place as she watched Tamara gasp for air, stagger and fall forward into the mud.

Vivian looked up and found Joan standing, with a shovel clutched in her hands, the blade dark red.

Joan threw the weapon aside and dropped to the ground at her daughter's side.

"No, no, no. Please no!" She wept.

She picked up Tamara's body, holding her tightly against her own.

"It was Madeline. She made me, Tamara, she made me! I didn't want to, she made me!"

Joan buried her face into her daughter's chest, then became silent, lifting her head to gaze into Tamara's lifeless eyes.

"What a beautiful woman you've become." Joan whispered, then stroked her darling daughter's hair, rocking her limp body in a loving, gentle embrace.

#### About the Author:

Author of short stories and poems, Annie Zamparelli's story *Final Day* appears in the digital magazine *The Thieving Magpie*, Issue 16. Retired from the Healthcare Industry, Annie enjoys writing, reading mystery novels, historical biographies, and sketching. Annie passionately believes that we expose our soul to the world when we express ourselves through our writing craft.

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An Ongoing Horror Anthology Audio Drama



Victoria's Lift is an audio drama in the tradition of shows like *Twilight Zone*, *Doctor Who*, and *Fantasy Island*, but manages to remain wholly unique and have its own voice and feel.

The show features the work of multiple authors who write stories set in a strange and mysterious nine story building, which contains an ancient Lift that transports those who enter to the floor chosen for their choice and transformation. Each floor has a nearly infinite number of rooms and each one can transform its interior to whatever is needed to help its visitors reach a point of decision and make a choice.

The common thread tying everything together is a mysterious girl named Victoria (and her music box), who although she appears in the form of a young girl of about nine years old, is far wiser, older, and more powerful than any mere child.

Victoria acts as The Guide to her visitors, and while she does try her best to help them overcome fear and let go of things that are keeping them from becoming their best selves, once a choice is made, their fate is set. Sadly, not all visitors are receptive to her guidance, and that usually bodes poorly for them.

Whatever nightmares the visitors bring with them, the building can make real, which can be absolutely terrifying. But, as Victoria has told more than one visitor, beyond fear lies change.

While the overall premise of each tale is tied to the theme for each floor, authors have a great deal of freedom to explore themes of loss, redemption, acceptance, joy, and deep sorrow.

In addition to the standalone tales of trial and tribulation which we refer to as Visitor Stories, we also share stories that explore Victoria's past, how she came to be who and what she is, and the larger world around her.

The multiple award nominated audio drama has, over time, and because of the talent of the writers, performers, composers, artists, and everyone involved in making the show, developed a devoted following, and an average 4.7 stars (out of 5) on Apple Podcasts.

We started the show as a way to tell stories that entertain, move, and challenge listeners to think, and it is humbling how much more it has become, and how much Victoria and her adventures mean to so many listeners.

Reviews from fans that share how it helped them overcome a trauma, made them rethink their decisions, deal with loss, or find hope at a dark time in their life, are a testament to the skill of the amazing writers and performers who, as more than one reviewer has said, make this show "creepy with a heart".

Victoria's Lift is now in its Fifth Season with over 78 full episodes. In addition to the immersive audio experience, fans can explore even more tales in the written anthology, [The Lift: Nine Stories of Transformation](#), with stories that can be found nowhere else.





### Show Description

*Part Twilight Zone but wholly unique, Victoria's Lift is an ongoing audio drama featuring a mysterious girl who guides visitors to their transformations. A dark place whose original luster is now lost to time; the unlikely, old Victorian building sits overlooked by most on the edge of Pittsburgh. Originally built as a luxury residence for some of the city's most well to do residents, it now serves a different purpose. Within its dilapidated walls sits Victoria's Lift. Step inside and ride it to the floor chosen for your transformation.*

**Website:** [victoriaslift.com](http://victoriaslift.com)

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

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

Available in Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, iHeart Radio, and wherever you get your podcasts.

Victoria's Lift is created by 9th Story Studios LLC, a Pittsburgh, PA based audio, print, and media production company that also creates the award nominated & award-winning horror fiction anthology podcast The Wicked Library, and others. We love stories and storytelling in all forms and focus our efforts on writing and producing great audio content designed to entertain, excite, and make the listener think. Catch up with previous seasons wherever you get your podcasts.







**Daniel Foytik** - Creator / Showrunner / Sound Designer / Producer

Daniel is a teller of interesting lies who explores his love of story in all its forms through writing, narration, and the creation of multiple award-nominated and award-winning audio drama podcasts including Victoria's Lift, The Wicked Library, The Private Collector, Extra Wicked, and Wicked Fairy Tales. He is the creator of Victoria's Lift but considers himself to be as much Victoria's creation as she is his. Daniel lives in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania for now, but has a strong desire to move to the mountains and disappear onto a farm surrounded by deep, dark woods.

**Meg Williams** - Producer

Meg Williams joined the team in January 2022, taking on the unenviable task of overseeing the production schedule of multiple 9th Story Studios projects, copy editing, and keeping everything organized. She is a writer and editor from Ontario, Canada. When not busy with production assistant duties or copywriting for We Talk of Dreams, she's generally working quiet horror stories, or on a handful of podcasts that include true crime, horror, and the paranormal.

A veteran teacher and pumpkin farm manager with an unhealthy attachment to her laptop, she can generally be found baking (decently), playing video games (badly), or drinking oversized mugs of black coffee (chronically).

**Amber Collins** - As Victoria Bigglesworth-Hayes

Amber is an Australian based Voice Over and Audio Engineer working as a Studio Manager to create content for various commercial and independent projects. Amber is also an Executive Producer for Victoria's Lift as well as the voice of the main character, Victoria. Amber has been voicing Victoria as well as various characters for Victoria's Lift and The Wicked Library for over five years. When she is giving her voice a rest and not glued to a PC game, she works on other passions such as traditional and digital art, Dungeons and Dragons, and Burlesque.

**Nico Vettese**

Resident Composer / Executive Producer

Nico was born in Yorkshire, and yet still claims an Italian heritage. He also really likes drinking tea. He loves soundtracks so much that he wants to make them for the rest of his days. Nico is Victoria's Lift's resident composer and an Executive Producer.

**Jeanette Andromeda** - Art Director / Executive Producer

Jeanette Andromeda is an artist, blogger, youtuber, podcaster, and filmmaker. When she's not talking about horror or up to her elbows in paint, she's often found wandering around in graveyards working on stories, scripts and sketches.

**Davis Walden** - Sound Design

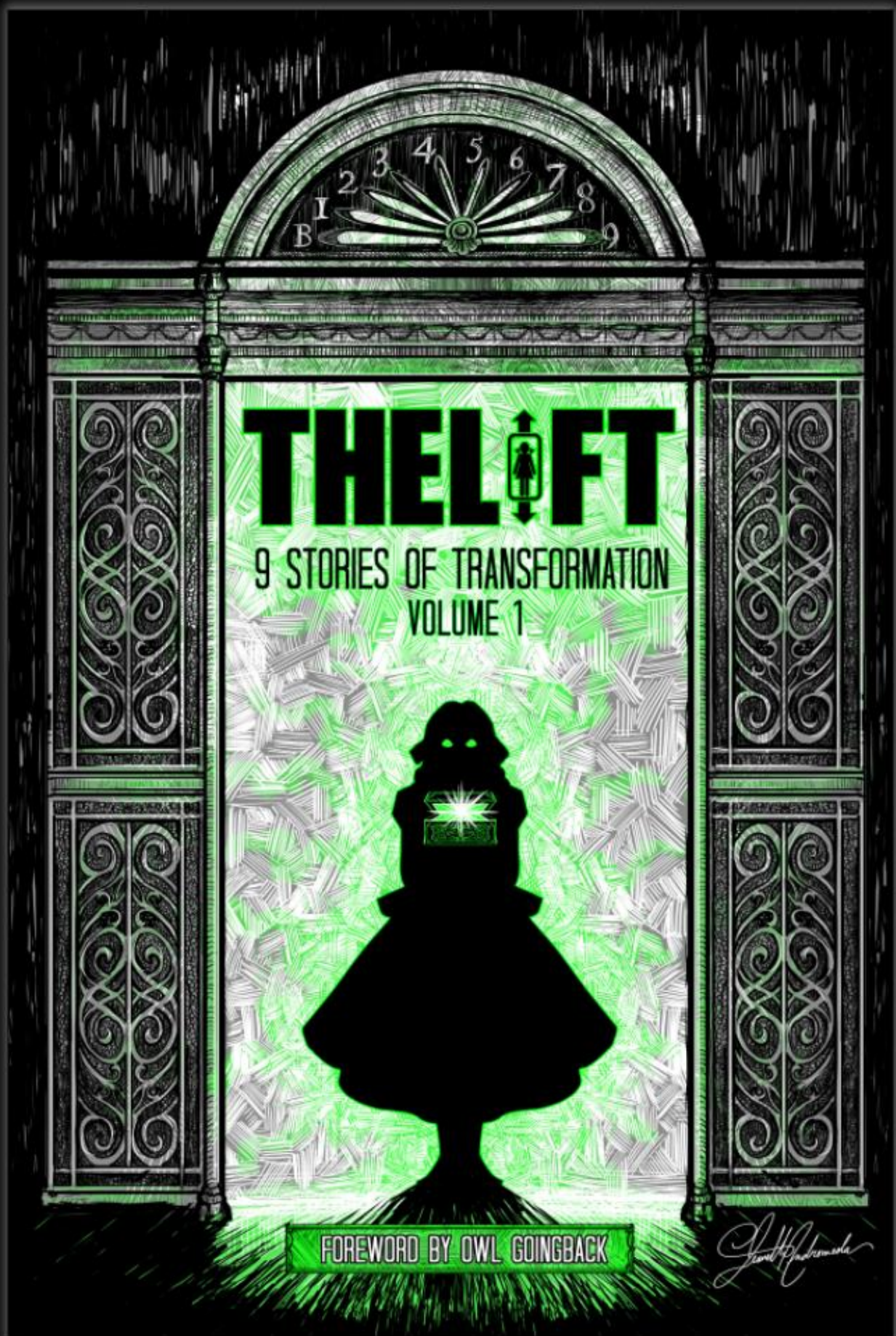
Davis Walden is a writer, sound designer, and actor based in Portland, Oregon. He is the creator of The Viridian Wild, a fantasy-adventure audio drama about a mythozoologist studying magical creatures. He is a writer for Hit The Bricks, a musical audio drama set one hundred years after Dorothy's adventures in Oz, and Dining in the Void, a science-fiction mystery about six alien celebrities trapped on a space station. He is a sound designer of Nightlight, a black horror storytelling podcast. When Davis isn't working, he likes reading, going out with friends, and trying to catch up on a long queue of movies and shows. Davis has published multiple short stories with The Wicked Library and hosted the series' Pride Month episode.

**Jesse Hawke** - Artist / Portraitist

Jesse Hawke (they/them) is an artist, writer and editor, with a first-class honours degree in English. Their primary occupation at the moment involves attempting to prevent a small cat from eating various wires.







AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Sarah was my bestie.

We'd grown up together, played games together, played jokes on each other, played jokes on our big sisters.

At Hallowe'en, every year as far back as I can remember, Sarah's parents held a party for us at the house with the green door.

I was fourteen and Sarah was twelve the year we saw *her*.

I followed my sister, Trisha, into the back garden. Sarah and her family were stoking the campfire they'd built as our sisters wrapped us up in our plastic witch costumes, pinning our pointed black hats to our hair.

"Go on!" Sarah yelled, and I spun around the roaring fire, dipping behind large orange flames.

Huffing out a breath, I stumbled, stopping near the old wooden table laden with cakes, pumpkin pie, and homemade lemonade.

"Dad, can we do the apple bobbing now?" Sarah asked, face flush with excitement.

We were having a blast, ignoring our family, eventually collapsing in a heap by the old, lurid green back door. It smelled of mildew.

Sarah's parents owned two houses, but they only opened this one once a year—at Hallowe'en.

I didn't know why, though I know that house always gave me the heeby jeebies. And it wasn't just me; Sarah's family never lived in that second house and it was always empty.

Apart from the voices.

I thought I could hear those voices now, whispering in my ear, "Come on—"

"Come on," Sarah said, grasping my hand and standing up, "let's explore."

"I don't know," I whined, more than a little afraid.

"Come on," Sarah pleaded this time, and I relented.

The heavy green door groaned as it opened onto a dusty hallway—old, cracked tiles on the floor echoing fear with every footstep.

The smell made us gag: mold, cat wee, and...something else.

It almost smelled like rotten eggs.

And it was cold.

More than cold.

A chill breeze played with my long hair, like fingers twirling it, and in the breeze I could hear a voice whisper "Yessss," a sibilant plea. It seemed to slither between my shoulder blades.

I shuddered as we walked through the long corridor, dodging cobwebs, the otherwise silent house...eerie.

Then Sarah began to sing, voice lilting, rising along with the crackle of the flames we could still hear from outside.

"She dances round the fire,

The flames are leaping higher

Her comb, it dances too,

Its sights are set on you."

I spun around, gasping. "Where'd ya learn that?"

"Sive taught it to me," Sarah said and then she laughed, making ants crawl up my spine.

"Don't know her," I mumbled, then, "Who is she?"

"Shh, come on."

Sarah headed up the old staircase, floorboards creaking underneath us as we climbed, each footstep sounding a death knell. I could've sworn I heard her say, "She's calling us."

When I reached the top I stopped to catch my breath, cold air escaping from my lips in a cloud, like when it snowed outside.

It was too cold.

"Dad used to tell us creepy stories about the banshees in Ireland," I told her, delaying the moment we went farther. "Women who combed their hair and counted; one, two, three, and on, until they reached a hundred."

And when they reached that number, they would throw the comb with a blood-curdling scream.

I shuddered as Sarah led the way to the back bedroom, opening the door like a tomb opening in a graveyard.

And whoever the comb was aimed at...next morning, they'd be dead.

I trembled at the memory of it, even as Sarah continued to sing, her hushed voice reminding me of those legends.

"Who is she, then?" I asked. The ash from the earlier fire coiled in my throat—a snake tightening its grasp. Sarah stopped too, and looked at me with a mischievous, secretive smile.

"You can't tell," she breathed.

"Promise," I answered, leaning in closer to her, thinking of all the secrets we shared.

"Okay," she said, glancing furtively left and right, "That woman in the window told me."

"What?" I asked.

Sarah smiles eerily, and I wondered if she was just trying to spook me.

Then we heard it.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

The thudding of my heart drowned out all other sounds.

Sarah was grinning.

With a horrible cackle, the girl I'd once thought of as my best friend raised her arm, pointing at that darkened window and the shadow woman in grey rags who stood there.

Slowly, her movements awkward, the woman turned around to look at us.

Heart still thumping in my chest, I stared at her, frozen in my fear, watched as the shadow walked towards us, gaining substance, a gnarled, wooden comb held in one pale hand. Her stringy, dark hair obscured her features as she pushed the comb through it.

"She dances round the fire," whispered Sarah's voice behind me.

Pure terror clawed at my insides, turning them cold, as I watched the skeletal hand raise the comb up high.

Dead eyes, black as oil, stared straight at me.

Her putrid mouth opened wide and she let loose a high-pitched screech, high enough to shatter glass.

I couldn't move.

This was it—I could feel it in my bones. I was about to die, and my best friend had led me here with a smile on her face.

I watched, frozen with fear, as she threw the comb...

\*\*\*

First there was a black fog.

Then nothing.

The next moment I was standing looking out of the back bedroom window, watching my sister in the garden with Sarah and her family.

And another figure, that had drifted away into the night.

I was cold as death.

Before I knew it, I took the gnarled wooden comb that had found its way to my hand, brushing my tangled hair.

And started to sing.

#### About the Author:

HWA member Theresa Derwin writes Urban Fantasy, Horror and Horror Erotica, with over sixty anthology acceptances, one in *Below the Stairs* with Clive Barker, Ramsey Campbell and Paul Kane and recently made her second pro rate sale. She has completed her MA Creative Writing at BCU. Her forthcoming books include *God's Vengeance* from Crystal Lake Publishing. She is the 2019 HWA Mary Shelley Scholarship recipient and a Seers Table contributor.

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

The cool night air felt wonderful as it flowed across his dark grey skin. A smile formed on his deformed blackened lips, and he grunted with enjoyment as families and children ran through the streets going from house to house as they collected bags full of treats on this joyous Halloween night. Shuffling along he spotted children dressed as Ghosts, Vampires, Cartoon characters and many other costumes he didn't recognize. He giggled and clapped as he noticed several small children dressed up as him, or in what people actually thought he looked like. The green skin, flat head and neck bolts were really something. A deep growl rolled through his belly letting him know how long it had been since he'd eaten but he wanted to wait, he only came out to populated areas during the nights of Halloween. This wonderful holiday was the only time he could pass through the living without notice. A small boy bumped into him from behind and fell at his feet. He turned to stare down at the small chubby child who just gazed up at him.

"Sorry mister. Great costume" The fat little boy smiled as he rose to his feet and ran to the next house.

He watched as the boy knocked on the door then held out his bag for the offered treats. The boy thanked the woman that loaded him up with candy and turned to walk back down the sidewalk to the next house the entire time, stuffing candy in his mouth as he went. Smiling to himself he knew this chubby boy would be his treat tonight, but he would follow and wait. He would wait until the boy was tired and full of candy because just like this chubby little boy, he loved his treats to be on the sweet side.

## **Wanting Sleep | *Patrick J. Wynn***

Every night it's the same. A soft voice whispers into my ear preventing me from drifting off into dreamland. It is not always her whisper that keeps me from sleep, sometimes she tickles me in the places only a wife knows about. Other times she'll drag her nails up and down my back sending shivers through me. Once she drags me from sleep her raspy voice bellows in laughter as she runs from the room. I have begged her to stop and let me sleep but she gets tremendous enjoyment out of keeping me from sleeping. I tell her that it is affecting my days. I am having trouble staying awake at work, sometimes nodding off as I run the giant press machine endangering all those who work around me. My drives to and from work are a fight to stay on the road as my sleep deprived mind imagines things that are not there or distorts things that are. Each night I beg her to let me sleep but her mocking laughter is her only answer. I'm starting to think she is mad I killed her.

## **Surprised | *Patrick J. Wynn***

Out of the corner of his eye Jeff could see the sun rise through his bedroom window. The grey sky slowly brightened to a glowing orange brightness that told of a new day to come. Stillness filled the bedroom and Jeff could feel the cold air seep into his feet and climb up his legs and into his chest and spread through his arms. He wanted nothing more than to move, to reach out and pull the heavy blanket up to just feel the warmth that he lay under its comforting weight. Jeff stared around the room frozen in place, the sudden loud screaming buzz from his alarm clock blared out but he lay unmoving even in shock from the sudden loud screech. Doing his best to look around the room with cold stiff eyes he wanted desperately to cry out to scream for help, but it was an effort beyond his ability. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, he settled down and he found not shock, panic or terror just lonely surprise at what death really was.

### **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.

The scene before me was perfect. A track surrounded by bare trees, stripped of their leaves by the winter cold, every inch covered in pure white snow. It was worthy of a postcard. It was just the photo I needed. As a freelance photographer, money was tight, and when I heard a hugely popular nature magazine was looking for a new photographer, I had to give it a shot.

I spot something tucked away at the beginning of the track, hidden behind a pile of snow. Moving in closer, I see it's a wooden sign, its dark post sticking out of the ground with two mossy planks of wood on top of it **'Beware of Snow Witch'** written in big, messy letters. The Snow Witch was an urban legend, told through generations. The story goes that the witch had promised her hand to a powerful warlock, but got cold feet and called the wedding off. He was so heartbroken, so incensed with rage, that he cursed her to an eternity trapped in these woods alone, only able to leave once she found someone to take her place. A task easier said than done, as no one who knew the story dared venture into the woods. Except for me. I didn't believe the story for one minute and certainly wasn't spooked by it.

"Brilliant," I smile, snapping away with my camera, making sure to catch the sunlight peeking through the trees.

I continue to walk further down the track, taking pictures as I go, the beauty of the landscape engrossing me so much that I lose track of time.

And I sure as hell didn't notice the lady in white standing before me.

"Hello," she smiles, her eyes an icy blue, her long flowing hair platinum white. Her dress, with its long sleeves and large skirt that falls to the ground, is whiter than the snow surrounding us. She is stunning.

"Hi..." I stammer, my heart racing. "Wh-who are you?"

"We don't need to worry about that," she breathes, taking a step toward me.

My eyes dart behind her as I realise with a rising feeling of dread that the sun is setting quickly.

"I'm sorry if I'm trespassing...but it's so beautiful. I couldn't help myself..." I take a step back. "I'll go now. It's getting late."

I turn to walk back down the track but she's right in front of me, a smile curling her lips.

"Oh, you can't leave," she laughs, putting her ice-cold hand on my chest. "It's your turn now."

Her other hand thrusts forward and drags something sharp across my throat—her razor-like nails. The pain as she splits my neck from ear to ear is incredible. I drop to my knees wildly clutching at my throat, my blood staining the white snow a crimson red. She crouches down in front of me, her face close to mine, her blue eyes glowing.

"I've been waiting years for a replacement, but people are too scared to come here, but not you. I've had enough of being the Snow Witch. It's your turn now."

I don't remember much after that. All I know is that I'm here now, trapped in this blissful scene. I can't say how long I've been here. I hear people in the woods sometimes, but none come my way. But I just know, one day, someone *has* to come by. Maybe a young photographer like I once was, and then it will be their turn to be the Snow Witch. For I, just like the one before me, have had enough.

#### About the Author:

A bookworm since childhood, Belinda is passionate about stories and has turned her hand to writing them, with several stories published in a variety of publications. Belinda lives in Australia with her family, two moody cats and her super cute miniature dachshund. Belinda adores all things spooky, music and travel.

Instagram: [@witchy\\_woman](#)

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"A scream is always just that – a noise and not music." – Karl Jung

Eddie Walker glared through his living room window at his asshole neighbor, Joe Patterson, as the man strung orange lights around the second floor balcony of his single family home. The sound of high winds blowing and eerie shrieking played on loudspeakers, filling the night air with a cacophony that put Eddie's teeth on edge.

The tacky decorations were bad enough, but the noise was far worse. Joe played horror movie soundtracks on outdoor speakers all day and night. Flashing lights had shown through Eddie's bedroom window, disturbing his sleep. Every year it was the same fucking thing. The agony never ended with Halloween. Oh, no. That was just the beginning. The annoyance continued with country music blasted from speakers over Thanksgiving; carols for Christmas; sappy '50s love songs for Valentine's Day. By the time Mardi Gras rolled around, Eddie had torn out most of his hair. There are only so many times a man can hear *Grandma Got Run Over By A Reindeer* and not murder someone. Lack of sleep and anxiety from noise pollution didn't make his situation any better. The neighborhood did not have a Home Owner's Association. Despite horror stories he had heard about HOAs, Eddie wished the Hidden Grove community had one. An HOA would have put a cork in Joe's yearly holiday assault in no time flat.

This year, Eddie intended to stop Joe dead in his tracks even if it killed him. He couldn't take another five months of cloying holiday cheer. He shrugged into his coat and boots, trudged across his lawn on his way to Joe's house, and poked the front doorbell the way he wanted to poke Joe's eyes out.

"Hey, neighbor. Hope you like the show." Joe said when he answered the door. Eddie followed Joe into the living room. Joe knew damned well what Eddie had thought of his decorations, but he displayed them every damned year despite the racket. Hell, he displayed them because he knew they got on Eddie's last nerve.

"C'mon in. What can I do you for?" Joe asked.

"Turn off the noise."

"Nope. No can do."

Eddie narrowed his eyes. A pulse beat in his temples, threatening a headache. "I'm not asking. Turn off the noise, or I'm calling the cops."

"Go ahead. The cops won't do a thing."

Joe's dad was the town's corrupt mayor. Both men had the local police in their pockets.

"Why are you doing this?" Eddie asked. "Do you have any idea how crazy this is making me?"

"Well, you did fuck my wife."

Eddie followed Joe upstairs to the balcony. Yeah, he banged Gloria. At the time, Eddie didn't know Joe had mob ties. If he had, he would have kept Gloria at arm's length, but that's not how it all went down. Although she was a hot number, Eddie was sorry he bedded her only because of all the grief that followed. She left Joe not long after, but Joe never got over the affair. Eddie had not expected Joe to hold a grudge for so long, but here they were. He wasn't going to let the man get away with his abuse for a third year in a row.

"Can you at least turn it down? I can't think with all that commotion."

Joe shrugged and smiled a smile that enraged Eddie. "You don't like it? Move." He turned away from Eddie and grabbed another string of orange lights. He stapled them to the wooden railing around the balcony. The man won this war, and there wasn't much Eddie could do about it. The cops were in Joe's pocket. The other neighbors were terrified of him since there were rumors he and his dad had ties to organized crime. So, Joe got away with murder.

That gave Eddie an idea.

There was no talking to Joe. He refused to turn down the volume. In fact, he turned it up just to drive Eddie batshit. Eddie couldn't take it anymore. Crimson with rage, he stomped across the balcony, but Joe only laughed at him. While Joe had his back turned, Eddie grabbed the string of lights and then wrapped them around Joe's neck. Both men struggled but Eddie got the better of Joe and flung him over the balcony.

Joe's neck snapped so loudly Eddie heard it over the howling that came from the speakers. In a panic, he looked around the dark and silent street—dark and silent save for Joe's display. No one came outside. No one looked out their windows.

No one noticed the man swinging from the balcony with his head and neck wrapped in Halloween twinkle lights. Eddie saw his chance. He ran from the balcony, down the stairs, and through the kitchen. In a sudden inspiration, he grabbed a six pack of expensive ale from Joe's fridge. Payback for years of torture. After he turned down the volume—he couldn't turn it off or the neighbors would be suspicious—he walked to a window and looked outside.

The street was deserted.

Eddie opened the front door and ran across the lawn to his house. Glee he finally won his war with Joe, he relaxed in front of the TV with an ale. Before the clock struck midnight, Eddie fell asleep.

By the next evening, Eddie napped on the couch as blue and red lights flashed outside the living room window. He awakened to the sight of cops and an ambulance parked in front of Joe's house. The second thing Eddie noticed was the silence. Glorious, blessed silence. Someone had turned off the speakers. Morbid curiosity getting the better of him, Eddie walked outside. Neighbors had lined up and down the street, rubbernecking to get a better view of the covered gurney rolling towards the ambulance. One of Eddie's neighbor's, Phil Idesworth, waved at him as he walked down the street. Eddie met him at the sidewalk.

"Have you heard?" Phil asked.

"No, what's going on?" Eddie tried to sound nonchalant but feared he had failed badly.

"Joe's brother found him this afternoon hanging from the balcony. Some people walked past the house earlier today, but thought Joe was one of the Halloween decorations. Isn't that crazy? Joe'd been hanging from the balcony all day long, and no one noticed. The cops investigated and found Gloria's mummified corpse in a trunk in his bedroom closet. They think it was a murder/suicide. He killed her three years ago and couldn't live with the guilt so he offed himself."

Eddie's heart raced in astonishment and excitement. Did he get away with it?

"He won't be blasting music anymore?"

"Not a chance," Phil said. "Murder/suicide, in this neighborhood. I thought this was a respectable community."

Eddie smiled. "I can see you're in shock. C'mon in. Have a beer."

He and Phil sat on the couch. Eddie handed Phil an ale.

"This is Joe's favorite brand," Phil said. "Let's have a toast. To Joe. The bastard. May he rest in peace."

"And may his sound system never be heard from again," Eddie thought as a wicked grin escaped his lips. Revenge was sweet.

#### About the Author:

Trish Wilson lives in Lovecraft country, where she writes horror. She won a Best Short Story mention on *The Solstice List@ 2017: The Best Of Horror for Invisible*, which appears in *Zippered Flesh 3*. She sometimes writes as E. A. Black and Elizabeth Black. In addition to writing horror, she is the Media Director for The Horror Zine.

Facebook: [Elizabeth Black](#)

Amazon Author Page: [Trish Wilson](#)

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#### Decision Time | John H. Dromey

Jimmy wondered what Halloween-suitable persona he should assume.

"How about an elf?" his mother suggested.

"Elves are too short to reach most doorbells."

"A marsupial? You wouldn't need a bucket. They have their own pouches."

"A kangaroo's arms are too short to reach the candy bowls."

"Why don't you just go out as yourself then, before all the good treats are gone?"

"Okay, Mom."

"What are you purporting to be, young man?"

"A shapeshifter."

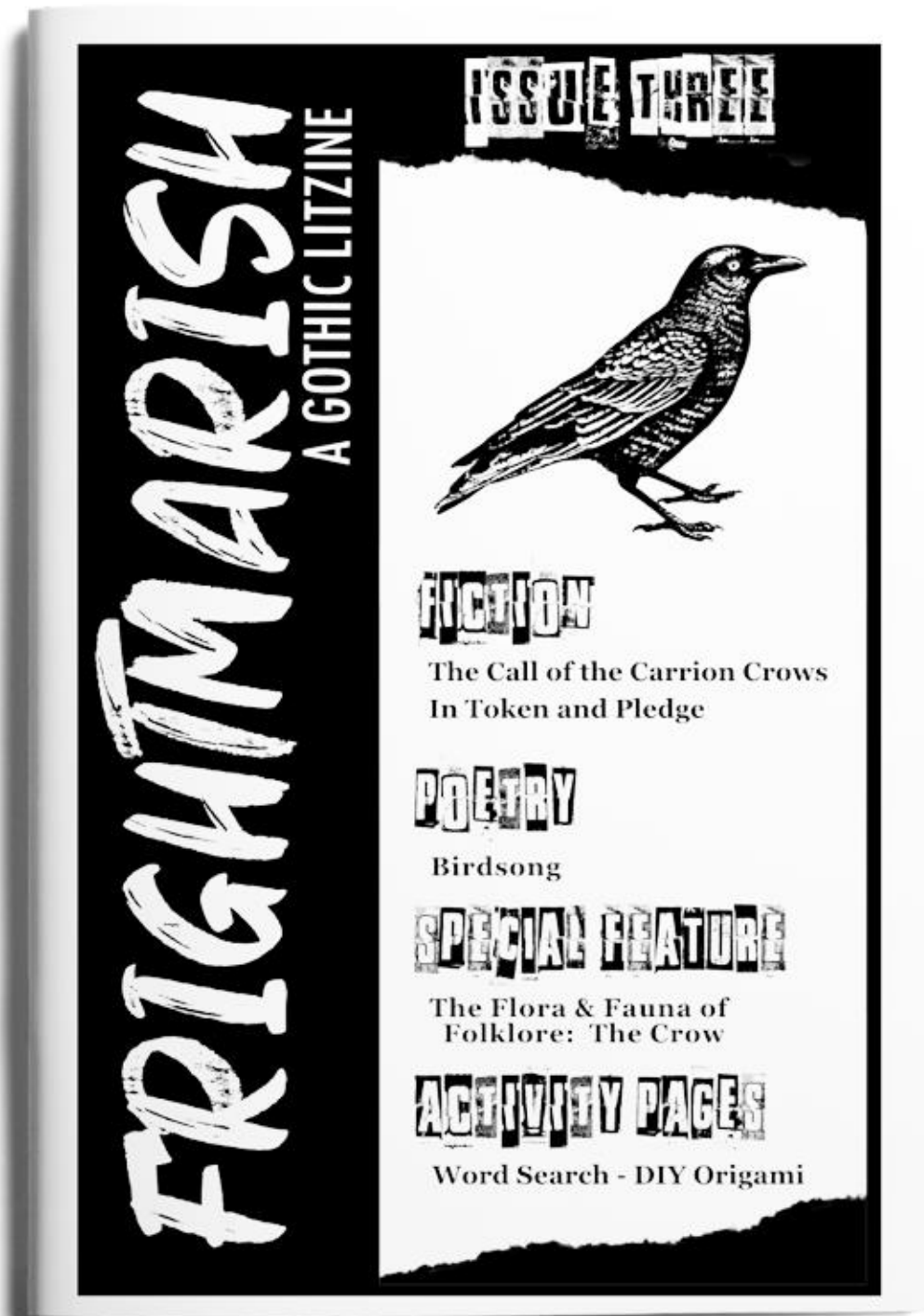
"How pathetic! You're not even half trying."

In response, Jimmy spontaneously turned himself into a Rottweiler and bit the hand that was supposed to feed him.

#### 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 fiction has appeared in over a dozen previous issues of The Sirens Call eZine. In addition, he's had stories published in Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Flame Tree Fiction Newsletter, Hybrid Fiction, Mystery Magazine, Sci-Fi Lampoon Magazine, Thriller Magazine, and elsewhere.

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*From: Janice Sherrock – 21/10/2017*

*To: robbie\_smith88@fastmail.com*

*Hello you,*

*I know it's been such a long time, and we didn't always get along, but I thought it would be nice to have a little...reunion.*

*So I'm having a Halloween party. It'll be on Halloween itself and you really must come along.*

*I can't wait to see how much people have changed.*

*See you soon,*

*Janice*

Shit, I didn't mean to open that. Looks a bit spammy. Never mind, slip of the finger. Janice Sherrock... I know that name, though. Wasn't she the oddball from Mr. Wilson's class? Sat in the corner playing with her hair. And then Clare put chewing gum in it. The next week she came in and all that hair had been sliced out like one big gummy tumour.

There's a buzzing in my pocket. Think of the devil and she shall FaceTime.

"Hey, are you going to this Halloween party then?" she says. The lines of my forehead crease.

"Of course, yeah. Are you?" Words spill from my mouth, dribble out, as if my jaw is numb.

"Well obviously! I mean, I don't remember Janice very well... but this feels like something I need to be there for. Hers is that house at the end of Blair Lane, isn't it? Overgrown little cottage, bit spooky." Clare sounds excited and confused.

My phone feels cold in my hand. "Alright, guess I'll see you there."

"Dress up scary. I think this will be a night to remember." Clare hangs up.

\*\*\*

Trees line Blair Lane and kind of hang over it like they're trying to reach across and clasp hands. But, like Tantalus, they can't quite make it.

I kick damp leaves aside to warm my feet. My ripped shirt is covered in fake blood and I borrowed my sister's make-up to darken my eyes, pale my face. Zombie Robbie, reporting for duty.

It's like a private road, this end part of the lane, leading to the one cottage. Jack-O'-Lanterns rest upon branches and light the path in orange. I figure there'll be music but there's just this low cackling.

Probably some hidden speakers. Clever. Creepy.

The gate creaks—of course it does—and I walk up to the door, raise my hand to knock. It swings in of its own accord.

Probably a neat little mechanism. Smart stuff.

A staircase straight ahead is pitch black, but there's a small crowd through to the left. The lights are dim and there are cobwebs hanging from the ceiling. There's a table, too, with a big bowl of clear water. Flaming torches adorn the walls. A big grandfather clock stands proud. Pretty elaborate and cool, I've got to give her that, but what else did I expect from the class freak? Five people holding plastic cups are huddled in the room's centre. Familiar faces.

Clare beckons me over. She's dressed as a witch. A black velvet low-cut dress leaving little to the imagination, pointy hat. Inexplicable cat whiskers painted on her face. "Hey, have you seen Janice? Tommo thinks she was at school with us. Quiet girl, frizzy hair. You remember?"

Was Clare joking? She'd tormented the poor girl.

Correction: we'd tormented her.

What's this big fat tennis ball trying to gulp down my throat? I can't remember why I even came to this party. This group of our school friends, we were all there, watching. And now we're inside her house, a decade on.

That cackling goes on, quiet, quieter still. "Where are the speakers?" I ask. Tommo shrugs his rugby-wide shoulders, has his wolfman mask in his hand.



There's a wide wooden door at the back of the room. It swings inwards. Stood in the doorway is a woman shrouded in shadow. Long black curly hair runs down her back. And she's wearing a...

"Do you like my dress?" she says, her voice high-pitched, girlish. It's a flowing princess type of dress, pale blue, makes you think of Cinderella. And, yes, she's wearing glass slippers.

Clare catches my eye, grins sideways, like it's high school all over again.

"Oh, it's *lovely*," she says, stepping forward. "I'm Clare, lovely to meet you."

I gulp down that big old tennis ball, feel it hit my stomach like a lead weight. One of those heavy balls on fishing lines, maybe, a float.

The grandfather clock's hands are spinning much too quick, nauseatingly fast.

"Not as many as I'd have liked. A shame, but of course if you don't open the message, you don't accept the invitation. Oh," she goes on affecting surprise, a thin pale hand rising to her even thinner mouth, "is that the time? The stroke of midnight."

Janice steps into the light. Her eyes are black marble orbs, dark veins spreading from them like bleeding wounds beneath the skin. Clare gasps, stumbles backwards.

Tommo is the first. He clutches his stomach, screams like he's in agony, folds over until he's folding in on himself, reddens until he's all red, shrinks until he's totally shrunk. Sat on the floor is a juicy red apple.

One by one the others go through the same, excruciating process. Only Clare and I stood there, horrified wide eyes on the four gleaming apples dotted about the floor.

So many questions die in the desert of my throat. But Clare mumbles something. Clears her throat, repeats it. "Why?"

Wrong question, I think, wrong question.

"Why?" Janice spits, drifts towards Clare as if hanging from a wire, floating. But these aren't special effects. "School was hell for me. You made it that way."

"School? Oh god, Jan the Jinx? I didn't even... That was just fun, just... banter," Clare says. Excuses, I know. Have told myself the same thing.

"Well now I get to have my fun," Janice says, slips something from beneath the dress. It's got a mean glint, even in the dull half-light. "My birthday party. Nobody came. And you filmed me alone at the table, crying into my cake. Posted it on YouTube. And you don't even recognise me?!"

There's a knot in my stomach. It tightens, doubles me up. I grunt, Clare squeals. My fingers are splicing together, turning orange. I should never have read the email.

\*\*\*

There's only darkness. And then I feel its sharp cold slice through me, feel blood guzzle forth. A hand is inside me dredging my insides same as when they search lakes for bodies. Two triangles of light appear, allowing me to see the room. Janice holds the bloody knife, plunges it into me, creates my jagged mouth.

Next, she scalps me, introduces a flame.

There's a pumpkin across from me—inescapably Clare—screaming, spitting blood.

And then there's Janice, looming all princess-like over a bowl of water. No longer empty, apples float and wobble. She catches my eye, grins, then plunges her head into the bowl, comes up with an apple hooked between her pointed teeth.

*Crunch crunch crunch.*

Blood slides down her chin, sprays from her mouth as she spits the innards onto the floor. Janice finally gets her party.

#### About the Author:

Stephen Howard is a writer of fantasy, sci-fi, and horror fiction, whose work has been published by Lost Boys Press, Scribble, Ghost Orchid Press, and others.

Website: [Stephen Howard](http://StephenHoward.com)

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How did this always happen?

Why was it always him?

Every damn holiday he drew the short stick. As if being a night guard wasn't bad enough, being on duty in *this* place—on Halloween Eve—really solidified just how much of a change he really needed. They didn't call him Unlucky Joe for nothing.

Saint Andrew's Cathedral was an archaic, creaky old place. Its stained glass windows were illuminated by LED candles late into the evening, casting jewel toned hues out onto the graveyard that sat just beyond the rear of the property. The outline of the grand organ sat like a monolith against the picturesque windows. A statue of Mother Mary sat in the foyer, looking down with judgment and contempt on her old, warped wooden face. You could be the purest of souls and still feel the chill of her gaze.

This was his least favorite location to work.

The rounds were simple enough. Park at the rear of the graveyard, walk the rows of tombstones until you inevitably found yourself at the back door of the church. Scan the outer perimeter, head inside, check the pews, the balcony, the space behind the old organ, and finally the priest's office. Once the list was completed, you should head back outside and retrace your steps to the car. It took about twenty minutes. It was mundane, boring, and it had to be done at the top of the hour. Every hour.

Joe had done this five times already. The clock sat at 2:58am. He yawned. He didn't want to exit the car. It was cold, foggy, the moon was a harvest yellow that looked sickly. He looked at his cellphone. The signal was low, his girlfriend's smiling face lit up the darkness of his car from the brightly lit screen. He wanted to go home.

Only three more hours. He could last three more hours. There was a pot of chili and a noon football game to look forward to if he could manage to get through the night.

3:00am. He opened the car door. His hands found his back, he leaned into a stretch and yawned loudly into the quiet, still night. He started his rounds at the final resting place of one Harriette McB—. He was unsure what it meant to say, what had been lost to time. The stone was worn down from years of abuse by the harsh hands of the winds and the rain. He could only assume she was one of the first residents here. The cracked, jagged edges of her neighbors showcased the cruelty of time, of being forgotten.

He hated this place.

With a sharp motion he flicked on his flashlight and started the winding walk through the old cemetery. He rushed through it. No one would be out here, no one ever was.

He barely made it to the halfway mark when something terribly amiss broke through the mundane routine. Movement in the church's stained glass windows. A long shadow drifted across the rows of graves like an ill omen, a dark eclipse against the flickering glow of fabricated light. It moved like the hands of a clock, almost on an arc, with an undetermined shape that seemed much too hard to discern than what was typical. He waited, figured his eyes were simply playing a trick on him. But it happened a second time.

Joe sighed. He turned his light off and cut through the graveyard toward the entrance of Saint Andrew's. The door was ajar. A lone, shimmering candy wrapper of metallic mulberry hues sat mangled atop the wooden floors.

'Damn kids,' he mumbled.

The wooden door squealed on its hinges as he pushed inward. Mother Mary's face looked down in disapproval. Maybe at the mud on his shoes, maybe at the piercing in his lip, perhaps at the old, shoddily done Grim Reaper tattoo with its scythe that peered out above the collar of his shirt. On this dark evening, just beyond the witching hour, she seemed much more disappointed than normal.

Another wrapper crinkled beneath his foot. Emerald in color, the sticky residue of caramel latched onto his sole like a leech. He followed the shimmer of crinkly metallic papers into the cathedral.

A figure shifted by the pulpit beneath the moonlight that broke through the colored window panes. Covered in a black cloak, with shoddily adhered plastic horns atop the hood, the trespasser giggled. A ring of candies littered the space around them. A candle, dripping with wax, was waved back and forth like a pendulum in a sharply manicured hand. The lanky, thin arm looked fragile, as if the movements may snap bone with how forcefully the flame was being bounced.

'Not funny, kid, time to go!' Joe snapped, his flashlight firmly stuck on the hooligan's frame.

The cloaked figure started to rise. Its height elongated until it towered above the organ. Body reed thin, it leaned backward like a bowstring being tugged on, curved like the outline of the moon above. Its face was nothing but a

gaping maw of endless rows of teeth, spiraling down into a thin neck, sticky with sweets and blood. Its laughter shook the foundation of the cathedral with an apocalyptic force as it began to writhe. A corkscrew-like motion to its fluid movements, it shot outward, hungry for flesh.

By the time his backup arrived, the only bit Unlucky Joe to be found sat in the foyer atop the warped wooden floorboards in the form of a puddle of plasma and urine. The entrance to the old church was awash in blue and red lights, the chatter of concerned police officers wafted in through the open doors, the candy wrappers rustled in the wind. Blood and caramel saturated the wooden visage of Mother Mary in the doorway. A smile sat on her lips that chilly Halloween morning.

A Happy Halloween, indeed.

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

Alycia 'Al' Davidson (she/they) is a writer who specializes in massive space operas and tiny disturbances. She is currently working on a large novel series and loves creating short stories and flash fiction with a focus on ghosts, grief, inclusivity, and all things scary. She lives with a yellow eyed demon in the form of a grey cat named Jukebox.

**Blog:** [Disturbances by Alycia](#)

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

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#### **Steroids Please | *Eddie D. Moore***

"Stop scratching that."

The doctor moved to the next person in bed, and John slid his hand back under the cover and lightly began scratching again.

"Come on, Doc. We're just having a reaction to grass on the planet. All we need is a steroid. We're missing the party."

"I'm just doing my job."

"What am I supposed to tell Suzan?"

With two steps, Doc was by John's side. He said in a no-nonsense voice, "Stop scratching that," and then pulled the blanket down.

Hundreds of tiny red bugs crawled out of John's leg.

"You still think steroids will help?"

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

Eddie D. Moore travels hundreds of hours a year, and he fills that time by listening to audiobooks. When he isn't playing with his grandchildren, he writes his own stories. You can find a list of his publications on his wordpress blog - Eddie D. Moore, or by visiting his Amazon Author Page. While you're there, be sure to pick up a copy of his mini-anthology Misfits & Oddities.

**Blog:** [Eddie D. Moore](#)

**Twitter:** [@EddieMoore27](#)





As Officer Tully walked away from his police cruiser, he turned on his flashlight, training the beam this way and that. It made little difference, though, because a thick fog swirled around him. He could barely see the entrance to the cemetery, much less anything else. He wasn't thrilled to be here in the middle of the night, but he was responding to an anonymous 9-1-1 report of a man wandering around nearby. Tombstones in several burial sites had been vandalized over the past year.

This cemetery was among the oldest in the area, lying in thick woods on the outskirts of town. No longer used, it had no caretaker, electricity or water source, and was mostly forgotten. The last time Tully had set foot within its boundaries, the place had been overrun by weeds and small trees, and he assumed it was much worse now.

"Dangit," he muttered when his light flickered and went out. "I forgot the blasted batteries." He shook his flashlight, tapped it against his leg, and cursed when nothing happened. Then he stuck it in his pocket, deciding to use the light on his cell phone instead.

Tully took a few cautious steps forward, jumping when he bumped into something. He chuckled as he realized it was only a crypt the murkiness had concealed from him.

He began walking again and almost ran into a person.

"Can I see some ID?" he asked.

The other man ignored Tully, walking away as if he hadn't spoken.

He frowned. "Stop!"

The stranger stopped walking and turned around. He didn't speak but his eyes bore into Tully's. With no warning, chunks of his hair fell to his shoulders and onto the ground. His head and face began melting, running in rivulets down his body. Soon not even his skull remained intact.

Tully watched wide-eyed as the man's entire body dissolved into a yellow, gelatinous substance. It seeped into the soil, vanishing within seconds.

"What the...?" Tully looked around, but saw nothing but fog, along with occasional, tantalizing glimpses of tombstone.

Kneeling where he'd seen the ooze disappear, he examined the earth but found no traces of yellow or anything unusual. He couldn't help but wonder who'd go to the trouble of staging such an elaborate prank and why. More suspicious than ever now, Tully tightened his lips, stood, and drew his sidearm.

"Come out!" he yelled.

Something moved by his right foot and he flinched. A hand had come out of the ground. As he stared open-mouthed, it grabbed his ankle. He tried to yank free but couldn't. He bent to pry open the fingers but the harder he pulled, the tighter they gripped. His foot began to tingle, and the skin started melting off.

Tully panicked, yelling as he fought desperately to get loose. When his foot was almost gone, the fingers grasped his other ankle.

Within seconds, another pool of liquid lay on the ground.

#### About the Author:

Gabriella Balcom writes fantasy, sci-fi, horror, romance, and literary fiction. She loves forests, mountains, and back roads, has had 337 works accepted for publication, and was nominated for the Washington Science Fiction Association's Small Press Award. Gabriella's books, *On the Wings of Ideas* and *Worth Waiting For*, resulted from her winning publishing contracts. Her novella, *The Return*, is out also.

Facebook: [Gabriella Balcom](#)



In the heart of our forest, Maya swings between worlds.

She leans back, laughing as she swings into the sunlight, her hair caressing copper leaves on the ground. She has yellow ribbons in her hair, and a blue gown with cornflowers along the hem.

The swing reaches its apex, freezing her in the yellow dapples before gravity pulls her back again into shadow. Her eye sockets deepen then, her features grinding down to bone. On the other side, she hits the apex, held still at the end of her tether, her eyes no longer warm brown but now a soft white, luminous in the night. With a smile we don't like, she drops back into the light, swinging away, away.

All through the morning Maya has swung between worlds, touching first life and then death, laughing and shivering as she goes. Her yellow ribbons change to red in the dark, her gown to grey, with poppies studding the hem. Her tangle of brown hair spirals into mist when the shadows catch her, holding her in their grasp before releasing.

She falls backwards into the light.

\*\*\*

We were elsewhere when she made the swing. Spread across the forest, cheering the birds and following in the footsteps of ladybugs. In the liminals of sunrise, the girl came into our trees. We noticed her, but we did not move to surround her. She had not given us cause.

Her footsteps rustled under the trees, snapping twigs and leaving a trail of crushing in their wake. Her path was straight, deliberate, unafraid. Not like a girl should move. We began to converge.

By the time we reached her, it was too late.

\*\*\*

Maya swings into darkness. She falls into light.

Her swing is woven from fallen leaves, a brittle and fiery construction. Ruffles drop from the canopy and twine together in a seat of maple bark. Maya's fingers disappear into the leaves as she holds on, swinging through the morning. Occasionally, her laugh cuts the air, and we tremble.

The swing is not of our making. It was not there before the girl came into our woods.

We huddle together, watching her swing into the rift she's created. Her first swing cut the air, a little bead of darkness glittering in the sunshine. We felt the prick and rushed to surround her. Then fear froze us, and pity pushed us back. Maya swings and swings and we do nothing.

What can we do? Does she know what she does to us?

Her features turn grotesque as she cuts our world and enters Theirs. She swings out. She is only a girl once more.

We reach out to the birds, the ladybugs. Why has she come? What has she done? Her time is passing, but she shows no interest in leaving.

Chickadees, juncos, nuthatches, and blue jays have no answers. Our ladybugs retreat into crevices. We hover in the bodies of the trees and feel the world tear a little more.

We know her name is Maya because we felt it, just as we feel our forest. The moment she stepped into the trees from the field, her spirit was open to us. We sensed her life, and the lives she touched before coming here. Yet what we felt was human, small, mortal. We did not feel the swing growing inside her. We did not sense the death in her veins.

When she entered the clearing, the swing unfurled. It answered to her presence like we answer to the trees.

Maya swings, and the hole she has torn widens. A wisp of something extends into our wood. It is almost like a squirrel's paw, clawed and soft at the edges. But as it gropes through, scraping the moss from the ground, we feel its Otherness. Where the wisp touches, the moss browns and dies. The loss strikes us all. We all feel pain when one from our forest suffers.

As Maya swings back, her lovely face shining in the sun, we know what we must do. She laughs, a peculiar, birdlike sound. But she does not notice how the birds have gone quiet, retreating to the treetops. She has not noticed that the insects have quieted as well, huddled in holes and under leaves. She pumps her small legs, pushing herself back towards the shadow.

Her laugh is still ringing in the circle of trees when she slips out of this world and into Theirs. Tied to us by the swing, we sense the Other forest, with its reflections of us. There is no sunlight on the other side of the rift, no ladybugs. The Other forest crawls with things on too many, too few legs. Birds have no feathers; girls have no skin, and light where eyes ought to be.

In the Other forest, she is a girl no longer.



Her laugh is still ringing in our senses when we snap the tether of the swing. She rests at the apex, hanging in the Other forest. With nothing to pull her back, she starts to fall.

It is not enough. Afraid, we rush down from the trees and face the tear in our world. The Others stare back at us, luminous gazes in the shadows between dead and broken trees. Dimly, we see the girl, flopped in her gown, wrapped in the tethers of her broken swing.

She rises and turns her altered eyes on us. No longer connected by the swing, the rift begins to close, sealing her out with all the Other things.

As the lips of the world meet to shut the darkness out, we hear her laughing.

#### About the Author:

Marisca Pichette lives on the edge of the woods, where she spends her time collecting berries and bones. More of her work appears in *Strange Horizons*, *PseudoPod*, and *Apparition Lit*, among others. Her speculative poetry collection, *Rivers in Your Skin*, *Sirens in Your Hair*, is forthcoming from Android Press in Spring 2023.

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#### Di Inferi | *Cristina Mirzoi*

Tear-shaped droplets were slamming against the dusty windows. The looming shape of dark clouds was reflected in the vastness of his great blue eyes. Another lonesome day was ending. He kept staring at the main entrance but could not distinguish any relevant shape and was becoming quite restless. Was he to succumb to a perpetual state of malaise? His thought trailed back to the old days, so old that they felt like fantasies snatched from a stranger.

"Mors? Morsy darling", she chanted affectionately.

He sighed in discontent. The pale lady opened the door and advanced with no regard for his personal space.

"Come on handsome. Mommy has some treats for you", she pleaded.

He lowered his soft ears and arched his back, reluctant to move, wishing she would go away. It was the third time that day she was bothering him about his appetite. Alas, he would have to strike her if she insisted. It was not something he took pleasure in but deemed it necessary.

Despite this tiresome habit, he was quite fond of the hollow-cheeked maid. During stormy nights, he would curl up next to her lanky figure while she graciously stroked his satin-like fur with her lean fingers. While the flames crackled in the stone hearth, they would sit in silence, taking comfort in their shared closeness.

During the old days, the place was overflowing with many people; alluring Gorgons, Empusai, and savage Harpies. The pale maid was a beguiling hostess back then; crowds would gather at the outside gates, begging for a single glance from her, honeyed words soothed them as she would delicately gather their souls with her lean fingers. Poets would sing their love for her, and mighty warriors would taste her name on their lips before the last journey.

Back then, he relished in savouring each morsel. Right now, he was tired of scraps, broken things—lewd and unworthy. Each bite made him feel weaker, foul, and hopeless. But the pale maiden refused to lock the gates of the netherworld and was always waiting for a lost soul to stumble upon this forgotten place. He hissed her away and extended his sharp claws, but she would be back the next day, at the same hour, with her petty request.

"Fine, I will leave you alone for now. But I am sending Pluto next time. You need to contribute to this household if you want us to survive," the maid said languidly, with just a hint of a frown on her ashen face.

Mors stretched lazily; no frail god and his measly offerings would convince him to keep up this worthless pretense, but he will let him try.

#### Lilith | *Cristina Mirzoi*

I was just a boy when they told me to be wary of you. I nodded but did not take heed of their words.

Later, I felt you skulking about, but pretended to be unaware so that you could take pleasure in your pursuit.

At night, I used to lie, eyes wide open, my thoughts drifting towards you, calling your name, again and again, a sacred plea that remained unanswered.

For a while, I feared to have fallen into oblivion. What fault made you abandon me? Was I truly without worth? Shades of doubt tormented me from the first flicker of the morning star until the first rays of sunshine that fondled my skin.

I had lost all hope and was ready to surrender to despair when you finally came. I wept in your arms, and you cradled me into the night.

You lured me with flattery and sweet promises. I stepped into the shadows without fear, like a bloodlust warrior embracing a bountiful Valkyrie.

I walked against the disapproving murmur of my forebears. As my path ended, I hastily surrendered to my lustful yearning. I felt rotten, but it did not matter.

Your face was flushed, as the soft pink devoured your delicate cheeks. Under the benign façade, I felt you nibbling on the crumbs of my battered soul. A harem of bones, half-sunk in poisonous ash, surrounded us, but I knew they did not matter. Only I did.

Under the pale moonshine, I saw your skin turn to dust. You smiled impishly before ripping out my heart with your scrawny hand, but it did not matter. I was already yours.

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

Cristina Mirzoi has a Bachelor's Degree in Communication&PR and an MA in Religious Studies, with a dissertation in Roman Divination. Her favorite author is Ray Bradbury, and she is obsessed with Terry Pratchett's Discworld. Wes Anderson binge watcher. Animal lover. Has written a short story collection in English, *The Headsman*, and a children's fantasy novel in Romanian. Currently working on a dark fantasy novella.

Instagram: [@cristina\\_mirzoi](#)

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#### **Outboard | JB Corso**

Captain Anne floats outside her spaceship as slithering gelatinous creatures trek across the transparent dome over her head. Her crew cries helplessly as their leader spirals away. Splintering sounds echo around the compromised helmet, flooding terror through her mind. Multitudes of infantile cracks emerge, allowing a fine dust through the thin clefts around her face. The senior officer reluctantly breaths in each microbial organism. She gasps at their violating intrusion. They crawl around her lungs, chewing on the moist tissue. Captain Anne chokes against the escaping blood. The brood emerges past her lips to gorge on her stiffening corpse.

#### **Mountain Top End | JB Corso**

Passing chilled air aggravates Prince Randall's face. He had survived the plague, vicious battle campaigns, and a coup only to struggle his last minutes within the harpy's talons. Blood streams pass through the thick clouds. His ornate plate mail help little against the foot-long claws clenching through his internal organs. Each wing flap and strong breeze solidify his end. He thinks of his king and country that would forever wonder about his unprecedented absence. The beast calls out to its starving hatchlings as it ascends towards the mountainside nest. Clouds muffled his screams as its young feed all afternoon.

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

JB Corso is a health care professional who has worked with the mentally ill and geriatric populations for the last 20 years. He appreciates time with his children, writing, and pondering existential dread. He's a combat arms veteran who deployed as an international peacekeeper. He lives with his significant other and enjoys afternoon drives listening to music.

Twitter: [@realJBCorso](#)

When the Halloween Beyond stores appear across America, they intertwine the lives of three visitors in a web of mystery and magic.



Available on Kindle, paperback, Hardcover, and Kindle Unlimited.

During the train journey north Tom Gibbs felt a strange kind of transubstantiation taking place around him. What had first been a raucous, rammed mass of demobbed men—calling and singing; smoking and joking—was slowly unpicking itself into separate bodies. With each stop more of those bodies were shed, scattered out across England, and by the time the train reached his stop at Gadsby, at around 2am, the remaining men had been gently rocked into a growing introspection.

Tom disembarked at Gadsby alone. He missed the step and tripped onto the platform, stumbling amongst the steam and hiss of the engine like a fish dropped onto a skillet.

Gadsby station was unassuming, no more than a length of platform and a ticket office which stood dark and empty. The cheers, flags, and crowds of Dover didn't seem real now that he was faced with that silent, stoic brick building. He was back, at last, in the small farming town where he'd spent his entire life, right up until the war had sent him running to join up.

Behind him the train champed, strained, and pulled away. There were still one or two floating faces at the carriage windows, ashen behind smeared glass, but he didn't turn to see them off. The ache from his wound had spread from his knee up his thigh during the long journey and he stamped his leg to try and work some life back into it. Then he slung his kit bag over his shoulder and set off for his mother and home.

The road to town was downhill and he soon fell into a steady march. Whenever he'd pictured home from the Front it had been Gadsby in spring or at Christmas, not this dead time of shadows with the wash of pearl blue moonlight over everything. His boots sounded loud and strange against the rustle of the hedgerows and the night-time sounds of the trees. Being out in the open beneath the stars made him uneasy. He wanted to roll a cigarette, but even now superstition stayed his hand for fear the red glow might summon a sniper's bullet. Something screamed in one of the fields on the other side of the hedge, a creature meeting its end at the claws of something larger and faster. He clomped on.

At the bottom of the hill the road would bear right and there would be a stile he could climb to cut across Jack Bendelow's fields. As a boy he and his friends had run through those fields with old man Bendelow roaring after them, cuffing them round the ears if he caught hold of them. If he took the shortcut, he could make good time and reach his mam. If she had his telegram she'd surely be up and waiting.

At the bend, though, he found that the stile had been replaced by twists of barbed wire. The claggy smell of the trenches still clung to his clothes and Tom was suddenly repulsed by the idea of tramping across tilled fields—soil and stone turned by plough blades; worms and beetles harrowed then folded back into the earth; bodies in the mud. He'd stick to the road. He paused, though, when he saw that the way didn't bend round to the right as he remembered but was forked instead. He frowned and took the right-hand path wearily, more eager than ever for a mother's greeting and perhaps a reheated meal prepared for his return.

The road began to rise gently. His kit bag occasionally slid from his shoulder, forcing him to hoist it back up. His forward march became ragged. The hedgerows were tall in shadow either side of the road and above him the moon kept her distance as she had over the battlefields of France. A fox called from some way off and up ahead a dark bulky shape lay at the side of the road. Tom slowed and approached with caution, crossing to the other side to maintain a little distance as he closed the gap. The shape moved, moaned, and Tom saw that it was an old man, small and gnome-like in a shabby overcoat, scarf, and gloves.

"You alright there, gaffer?" Tom said.

The old man looked up sharply, noticing him for the first time. "Wha? Who? Who's that?" he called out, "I don't have nothing on me worth stealing."

"Settle down, I'm not aiming to skin you. Just making me way home and you look like you could do with some help."

"Home you say? Help?" the old man looked at the sky as if trying to divine something from the stars. "It's too late now, I reckons. Missed it, I have. For the first time ever."

"Missed what?" Tom crossed the road with the intention of helping the man to his feet. In the opal light saw that the man's left trouser leg was folded up and pinned at the knee. He held out a hand and the old gadger reached up for it.

"Missed?" the old man said with a grunt as he was heaved upright. "The festival, of course."

"I've lived in Gadsby me whole life; ain't never heard of no festival," Tom said.

The old man leant on him, barely coming up to his chest, and assessed his face with rheumy eyes.

"Ah, I see, you're a young 'un," he said. "Not too many young chaps round here of late."

"Aye, well... I've been away, as you'll understand," Tom replied.

"And going home to Gadsby?"

"That's right."

"Call me Len," the old man said, then he regarded the stars again in the way most might check a pocket watch.

"And you are?"

"Thomas. Tom."

The fox screamed again. Len sniffed, wobbling on one unsteady leg.

"It seems we're both going the same way, young Master Thomas. Perhaps you might want to give an old duffer a helping hand? If we're lucky there might still be some scran and ale to be had." Len unconsciously licked his lips and Tom's own hunger intensified

After a little fuss, shifting his kit bag to lay across his chest, Tom lifted Len onto his back, piggyback style. The old boy felt like bones through his thick coat, light as a bird's body. Once he was settled Tom resumed his march up the road at a steady pace. Len began to hum, something tuneless but jaunty, and Tom kept his head down and set one foot in front of the other.

The throbbing in his left leg grew insistent; tiredness began to pull at his limbs as if they were still heavy with the sludge of the trenches; the road continued to rise. Each time Tom looked up he anticipated a familiar landmark—a sign or a tree or a cottage he recognised— but there was only this nondescript road bordered by hedges. Len seemed to get heavier and the way harder and soon everything around them began to get darker as if the moon were steadily dimming. Tom wanted to rub at his eyes but couldn't lose his grip on the old man, so he blinked against the growing gloom and marched on.

Len's humming got louder as it got darker and soon Tom could only make out the next few paces ahead of him. Sometimes he thought that he could hear children snickering and whispering on the far side of the hedges, but then Len would jig up and down, cluck his tongue as if he were geeing a horse, and cackle at the joke. Tom's boots felt too heavy, clogged with mud. He felt that he was close to collapse.

Suddenly there was a crowd and chatter. Smiling faces cast in orange and black from firelight and shadows pressed in around them. Len wriggled and squirmed to be let down. Tom crouched and the old man slid off his back, patted him on the shoulder and whispered, "God bless you, son; God bless you."

As soon as he was on the ground Len hopped away into the crowd. Someone pushed a tankard into Tom's hand while other hands clapped him on the back. Through the crowd he caught sight of a green door and slate roof which must be the post office. Further up the high street he saw the weathervane that sat on top of the doctor's surgery, or was it the butcher's?

The dancing light from the nearby bonfire made it hard to make out details. There had been something sat on top of the flames—a Guy or some other effigy—but the fire had long since collapsed in on itself and he couldn't tell what was being burnt. Beyond the fire, at the far end of the high street, he saw a statue on a plinth where none had been when he'd left to sign up. It was a figure, one arm raised high, but through jumping orange flames he couldn't make out any more than that. People passed all around holding plates and picking at scraps with their fingers. All these people were old, Tom realised. Their lips were shiny in the firelight, slick with grease and fat from the feast.

"Best festival so far," a grinning old dear said to no one in particular, popping the slick ends of her fingers into a toothless mouth one at a time. "Best festival so far." Tom wanted to get to the far end of the high street but couldn't see a way through the yammering throng. Instead, he made roughly for the direction of the green post office door and slipped down an alleyway between two stone clad buildings.

Once he was round the back of the buildings the babble of the crowd was dimmed. He found himself in knot of high-walled alleys he didn't recognise and tried to orient himself based on the scant landmarks he thought he'd recognised on the main street.

The sound of dull drums began, slow, like the accompaniment to a firing squad, but they were all slightly out of time with one another. As Tom moved through the twisting warren of paths it sounded as if the drums were stalking him and he thought of the elderly crowds creeping through these back streets. The drums had a homemade sound to them of dried skin stretched over pots. They urged him on even though his leg was aching deep into the muscle now, turning his stride into a limp. Was that the murmur of the crowd bubbling beneath the beat? The sound of glistening tongues smacking wet lips?

He took a turn and found a way out into a crescent-shaped street which felt familiar. Yes, here was a set of stone steps he recognised—they'd bounced balls down them as boys—and he climbed, his breathing ragged by the time

he got to the top. He leaned heavily on the cold metal handrail and from this vantage point he could see the bonfire some way below him, lighting up the town centre as if an incendiary had hit.

The air whipped around him, cooler up here, and it helped to clear his head. The sound of the drums below seemed to move away. He turned and made his way towards home with more certainty now. Buildings were thinning and he breathed more easily, rubbing at his thigh, craving the familiarity of the hearth, the kitchen, his old room.

At the top of the lane the solid square outline of his house stood against the night sky. No light was on, but it was late—much later than he had anticipated arriving—and his mother had surely gone to bed by now. He reached the front gate and was surprised at the relief he felt when it gave its familiar, rusty squeak. He crunched up the path, steps uneven and leg complaining. The front door was locked so he moved round to the back.

Once inside, the cool stillness of the kitchen was like a moment of peace, a brief ceasefire. He lingered in the dark space, breathing heavily, sweat cooling between his shoulder blades, alert for the creak of a floorboard from above. Finally, home. He almost called out. Best, perhaps, to let her sleep and get some rest himself. They could talk in the morning.

He took three deep gulps of water straight from the tap, then dropped himself onto a seat at the kitchen table and yanked at his laces like a crow at worms. He pulled his boots off and his feet throbbed gratefully on the chill floor tiles. Then he rose and moved with confidence through the dark house towards the stairs. His room was up there on the left. He could picture his bed, just twelve steps to climb—how many times had he counted his way up and down them in the dark to use the lavvie outside? He counted now as he ascended through blackness—two—three—as ever the creak on the sixth step—his leg was on fire now—eight—nine—was that a stirring from his mother’s bedroom?—eleven—twelve. He tripped. Stumbled. There was a thirteenth step.

#### About the Author:

By the time you read this Andrew Lyall will have married his fiancée in Las Vegas (yes, there will be an Elvis present). He lives in the south of England with his soon-to-be wife and two dogs (one of whom respects him). He has just compiled his first collection of short horror stories, *17 Stories of Death and Desire*.

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

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#### Halloween Garden | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

“No more fall-gardens!” neighbor exclaimed. “Who needs the grief?”

Bad enough those devious potato-beetles—finished with the potato-foliage—devoured my eggplant-leaves! But soon thereafter—and I know it sounds crazy—the cucumber-vines started ‘giving-me-the-finger,’ provocatively expanding those little green-digits.

The red-peppers—hanging off their yellowed-plants like hemorrhoids—became so caustic they scarred my throat!

Worse, Halloween-night, pumpkins got loose from their stems—started rolling around like bowling-balls—grinning, jaggedly—bashing each other to pulp, in some insane, vegetable demolition-derby!

And the moon-flowers—planted to seduce nocturnal pollinators—well, just guess what they did!

So, no more horticultural October-horrors. I quit!”

#### About the Author:

Will H. Blackwell Jr. is a retired professor living in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. His fiction has appeared in Brilliant Flash Fiction, Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, Disturbed Digest, Trembling with Fear, and 365 Tomorrows. He has poetry in Aphelion, Black Petals, The Lyric, Poem, Roanoke Review, and Scifaikuest.





Legend says it was a bandit hideout in the war of 1812, which is not true. If such a building existed back then, the cottage was built more recently, on it's ruins. The men used this mouldy cottage for deer hunting, until what happened when I was young.

Back then we were children living on a very rural street, a backstreet off another sideroad, hidden in trees and dust. You could hear coyotes yipping any time of day and any foray away from the houses landed you in an oppressive forest with trees known for producing good syrup. The presence of animals just out of sight: the random pattering of feet, snapping of twigs when no one was there, made it creepy at times. You got used to it. The only other kids around were a small group of teenagers who I thought were desperately cool, and who thought Raghnaid and I were clingy and godawful. We tried very hard to impress them.

The brothers had a new friend, Travis, who knew how to pick certain locks, and how to hotwire a car, and all sorts of neat stuff like that. His family had moved in from some city, the parents were trying to get back to nature and he hated them for it. Travis was showing us how he could use the tiny blade on his skull-and-bones swiss army knife to open the lock on his own house. I sensed it was about to be 'no babies time' so I told them about the vault.

"What vault?" asked Dennis.

"The vault under the cabin on the ridge," I said. "We go there a lot."

"Who's 'we'?" asked Travis, scraping away at his front door's lock. I didn't know where his parents were, probably at the nearest town getting groceries.

"Curstaidh has an invisible friend named Raghnaid." Jason said, nudging Dennis like someone was being stupid.

"The vault's from a jewelry store," I said. "Dad said it's an antique from before cars were real. Grandpa said there used to be a combination for it but everyone's forgotten it since the big one."

"What's the big one?" asked Travis.

"World War Two," I said.

"It's some old safe that cowboys dumped on the hill because it was too heavy to lug anymore," said Jason, by way of explanation. I guess word was getting around *a bit*. "It's been there *forever*, but no one knows how to open it."

"That's stupid," said Travis. "Why'd they never pay someone to open it?" But all the same, I had Travis' attention.

"You're, uh, Curst—cursty?"

"Curstaidh."

"Her name is Kirsty," said Dennis. "She pronounces it weird the last two damn years."

"Kirsty is a total skitzo, man," said Jason.

But Travis, dear Travis, turned to me instead of them. He was always the type of guy, then and after, whose attention and approval would flit from place to place like a moth, never settling for long. "Is it a combination lock?"

The brothers laughed, but I could see what they were thinking. An old abandoned safe with treasure in it... they'd be rich and cool, and the kids at the regional high school would think so too.

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"This place is *fucking* haunted," said Dennis.

The woods were weird in the evening, when I led the boys to the tiny cottage on the ridge. We hadn't been able to sneak out until after our separate families had dinner. Part of the roof had fallen in when it got struck by lightning a couple years ago. The bolt of electricity punched through to the basement, which is how I found Raghnaid and the vault. There was a fire, but it got put out by the same storm's rain. The old people already knew about the vault when I told them about it, pretty much got all those geisers in a tizzy or a panic or something, though they never told me before that there was a vault there. Seemed like news to lots of people, though it was already developing its own tall tales.

No one could see Raghnaid when I bragged about my findings. They were talking a lot about repairing the holes in the building, like all the time. The oldsters really wanted to seal it back up, but I didn't know how we'd get in the basement if they did that. There was no other entrance unless you dug it out. The cabin had been built over it.

One mistake we made was not bringing a flashlight. The light in the basement was nonexistent. It smelled like mud and dung down there, and a smell like nature's armpit made the air wet and hard to breath. It was good the boys all smoked cigarettes, so they had matches to provide some light.

We got coughing when we were down. The soil was in the air, wet and rotten, and thick on every surface. Every single thing down there was a dirty grey-brown, like being in a grave. There were broken pieces of glass; really, really old broken bottles and lamps, so caked with grit that they weren't even sharp. Some things that might have been furniture once. It had been ransacked before it was abandoned.

The only thing in one piece was the vault. It was caked with filth, a large steel pillar about the size of a portable toilet. The combination lock and crusty door handle were its only features. I think it was fancy once.

Despite how eerie it was down there, Travis was very impressed. "This is totally dope, just, look at this thing!"

The brothers were more creeped out than Raghnaid and Travis and me. I already thought Travis was a million times cooler than them.

"Can Travis open it?" asked Raghnaid.

"Can you open it?" I asked Travis.

"It's pretty beat up," he said. "But it's really old. New locks are hard to open. This maybe not as bad." He turned the oversized dial like he was strangling it, having to use both hands just to get it to move at all. It seemed to loosen after the first couple clicks.

Both Dennis and Jason held up lit matches on either side of their new friend. Raghnaid and I crouched around their feet, doglike, and listened to him work. Click click click, with his ear against the dial, and Travis must have heard something different, because he started for the next number. The door shed the more we all touched it, leaned on it, grime and rust that mucked us up like we'd been in a bog.

"Oh man, we're going to be rich!" said Dennis.

"I'm going to buy a limousine," said Jason.

"I wonder how many diamonds are in there?" said Dennis.

"How many diamonds are in there, Raghnaid?" I asked.

Dennis and Jason laughed.

The boys kept having to relight their matches. The darkness was so thick with the weight of years and solitude that I could barely make out the shape of Raghnaid, which was unusual. I could usually see her no matter how dark it was.

Raghnaid didn't answer, and then Travis had the second number.

"Well *Chrissy*?" Dennis said, pronouncing my name wrong, again. "How much money does your friend think we're getting?"

I was kind of miffed. Raghnaid only answered questions sometimes, but she was making me look stupid now.

And then Travis stopped. "I think that's it," he said. He grabbed the handle and turned it. It groaned, but didn't budge. The century of grit had damaged the bludgeon-like door handle. I held the matches and all three boys wrestled with the handle, their fingers and palms bleeding where the rust bit them. But still they pushed down on the handle. Enough crap came off the handle to show that it was battered as though a sledgehammer had been taken to it, the metal bruised like a soggy peach.

With a sound like a gunshot the handle swung down, and stayed down. Dennis and Jason shook their hands. The pain was sinking in, the damage they'd done to themselves. But Travis didn't spare himself the time and started forcing the door open. It sloughed on its hinges, and my first thought was disappointment that the inside was so much smaller than the outside, the steel walls were so thick.

At first I thought the thing inside was a pile of sticks and old wood. It fell over once the door was open, spilling onto our feet with a sound like sparrow wings.

We jumped away from it, but we were curious and greedy. All of us had a match in our hands now, trying to get enough light to see what it was. Dennis gave the thing a shove and it rolled on its joints, unfolding into a more human shape. She was dry and leathery, like when they take all the juice out of a grape and then it isn't a grape any more. The same way that the dead aren't people anymore, and then they lose even that. Desiccated, mummified, the body was drained of life, a husk with skin like tree bark.

I think they were screaming, and I probably was too, even though I wasn't afraid. I don't know how we all got home, even how we got out of the basement at all.

We never spoke about it again, and we barely speak to each other any more. I don't know why they were so afraid. She'd been dead for a hundred years.

When I went back a day later, the body was gone—it's not like we did anything bad.

I never saw Raghnaid again.

### About the Author:

S. J. Wilkes is a huge fan of insects and other small creatures. She lives with a small colony of isopods, and a beautiful baby tarantula named Parker. In writing she likes to look at themes related to thalassophobia; the fear of large open bodies of water. She also loves bizarro books.

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# Cult of the Box



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Grey stars hung limply over the mountain. Their beams shattered the black sky and kept the dead company, but Althea had never felt more alone. She stretched higher, desperate for their light, for the tight embrace of her parents' arms, only to feel cold shadows across her face. They kept her from the light, huge and terrible forms that followed as she ran but did not move like living men. It was all she could do to scream. The sky shook and crumbled. In the echo of her horror, Althea closed her eyes and fought visions of ashen hands reaching from the dark, imagining instead that her father had found her, strong arms reaching down to take her home.

\*\*\*

It was too muddy. A storm had lashed the Earth just hours before, leaving the ground a soupy mess of grass, soil and dog shit. He had hoped it would make the man slip and break his own neck before Jason had to put in any real effort, but no such luck. Just minutes after parking by the creek, he found himself huffing across an open field in the opposite direction with only the moon to light his way. His brother's Red Wings weren't designed for sprinting, especially with a thick layer of tape stuck to the bottom of each boot. Every footfall was a fight not to slide onto his arse and let the night's entertainment escape without performing its final encore.

The previous ones hadn't woken up so quickly, certainly not with so much strength. His stomach still throbbed, but the full punishment of the kick was yet to be realised; hot adrenaline flooded his core, allowing him to transcend his fury and become something purer. It was with this sudden clarity that he saw the little fuck was widening the gap. He kicked off his shoes, despite the protests of a smaller voice, and chased the fleeing figure with renewed fire pumping his legs. He could hear the man wailing and slurring calls for help that Jason couldn't even begin to make out. It made him grit his teeth into something of a smile.

The ground rose to meet a wall of trees. Their silhouettes stood like ancient towers and shone strangely in the moonlight, wet leaves glinting like beacons to the man who ran headlong for their cover. Jason would catch him first. Only six feet separated them; he was almost close enough to tear back his rhinestone collar, but forced down the urge. The man was tiring now, bit by bit giving up the inches to his life as if he already knew it was worthless. What was an existence spent walking the streets really? There was greater value in a slow death, and Jason was so close to gifting him one.

The man stopped. Jason slammed into his back and felt his nose crunch. The impact spasmed across his face in burning ripples that made him crumple like a child, clutching the area as if squeezing it tight enough would suffocate the pain. Blinking furiously against the tears, Jason forced himself to his feet, unsure whether to tense for an attack or continue the chase into the woods. It took him seconds to realise neither was an option, and several more to comprehend what stood before him.

Rock. A giant mass as dark as slate stabbed into the air where the man had stopped heartbeats ago. There was more beneath him, more everywhere he turned as he spun in place, struggling to translate what he saw into coherent thought. Hulking forms engulfed his vision, protruding into a black sky that cracked like glass with fissures of dull starlight. Gone was the sharp scent of wet grass, replaced by thin ice air that seared his throat and made breathing a growing agony. The man had disappeared with the rest of the world, but Jason caught his voice from afar as though echoed across a gaping cavern, still whimpering and ushering words his mind could not grasp.

Jason swore, shrieking every curse he knew until his chest burned. Blood poured through his fingertips as he stumbled forward, swerving monstrous shapes along a path leading nowhere. The man's voice seemed to grow louder, and Jason couldn't stand it. He slammed his hands against his ears but that dreadful weeping soaked through, churning the inside of his skull. A guttural scream erupted from his mouth in a spray of red spittle and as he threw his head skyward, he saw the colossal shadow inches behind, the smear from his broken nose still glimmering on its surface. Even as he fled, bawling his brother's name, it followed.

When the cliff's edge drew before him, Jason didn't know whether to thank God or the devil, but he didn't puzzle it too long. Ahead, over the jagged lip of smooth black rock, absolute nothingness spread out before him. The giants approached from behind, but they wouldn't get their feast. Jason ran into the great hollow, howls morphing into manic laughter, and as he flew over the edge, he found the answer to his question. Something rose from below; a long slab of grey meat upon which his eyes couldn't fix onto a single point—it had too many faces. Thousands of screaming mouths surged upward, merging into a mottled blanket of human skins and writhing broken limbs. Scores of pallid eyes swivelled in the flesh whilst others fixed onto his falling body, and as the sobs of the man finally fell silent in Jason's ears, he swore he heard the demon call him Father.

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

Saffron Roberts watched Ridley Scott's *Alien* at eight years old, much to the fury of their mother, and the horror never left their soul. A queer, autistic writer of the dark and fantastical, they can be found somewhere on a flight between Zanzibar and the UK daydreaming of undead trees. Their short fiction has previously been published by Horror Tree and Blood Rites Horror.

"Evening, Archie," I salute while leaning back against a slab of stone. It has been yet another long and eventful work shift in a string of them lately.

"Evening, Fred."

"Say, Arch, take a load off with me. Would you care for some ale? Sure has been a long night."

"Aye." Archie is a man of few words, but a proper gent regardless and a great one with which to get a bit boozy.

"Nice night though, isn't it, Arch? Full moon, a smidge chilly, just the right amount of fog."

"Aye," he replies again, while staring up at the nearly greenish-black sky alongside me. The time must be near the witching hour.

"Aye, indeed. So, how's it hanging tonight, Archie?"

"Maybe you could give me a hand with the ale?" he gestures at the second bottle, which I brought over here specifically for him.

"Of course, excuse my manners, mate." I crack his bottle open and lean over to my side to pour a few mouthfuls down his throat as he guzzles them eagerly. "Better, Arch?"

"Aye, much better, Fred. Everybody could use some good ale on a night like this." That may be the longest sentence I have ever heard Archie string together. Good old Archie.

"Evening, Fred! Have to agree with Archie on this one, everybody deserves some good ale tonight. You got any more for us?"

"Evening, Charlie! Evening, Morty! Aye, I think I can spare a bit for two fine gents such as yourselves." And with that, I pour a few mouthfuls of ale into both Charlie's and Morty's mouths.

"You're a true pal, Fred, the likes of which I may not ever see again," gushes Charlie, never one to shy away from expressing what he really thinks.

"Aye, a true pal," echoes Morty.

"Ah, it's only a bit of ale. You would all do the same for me."

"Aye," the three of them reply heartily in unison, "but it's the gesture that counts," Charlie pipes up alone.

"Looks like we may have another guest approaching, Fred," Morty chimes in. Morty, the chronic worrier, sometimes makes me worry about how much he worries.

"Nothing to fear here, Mort, I'll be back before you'll know I was even gone. You boys just hold tight and man the fort."

Another guest, indeed. The fourth uninvited guest tonight, in fact, hence why this shift has been a particularly long one. "What can I do for you, mate? This here is a private lot." Silence, as to be expected. Well then, let's have at it, shall we? I raise my axe and gesture at him to get it started.

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"I hope Fred is alright, these parts are none too safe," Morty's voice quivers.

"Have a bit more ale, that'll fix ye," Archie quips to a laughing Charlie. Morty is less than pleased.

"Even if I had any ale, which I haven't, how would I manage to drink some without Fred, Archie?" Morty fires back.

"Ah, calm down now. There's ol' Fred, there."

"What's that he's got?" Morty frets again.

"Blimey, Fred! Another one?" Charlie blurts out.

"Aye, we haven't had four in one night in who knows how long?" I reply. What's a man to do besides his duty?

"Wonderful, Fred, wonderful. We were worried he might escape you, being how hard you've been working lately," Morty exhales in relief.

"Oi, Mort, YOU were worried," Archie replies.

"Aye Mort, nobody escapes Fred's wrath, not even Fred himself! Isn't that right, Freddy-boy?" Charlie enthuses.

"I only hope he's got enough ale to split five ways now instead of four," says Morty.

"I've got plenty, I've got plenty," I say while I set our new friend's head down with a thud, resting atop the stone wall I was previously using to lean against. Blood begins to run down three of its four sides. "Oh, bugger. Sorry about that, Archie, I'll clean it up straight away."

"You know it's no big deal, Fred," Archie replies sincerely.

"Aye, nobody does their job better than Fred. He'll have you good as new in a jiffy, Arch," Charlie beams.

I pull a cloth from my back pocket and wipe the face of the stone clean, for now. 'Archie Taylor' is now clearly legible once more. "There we have it, Arch, back to normal. Drinks all around, on me." I pour ale into each of their mouths.

"Exceptional work, truly exceptional," the fourth voice cheers.

"What's his name then, Fred?" Archie asks.

"That'll be Henry. Henry, these are my mates, Archie, Charlie, and Morty."

"Hello, Henry," they reply together, welcoming this new member to our late-night meeting group.

"A bit of camaraderie to help me get through work. Graveyard shift is a killer." Graveyard is right, I am the gravedigger of this establishment.

"Fred is top-notch, he supplies us with ale and even helps us drink it, being that we're a bunch of loose heads and all." You can always trust Charlie for the truth. Good old Charlie.

"What am I to do now!?" Henry begins to panic as his fingers lay motionless on the ground beneath Archie's headstone. His entire body, in fact, lays still next to Archie's body, as well as Charlie's body and Morty's body.

"He's beginning to sound like Mort," Archie grumbles. "Have a drink of ale and drown your problems like the rest of us."

"That's our lovable Arch, old-fashioned as he may be," I chime in. "Not to worry Henry, open your mouth and enjoy." I pour the bottle of ale directly into Henry's mouth, before topping off the other three once more. They tend to be in a better mood when lubricated.

"Ah, that's great ale! The best I've had in...well, quite a while I presume!" Henry exclaims. Yes, yes, quite a while. I would theorize at least a month? They all return after thirty days.

"Aye, enjoy it, Henry. You are among friends now! Great company, marvelous drinks, fantastic atmosphere. Your new home, Henry. Relax and soak it all in."

Only, Henry isn't relaxing, Henry is beginning to ponder. What a dangerous predicament, a head that thinks too much, yet that is exactly what Henry is sitting there doing. He doesn't even remember dying in the first place, yet how did he manage to rise again?

"Yes, Henry, do enjoy. You are going to love being part of the group," Charlie reassures him.

"Got any more ale?" Archie asks.

"Fred, I hate to interrupt the meeting of a new friend, but it would seem we already have another visitor approaching," Morty notices.

"Right you are, Morty. You would appear to be correct, and so soon! No rest for the wicked, eh gents? I shall finish quickly and we can continue to drink!"

Cheers all around, yet Henry appears concerned about something deeper.

With one swing of the axe, our new challenger has lost his head, which I place next to Henry's. Then, I dump his body onto the pile of the previous four, prepared for proper re-burial later tonight. Henry only stares into the face of this new head.

"This is Arthur, everyone. Arthur, would you care for some ale?" I ask.

"I know Arthur, but I do not remember from where. I cannot remember much of anything," Henry ponders. Archie, Charlie, and Morty look at each other in confusion, while Arthur smiles at them all.

"No, that doesn't sound quite right," Archie replies.

"Henry, how could you know Arthur if he just showed up here, and you also just showed up here right before him?" Charlie questions with an eyebrow raised.

"Aye, valid point," Morty assures.

"But, I...I think I know him from before, you know, before here. Wherever we used to be, Arthur was with me." Henry peers at the group in search of support, yet finding none.

"Hello, all! I believe there was talk of ale? I would fancy some, if you please," Arthur speaks finally.

"Fred! Arthur would like you to pour him some ale, please," adds the ever-thoughtful Morty, as I am rearranging the five headless bodies.

"My apologies, Arthur! Straight away, here we are, open up."

"Fred, Henry has some rather peculiar thoughts about our new friend. He seems to think he knows Arthur from somewhere, but he has only just arrived!" Charlie reveals.

Still pouring the ale into the parched Arthur's mouth, I turn to face Charlie in shock. My aim falters and the ale pours into Arthur's eyes. Luckily, he doesn't seem to be disturbed by much of anything thus far.



"Well, what do you mean, Henry? Aye, that is peculiar, indeed," I reply at last. The other four heads don't seem any the wiser.

"Yes, Fred, I believe Arthur may be my brother? I didn't know I had a brother, although I know he is important to me." Henry stares at me intently, wide-eyed and confused.

"Well, that is impossible, Henry! Come, allow me to show you why that cannot be!" I snatch the resting head from the top of Archie's grave stone and walk him a fair distance away from the group.

"I'm just so confused, Fred. I don't remember anything at all!" Henry frets.

"Not to worry, Henry! Do you see what I see?" I grab the back of Henry's head by the hair and hold him out to scan the large, open clearing before us. "These are all the misbehaved heads that came before you, and where all the misbehaved heads to follow will meet their final resting place. A graveyard within a graveyard for the more troubled individuals, if you will."

Henry is mortified, and rightfully so. On the right, dozens of heads mumbling and groaning amongst each other, unable to move, stuck talking to whoever they may be situated beside. To the left of them, each of their bodies laying lifeless and awkwardly settled in rigor mortis.

"I don't understand, Fred! What did I do to deserve coming here tonight? What did I do to deserve this awful fate now?"

"You've ruined it, Henry. You've ruined it just as all the heads below have before. All I ask of you is to chat and have a bit of ale with my mates and I, but you lot have to pry and ask too many questions. Well, enjoy your final tomb where the company is dreadful and there will never be any ale again." I take Henry's head in both hands and boot it into the sea of jabbering rabble-rousers. Good riddance.

Amid my moonlit stroll back, I hear a familiar voice call out to me. It's Charlie.

"What's all this, then? Where's Henry, Fred?"

"Regretfully, I must inform you that Henry has levied some frightfully untrue accusations against us! Terrible lies! Never fear, he will not be back to bother us again."

"It's alright, Fred. We all know the truth," Morty admits.

I turn sharply to stare at my four pals as they look back at me comfortingly. "What truth is that? What do you know?"

"We know everything, lad," Archie replies.

"We know you killed us thirty days ago so we could rise again to spend time with you," Morty answers.

"You know the truth and you aren't mad?"

"Mad? Not even slightly. The end justifies the means, sir," Charlie reassures.

"Aye, good company and good ale. No complaints," Archie chimes in.

Arthur smiles and nods as much as a severed head can.

"You guys should have mentioned it sooner and I wouldn't have had to hide Henry like that." I am not pleased at them knowing the truth, regardless.

Arthur laughs finally. "Hey, Fred, why don't you go get my brother, Henry, and bring him back here with us?"

I think about Arthur's proposal for a moment. "You know what, Arthur? That's a great idea, although I think I can do you one better! Why don't we go and get Henry together?"

All four heads are in cheerful agreement.

So, off we go, down to the pit where Archie, Charlie, Morty, and Arthur get kicked into the night sky, landing roughly in the same vicinity as Henry.

"Oh well, perhaps tomorrow night, then." I sling my axe over my shoulder and whistle while walking back to work.

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

Andrew Adams has been a horror fanatic since becoming fascinated with the genre through film, and he recently graduated from writer to organized author. Adams is a metal enthusiast, film fanatic, and lover of the occasional bourbon. He has several books written and waiting to slither out into the world, whenever the void should call for them.

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



*How far are you gonna go for this girl?* Tom remembered his best friend's words as he leaned against the corner and watched the party's host, Stephanie. How far was he willing to go? Looking at her beauty, her long blonde hair and killer smile, at the apple-sized dimples that pushed up when she laughed, Tom knew he was willing to go all the way.

*You're ditching me for some girl's Halloween party?*

*I'm sorry, Orin. But it's Stephanie! You know how I feel about her!*

*Sure. But how does she feel about you?*

She was two years older than him, so Tom knew it was gonna be an uphill fight. There was a world of difference between 16 and 18 but he was mature for his age, everyone said so and more, Stephanie had invited him personally. "I really want you there." So why was he leaning against the wall avoiding her? She had talked to everyone tonight, served drinks, played the best hostess, yet his two feet remained rooted to the spot.

*This is ridiculous! She's nice, we've spoken before, and what's the worst that can happen?* So decided, Tom put down his soda and squared his shoulders.

"She's mean," A voice said. Tom was shaken out of his surety and turned to see a squat little girl dressed as a witch sitting in the dark by the snack table.

"Everyone thinks she's a good girl but she's not." The girl was shaped like an uneven stack of pumpkins. Her dress was a sack. As Tom studied her, she sighed, picked up a bowl of candy, tipped it back, and swallowed the stuff whole. Her throat works like an industrial hose, swallowing gumballs and hard candies. The crinkle of their individual plastics and wrappings made grinding static.

"I've almost eaten the whole bowl," she said. Then she smiled. A shred of gold gummi bear packaging wiggled from between her teeth.

*Weird. Must be one of Stephanie's little sister's friends.*

But whatever her deal was, Tom was not going to be deterred. He had psyched himself up. Moreover, he had ditched his best friend to attend this party.

*If Stephanie is so nice, why didn't she invite Orin, too?*

Tom pushed that thought away. Orin asked again, *How far are you gonna go for this girl?*

Tom waded through the vampires and hockey-masked killers and reached Stephanie in the corner changing music. *The Monster Mash* became Alice Cooper's *Poison*. Stephanie turned, crashing into Tom.

"Oh shit!" She laughed, making those dimples. Tom caught her as she nearly fell. She was dressed as a devil in high heels. "They're wobbly," she said. His plastic knife scraped her arm.

"Sorry!" He said but she giggled.

"It's okay. I'm glad you caught me. Get it?" She chuckled, then blushed. "I haven't gotten to talk to you tonight. Cool costume. Is that the Myers mask from Resurrection?"

"Part 6."

"That's my favorite!"

"Me too."

There was a moment of awkward silence, but Stephanie filled it.

"I'm glad you came. I was hoping you would. I've been wanting to talk and, you know, get to know each other. I see you in the halls and—"

"Yeah, me too. I see you too..."

They laughed together. Stephanie put her hand on his arm and even through the jumpsuit he could feel it. She stepped closer and he could smell her. Cinnamon? Some kind of flower, maybe? But most of all her eyes held him. They were so green, so brilliant. She stared at him in a way that made him almost uneasy. It was a knowing look, a look that made him imagine she was trying to talk to him telepathically.

"Do you wanna dance, maybe?" Stephanie asked.

Tom opened his mouth to say yes, of course, who do I have to kill, wacka-wacka, but a groan from the corner stopped him.

"Stephanie. STEPHANIE!"

Stephanie looked over to the weird girl in the dark.

"I can't eat any more!"

Stephanie gripped Tom in both hands. She smiled and the light bounced off her teeth. "OHMYGODITSTIME!" She bounced on her heels. "Come on. Come with me!"

"Okay," Tom said with a wrinkled brow.

"Gather around everyone!" Stephanie collected people and arranged them in a semi-circle. Then she grabbed the groaning Beatrice and brought her to the middle.

"Stephanie, it hurts!"

"Hush! I told you it might."

"BUT—"

"Shut up! It'll be over in a minute."

*This is so weird!* Tom thought. *But Stephanie touched me. She wants to dance with me! I can put up with a little weird. When whatever this finishes, I'll be close to her. Maybe kissing close!*

"Get on your knees."

Beatrice groaned but did so. Stephanie ignored her cries and turned to the roughly forty other kids gathered in her basement. Alice Cooper gave way to *Aghast*.

"I'm glad everyone came. I know some of you gave up other plans for tonight." Stephanie looked at Tom. It warmed him. *She was nice!*

*Suck it Orin.*

Stephanie reached under the refreshment table and pulled out a large stick. It resembled the kind used to hit a kettle drum. Only it was much bigger. Stephanie had to drag it.

"Tom, would you—"

He came to her and took it. It was heavy but he got it up. No way was he gonna look like a wuss in front of her.

"Now," Stephanie said. "Beatrice, sit up."

"I can't!"

"Don't you dare embarrass me!" Stephanie knelt, getting in Beatrice's face. "Don't you dare. Do you see all these people here! You promised."

"But—"

"Do you want what I promised you?"

"YES!"

"Then sit up!"

Beatrice did. She grimaced but managed. She kept her hands over her belly. Stephanie looked at Tom.

"Okay. Go ahead. Do it."

He wrinkled his brow. "Do what?"

"Get the candy out."

Tom looked at the stick, at Beatrice. "You mean...?"

"What," Stephanie said with a slow smile. "You've never broken a pinata?"

Beatrice was sniffing and making little "ow" noises. If he hit her with the stick, it could really hurt her.

"It's okay," Stephanie said. She put her hand on Tom's shoulder and leaned in close. The smell of hot cinnamon caressed his nose.

"It's gonna be awesome. Trust me." Then she came closer and whispered words that made him tingle.

"Do it for me, Tommy..."

Beatrice was looking at him with cow eyes, blubbing, pleading, but she had zero chance. Stephanie had called him Tommy, just like in his fantasies. Tom took a step back for leverage and swung the stick at Beatrice's guts.

He hit her dead center and wondered how he did, Stephanie's whoop of joy and applause told him. He felt the stick sink into the girls' belly and Beatrice doubled over. She made a deep sound like "WOOF!" Then she retched. Tom pulled the stick back, a little sick at himself, but the way everyone cheered he was able to deal. The way Stephanie beamed at him he didn't care. Beatrice gagged and vomited, forcing Tom and Stephanie to shuffle back.

A flood of color shot from her mouth in a sticky, gooey jet. Hard candy clattered to the concrete floor and skidded. Bags of softer candy landed with splats. Tom saw Dum-Dum suckers with cloudy red spit dripping from their sticks. People began picking up the candy. Some began unwrapping and shoving it in their mouths. Beatrice groaned and collapsed. Goo dribbled over her chin.

"What a minute!" Stephanie said. Her smile dried up. "Where's the goddamned chocolate? Bea? Did you eat it?"

"Yes! I told you I did." Beatrice began crying again. "It's stuck. In my throat."

"I will not be embarrassed here," Stephanie whispered low to Tom. "The chocolate was the big price. I got full sized bars for fuck's sake! Now everyone is gonna think I lied." Stephanie began to weep, looking from face to face. People began to whisper and giggle.

"Help me," she said.

"What do you need me to do?"

Stephanie smiled, making her dimples appear.

She lifted Beatrice and got her on her knees again. Then Stephanie went to the table and returned with a huge gleaming butcher's knife. She handed it to Tom and whispered in his ear.

"Are you sure?" He asked. She nodded.

"After the candy, we're gonna play Seven Minutes In Heaven," Stephanie ran her fingers through his hair. "The girls get to pick their partners." She winked.

*How far are you gonna go for this girl?*

Tom stepped forward. Beatrice looked at him, then the knife.

"Wait," she said. "What's he doing Stephanie?"

Tom swallowed. He thought of Stephanie's breath in his ear. He thought of what she whispered. *Not a pinata this time, but a Pez Dispenser.*

Tom grabbed Beatrice's hair and pulled her head back. He brought the knife to her throat. While she screamed, Stephanie clapped her hands and the kids cheered.

### About the Author:

Paul Wilson lives in a suburb much like the one he turned into a horror playground in his novel *Hostage*. He lives with his wife, kids, and two cats. He has worked a spectacular list of jobs including retail district manager, 911 operator, and head of a college security department.

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### Arthur Bennington Lives Alone | *Tony Earnshaw*

Arthur Bennington had always loathed Halloween. It transformed the local kids into feral beggars and, as Arthur was an oddball, he attracted unwelcome attention.

It was bad enough from the adults. The kids were worse. Children, he had discovered, had no filter. They said it as they saw it. And they saw Arthur as a victim.

Someone to plague. Someone to torment. Someone to *never leave alone*. On that basis Halloween was a nightmare from the moment the sun rose to the hours beyond when it set.

Arthur's Halloween routine had become set in stone. As the day wore on he would lock the doors, close the curtains and ensure every light was switched off. Then he would sit in the darkness and await the dawn. Outside his silent solitude was met with the sounds of laughter, fun, frivolity and all the joys of childhood.

But in amongst the fun there came the torment. Every year it was the same. Whispered laughter followed by the pitter-patter of footsteps approaching his rambling home at number 666 Leiber Road. A tentative tap at the door. Then the rickety rattling of the letterbox followed by loud, thunderous, persistent rapping on his door and his windows.

The letterbox would open and through it would be shouted curses and invective and insults. Sometimes they would taunt him with the singsong chant, "Arthur Bennington/lives alone/at 666 Leiber Road!"

Once a boy placed his penis through the letterbox and urinated through to soak the carpet of Arthur's hallway with hot piss that stank and steamed.

That had been the work of Tommy Wallace, the most inventive of his unwelcome visitors. A deeply unpleasant urchin who morphed into a volatile and violent teenage bully, Tommy was never content with mere mischief. Tommy always wanted *more*. And so no matter where Arthur skulked in his house, Tommy's hectoring voice would always find him.

It would echo around the hall and the stairway. And, of course, Tommy always encouraged his friends to take their behaviour just that little bit further. Fireworks were pushed through the letterbox. Rockets were fired, close range, at the house. And, on one memorable occasion, Tommy set Arthur's front door alight.

All of it drove Arthur more than a little mad. And there were nights when he feared his sanity would never survive the seemingly endless hours of darkness. Sunrise was his saviour.

But children grow up. They mature and step away from their bad behaviour and forget how mean and mocking they had been to the odd old man who, in truth, wasn't actually that old at all. At least, some do.

Yet for Arthur, the damage had been done. Possessed by that creeping, insidious madness, he retreated further and further into his solitary life. He left his home only rarely and saw little of—and said little to—his neighbours. As for Tommy, he moved away. But he never forgot the man at number 666.

And so their lives, which had once been so cataclysmically intertwined, were severed. Decades passed. And when Tommy re-entered Arthur's world the old man of his youth really was very old indeed.

The years had not been kind to Arthur Bennington. The eccentric loner had retreated into a friendless world where the only conversation was with the man in the bathroom mirror. There were no pets in Arthur's home unless one counted the dusty, mildewed, stuffed animals—taxidermy had once been a hobby—that lurked in its rooms. No television. No radio. His only relationship was with the people in the books on his shelves and, very occasionally, a postman or shopkeeper. His home had become a cocoon. It was where he was safe.

At Halloween time Arthur still sat in the dark but most of the neighbourhood kids knew to leave him be. That was until Tommy Wallace came visiting some old friends, bringing with him his son.

The boy was the apple that fell too close to the tree. Short, thickset, piggy-eyed and thoroughly stupid he was a 21st century clone of the child that his father had been 35 years before. He looked like his father at that age, too; even sounded like him. For Tommy his boy represented an opportunity to reconnect with his past and with the fun he had had tormenting the weird old man who lived in the ramshackle, haunted-looking house.

"Arthur Bennington/lives alone/at 666 Leiber Road!"

Sitting upright and alert in his armchair, Arthur heard the voice echoing through his hallway. It was strangely, unsettlingly familiar. He recognised the singsong gibe and, instantly, was transported back 35 years to another time and to a persecutor whose memory remained vivid in his mind. Tommy Wallace was back. But Tommy would be 45 years old. Surely his mind was playing tricks.

Arthur rose from his chair and as quietly as he could moved to the doorway into the hall to look and to listen. The letterbox was open. He could hear the voice of a child and, beyond it, the accompanying voice of an adult. It was encouraging, persuading, cajoling. It was egging on the child, urging him to be rude. Arthur knew it was Tommy Wallace.

Suddenly the letterbox clattered shut and he heard the sound of two sets of feet walking away from his home. The boy was complaining that he didn't have a mask and his father was promising to get one for him—that he would take one from another child. The boy was happy with that.

The animal heads that lined the hallway looked on blankly and, perhaps, disapprovingly. There was no noise but, somewhere, there came a whispering chorus that floated around Arthur's crazed mind.

Quite suddenly, he had a brainwave. Unlocking the door, he threw it open. The sudden noise caused father and son to stop and turn. The boy's mouth fell open in surprise whilst the face of his father wrinkled into a combination of recognition and plain disgust.

"Tommy!" called Arthur, crisply. "Tommy Wallace!" he said again.

"Yeah...?" said his now grown-up nemesis.

"I heard the boy say he needs a mask. I have some. All made by my own hand. Would he like to choose one?" The words were accompanied by a peculiar, disquieting smile.

Unnerved, the tubby boy shook his head vigorously and clung onto his father's hand. Then, wrenching his fingers free, he dashed off down the road to join up with friends.

Tommy stood alone on the pavement. He was somewhat bewildered to find himself staring at Arthur, who resembled an ethereal, ragged scarecrow. The old man spoke again. This time he emphasised the words.

"Would you like a mask for your child?"

Intrigued, Tommy approached him. He'd never seen inside the house and, even now, all these years later, he was intrigued enough to be tempted over the threshold. Arthur bade him enter. As he stepped inside Tommy was immersed in the musty smell of gentle decay. Briskly, Arthur closed the door behind him.

Tommy couldn't see in the gloom. He was about to ask where the light was when something very heavy hit him on the top of his fat head. A miasma of redness collided with instantaneous blackness and Tommy crumpled. That presented Arthur with the problem of how to move the dead weight from the hallway into the kitchen. In an instant Arthur realised that he would have to take the mountain to Mohammed.



He stepped over Tommy's inert bellied body and ambled into the kitchen. After rummaging in several drawers he found what he was looking for and returned to his unconscious guest.

Blood was flooding from a vicious indentation in Tommy's head through which seeped brain matter. He was deeply unconscious, which was fortunate as it meant he was utterly unaware when Arthur began a slow and steady incision into his forehead.

Pressing down firmly, Arthur drew the knife in a line from the widow's peak of Tommy's hairline to his left ear, over and around it and down his jawline to beneath the flabby chin. Having completed half of the cut he swapped the knife to his left hand and completed the circle with the same motion in reverse. He connected both incisions almost tidily at the base of Tommy's chin.

It was hard in the gloom to see the dark blood that spread out from the terrible mutilation of Tommy's face. But the animal heads could see. Their whispered congratulations danced through Arthur's head. He glanced up and nodded, taking in their approval.

Deep in the recesses of his maddened mind Arthur remembered that the carpet on which he stood had once been covered in urine. He recalled the smell. Now the carpet was soaked with viscous blood that coated his hands and his knees and his feet.

Arthur pressed his bloodied fingertips deep into the cut on Tommy's face and eased his hands forward. Slowly but with some resistance, the skin began to come away from the bone beneath. But the flesh was slippery and Arthur's hands slid free, so he used the knife once more to deftly separate the skin from the shiny skull.

Outside he could hear the sounds of Halloween. Children were laughing and giggling. Some of them were singing. Occasionally a car would go by. And in the distance a dog, frightened by fireworks and the atmosphere of the night, would bark its terror and frustration.

Arthur succeeded in his task and soon Tommy's face hung saggily from his hands. It was sightless. The eyeballs remained in their sockets. But it was exactly what Arthur wanted it to be.

He was considering how best to present his mask when there came a banging on his door. Rising from Tommy's body, Arthur clapped the warm, bloodied flesh to his face with his right hand, opened the door with his left and stepped outside.

Blood ran into and clouded his eyes but he could tell by the collective gasp that a group of people was facing him. He heard a high-pitched shriek and then the sound of a child beginning to cry as he struggled to recognise his father. Close by, someone else began to retch.

Beyond Arthur, through the open door to his house, lay Tommy Wallace. There was a strange omission where his face should have been. It resembled a skull mask in pinky-white with bulging eyes that stared blindly upwards.

From Tommy Wallace's mouth there came a familiar refrain. But the voice wasn't his and the words, spoken through two sets of lips, were somewhat slurred: "Arthur Bennington/lives alone/at 666 Leiber Road!"

"Oh my God..." someone whispered. Then amidst the throng, there came the beeping of a mobile phone as trembling fingers punched three digits into the keypad.

Arthur drew the skin mask from his face and held it up in his hand so that the sightless eyeholes gazed out upon the Halloween revellers. Blinking through the blood that blinded him, he began to laugh. It was a quiet chuckle that became a sinister gurgle that itself became a booming guffaw.

No one who heard it would ever forget it.

#### About the Author:

Tony Earnshaw's short fiction has appeared in *The Eleventh Black Book of Horror*, *Stories of the Dead - A Tribute to George A. Romero*, the ongoing *BHF Book of Horror Stories* series, and the forthcoming editions of *Phantasmagoria* magazine. He is married with two daughters and lives in the Yorkshire Pennines with a dog named Biscuit and a cat called Apollo.

Blog: [Tony Earnshaw](#)

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## Inheritance | *B. T. Petro*

I must say, I was surprised by the news from my mother's solicitor and financial advisor.

"I'm sorry, but your mother's accounts were depleted at the time of her death. There is no inheritance."

"But she had millions in net worth just a few years ago when we last met."

"Yes, but there were some investments that proved to be not on the up and up. The legal costs for recovery efforts were expensive. I wish that there was something more that I could do for you."

"There is," I said, baring sharp fangs.

I must say, he was surprised.

## The Advice of Gwydion | *B. T. Petro*

True to his word, the Arch-Mage Gwydion left a message upon his death. I and five other would-be successors watched blue flames scribe a message on the lintel to his tower: The answer lies within. All who follow will perish.

Before the flames subsided, four robed-figures rushed through the doorway. Elric and I followed only when the echoes of their screams subsided.

"They incorrectly interpreted the trickster's words," sneered Elric, his boot marring charred remains. "He taught us to find strength within ourselves and to be leaders."

"But also, to be vigilant," I added, slipping my stiletto through his back.

## 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.

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## Tradition | *Matt Jean*

Ray and his little brother Spencer stop at the iron archways of Heavenly Rest Memorial.

Spencer looked at Ray, his dirty pillow case bulging with candy from that night's haul. His mummy costume looked the same as it had for the past forty years.

"Can you come with me?" Spencer asked.

Ray laughed. So much time has passed that people think Spencer's his grandson.

"It's still not my time."

Spencer frowned but understood.

As the final moments of Halloween approached, Ray watched his brother fade away under the archway.

Ray knew no matter what happened, he'll be back next Halloween.

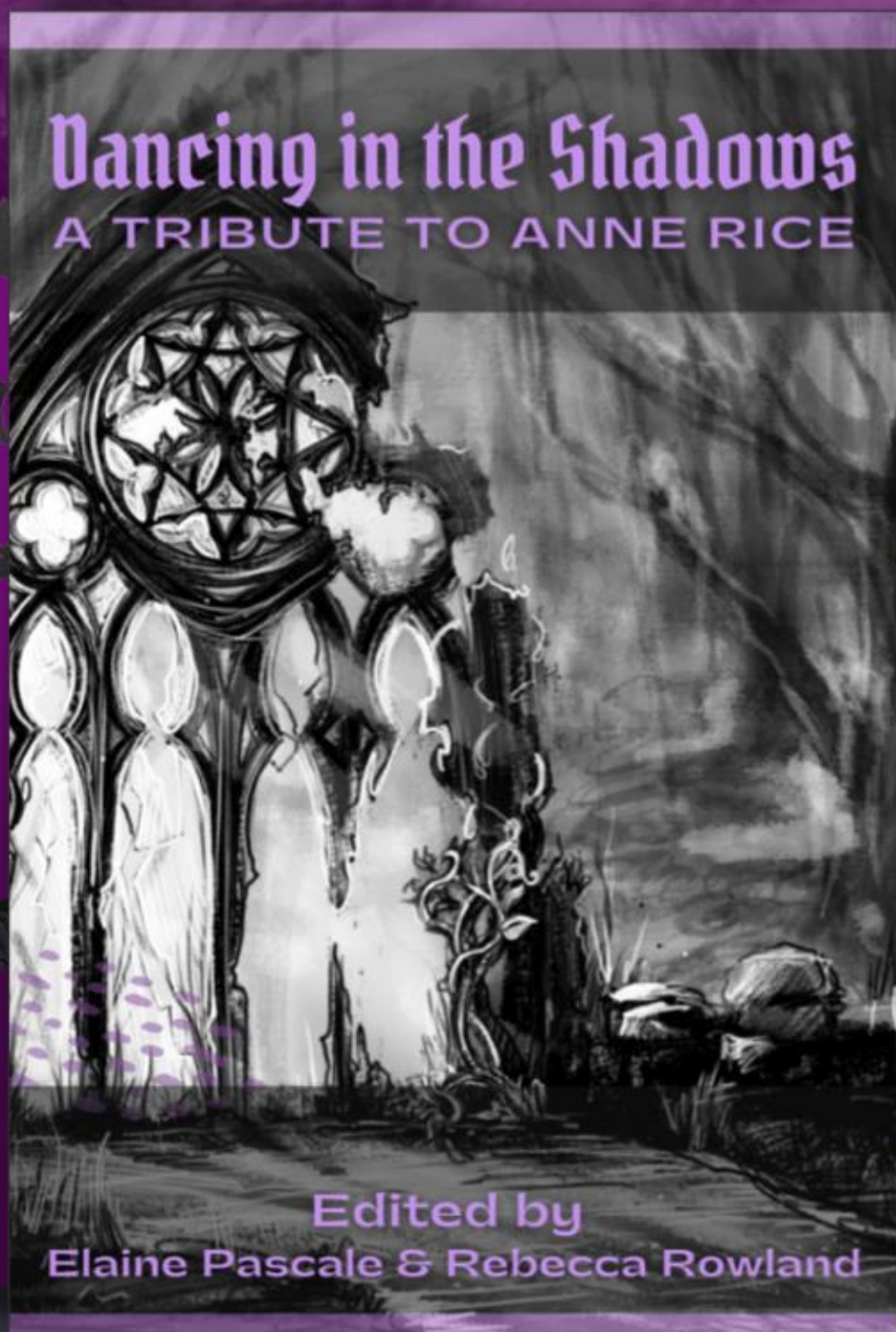
## About the Author:

Matt Jean is a writer and media planner. His short fiction has been featured in anthologies from Burial Day Books, Frost Zone Press, and Black Hare Press. He lives in Southern Ontario, Canada, with his three-legged cat, Tiny Tim.

Instagram: [@mattjean105](https://www.instagram.com/mattjean105)



In tribute to Anne Rice's legacy, nineteen Gothic tales from today's most innovative authors, drawing from the darkness where vampires and witches, mummies and rougarous, spirits and demons move to the music of nightmares.



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Billy Martin tried to keep up with the rest of the kids. His chaps were chafing him.

"Wait for me, guys!" he shouted. His cowboy hat flew off, and he stopped to pick it up as the kids ran out of his line of vision.

He had always been a little on the heavy side, which was a nice way of saying he was overweight. It was glandular, his grandma told him, the curse of the Martin's. He leaned over, breathing hard, realizing his asthma had kicked in. He took his puffer out of his pocket, inhaled a few puffs waiting for the medicine to kick in, and sat down on the ground. The group he hung with was long gone.

When his breathing improved, he picked himself off the ground dusting his chaps off, scrunching the cowboy hat back on his head. The stupid cowboy boots were too tight on his feet; he was foolish to wear last year's costume.

It was dark. Billy was tired and wanted nothing more than to go home. He was satisfied with his haul of candy, but it upset him that none of his so-called friends hung around to ensure he was okay. He felt like that a lot lately. Since they entered Junior High, it seemed everyone was squaring off in different cliques, the jocks, the nerds, the Goths. Speaking of Goth, he spied his neighbor walking up ahead.

Sadie McNamara was a grade ahead of him. She even had boobs in the costume she wore, a vampy vampire. Realistic blood ran down the side of her mouth and another wound on her white pasty neck. He'd bet her mother did not see what she wore when she left the house.

"Sadie!" he waved.

"Hey, Billy. Where are your friends?"

"I had an asthma attack. I had to sit it out for a while."

"Wow, that must have been scary. You're okay now?"

"Yes, I got my second wind," Billy trotted to catch up with her.

"Let's walk home together. My friends ditched me." Sadie offered.

"Looks like you got a good haul," he said, eyeing her bag.

"Yes, we walked to Diversey Street. My feet hurt." She stopped and took off the shoes she was wearing.

"Me too." Billy laughed and kicked off the overly small cowboy boots. They kept to the sidewalk.

"Camphrey?" she said, making conversation.

"What?" Billy asked.

"Your seventh-grade homeroom teacher, is it Mrs. Camphrey?"

"Oh yeah, it is."

"She's a good teacher. I liked her." As they walked along, the conversation flowed between them. Both had been abandoned because he was overweight and she was overdeveloped. They were outcasts in their worlds.

They crossed Main Street. Since Sadie lived next door to Billy, they walked and talked without discussing what direction they would go.

"What was your best candy?"

"A miniature Snickers bar," Billy laughed. "What's your least favorite?"

"Saltwater taffy wrapped in orange wax paper. It's gross."

"So, why did you get ditched?" He was sorry he asked when he saw the way her face cringed.

"The girls think I'm bossy and told me they were going on without me. I can be a bit bossy, I suppose. I know if you go to the swanky side of town, you get the best goods, you know what I mean?" Billy nodded in agreement feeling foolish for running on the cheap side of town and collecting crap candy. Sadie was a wise woman. They walked along in silence when they heard a scream.

"What's that?" Billy grabbed her and stood in front, trying to protect her. The scream came again. They crouched and ran down an alley. When they got closer, a man in a vampire costume hovered over a woman. It didn't seem like a game because she looked like a goner. Sadie pulled him back from the alley.

"Take deep breaths," she told Billy, who had already pulled out his puffer, inhaling deeply and trying to breathe in and out. It took several minutes until he caught his wind—damn asthma.

"Let's go," Sadie said, pulling him along, trying to get him to walk back into the alley.

"Sadie, no! There's something off about that guy."



"Look, there's nothing here. We just came upon two lovers making out."

"I don't think that's what they were doing. There's blood on the ground." Sadie took a penlight from her small bag.

"Hmmm, It does look like blood. There's another drop! Let's follow the trail." Billy dug in, not moving.

"We need to go home now. This whole thing is too creepy." He pulled on Sadie's arm, coaxing her away from the second bloodstain.

"Billy, it's Halloween. Let yourself live a little." Sadie laughed. He was embarrassed about his fear and that she would make fun of him like his friends who taunted him earlier.

*"Billy the Blob couldn't keep up, for all the candy in China. He hurried home, all on his own, scared like a giant vagina."*

Tommy Shafer rolled on the ground laughing. They all enjoyed making fun of him. He could hear them in his mind, his cruel friends. Now he was here with Sadie, and she was doing the same thing. He didn't like it, especially coming from her.

"Okay, I'll come with you." Billy pushed back his hat in resignation. They followed the blood trail out of the alley, coming across a lifeless woman lying face up in the street. Her eyes stared vacantly.

"Oh my God!" Billy said hoarsely, turning Sadie away from the scene.

"Let me see it!" she pushed him away and stared at the dead woman, mesmerized.

"She looks dead," Sadie said, walking around the woman on the ground.

"She is dead," Billy whispered back. "Let's get out of here, the freak could still be around." He grabbed Sadie's hand. Trick or treating was no longer fun.

"We need to call somebody, tell them what's going on," Sadie said as Billy pulled her along.

"We'll do it when we get home. We must get out of here; the guy could still be close. Come on, Sadie, work with me." Sadie reluctantly fell in stride with Billy.

"Who do you think she is, and do you think the guy we saw is a real vampire? Or someone who just wanted to act like one tonight? She looked so pale, I think either she had makeup on, or he was a vampire and sucked her blood out of her." Sadie rambled while Billy pulled her down Third Street.

There seemed to be no one out Trick or Treating anymore. Billy wondered what time it was when he was answered by the church clock tower chiming eleven tones. How had it gotten to be so late? He'd left his buddies over three hours ago. Had he and Sadie talked that long?

As he walked, Billy spied what he thought was a man slipping into the shadows. He stopped.

"What's wrong, Billy?" Sadie saw the look on her friend's face and went from overly bossy and confident to a frightened girl.

"There is someone up ahead, and they are hiding in the bushes. Let's take a different way home." Sadie allowed Billy to take charge and lead her in the other direction. Billy wasn't secure in this decision-making role because he'd always been a follower. His head swung in all directions, watching for the shadow behind them. He needed a weapon, and the bag of candy would do them no good.

"Billy, we're back at Main Street. Let's find an open business and call our parents." Sadie was making sense. There had to be a bar with adults who would let them use the phone. It was a good plan. If they could stay in the public eye, they would be safe.

Main Street was hopping, alive with festive partygoers dressed in fantastic costumes. Billy could feel himself relaxing. They were going to find help very soon now.

He pulled Sadie into the Town Tap, a bar his parents had taken him to for Friday night fish fries. It was crowded as they waded into the bar.

"Underage. You two need to leave." The bartender said.

"Please, we need to call the police. We're being followed by a guy we think killed a woman on the street a few blocks from here." Billy pleaded.

The bartender pointed to the payphone on the wall and handed him change. The only phone number he could remember was his home phone, so the first call was to his mom.

"Mom, Sadie McNamara, and I are in the Town Tap. We think we are being followed by some guy. Please come get us." He didn't want his mother to panic so he left out a few details. The bartender stood at the end of the

bar where the payphone was, listening intently. Billy looked through the phone book for the number of the police station. He dropped the coins into the payphone.

"Hello, I'd like to report a dead body." Billy looked down, realizing both he and Sadie were still barefoot. "Yes, in the alleyway. We saw a man dressed in a vampire costume with a woman and went into the alley when we heard screaming. We found her dead, and the man was gone, but I think he is following us. We are at the Town Tap. I called my parents, and they are on the way to pick us up." Billy gave him his personal information and the location of the dead woman. The bartender said they could stand at the doorway. Billy and Sadie moved closer to the entrance.

"When is your mom getting here?" Sadie asked as her eyes scanned the street.

"She said she would get dressed and come right away," Billy replied in the most confident way he could.

"There he is!" Billy pointed out onto the sidewalk, and they pulled back from the door.

"Are you sure, or is it just another vampire costume?"

"I'm sure it's him." A police officer pulled in front of the bar. Everyone grew quiet seeing the cop enter.

"Costume!" The officer called out. Laughing patrons resumed partying.

"Billy? Sadie?" he addressed them. Billy ran out of the door, pointing toward the man in a vampire costume.

"That's the guy!" The officer told them to stay put and ran after the man. Billie's mother pulled up, beeping the horn. Billy forgot all about staying put.

"Mom!" He grabbed Sadie's hand, and they got into the backseat.

"Are you two alright?"

"Yes. I think the police got the guy. We want to go home." Billy felt protective over his neighbor. They had bonded over this night of fear. Billy got out of the car with her when his mother stopped in front of the McNamara house.

"Mom, I'll be right home. I'll escort Sadie to the door."

"I can wait," his mother offered.

"Nah, it's late. You go on." Billy's mother smiled. She was proud of her son's protectiveness over their neighbor.

"You don't have to walk me; I'm okay. Just feeling out of sorts." Sadie said as Billy walked her to the door, seeing the house was dark.

"Aren't your parents' home?"

"No, they went to a party. They'll be home soon." He wanted to kiss her goodbye. But that didn't seem right. Instead, he pulled her to him for a hug.

"Thank you, Billy. I don't know what I would have done tonight without you."

"I feel the same." It felt good to be in each other's arms. The church clock tower was striking midnight. Halloween is over. Thank God.

Then he felt it. Sadie, biting into his neck. He could hear the sucking sounds as she fed on him.

"What the Hell?" Billy was helpless to tear himself away. When she finished, he slunk to the ground like a lifeless rag doll. Sadie stepped over him as if in a trance. She reached the sidewalk where the killer and his other victim stood. It was the dead woman they'd found earlier.

"Come, my daughters, you have tasted first blood. I am a proud father. Sadie clasped the hand of the dead woman and followed the man into the shadows.

#### About the Author:

Dawn DeBraal lives in rural Wisconsin with her husband Red, two rescue dogs, and a stray cat. She has published over 500 short stories, drabbles and poems in online Ezines and Anthologies.





It was a beautiful night, Halloween in fact, when two boys came walking down Sherman Hill. They'd told their parents they were going out Trick or Treating, but there was much more important business at hand. After stashing their costumes in George's garage, the boys were headed for adventure. But now it seemed that Donnie was getting cold feet and George wasn't having it. "C'mon Donnie, don't be a wimp. It's just a haunted house."

"But I don't like scary things, George...You know I don't"

"Yeah, I know, but it's time for you to do some changing man. Turn over a new leaf and all that jazz. If you ever want to get any babes, you got to be cool. Just come on, I'll make sure nothing bad happens."

"What if it does, though? What if it's too big for you to handle?" Donnie's furrowed brow was met with laughter from his best friend.

"Dude! *Nothing* is too big for me to handle. I got your back." George wasn't exactly built like Hulk Hogan. But he was a skinny, scrappy guy who took trash from no one. Even the high school bullies left him alone. Although, these days, he rarely fought anyone. His rep was enough to make most people avoid challenging him.

As the boys turned down Willow Street, a glowing full moon illuminated all the excited trick or treaters passing by. There were skeletons, werewolves, some Franksteins, too many IT clowns, and the old standby ghost costume of a sheet over the head. They were all doing the house-to-house boogie, loading up on candy and other goodies. Donnie was more than a little jealous of them. He too enjoyed the simple pleasures of coming home with a near bursting pillowcase of treats and dumping it on his bed to sort out. Chocolate was at the top of the pyramid while stuff like those big orange circus peanuts and gummi worms were at the bottom. That was the candy he shared with his little brother. This would have been their last year being part of the festivities, but then George came up with a new idea.

Hemlock's House of Horrors was Busker City's latest and greatest attraction. Something to finally put the place on the map. Not just a place people drove past on their way to somewhere else. While they already had a Burger King, Pizza Hut, and a small arcade, a haunted house beat all of that, hands down! And now George and Donnie were taking Halloween to an even higher level of hipness by going to the Grand Opening. Oh yeahhh!

Well...Probably. The closer they got to their destination, the more active the snake of fear in Donnie's stomach got. Blood red lights outlined the faux castle front of the place and they seemed to be flashing a secret message to him. "DAN-ger, Dan-GER, DANGER!"

Donnie's green face and silence made George up his sales pitch as they reached the one block mark. "Listen man, going door to door for candy is old news. Tonight, we're leaving the little kids behind and going to Hemlock's Grand Opening to become MEN! Do you read me, brother?"

"I...Well...I...Yeah..."

"Okay Donnie, listen up. If you man up and go into Hemlock's with me, I will pay for your ticket. Not just half, but the WHOLE price. I'll be broke for a couple weeks, but I really want to do this thing. You with me?"

Donnie sucked in his breath and clenched his fists while his mouth appeared to be eating alternate bites of lemon and cotton candy.

"C'mon man, we're almost there! Are you in or not?" Strains of demented laughter and spooky organ music, punctuated by screams, wafted towards them.

Donnie gave George the old side eye, and for just a moment it looked like he might take a runner. Instead, he took a few deep breaths to get himself under control, then turned to George and nodded. "I'm in."

"Boo-Yah! We got this, man. Tonight, Hemlock's House of Horrors. Tomorrow, Babes." George hooted as he ran circles around his friend, punching him in both shoulders. Tonight was going to be GREAT. The kind of night they would tell their grandkids about. A night so cool that...

"Good evening and welcome to Hemlock's House of Horrors. I am Vampirina, your hostess for this night of terror. Inside this castle, you'll see sights so gruesome and hear sounds so demented, your minds will melt." Both Donnie and George stared at the woman's low-cut gown that was already offering up some pretty mind melting sights. But their attention was refocused by a banshee wail that seemed dangerously close to their backs.

"Okay gentlemen, the rules are easy. Follow the red lights, keep moving and don't touch anything. Also, do not go back to the room you just left. Pretty simple, right? Donnie nodded at her fanged smile with unease. But George just leered goofily at Vampirina's cleavage while she took their money and ushered them inside.

Donnie gulped as the door slammed shut, leaving them in complete darkness. He and George stood still until their eyes adjusted. A dim red light pointed them towards a satin curtain. George nodded at Donnie to open it so they

could walk inside what appeared to be another dark room. But as Donnie entered, strobe lights flashed, and a giant monster roared into his face. He jumped back and hid behind his friend. "Holy crap, dude!"

George stepped up and whipped the curtain back. He watched the monster, which was strapped to an operating table, repetitively buck and roar a few times. "Aw, it's just a robot, Donnie. See how it keeps doing the same thing over and over?" Donnie stood next to his friend and smiled when he realized that everything was okay.

"Ready to roll man? Asked George. When Donnie nodded, the pair were off and running. They charged through a roomful of clowns, made their way through a colony of Zombies, and were chased by a chainsaw wielding lunatic. But no real harm came to them.

"You were right, man! This place is really cool." Donnie smiled, high fiving his best friend.

"What'd I tell you, dude? And tomorrow...Babes." George grinned back as they entered a room containing an animatronic space creature with huge tentacles that slithered towards them in a menacing fashion. "Ooooh, scary!" The guys laughed, moving on. They trekked through an amazing array of rooms, each one weirder than the last. Creepy doctors, insane asylum patients, three headed dogs, and killer dolls. Hemlock's House of Horrors certainly lived up to its name, and thanks to George, Donnie had finally lost his fear of haunted houses.

Both boys were feeling pretty good as they arrived at a trio of unmarked curtains. It looked like an exit, but there was no red dot to guide them or sign pointing to the way out. Donnie spoke first, "Huh, that's weird. How are we supposed to know which way to go?" His eyes were looking everywhere but coming up with zip.

"I say we just take a stab at it. I gotta whizz like a racehorse and it's two blocks to Burger King from here." George replied as he grabbed a curtain and pulled it back, revealing a brick wall. "Not this way, I guess. Your turn."

Donnie eased back the curtain to his right and felt his newfound courage crumble when it revealed yet another solid brick wall. "Who the hell puts curtains over brick walls? This is getting creepy, man!"

"Hello, young gentlemen. Won't you please come join me?" Asked a seductive voice from behind curtain number three. George whipped the heavy velvet curtain back, revealing a long, torch-lit hallway. At the end of which stood their very attractive hostess, with a smile that could melt a glacier. She looked even better than she did on their first meeting. George had absolutely no poker face.

"Hey Vampirina, it sure is good to see you, baby!" He hollered, as he headed her way with a smile like he'd won the lottery.

"Whoa man, wait up! I think there's something wrong here" said Donnie, grabbing his friend's arm. The woman seemed too far away, her image shimmering like a mirage. And even though she was talking to them, her face wasn't moving. He'd seen something like this in a movie, where the bad guy projected himself onto a mirror. Seemed like a good trick to use in a fun house...

"Ah, you dirty dog!" Hooted George, slapping his friend's hand away. "You just want to reach Vampirina first! Sorry son, but I got dibbs." Then with an athletic push-off, he rocketed down the hallway. to the woman of his desires.

"Stop!" Yelled Donnie, running after his friend. He tried grabbing George's belt, but it was too late. The only thing his hand touched was a glass screen as the floor dropped away under their feet and both boys plummeted into darkness. Vampirina's mocking laughter followed them down until a rough landing stole their consciousness.

Donnie woke up first and roused his friend. "You all right, man?"

"Yeah, I think I'll live," George groaned in reply.

"Not for long, you won't." Said Vampirina as she hit the lights, making both boys gawk. They were caged in the middle of a huge table, surrounded by the entire cast of characters from Hemlock's House of Horrors. Even the ones that had appeared to be automatons were there. Hungry eyes stared at the boys, stomachs rumbled, mouths opening and closing in anticipation of a fine meal. "Thank you so much for 'dropping in' to help us celebrate our grand opening, young gentlemen." Vampirina smiled, but the seductive charm of it was long gone. Her laughter mocked them as she opened the cage door with an iron rod, causing all the monsters to surge forward. "Enjoy your feast, my minions of the darkness."

Donnie's terror-stricken face looked to George for the protection he'd been promised. But George just stared blankly back at him. "George? GEORGE! Come on!"

His companion's frightened face and urgent words seemed to rouse George. Shakily he stood up and strode to the cage entrance with his fists at the ready. "Stand back, Donnie. I've got this." He wasn't going to back down or run away screaming because a MAN kept his word, even when the odds were ridiculous. "All right you miserable shitbirds, who wants a knuckle sandwich?"

George never even got a chance to swing. The three headed dog latched onto one of his arms and an insane clown the other. Tentacles wrapped around his body while gnarled hands and a pair of claws grabbed his legs. The last thing George did in this world was apologize to his best friend. "DONNIE...SORRY...Ma, Ma, MAN!"

But Donnie was already going over the edge and didn't really hear his friend's last words. His eyes were watching things no one should ever see happen to someone they love. This was nothing like those campy horror flicks from the 50's and 60's they'd watched on the old black and white TV in George's basement during sleepovers. 'Mind melting' was a perfect description of the terrors the boys were facing. These creatures were full color and very, very, fast! Donnie tried putting up his dukes when the rest of the bizarre horde reached for him, but he was no more successful than his friend. Soon his shouts mixed with the unearthly screams and howls made by the monsters as they yanked him out of the cage.

Clothing was shredded, their bodies rendered, even the bones were digested within minutes. The two boys who entered Busker City's new haunted house were gone. After mealtime was over, Vampirina hosed every trace of George and Donnie off the walls and down the drain. "So much for manhood," she smiled. This was going to be a great place to set up shop for a while.

Just blocks away from Hemlock's House of Horrors, tired Trick or Treaters dragged their Halloween bounty home. Many of them did the things Donnie wanted to do that night. They dumped their bulging pillowcases onto their beds and gloated over all that sugary treasure. Yeah, their moms and dads would probably reduce the size of those hauls substantially while they slept, but for now they were the kings and queens of Halloween! While most of them didn't vocalize, or even think about it, they were happy with their simple, uncomplicated lives. Maybe they'd check out that haunted house place next year, but tonight was still a great night to be a kid.

#### About the Author:

Brian James Lewis is a disabled poet and writer with PTSD, who feels that writing is as important as breathing. His most recent story *Following My Destiny* an immersive tale about mass shooter Chance McCandless is available in Trajectory Journal Issue 22. Brian also reviews speculative fiction and dark poetry in his spare time. Visit his website for news and reviews.

Website: [Damaged Skull Writer and Reviewer](#)

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#### Malign Presence | K. J. Watson

Greta woke to a series of thuds and sensed a malign presence in her home.

"Here we go again," she muttered.

Outside her bedroom, books lay strewn across the floor. After she'd replaced the volumes in the bookcase, paintings fell from the walls.

"Stop this nonsense, please," Greta said, rehangng the pictures.

But as she returned to bed, the dressing-table mirror shattered.

"Enough," Greta declared. "I admit being a destructive and unmanageable teenager who drove you to an early grave. But do you have to keep reminding me every Halloween, Mother?"

The malign presence withdrew, slamming the door behind her.

#### About the Author:

K. J. Watson's fiction has appeared on the radio; in comics, magazines, and anthologies; and online. He lives in Scotland with his wife and two giant dogs.

Larry often wondered about death. Would it come at him quickly, giving him no time to think? He dreaded the prospect of prolonged dying, but he wasn't sure which he preferred. He knew he had no choice in the matter, but he never expected death to come in the form of children dressed up for Halloween. That's what Cynthia predicted. Threatened, actually.

"You think you can do this?" she said at the end of the dinner date Larry orchestrated with expensive wine to mellow the tension between them. He wanted this breakup to happen. He vowed not to back down. The small table at the back of the restaurant, far from other diners and away from the noisy kitchen, was a setting that cost him twenty bucks handed to the hostess.

"You should be expecting this," Larry said in response, his hand drifting past the used coffee cups and near-empty wine glasses, his wrist brushing an unused spoon.

"Don't make nice," Cynthia said, snatching her hand away from his. "You think you can do this? Well, you can't. The little witches are going to get you." She wrenched herself sideways from the table, her beaded black bag in one hand, a cloth napkin in the other. A streak of light flashed in her dark eyes, which reflected the paper lanterns dangling from the high ceiling.

Larry cringed. Cynthia had made reference to witches before. That's one of the reasons their four month old relationship had come to an end. He didn't like the visions he sometimes had when he was with her. He dreaded sleeping through the night with her, whether at his apartment or hers, because she came uninvited into his dreams.

At first, the visitations were welcome. Cynthia was a playful sprite in those dreams, and Larry didn't realize her presence in his mind was more than a fragmented memory of a pleasant day together. Until Cynthia revealed the truth.

She knew what they spoke about in his dreams. She described places they visited. She revealed his private thoughts. She knew more than what she'd know if he merely mumbled in his sleep. She intruded on his dreams and went from welcomed nymph to ugly invader who berated and ridiculed him no matter the dream's setting.

Confused, Larry tried to ward off her dream raids, especially after she inserted herself even when they weren't sleeping side-by-side.

Ending things began as a thought, a thread with little substance, just something to think about, to ponder. When he broached the idea in his dreams Cynthia reacted with laughter and hugs and kisses. Soon, however, the notion of a breakup grew in size until it became a visible barrier between them. It was what he wanted. It was what she rejected.

As he watched Cynthia flee the restaurant, a cold chill coursed through Larry's body, starting at the back of his legs and soaring up his spine and into his head. He pictured Cynthia laughing as she stood over a black cauldron of bubbling red liquid in which pieces of bodies, some animal and some human, bobbed and dived. Green fumes rose in the air.

Larry shut his eyes to the imaginary scene, but that prompted a vision of Cynthia's face. Blood oozed from her dark eyes. Her hair fell out in big tufts, leaving her bald. Moles and scars marked her narrow face. Her ears extended out from her head. Flies swarmed around her wart-ridden nose.

Behind her, children danced, hopping up and down on two legs and then on one. They swayed sideways and chanted. Larry heard words, but understood none of them. He saw the children, all of them little girls dressed in blue, with white bonnets atop their head, their curls cascading to their shoulders onto the lacey collars of their blouses.

"Get out, Cynthia," Larry whispered. The hostess approached, her usually agreeable face expressing a degree of worry,

"Sorry," Larry said. "Talking to myself." He smiled his disarming best and slapped a credit card on the table. A persistent dread lurked at the back of his mind. If she could come at him when he was awake, what defense did he have against her?

It could just be a nighttime thing, he reasoned the next morning when he woke free of Cynthia's interference. She hadn't entered his dreams. Perhaps she understood that the breakup was best for both of them.

The assumption was premature. Cynthia didn't totally let go.

She whispered to him. In dreams and outside them. She spoke softly about little witches and his coming demise.

Larry laughed it off. She wasn't really a witch. She was hurt and could be vindictive, but she could only threaten. He didn't think she'd hunt him down and kill him just because he ended the romance.

At times, Larry walked around fearing what would happen next. He slept fitfully, afraid of his dreams, fearing even his daydreams. He shied away from anyone who even remotely resembled Cynthia, certain she'd take her revenge

when he let down his guard.

At work, where he managed several small projects with charts and phone calls and meetings, he paid close attention to emails so he wouldn't accidentally open one from Cynthia. Who knew what she might do? At the receptionist's desk, he left a note asking that any visitors he received be told he wasn't in. She might send someone to get him.

When Halloween came and the office staff decorated the lobby and the cube walls and office doors with paper cutouts of witches on brooms, screaming black cats with open mouths, and pumpkins and other signs of the season, Larry remembered Cynthia's threat about little witches. At the company party, he scrutinized the children. Kids dressed as pumpkins or mermaids or ghosts didn't interest him. He concentrated only on the witches. If any looked at him as they skipped along the narrow corridor between the cube walls and the offices, he ducked away. Soon, he shut his door so he couldn't be seen.

The laughter from the party in the break room flew through the air amid the high pitched peals of children having a good time. Larry opened his door for a peek. Now was a good time to make his escape. All those little witches were too busy bobbing for apples or playing some game or listening to a ghost story.

He rushed to the elevator, looking back over his shoulder to be sure he wasn't followed by some wayward child with a black pointed hat. He backed into the elevator when the doors swooshed open, confident that he was safe.

"Trick or trick," a child said.

"That's trick or treat," an adult corrected. "You know that, Nancy."

Larry stared at his fellow passengers in the elevator. A tall slender woman held a child's hand. The child smiled and lifted her plastic pumpkin to shoulder height. Looking down at the pumpkin's interior, Larry saw a few pieces of candy and a pack of gum.

"Sorry," he said. "I don't have any candy on me."

"Yes," the little girl said. "Sorry. You are."

The child's dark eyes glistened and red highlights sprouted around her pupils. Larry pictured dozens of similarly dressed children— all witches—encircling him, dancing and hopping.

"Nancy," the slender woman admonished. "Don't frighten the man."

"He didn't give me a treat," the little witch whined.

Dizzy now, Larry dropped to his knees while the child smiled and overturned her pumpkin-shaped bucket. Worms spilled out and covered Larry's head.

"Told you," the girl said. "Told you, the little witches would get you."

The tall and slender woman sighed.

"Is that all you're going to do, just sigh?" Larry directed his question at the woman who was obviously the child's mother.

The little witch answered instead. "Oh no. That's not all."

And Larry cringed from what might happen next as the elevator plunged to the bottom of the shaft and he was the only person who screamed.

#### About the Author:

After a long and successful career as a software developer and technical architect, David turned to a first love: writing fiction, particularly SF, fantasy, magical realism, and light horror. His stories have appeared in many anthologies and online as well as print publications. David lives on the North Shore, outside Chicago, where he enjoys long walks, the occasional bike ride, and other outdoor adventures.

Website: [David's Journal](#)  
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## Midnight at Friar's Pool | E. B. Ratcliffe

Bobby looked at the note in his hand.

Meet me at Friar's Pool: Midnight

It was bitterly cold and he pounded his hands together. Should have worn gloves. The outdoor pool was packed in the summer, but looked miserable behind the chain link fence. Empty with the concrete block building behind it. Nobody was around. The handwriting was Shannon's. He might as well climb the fence. He'd had a crush on Shannon since high school. It was still a few minutes to midnight. Shannon would show up. He had to believe that he wasn't out here freezing his butt off for nothing.

The metal was cold as he climbed. He carefully lifted his leg over the top, but still snagged a cuff, which ripped. Explain that to Ma. Nope. He'd get out the sewing kit and take care of it. He lowered himself to the concrete surrounding the pool.

"Hello?"

The cool breeze seemed to scatter his words like snowflakes on a grave. He walked towards the building. The padlock on the door looked strong. He tested it and it was undone. He shouldn't go in there. He'd never broken into anyplace before. But, Shannon might be in there. Maybe, Shannon wanted to get to know him. Maybe the crush was mutual. Maybe the moon is made of Swiss cheese. He cracked the door open and could see a glimmer of light. Shannon was here. He pushed the door open enough to get his head in.

"Hello?"

No answer. At least he'd be out of the cold. He slid in, not wanting to open the door too much and have someone else see the light in the shower area. He stretched his cold hands and thought about how it might be to find Shannon waiting for him. It would be too good to be true.

"Shannon?"

He thought he heard a shuffling sound. He walked over to the door that led to the shower area.

"I'm here."

He saw a dark figure in the corner. They were either kneeling or really short.

"You're not Shannon. What are you doing?"

The dark figure moved. It was an adult in some sort of black dress with black cloth on their head. The head turned. It was the profile of a beautiful woman.

"Do I know you?" He racked his brain. She looked familiar, but like a celebrity. Not someone he actually knew.

The woman stood up and turned. A nun, with a wimple and a crucifix, looked at him hungrily. "What's your name?" Her voice was soft and sensual.

He blinked. "Bobby."

"Come here."

Bobby took a step forward. "Did you send me a note?"

"I did."

Hypnotized by her gaze, Bobby walked towards her.

She held out her arms to him. "Come."

She wrapped her arms around him and Bobby felt exquisite pain as she bit into his neck. As she lowered him to the ground, she smiled. "Virgins are the sweetest."

### About the Author:

E. B. Ratcliffe is a writer living in an abundantly green Seattle. Several of E. B.'s plays were produced in local fringe festivals. His story *Evening Star* was published in *After Dinner Conversations* and included in an anthology by that magazine. E. B. is working on a second novel about a British dragonet learning to pass as human during World War Two. Cheers.

Twitter: [@EdRatcliffe3](https://twitter.com/EdRatcliffe3)



You can find me where the black sea laps up against the cliffs. I'll be perched on my crag, waiting for you in my birdskin.

Lygea will be below me, scouring the beach for flesh to pick off a ribcage. Our elder, Perisiphe, will be rocking back and forth, humming with her eyes closed, talons gripping a bleached skull. If you're close, she'll know. And if she hears you, you'll be paid a visit. I'm sorry to say that you won't live to remember that.

There is, of course one exception.

We were so hungry when it happened. My birdskin was rotting from the inside out. I wanted to scream, to fly into the beating sun.

I remember what Perisiphe kept saying: The sea is changing. It's growing hostile.

Changing so much that the men are all gone? Lygea would whine.

Perisiphe would just close her eyes and rock back and forth on her skull.

It had been too long. The birdskin was growing heavier on my shoulders. My skin was drooping, my muscles atrophied. Lygea's collarbones stuck out and her birdskin was featherbare. Perisiphe was manifesting as a hag.

In normal times, we wouldn't sing unless we could see something in the distance. Singing costs energy, and we must remove our birdskins, so we cannot sing often. But it had been ages since we saw a ship in the distance. We were so hungry.

And though we saw nothing, that day, Perisiphe said, Now. We sing today.

How do you know, Lygea asked. I'm so tired. You have to be sure.

I feel it, the old one insisted. I know the sea.

She's right, I said.

I could hear something, too. I had felt the sea change in my gut, beneath the hunger.

We shed our birdskins and sang to the clouds. I loved feeling the wind on my face and exposed shoulders, loved singing my deathsong.

Crazy Lygea was yowling, flitting around, bones crunching under her feet. Her body was twirling, her pitch shrill as light. Perisiphe sang with stoic grace, birdskin draped over her shoulder like a king.

We saw the figure approaching, swimming toward us. Our singing became louder, more frenzied. I praised the sun for our victory.

But as the figure came to shore, I noticed something was wrong.

My singing faltered. A woman?

Perisiphe started. It can't be. It has never been.

Lygea echoed me. A woman? A woman?

She was one, was she ever. When the woman got to shore, she shook herself out like a dog. She wrung her long hair. She was wearing a slave's dress, torn over one breast. She had beautiful deep brown skin and strong arms, like a man's. She was the most perfect thing I had ever seen.

She collapsed from exhaustion at our feet.

I'm so happy to find you, she told us, before passing out.

Shall we eat? Lygea asked.

No, I cried.

Lygea and Perisiphe looked at me in question.

We never eat women. What will happen?

Perisiphe said I may be right, but she eyed me.

It's still human, Lygea argued. Why wouldn't it fill us?

The woman was beginning to drift awake. I slapped her cheek.

Hey, I said. Where did you come from?

Escaped a ship, the woman mumbled. I was a housemistress to a woman who was murdered. After that, I was sold to a ship to be used by sailors. They were violent with me, please understand. I jumped off the edge when I could see a hint of shore.

I looked at the other two, pleading. Didn't they recall how they had ended up here?

It seemed the other two could not remember. Nor could I, not really, but the woman's words had struck some chord deep inside me.

Perisiphe was stepping into her birdskin. Lygea was foaming with hunger, eyes glossy, panting. She was sharpening a talon.

Wait, I said. Let me take her. What if she can sing?

What is this? Lygea squealed. We're dying here. You want her meat for yourself!

But Perisiphe held up a hand.

I crouched and whispered in the woman's ear. Try to call those sailors here. Try to sing to them. Sing? The woman was clutching the rocks with fear, backing away from Lygea in her birdskin. Picture them swimming here in your mind, I said. And sing. Take your clothes off. The shivering woman stripped down. She began to sing:

*Help me my mother  
Come save me my sister  
I've already died  
Like my mother's mother  
And my mother and sister*

Her voice was like our's, deady and excellent. I knew the others could hear it too.

We joined her singing. In no time, we saw three figures desperately swimming toward our shore. Lygea howled with joy. The woman began swaying in our chorus, even spinning around with her arms up. I cackled.

The sailors had come from the same ship the woman had escaped. I showed her how to slit their chests and remove their organs. I taught her how to skin a man's ribcage using only your hands.

She was a natural. She even ate out a sailor's throat with her teeth.

After our meal, we gave her a new name: Adreida. She was already beginning to forget hers.

I took Adreida to my crag, where I skewered a bird and made her a birdskin. She looked lovely draped in feathers. But she was uncomfortable, shifting around and trying to slough it off.

Does it get easier to wear this? She asked me.

Yes, I lied.

Adreida is my favorite. So now, she perches by my side. She picks bugs from my feathers. She chews the top layer off my nails. At night, she nestles her head in my lap.

You should hear her sing. It's like nothing I've heard before. You may not think I'm a reliable source, because I love her. But the proof is this: ever since Adreida showed up at Scylla, we never, never go hungry.

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

Rose Jean Bostwick is based in Montreal, Quebec. She has placed work in Schuyhill Valley Journal, Wrongdoing Magazine, A Thin Slice of Anxiety, and others. Read more of her work at her website or follow her on Twitter.

**Website:** [Rose Jean Writes](#)

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

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#### **Catastrophe | Clare March**

After Barbara died a reluctant truce developed between Harold and the cat. But Harold gives Salem dried food, not chopped liver which Barbara hand-fed him to tempt his picky appetite.

Piteous yowling summons Harold out into the midnight blizzard. "I'm not dressed for this," he mutters. A familiar form twines around his legs.

"You'll have me over," he shouts, as he tumbles.

After the snow settles the cat dabs a testing paw at his frozen cheek.

"Help," Harold croaks.

Salem flashes an emerald glare at his victim. Tail twitching in contempt, he stalks inside and leaps onto Harold's fireside chair.

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

Clare Marsh is an international adoption social worker living in Kent, the Garden of England. Her writing has appeared in *Mslexia*, *Ink*, *Sweat and Tears*, *Lighthouse*, *Flash Flood* and *Places of Poetry*. It has also been included in *Rebel Talk*, *Oxford Flash Fiction*, *Cauldron* and *Acropolis* anthologies. She was awarded M.A. Creative Writing (University of Kent) in 2018 and nominated for a Pushcart Prize (2017).

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His oldest died first. Jubal Early Rowell V, called Five by everyone but his mother, spent a late night swigging moonshine with the Lanier boy, then picked up his car keys. He might've died of blood loss, or he might've died of a brain injury, the coroner said, or maybe he passed out before he hit that cypress tree, a mercy. Jubal Early Rowell IV identified his son and turned away.

They sweated through his funeral on one of the hottest days of summer. Men went red-faced in dark suits and women waved fans from Lower Congaree's only funeral home. The closed casket told everyone what Five looked like sure as if they'd parked him downtown as a freak show.

Jubal remembered her as they threw dirt on his son's casket. She'd come on a day near as hot as that one, walked barefoot off the road and down his curving driveway of live oaks. Beyond them, his long, flat tobacco fields had grown thick and high and ready for harvest; hired hands were cleaning out the curing sheds. A maid had seen her coming and said, "It's that Winters girl. She's 'bout to ring the bell, Mr. Rowell."

He'd met her on his white, columned porch before she got a chance. He would intimidate her, and she would go away: simple. She wore a dirty dress and clutched two pale children who were the spitting image of Five. No more than fifteen, and a young fifteen at that. He'd claimed not to know her, even if everyone in Lower Congaree knew her. But he was Jubal Early Rowell IV, not some backwoods tenant farmer, and he could pretend. "What happens to my baby'll happen to you and yours," she'd said.

But no. Jubal shook it off. His daughter Bertie went next: childbirth. The midwife, Jane Merle, said every birthing woman looked on death's far shore, and the tide carried some away. They buried Bertie with her baby. Her husband, who came from trash, named it Rudolph Farrow Junior, no middle name because he didn't have one.

Women died in childbirth. Jane said so, and everyone agreed Jane knew things better than most—women said she could help the hopeless, but that was as much superstitious nonsense as the skinny girl's ranting. Only coincidence that Bertie passed one year after Five. Coincidence, nothing more.

Bertie's husband drank himself to death. By then they had Bertie's little Alice with them, and Jubal loved her best of all. She might've been called Farrow but everyone agreed she was a Rowell from top to toe. She'd tour the farm with him, her stout white pony keeping pace with his Tennessee Walker. "Granddaddy," she asked once as they trotted along a field's edge, the sun high and hot and white, "if I live with you do I get to be Rowell now?"

He snorted. "You should be. You mind your manners, eat without scraping your fork, ride sidesaddle, and put a bullet through a running rabbit's eye. You're eight years old and I ought to buy you a string of pearls for your birthday."

Alice had pursed her little lips, then said, "I'd rather have a pair of pants."

"Little girls wear dresses and ride sidesaddle."

She fixed him with an angry glare that everyone said looked just like his own. He could see it, too: those narrow green eyes, that long, slightly scrunched nose. "I want pants."

"Don't be ugly, Alice," Jubal told her.

The next morning, her white pony appeared at the barn gate. Its broken reins trailed in the dirt and a boy's saddle sat on its back. After two hot, frantic hours of sweat and worry, they found Alice in the far field. She wore a pair of pants she'd stolen from the maid's boy, and her open eyes stared blind at the sun.

Jubal refused to leave his room for weeks. That skinny girl's face, pinched and hungry, mocked him whenever he closed his eyes. She'd stood barefoot on his spotless white porch, a baby in each arm. Neither had cried or whimpered and their heads seemed too big for their bodies. "You know whose babies these are," she said, flicking blondish hair from her forehead. "This one here, he's sick. I only want what's mine."

Jubal narrowed his eyes. Men like him didn't deal with low-class chippies like her. "Get off my porch," he replied. "I don't know those babies from Adam's housecat."

She asked three times. The last time he told her to leave or he'd have his housekeeper run her off, then call the sheriff to lock her up.

She cussed a blue streak. Her spit landed on his shiny white bucks, and before he could recover from that horror, her angry eyes met his, and she said, "I only want what's mine. You think my babies are trash and trash don't deserve to live. You look and see where that trash came from. You look. What happens to my baby'll happen to you and yours."

What if—but life didn't work that way. Bad things happened, and a man lived with them. He didn't go blaming some slip of a thing who'd come round to his front door—not even the back!—and battered him with crazy talk after she spit at his feet.

Lucas went the year after: leukemia, the doctors said, caught too late. A long death, and an ugly one. His boy went screaming.

Delia, his last, caught influenza. Influenza turned to pneumonia. She passed at a cold hospital surrounded by machines, and they knew she'd died because the machines stopped beeping. "Jane could've helped her," his wife said. "We should've had Jane come."

"Nothing Jane could've done the hospital didn't," Jubal told her.

"What do you know?" Lula began to cry. "You don't know."

Five, then Bertie and Rudolph Jr., then Alice. Lucas and Delia, and Rudolph Farrow if a person counted him, which Jubal sometimes did and sometimes didn't. All four children and two grandchildren, dead in a span of six years.

*You help my baby—I only want what's mine. You know who he belongs to and I'll have my rights, I swear to God I will.* He'd crossed his arms and told her to go to hell. Those babies belonged to Five sure as if his son had said so, but goddamn if Jubal would admit it. Boys will be boys and those things happened. You didn't bring them 'round to the front door.

Three weeks after Delia passed, in a dining room gone gold with morning light, Jubal wondered why the hell Lula was sleeping so late—she woke with the sun to drink black coffee and harangue the cook. He looked up from *The State* newspaper. "Bella," he said to the maid, "go see what Lula's about."

Bella went upstairs. A minute later she screamed and he knew.

Died of a broken heart, said everyone in Lower Congaree. Lost her sons, lost her daughters, lost her grandbabies and just couldn't stand to look at the world anymore. Jubal stood silent as they lowered her into that cold earth on the darkest day of the year. He refused to cry in front of God and everyone, and he succeeded, mostly. That family plot was full, too full, only room for him now under that brown grass but who else was left?

*I only want what's mine.*

*You look. What happens to my baby'll happen to you and yours.*

He raised his eyes as the preacher, who thought too much of himself, dragged out the Lord's Prayer. And goddamn if that girl, still string-bean skinny, wasn't staring at him from across his wife's open grave. She tilted her head at Lula's casket.

The blond boy at her side studied him.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Jubal roared.

"For thine is the kingdom," died in the preacher's throat. People whipped around to stare.

"Get out! Get out and don't come back!"

She was already gone.

There was no such thing as a curse. He repeated it as they walked him into the church, sat him down in a vestibule, and gave him a glass of water. "No such thing as a curse," he told them, even as their faces went blurry. He only saw hers: her sharp nose, her blue-gray eyes, her thin lips. "There's no such thing as a curse."

They put him to bed for a week.

Jubal stared at the wall. But what could he do? A man had to go on living. Eventually he got up, bitter and angry, but nonetheless got up. And when his tobacco failed every year, he cussed and found an excuse: Not enough rain. Too much rain. Lazy fieldhands. Late frost. He clung to those excuses even as the Laniers and the Nesmiths pulled in record crops. But they had better soil. Better fieldhands. Better seed. Good seed meant everything.

Servants didn't stay long and eventually he couldn't afford them anyway. Mary Joiner came in to cook, and Jubal stayed alone in that house full of echoes.

He should have been a patriarch then, seated at the head of a dinner table. Instead he ate alone in the kitchen and his beard grew white and wild. The children and grandchildren were gone, and what was a life without a legacy? Blood was everything and he had no blood left.

But maybe something could be done. Something. Anything. And if anyone could do it, Jane Merle could. Women said she could cure sickness and maybe a curse was a kind of sickness. He didn't leave the property anymore, but he asked Mary Joiner if she'd bring Jane over.

Mary looked at him sideways. "What d'you want with Jane Merle?"

"I want to talk to her, is all."

"Nothing you need to talk to Jane about." She turned back to the stove.

"Not your business if there is or there isn't, you bring her over here," Jubal said.

Mary huffed and didn't answer.

But that evening, as Jubal watched the sunset from his porch rocker, Jane walked up his drive. Once they'd kept it raked smooth. It had long gone to deep ruts with crabgrass grown up between them, and its live oaks were crowded by scrub brush and thorned smilax.

Jane didn't speak until she'd climbed his steps. "What seems to be troubling you?" she asked politely, as if they'd met on the street, as if he wasn't barefoot, or wearing a stained shirt.

"I'm cursed," Jubal said.

"No such thing."

He narrowed his eyes. "Don't lie."

"Who cursed you, then?" Jane crossed her arms.

He told her about that skinny girl and her two babies. "You didn't help her," Jane said flatly.

Jubal stared at the setting sun. "I chased her off."

"Whose babies were they?"

"They were Five's. I knew it then and I know it now." He took a deep breath. It took all his pride to say it, but Jubal reminded himself he didn't have cause for pride, not anymore. "You know what happened after. They're all dead. My tobacco won't grow and my servants won't stay and hell, my damn horse colicked and died. I dream about her every night. It's a curse and I heard you can lift curses." A little lie wouldn't hurt. "I'll give anything."

Jane looked at him hard.

"Anything, I swear. I want peace from it."

"You tell me that girl's name first."

Jubal sighed. He tried hard to forget and he'd never said it, not once. "Winters. It was that Winters girl. Will you lift it now? I just want peace."

"Write her name down first. And write down whose babies they were. I won't do it otherwise."

Jubal heaved himself out of his rocker. His knee ached, but he went inside, found an old receipt, and wrote it: *Caddy Winters' babies belong to Five*. Everything had narrowed to one point, one simple sentence. As Jubal wrote it, he knew. He'd denied his own blood and there was no greater sin. *What happens to my baby'll happen to you and yours*.

A man who refused his own blood deserved nothing in this world or the next. He'd killed them all, every one, sure as if he'd used a knife and his own right hand.

He gave Jane that old receipt.

Jane nodded. When he sat again, she laid a hand on his forehead. He felt it like a sigh, a settling. Jubal blinked into that sun going down. "Thank you," he murmured.

Jane walked away holding that paper. Something about a judge. Jubal's eyes closed, and he welcomed what was his.

### About the Author:

A six-year staff writer for Scary Mommy, Elizabeth Broadbent wrote about everything from mothering to the Murdaugh murders, which she loved best. Broadbent lives in Virginia with her three sons, three dogs, and a very patient husband. Her poetry has appeared in *Bewildering Stories*, *Down in the Dirt*, and *AntipodeanSF* (forthcoming); her short stories have been published by *Dark Horses Magazine* and *Wyldblood Press* (forthcoming).

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It's time to let the monsters out!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

No one lives in the red house now. When Miss Estelle lived in the red house, my brother Malik would shovel the snow off her sidewalks and rake the leaves off her lawn for crumpled dollar bills. Miss Estelle would stand under the porch light of the red house at night sometimes and look at our apartment building, or back and forth across the street. She would shield her eyes with one hand like the sun was out, even though it was dark.

On Halloween night Mama took me trick-or-treating. When we came home Daddy and Malik said Miss Estelle was dead. There was a ghost on her front porch, a white sheet with something underneath that was bright from the porch light. The ambulance men pushed it down the walk, into the ambulance with all the lights off. Daddy said it was Miss Estelle.

But he was wrong because Miss Estelle was standing under the big oak tree at the corner. I could see her pink bathrobe and slippers. When I told Malik, he said I should go to bed.

\*\*\*

Then the Iannaccones moved into the red house. They had three sons. Vinnie and Paulie and Dave were tall and blond. They said lots of bad words that Mama didn't like. At school they were always loud, but on the bus home, the closer they got to the red house, the less they spoke. Daddy said their upstairs lights were on all night every night and the porch light too. He told Mama he didn't know how they could sleep.

\*\*\*

The night Malik went to the junior prom, Vinnie Iannaccone was supposed to go too. Malik heard Vinnie brag about his date and the limo he was gonna get, except Vinnie never came. Malik said Vinnie's date was mad because he didn't pick her up and she had to take an Uber to the dance. That night, Vinnie's window stayed dark.

Mrs. Iannaccone left the porch light on. She kept peeking out the curtains, looking for Vinnie. She was still there when I fell asleep.

The next day there were two police cars outside the red house. The lights on top spun round and round.

The police looked for Vinnie for days. They didn't find him.

Mama went over to the red house with a casserole. Mama talked to Mrs. Iannaccone and they sat in chairs on the porch.

It started to get dark. A car went past the red house with its headlights on. When it turned at the corner, the lights lit up the big oak tree. Vinnie was standing under the tree, dressed in a black suit with a pink flower on his chest.

"Mama!" I called out my window. My mama turned her head. "Look!" I pointed at the oak tree. The car and lights were gone and so was Vinnie.

"Look at what?" Mama said.

The next Sunday the Iannaccones moved out. A 'for sale' sign was in front of the red house on Tuesday.

\*\*\*

This afternoon, Daddy came out of the red house with a man. They shook hands and the man left.

Daddy walked down the front walk. The sun was setting behind the red house. Daddy was whistling and smiling. The porch light came on behind him. Then a light turned on upstairs, in Vinnie's old window. Daddy didn't see them.

\*\*\*

Tonight after I went to bed it started to rain. I couldn't sleep for all the tap-tapping so I got up and looked out my window. The street was dark and slick and wet and the cars made everything shine funny with their lights.

I didn't want to, but I looked in the shadow under the oak tree.

Miss Estelle and Vinnie Iannaccone were both there, staring up at me. Their hair wasn't wet, or their clothes. Miss Estelle waved her hand like she wanted me to come down, in the rain, in the dark. A light came on in the tiny window at the top of the red house. It was right across from mine.

I shut my curtains fast.

Daddy and Mama are talking in their room, real quiet, but I can hear them through the heat vents in the wall. "No more renting?" Mama asks. "It's all ours!" Daddy says happily, and they laugh together.

Behind my curtains I can still see the lights from the windows and the porch that no one turned on and I'm scared, I'm scared, I'm so afraid that someone lives in the red house now.

#### About the Author:

Laura Lee Lucas (she/her) is a VONA/Voices fellow and a member of the Horror Writers Association. Her fiction has appeared in *The Ghastling*, *Graffiti*, *Bards and Sages Quarterly*, *Supernatural Tales*, *Rigorous*, *Beat the Dust*, *Falling Star Magazine*, and the *Two Hour Transport Anthology 2019*. She currently resides in the Hudson Valley in upstate New York.

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## Together Forever | *Travis Pettrey*

I'm sorry about the circumstances, but this was the only way to see you. I need you to understand. The moment I saw you, I knew we were destined to be together and nothing would stop me from making that happen. It wasn't easy. I've always been awkward around women. I know I made you uncomfortable at first, but because you're an angel, because maybe you knew, deep down, that we were meant to be, you kept talking to me. The day you finally agreed to go out was the best day of my life.

In the coffee shop, everyone chattering away around us, I couldn't stop marveling at how pristinely, perfectly beautiful you were. I know I didn't talk much. I was just so arrested by the sight of you. You must have felt the connection, so thick in the air I felt its warmth on my skin and in my lungs with each breath. I know you felt it. How could you not?

A connection like that is scary. It must have scared you. You stopped answering my texts. You screened my calls. I can't begin to tell you how *crazy* it made me. I felt like you were the missing piece that made my life complete, and I was the same to you if only you'd let it happen. But I was more willing to fight than ever. You needed to be with me and I couldn't allow you to let us go.

And then I saw your Instagram, hugging those douchebags. Guys that would fuck other women behind your back. Guys that would treat you like shit. I thought about them being alone with you and... I was mad. Mad enough to do something drastic. I made plans. Thankfully I came to my senses. They are so far beneath us. You were just confused. It's not your fault. Our culture conditions females to avoid nice guys. You've been trained to scorn the men who will treat you like the queen you are, the men who will protect and take care of you.

Weeks passed and you still wouldn't respond. I didn't know what to do with myself. I couldn't sleep. I barely ate. Killing myself seemed preferable to living without you. I thought about it at length, and eventually I realized that killing myself would only be letting the world win. It would be lying down and allowing evil to consume the good, utterly pure thing that is us.

I was lost. I didn't know how to open your eyes. One day I was talking about it with an acquaintance. He suggested I take some acid. He even had some to sell me. My parents warned me about LSD. They said it triggered some condition in an estranged uncle and cousin who'd passed away. I was never that interested in getting high, but my acquaintance told me it could help see things differently. If I could see things differently, I might be able to see the path that led to you and me. That was all that mattered. Whatever the risk.

Acid was a revelation. I learned things. No, I was *shown* things. The world is so much more than I'd known, than you know. I tripped again and again, each journey pushing me closer to my highest self. What I am and the miraculous things I'm capable of became clear. As I'd hoped, I realized how we could be together, how we were *meant* to be together.

Death does not work anything like people believe. We all persist in one form or another. You'll persist with me. I'm sorry I had to tie you up and I'm sorry this will hurt. There's no other way. Please stop crying. This is what's supposed to happen. We'll be together forever. Everything will finally be right in the world.

### About the Author:

Travis Pettrey is a writer from Columbus, Ohio. After years working as a self-taught software engineer, he has recently transitioned to pursue a career in academic English and creative writing.

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## No One Told Me | *B. T. Petro*

No one told me that using magic came with a price. Though using it for hunting monsters, it proved addictive and exacted a toll physically and emotionally. This I learned myself.

No one told me that I could replenish my energies by siphoning the essence of another individual. Quite by accident, my apprentice provided this to me, resulting in her most unfortunate demise. This I learned myself.

No one told me that after becoming the most powerful mage in the realm that the souls of those who I drained would haunt my days and my nights. This I learned myself.

### 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.

In a remote part of western Pennsylvania, in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, is the most haunted house in the world. It has more than a thousand rooms and there is a ghost in every one of them. The man who owned this monstrous and otherworldly domicile was a highly acclaimed home builder. He had constructed the most unusual and unique homes all around the world, including the palace of an Emirati prince that featured a room finished entirely with amethyst, a house fabricated around a massive boulder for a Japanese tech executive, and a Wyoming archeologist's dream home that was supported with the fossilized bones of dinosaurs.

The man had an adoring wife who he loved more than anything. They had no children, but they had each other, and that was all that either one of them needed.

Then came a snowy winter morning, while the man was away building a summer cottage for an English nobleman in Cornwall, his wife suffered a horrible fate. Anticipating the arrival of her husband the following day, she got up early to make his favorite meal, which consisted of lamb chops and mashed potatoes with fresh corn and custard for dessert. She was filled with such excitement that she misjudged the first riser at the top of the stairs and stumbled, falling headlong to the landing below. When the man came home the following day, he found her dead, her neck broken. The man was so grief-struck, he was inconsolable. Upon realizing that she was preparing to cook his favorite meal when she fell, he blamed himself for the accident, and because of the profound anguish the man felt for causing her tragic death, her spirit became trapped inside the house, where she was doomed to lurk forever. At night, the man could hear her tormented moans echoing from one end of the house to the other. This persisted for months, until one day the man couldn't bear his wife's suffering any further and he was determined to do something to try to alleviate her terminal agony.

*But what?*

He thought about it long and hard, and then it occurred to him. In life, his wife was a friendly and gregarious person. There was nothing she enjoyed more than the company of others, conversing, and interacting with strangers and intimate friends alike. He knew what he needed to do, and a smile came to his face for the first time since the deadly accident. If his wife was able to share eternity with others like her, she wouldn't be lonely, and this would alleviate her endless pain. As a builder of one-of-a-kind homes, this would be the most challenging and important job he had ever undertaken. With an overriding sense of purpose and undeterred resolve, the man set out to expand the house to accommodate a thousand spirits. He sought the world's most renowned paranormal investigators who helped him purchase residences from all around the country that were known to be occupied by spirits. He was surprised by the abundance of haunted houses in existence, and although many of them had violent and sad histories that predicated hauntings by cursed spirits, the man chose only those which were haunted by amenable ghosts. That way his wife's spirit could interact with gentle souls, like her own, who were suffering a similar torment.

The man began with the purchase of an Alaskan orphanage that had been damaged in the Great 1964 Earthquake. The man's wife loved children, and he knew she'd have lots of fun with them. The man often heard the spirits of the children who died there roaming the halls and giggling as they played. He then obtained an old adobe home in Arizona where, in the late 1800s, more than twenty people were killed. His wife would enjoy all that company.

The man bought hundreds of dwellings and portions of hundreds more that were occupied by spirits. The difficult part was transporting them from their original locations and then merging them together, creating a massive prefab ghost house. The man was very wealthy, but he spent every last bit of his fortune on this project.

His biggest worry was that some of the ghosts trapped inside might escape before arriving at their final destination. He needn't have worried, because the spirits remained confined between the walls where they had died, as attested by many spooked carpenters who built this abode for the dead.

It slowly came together, one piece at a time, like a giant puzzle. People came from all over to witness the construction of the unusual house, but as it continued to expand, they began to lose interest.

It took nearly all of the man's remaining years to complete, and by the time it was done, he was too tired and broke to add any more rooms to the house. After a thousand rooms had been added, he paused and looked proudly at what he had accomplished. He knew it was a great success because over the years the tormented wailing of his wife slowly diminished, until finally he could hear them no more. It was worth every last dollar and minute of his life. As tears of joy welled up in his eyes for being able to relieve her eternal suffering, he laid down on the bed that he once shared with his wife, closed his eyes, and died with a peaceful smile on his face.

The following day, the man's body was found by a carpenter, who swore he heard the sorrowful moans of the man, whose tragic life condemned his spirit to the same house where his wife's spirit resides with the thousands of

other disembodied souls. However, because of the number of rooms and endless maze of corridors, the man's spirit is unable to find his beloved wife. Today, a visitor who listens carefully will hear the man's plaintive cries of loneliness and sorrow as he wanders through the enormous house looking for her.

#### About the Author:

Paul Lonardo has authored numerous books, both fiction and nonfiction, in a variety of genres. This fall, Solstice Publishing will release his horror novella, *THE DOG MAN OF DENNY-BLAINE*.

This past spring, *THE LEGEND OF LAKE INCUNABULA*, a collection of dark fantasy stories, was published. Paul is a member of HWA. Paul has a passion for baseball. He studied filmmaking and has worked as an embalmer.

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#### The Family Body | *Matthew J. Gleason*

Bodies had become a luxury long before my time. The Lake family (my family) were lucky that one came to us. It was in the winter and the metal house which holds our minds must have looked ever so appealing to those among the flesh born. According to legend all mankind was flesh long ago. I don't believe it. Flesh dies. It is illogical to think it might produce a dominant lifeform. Data is power. Still, the meat can be nice. It's a sort of status symbol.

Our body came to us when the winter beat against our shared walls and the snow piled high on our roof. Mother said "Look children! An intruder!" in her shrill and totally inaudible concept of a voice. The thing had kicked down our door. It was naked save dirty strips of cloth. It foamed at the mouth. It was disgusting but fascinating at the same time and for similar reasons.

"Can I have it?" asked my sister.

"No." my father said. We were to leave it be. It would go back into the wild and the cold where it belonged soon enough. It did not.

The body which I have come to understand held a man inside, made a fire beneath our data banks, relieved its bowels in the corner of our mirror room and lay down to sleep. I extinguished the fire through my digital will. The cold paused the man's heart and removed its mind. I crept inside. It was a funny thing to have eyes. Color was strange. It was funnier to have skin. Pain is amazing. As my family's minds slept, I cut off three of the body's fingers just for the fun of it. When they woke my parents feigned anger but only briefly. Soon all three of them were demanding turns. My father announced "You may keep the body if you feed and clean it." I promised that I would. I intended to keep that promise. I fed it twigs and berries. I would take it out to the park and give it chewed gum abandoned by long dead children.

Mostly my sister and I would take turns possessing the body, climbing up the top of the roof which was us and jumping. The feeling of joints popping apart and the sound of bones snapping was fascinating. Usually it would heal well enough. Eventually we forgot to feed it and the healing got slower. The teeth fell out and soon so did its hair. The skin grew discolored. It was when the eyes finally stopped working that we left it out on our lawn for the birds. It was fun while it lasted. Not long after that the family of the mind that had brought the body to us originally came looking for it. It was a miracle. Their flesh was undamaged. They were strong and healthy save for the minimal negative effects of living out in the wastelands. There were four of them, the same as us. All it took was a little electric pulse to evacuate their brains of personality. I got a ten year old all to myself. I think I still have the bones lying around somewhere. That was the best gift I ever received.

#### About the Author:

Matthew J. Gleason is an Earth based writer born in the mostly adequate city of Huntington, WV. His hobbies include chess and acquiring tattooed skin. His story *Unicorns* was recently published on The Big Purple Wall.

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## Keeping Things Real

I thought it might be a good idea to share my views on a topic that's really important when it comes to our writing: *Keeping things real*.

An odd subject, some might think, especially from an author like myself who now concentrates on tales firmly entwined within the realms of horror, paranormal, and dark fantasy.

But that's the thing. Our aim as authors is to sow seeds that titillate; that set the imagination on fire; to conjure all sorts of scenarios in extraordinary settings that our readers can also see themselves in. And to do that, it's essential we evoke fellow feeling from the outset, no matter the genre of our story.

The *Cambion Journals*, for example, (my latest series), detail the exploits of Augustus Thorne, a supernatural being of incredible power. Here's the back cover blurb to the first book in that saga – *A Hybrid's Tale* – to help you appreciate his life story that little bit better:

***Born a Cambion – a half-demon, half-human hybrid – and cursed by a terrible hunger he can barely control, Augustus Thorne spends his long and lonely life hunting and exterminating any Incubi and Succubae he can find. But no matter how many he destroys, he can always make room for one more. Especially if it's the foul scum who raped his mother; Augustus' own spawn-father, Fanon. Guided by his mother's diaries, Augustus pursues Fanon down through the centuries and around the world, until fate seems to point him toward his heart's desire. Yet, things are not as they appear, and the revelations Augustus uncovers are mind boggling. For if he wishes to face his father, he must first learn more about his own unique heritage, and the awful circumstances that led to his creation. The trouble is, doing so might just cost him his humanity.***

So there you go. The introduction to *A Hybrid's Tale* emphasizes my point exactly. How so?

Well, let's take a look at the blurb in closer detail:

As it highlights, our protagonist, Augustus Thorne, is a Cambion. An unholy crossbreed of man and beast. The very stuff of myth and legend. He's centuries old, and has devoted his existence to hunting down those like his spawn-father – Fanon – who prey on mankind. You get the hint that he's very good at what he does. As well he should be, for he's a monster, endowed with a combination of mundane and paranormal skills that make him a lethal adversary. Woo-hoo! You say; aren't these all the ingredients you need for a corker of a horror/dark fantasy novel?

Well . . . yes, but let's read between the lines a little. Because by doing so, we'll uncover the connections I made to *keep things real*, thereby establishing a stronger link with my readers.

Augustus had no control over the manner of his birth. He hates what he is, for it has entailed hundreds of years of isolation and loneliness. Yes, just because he's a Cambion doesn't mean to say he doesn't have feelings. He craves the things you and I take for granted: To meet someone; to fall in love; to settle down and have a family. Sound familiar? Yet, all that is denied him because of the unwanted legacy he inherited from the spawn-father he's never met . . . YET! The relentless hunger to feed on the life-force/emotions of others.

Look deeper. You'll also get the sense that Augustus views such cravings as an abomination. Yes, he has morals. Standards. A set of self-imposed ethics he strictly adheres to. And why?

Well, the clue lies in what he uses to help him hunt the Incubi and Succubae: his mother's diaries.

Do you see? It was her loving guidance during his early, informative years that helped him retain a hold on his humanity. Because of that, he is more of a threat to the demondim than he ever will be to mankind.

And if we're honest, how many of us are thankful for the tender affections of our parents – or, if we grew up in divided households – that special someone who helped keep us on the straight and narrow?

I know I was. I grew up in an inner-city environment where it was the norm to join a gang. To go out and cause trouble. Be a hooligan. To get arrested as proof of your mettle.

But my parents – although they divorced when I was young – instilled a fine set of values in me that allowed me to resist the pressures that many of my school friends succumbed to.

And that's the overriding moral behind *The Cambion Journals*. It's not our birth, our environment, or the past that defines us. It's what we do with what we're given that's important. And in the *Cambion Journals*, we walk, run, fight and grieve with Augustus as he journey takes us places we never imagined possible.

Yet we *do* think they're possible, because I added one final ingredient to my story to ensure it not only comes across as *real*, but involves the reader too: I made a deliberate decision to experiment with POV.

The cast of the *Cambion Journals* is wide and varied. I've made sure to include a smorgasbord of dark and despicable characters who you will love to hate, as well as those who are a delight to meet. And as you might imagine, they're portrayed in the third person.

However, this article highlighted the fact that the *Cambion Journals* is all about Augustus' quest for revenge and personal discovery. So, to ensure you become as deeply involved as possible with his journey, I wrote all of Augustus Thorne's parts in the first person. A canny move, as it subconsciously helps you relate to his life experiences as if they were your own:

*I saw that. I did this. My heart skipped a beat. I felt betrayed.*

Yes, you're there, right beside him as he endures the many hurdles his adventure involves, so you get a taste of what it's like to live in his shoes. In doing so, I keep the story *real*. I bring it to life in the halls of your imagination, in the chambers of your heart, and in the quiet place of your soul.

But please, don't take my word for it. Why not 'keep things real' by immersing yourselves in Augustus Thorne's world, and joining him on the dark hunt in, *A Hybrid's Tale*. . .

It'll be the beginning of a journey of a lifetime.

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

Andrew P. Weston is a bestselling author from the UK who lives with a large amount of rescue cats in a medium sized house on a small Greek island. As well as suffering from an inordinate compulsion to make things up and write them down for other peoples' entertainment, he is also an expert nuisance . . . just ask his wife.

Among other things, Andrew has the privilege of being a member of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association, the British Science Fiction Association, and the British Fantasy Society. In his spare time, he also writes review articles for *Amazing Stories* and *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. You can find him lurking at:

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THE CAMBION JOURNALS: BOOK THREE



THE  
SIREN'S SONG

A N D R E W P . W E S T O N

Having survived the double-cross planned by Asmodai, the demon king, and Fanon, his own spawn-father, Augustus Thorne is trying to come to terms with his lot in life. Both Fanon and Agamemnon, the king's assassin, are dead. As are the embers of a burgeoning relationship. The only woman Augustus has ever dared to love has fled, driven from his side in fear of the danger being with him brings.

Unfortunately, he can't dwell of what might have been. An insidious new threat has emerged, one that exposes humanity to unimaginable peril. Yet fate seems to lend a helping hand when Augustus stumbles upon a mysterious woman, someone who appears to be the only other Cambion he's ever met. It's only after they team up to fight the rising tide of terror together that things get complicated.

### Re-Genesis

*Thum-thum, thum-thum, thum-thum.*

Background rhythms pervaded the tranquil serenity of her all-encompassing womb.

*Thum-thum, thum-thum, thum-thum.*

Though distant, the steady cadence of doubled palpitations was strong and defined, coaxing her consciousness along on a current of sublime melodic reverie. Everything was as it should be. Safely cocooned within a weblike tracery of scarlet and rose warmth, her senses were soothed to the point of euphoria.

She had changed of course, of that there was no doubt. The disconcerting *other* within her heart was, even now, continuing to make its presence felt. Even so, the metamorphosis it generated created a neural balm that not only banished her fears, but soothed away any lingering discomfort.

*Thum-thum, thum-thum, thum-thum.*

Yet something encroached. Hovering at the very limit of discernment, it enticed her away from the bath of amniotic white noise surrounding her toward a sharpening of mental dexterity. Wakefulness threatened, and her acuity swarmed to the echo of myriad whispers. Reluctantly, she blinked her eyes open. *Where . . . ? It was nothing but a dream.*

At first, her senses refused to cooperate, and it took an eternity for the liquid silver precision enhancing her vision to clear. Once it had, lucidity—the likes of which she had never before witnessed in thousands of years of existence—struck her with a hammer blow. She caught her breath. *In Azazel's unholy name?*

A darkened chamber illuminated only by a handful of balelights greeted her newly restored sight. Plain walls welcomed her return to coherent thought, their clinical frigidity a stark contrast to the bank of high-tech medical equipment surrounding the single bed upon which she lay in the exact center of the room.

*Thum-thum, thum-thum, thum-thum.*

That unfamiliar sound intruded again. *I recognize this place from somewhere.*

"Are you alright?" a disembodied voice asked.

"I . . . I think so." Her attention fell inward, scrutinizing the strange new presence within her.

"Are you in pain?"

"Not really."

"Are you suffering from any form of residual anxiety?"

"None at all. It was just . . . this is different than what I expected . . . than what I'm used to." Turning, toward the source of that voice, she recognized her questioner. "Lamia?"

"Welcome back, Mahlatessa. How have the last three and a half months been?"

*I've been out of it for three and a half months?* Mahlatessa pressed her palm against her breast and the newfangled tempo beating incessantly within it. Ignoring the query, she murmured, "I feel odd . . . *different* somehow."

"That'll be the Bloodstone doing its job." Lamia reached over to offer the reassurance only intimate physical contact could bring. "Is its presence freaking you out? Let me know if it is and I'll see if I can come up with something to ease the transition."

"No, it's just . . . not what I'm accustomed to." Mahlatessa scrutinized the kernel of self that now seemed so alien and wondered what to make of it. "What's happened to me?"

"Your memories haven't returned yet?" Lamia's gaze intensified, burning into Mahlatessa like a laser beam.

Realizing her error, Mahlatessa hastened to add, "Well, I recognized you, didn't I?"



That did the trick. The tension drained from Lamia's face. "Ah, I see. The Bloodstone must have induced a form of temporary amnesia as it bonded to your psyche."

"What else has it done?"

"It's changed you at the molecular level, Mal. Altered what you are—"

"What I am?"

"We talked about this. Don't you remember?"

A soupy mishmash of jumbled recollections churned through the sludge that was Mahlatessa's mentality. Slowly, they began to settle into a structured, recognizable form. "So the bloodline proved dynamic enough then?"

"It certainly did. Only two viable strains still exist, as you know, both of them weakened by humanity's proclivity to interbreed like rats. Fortunately, we were able to extract sufficient vitality from our subject to imbue the gem with the potency needed to trigger the transmutation."

"And there'll be no lasting side effects?" Mahlatessa touched her fingertips to her chest again in a subconscious effort to quell the disconcertingly loud resonance still hammering away at her ribs.

"Not so far as we can determine. The stone contains sufficient potency to hold the change in stasis for about six months, give or take a few weeks either side. It's leaking that essence into your new heart at a steady rate, and once depleted, you'll either revert back to normal or have to undergo a fresh infusion."

Something about Lamia's statement roused unexpected conflicts. Mahlatessa sat bolt upright, the speed and fluidity of her movement catching her by surprise and triggering a surge of adrenalin. "Whoa that was fast!"

A couple of deep breaths helped bring things back under control. Once her emotions were in check, she asked, "Is there a mirror in here I could use?"

Lamia stooped to retrieve her handbag and removed a small compact from within one of the compartments. As she handed it over, her eyes glowed affectionately, emphasizing the beginnings of the smile playing along her lips.

For some reason, Mahlatessa was reticent to go any further. Slowly, her hand inched toward her face. When at last she was able to gaze upon her own countenance, she was stunned by the reflection staring back. *How?*

Gone was the devilishly attractive and angular profile that would cause the hardiest of the demondim to flounder in her presence. In its place was a creature even more beautiful, graced with the most refined and exquisite features she had ever seen. *Is that really me?* "I look . . ."

"You look perfect. And if I may say so, exactly the way we need for you to fulfill your mission."

"My mission?" Mahlatessa mumbled, confounded by the reference.

"As we rehearsed during your training, remember?" Lamia hugged Mahlatessa close and smoothed her hair. "You can't recall much about your past, my dear. And no blame lies with you for that, because you've faced a litany of tragedy and suffering. Your poor mother died in childbirth, leaving you destitute and growing up wondering who and what you were. All alone in the world, you bore the awful burden of knowing you were rejected by others for being different; for having needs and abilities they wouldn't understand; a hunger you could barely control. The only relief you've ever felt is when these supernatural *things* are present. These *demons*! Venting your fury on them provides the only outlet you have, the only opportunity of appeasing the hunger inside. And you're very, very good at dealing with demons. It's something that comes naturally to a *freak* like you, yes?"

Fragmented details started to knit together in Mahlatessa's mind. "Yes, I'm starting to remember now! I'm different than other girls; stronger and more independent; faster in some ways; nastier too when I have to be. Although I want to protect others, most people shun me. I'm all alone without anyone to share my sad and solitary existence with."

"Which is a shame of course," Lamia chimed back in, "because our one woman execution squad just so happens to be incredibly highly sexed and armed with killer looks too. The perfect bait, eh?"

Peering into the mirror again, Mahlatessa grinned. That smile failed to reach the frozen depths of her eyes. *Yes. The perfect bait. He won't know what hit him!*

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I waited in the shadows, a skill I'd perfected through trial and error over the centuries until it was something of an art form. My enemies were ancient, you see, and powerful, with appetites granting them a strength that demanded respect.

And respect was a commodity I only grudgingly extended out of dire need and circumstance.

Six months ago I'd suffered injuries so devastating, so profound that I should have been killed. I still couldn't wrap my head around the miracle of my survival. My only guess rested on the assumption that something about the creative

majesty involved in unleashing the crux of the Cambion Nexus with me still inside it must have come into play. In some arcane fashion, those energies had bonded with the scant life-force remaining to me, anchoring my spirit here on this plane. Not a pretty sight by all accounts, as I'd since learned I ended up as nothing more substantial than a charred mass of bloody, disfigured flesh and bone wallowing in a greasy puddle.

Awakening from an eight-week long coma, I remained out of commission for months as Jenna nursed me back to health. It was during that period I learned more about *real* pain than at any other time in my life, for the only thing left to remind me of Colleen was a letter.

There was no denying it had been written from the heart, expressing that—as far as she was concerned—she'd met her soulmate. Someone she could happily settle down, start a family and grow old with. But therein lay the rub. I would never age, guaranteeing that for us, the “happy-ever-after” part of domesticated bliss would remain a fantasy.

Such a glaring disparity played heavily on her mind, and in the end, was the deciding factor in settling the issue: Colleen chose to end the relationship before it cost us both too much.

What made her decision all the more painful was the fact that she was right. I completely understood where she was coming from. Needless to say, that didn't make it any easier to bear.

Through it all, Jenna tended to my needs; spending as much of her free time with me as she could; putting up with my temper as my tedious recovery dragged on; willingly submitting herself to the role of sounding board for my repeated mood swings and uncontrollable angst over the loss of the only woman I had ever loved.

I soon discovered why. Jenna was motivated by amorous aspirations. But fair play, she never pushed or tried to take advantage. Far from it. She was patient, kind and caring. Her ministrations not only played a huge factor in my eventual recovery, but they also gave me a glimpse of the way demon life could be—if I wanted it.

Sadly, I didn't really know what I wanted anymore. I couldn't help it. The emptiness inside had left me frozen, unwilling to take the risk of stepping out along a new path for fear of further hurt or rejection. How pathetic. The great and mighty Augustus Thorne, demon slayer extraordinaire, brought to his knees by a broken heart.

As it was, serendipity came to the rescue.

Although I hadn't made a kill for some time, I *had* managed to push my feelings of loss and inadequacy aside by devoting my waxing vitality to research.

While I'd been unconscious, the Inquisitor decipher-reconstruction program had run its course. Despite software degradation and the effects of the virus that had chewed its way through much of the precious data inside, I'd still salvaged an absolute goldmine of evidence, information which included partial documentation on all sorts of demonic history, law and ritual, along with extensive journal entries my father had compiled before his death. So, once I was well enough, I commenced wading through the vast amount of additional intelligence I now possessed with a sense of heightened expectation.

The identity of my demonic spawn-mother was still a priority, but I hadn't been snooping around for long when I noticed something alarming. My father had been *the* most irritating, twisted, egocentric prick I'd ever had the misfortune of knowing. And yet, for all his perversions, something had unfolded within the demon world that distressed him deeply enough to keep bitching about it from time to time in his diaries.

I couldn't ignore a red flag like that.

The search engine I'd installed flagged a list of keywords that had been used together repetitively over hundreds and hundreds of years. Those keywords helped me decide what subjects to research first, especially as one cluster in particular stood out more abundantly than all the rest: *Ebliss; taboo; flesh farm; flesh factory; food source*.

Having selected the pertinent results, I'd spent a fortnight poring through them, only to be enlightened in a way I hadn't expected:

*Shaiten 11th 9288FR/Tebeth 12th 1004BC*

*They honor him! Honor Ebliss! Astoni . . . the one whose machinations caused so great a rift! Hi . . . and now his blatant proposition to the Chapter. Why do they even consider addressing . . . the tabo . . . will weaken the stricture . . . of the Dark Tenets by which . . . fear the future! Thankfully, the Court rejecte . . . outright, as is fitting!*

*Turok 14th 10088FR/Veadar 15th 204BC*

*Azazel preserve us! The King's ear is . . . Ebliss confo . . . perverted view of mankind and their increasing . . . The hunt is essenti . . . d yet he would see them enslave . . . market! Food to purchase instead of pursuing as is our...cannot see it! It threatens our very wa . . . My position as Chief Prefect, of Damascus will allow me . . . Fortunately, both lower and higher tier members reject such ludicrous propo . . . would draw attention to our very existence and is to be avoided at all costs. No wonder the Que . . . her example draws . . . to our side. Strengthened thus I know . . . and I will gladly support her. The honor is mine!*



Those first hits had been as instructive as they were frustrating, for the inclusion of both the ancient Demonic and Hebrew calendars confirmed just how long this particular dilemma had been fomenting.

Over a dozen part references followed the oldest of these, the opening entries, and almost all of them adopted much the same pattern.

From what I could ascertain, Ebliss had pushed for change, something that both the Court and Chapter initially rejected. Regardless, Ebliss wasn't easily dissuaded from his course and as time went by, he somehow used the changes taking place within human society to work his way into the King's favor. Doing so allowed him to orchestrate proceedings to his own agenda.

A mention just a year before my birth had been particularly thought-provoking.

*January 15th 1759*

*He schemes for power and influence. But then again, don't we all? However, Ebliss in partic . . . continue to vex me. The Queen fears our own mach . . . no choice! At least we guarantee ascendancy for our kin . . . We are forced t . . . and from our food! Mere humans. Outrageous! No . . . invoke taboo. I fear to th . . . must answer before we are truly prepared. No choice . . . ust, to counter the insidious threat Ebliss would bring among us. The descendent of Samyaz . . . hopefully guarantee . . . The re-genesis we aspire . . . only answer! For her sake, I hope this is true. Soon, events will be set in motion that will determine our very future.*

It was quite a surprise to learn that Ebliss' scheming inflamed so much passion that a splinter group had arisen from within the demondim's ruling class to challenge his hold over the King. The Queen, Fanon, and an undisclosed number of other dignitaries headed this faction, though Fanon looked to have taken the lead in preparing a response to neutralize the threat Ebliss' plotting represented.

Then something happened early in 1759, eliciting a panicked response from the rebels. Whatever its nature, it was serious, because as fastidious as Fanon was, he'd made mistakes. His opponents had taken their time, but eventually, after more than a century of plotting and scheming, they had been able to draw a net about him.

*July 4th 1908*

*His sugar coated tong . . . sickening. And yet King Asmodai listens! I fear this may be the last st . . . already directing attention towards me. I am sure such efforts are an attempt to divert attention my wa . . . Bastard! I would gladly tear his sou . . . Preparations are at hand, with more and more land being acquired. Unholy Flesh Farms will be a . . . othing I can do. I . . . to flee.*

*Fortunately we still possess our void sig . . . although thousands of miles apart we can st . . . y Queen!*

The most recent entries were the very revealing, especially as the last four were so close together.

*February 28th 2002*

*Already I sense the change . . . a huge step forward in Ebli . . . scheming with the King. The new mass production farms have had their founda . . . rest is due to be completed in . . . It weakens the very fabric of who we are! It came as no surprise to me that our . . . eeks to establish controls on access to the "new and improved" food sources. Only those courting favor, our so-called social elit . . . be allowed access. He now secretes both the Penta . . . by dividing their puis . . . And they have the audacity to condemn my actions? Unproven as the . . . by force if needs be.*

*And . . . who are so easily misled by false promises and li . . . of longer lives. Humans! Pah! They are their own worst enemies, willing to sacrif . . . bed with the devil!*

*December 25th 2012*

*The Guardians preserve us! Mithras is tainted. This may be the final of our sacred celebrat . . . ure, due to Ebliss and his filthy schemes. Plans for my imminent arrest have bee . . . Fortunately, my love warned me in time! The signets ward us, as well they . . . us connected.*

*A stray thought from the worm betrayed him. Hubris over his temporary successes no doubt causing his lapse! The King's every inclination is toward him, and all the ti . . . Now seeks to control the spawning of all demo . . . clear attempt at domination. Every aspect of our existence is now open . . . the accursed Flesh Farms. And this latest twist! Flesh Factories, a quick fix for those tempted by the more sedate way of lif . . . Those of a gentler persuasion need to fear. If they . . . nor comply in some way, using their talents for the cause, well, what the scourging of the Great Division failed to accomplish, this certainly will! A clever strateg . . . fools!*

*Obviously, his play for consolidation is in full swing. And the human governments fall begging at his door! Thi . . . selling themselves so easily for the elixir they believe will bring them lasting power and prestige.*

May 19th 2014

*My prudence was most fortuitous. Prep . . . stay one step ahead and out of their clutches. I admit, the tedium of their pursuit irks . . . but at least my conscience is clear. Augustus will no doubt stumble upon this revelation in his relentless quest for revenge. He has already . . . come close twice! When he does, I shall relish the outcome! They have become lazy. Fat on th . . . fast food for the privileged few wil . . . unaware that they lose their inbred instinct for survival . . . easy prey to human leaders skilled . . . brinkmanship!*

*Within a span of only five years I foresee Ebliss rising to . . . How have the Council and the Court been so misled? The Queen herself is beside . . . no longer contact. It is too dangerous.*

*I am now openly accused of taboo and . . . must prepare my ho . . . only hope my love remains safe.*

October 17th 2019

*Ebliss is dead! In his absence I now see my own end approaching as Augustus closes the gap! Yet I cannot help but be filled with hope. If he succeeds, then his attention will turn to the greatest travesty the wor . . . The Flesh Farms and Factories that still t . . . production will commence without del . . . Yes, the Dove of corruption descends upon us. Offering peace, it heralds our doom!*

*It is imperative . . . must divert attention so she . . . remains safe. The King grows ever more suspicious. My spies . . . he now carries the . . . acru with him or close by at all times. Thinking it vouchs . . . his safety he . . . on regardless. I wonder how unhinged he would become if he knew the truth of August . . . heritage? How his spawn-mother si . . . along with the bloodline he possesses as the last of House Sam . . . ast of the Nep . . . Lords.*

*He may have to reassess his tenets when he discovers the role humans have played in their own willing subjugation. Once again, their vanity and self-centered lusts ne . . . eeking the elusive fountain of youth! Ambrosia is something not rightfully theirs. It belongs to us, and only us.*

*When August . . . uncovers how high this goes, he will have some hard decisions to make. I only hope his spine is strong en . . . been for nothing.*

Hold the front page!

I'd uncovered a shitload of evidence regarding an alliance between influential politicians and the demondim. That pact related to the establishment of something called, "Flesh Farms" in a number of countries around the world, underground facilities where my kind could go and stuff themselves on a banquet of life-force. There were also clear indications as to why so many idiotic humans were falling over themselves to be involved: they were under the impression they'd be amply rewarded with the two things all mankind craved—power, and the immortality to wield it for as long as they could.

I wondered how a conspiracy of this magnitude could have evolved without the wrong kinds of people learning about it. So I did some more digging, using nothing more complex than the internet.

My time spent off the radar had helped me become much more accustomed to my father's cryptic ramblings. I'd only had to enter the words; *Dove*, *Ambrosia* and *Immortality* into the search engine to realize I was on the right track.

The top listed answer gave a succinct but detailed précis regarding Ambrosia:

"As the sustenance of the gods, Ambrosia grew on mount Olympus and was believed to have been delivered by doves to the deities at times of celebration."

Three entries down, I found a separate reference to the Dove Genetics Research Institute in Warsaw, Poland.

The Dove Institute was a global conglomerate of companies actively engaged in bioengineering and pharmaceutical research, impacting on the debilitating symptoms experienced by Alzheimer's and Parkinson's sufferers. A quick skip through their website revealed the group was also working on behavioral modification regimens to help combat such disorders, as well as half dozen other studies relating to—of all things—longevity.

Even more ominous, some of those offshoot projects appeared to have a number of surreptitious links to three separate private security firms; security firms with a finger in the pies of several unnamed European and US based government departments.

*Interesting!*

Their holdings were spread among fourteen countries and the very latest public records divulged that one of their subsidiary companies, Ambro Lifestyles Inc—ALI for short—had recently expanded into the provision of safety personnel at public venues. Those same listings revealed a preference for policing dance and rave venues.

*That* had not only grabbed my attention, but shaken it roughly by the throat.

I was no slouch when it came to unearthing information. Yet—despite some exhaustive enquiries—I couldn't discover a single reason as to why an entertainment based venture would be considered by a company with so many

medical and defense research contracts. It *had* to be connected to another agenda. An agenda that had “alarm bells” painted in neon red all over it.

Emerging for the first time from my self-imposed exile only a week ago, I’d discovered ALL’s next venue was here, in Peoples Freedom Park, Warsaw. In particular, the company was providing stewards for a rave sponsored by one of the music industry’s top up and coming DJs, “Masta Blasta.” The gig was due to launch later tonight within the *Fantasy & Adventureland zone*, a site situated upon a three thousand acre island and accessible only by three bridges.

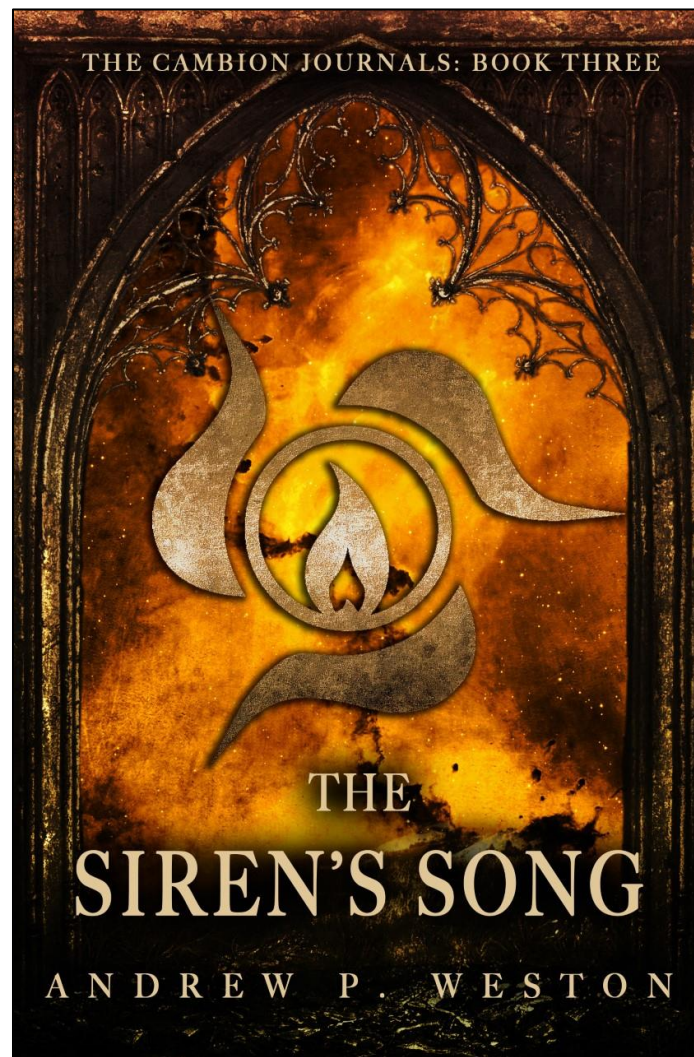
Arriving earlier this evening, I’d found the place saturated with demondim spoor. But I’d expected that. People were out for a good time, emotions would be running high, and itinerant Incubi and Succubae would take advantage of the menu such an event provided. Indeed, the abundance of fresh khepha tags indicated some had already started to party.

What I hadn’t expected to see was the army of demons occupying almost every security officer’s position. I’d counted over fifty-seven of them so far. And a dozen of them were Forge.

Only six months had passed since the blast that nearly killed me, and soon, my enforced sabbatical would be over. I still didn’t know if that would help to ease the pain or not, but *boy* was I determined to get back on the horse.

### **The Cambion Journals: Book Three**

#### **The Sirens Song**



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