

The Sirens Call



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issue 45

*A Dark Fiction
Horror eZine*

Distant Screams!

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

*Featured Artist
NOISTROMO*

*Featured Author
Tim Meyer*

*An excerpt from
'The Switch House'*

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I agreed to this gig with all my body parts. Ten minutes in, I'm hobbled and down an ear.

My attorney warned I might not depart the hearing in the same shape I arrived, but when compared with the alternative—a date with the hot seat—the decision was a no-brainer. If I can survive thirty minutes of judgment by my dead victims, my death sentence will be commuted to life.

Twenty minutes to go.

I'm strapped to an operating table, raised for my witness of the comings and goings between here and the afterlife. A floaty delicate light gossamers the dim death chamber in signal of an arrival. Susan steps through the gauzy portal, backlit and luminous. I'd picked her up hitchhiking. She wore chiffon, my mother's go-to fabric for fancy dressing sorority girls. "Get me out of here," she said, throwing herself into my car. A shame really. She'd been classically screwed over, her boyfriend dumping her for another girl. "Guys are scum," I said and snapped her neck quick. I gave her a good sendoff, digging her grave the regulation six feet instead of my typical toss in some random ditch. I smoothed the wrinkles from her filmy dress the best I could, throwing the first shovel of dirt over a stubborn crease in the bodice. Mother was right. Always keep a garment steamer on hand.

Susan runs into the arms of her joyous family. She looks good, her dress freshly ironed. A young man stands midway, watching, a wide smile on his face. The mother sees him and sinks to her knees, wailing. "My son, my son," she cries, piercing my remaining ear. "Frank brought me home, Mama," Susan says. "But he can't stay." She looks at the warden. "But I will."

Frank blurs into all that is holy and with a swirl once around his family, dissipates back into eternity.

The surgeon snaps on a pair of gloves.

The warden signals to wait and thumbs through the procedures manual. He clears his throat and reads aloud. "An escort may accompany the victim to the hearing. The return of the escort to the afterworld does not result in the detachment of a body part from the death row inmate. A body detachment request is the exclusive right offered victims opting for continued residence in the hereafter. The returning victim may select a specific body part for detachment from the death row inmate or leave the determination of body part to the state. Victims choosing transfer back to life over return to the hereafter relinquish all rights to request body part detachment from the death row inmate." He peers over his reading glasses. "Questions?"

My attorney and the victim advocate nod agreement with the rules. The surgeon tosses the gloves into the waste bin. I imagine the blue latex paisley against the stump of my congealed foot. My ear had been whisked away in a cooler. I'd signed on as an organ donor as part of the deal. The warden restarts the clock. "Fifteen minutes remaining," he states for the record. "Proceed."

I lose my hand to Valerie. I'd strangled her, so her request made sense. A street gal with a healthy heroin habit, she worked the streets in weighty polyester. "I know I stink," she said, settling herself on me in the front seat. "It's been a couple of weeks between laundromats." Pulling a roll-on from her bag she told me about her kid as she dabbed at her pits. He was somewhere out west and far better off raised without her. Guess the kid thought different. Valerie tells the warden ten years following her death, the cherub oded on opioids and went looking for momma. He stands with her wearing crisp cotton, holding her hand. "We are together forever," she says. "I'll never leave my son again." Valerie gives me the finger as the scalpel slides through my wrist.

Ten minutes.

I crossed paths with Sam on the Appalachian Trail. He wore a red flannel shirt like mine, the exact same size and brand. I liked him straight away and his dog too, a big bruiser of a chocolate lab named Buster. We shared conversation over granola bars and a couple slugs of Wild Turkey. I thanked him for his company and put Buster down with a single shot. Sam came after me, lunging into the second.

He stares me down, his grip tight on the dog's leash. A trail pack hung off his shoulders, his red flannel tied around his waist.

"Hell yeah, we're coming back," he says to the warden. "Five hundred miles left to hike on the AT."

My attorney interrupts. "The dog is considered property of the victim and ineligible to participate in the detachment selection."

The second hand of the bleak institutional clock thuds, thuds, thuds.

Sam laughs. "No need to dick around with the legal. One body part does the deed for me." He ruffles Buster's ear. "Take the asshole's heart."

The surgeon snaps on his gloves.

Five minutes.

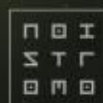
Damn.

About the Author:

Sheree Shatsky writes short fiction believing much can be conveyed with a few wild words. She was selected by the AWP Writer to Writer Mentorship Program as a Spring 2018 mentee for flash fiction. Recent work has appeared in Crack the Spine, Foliate Oak Literary Magazine, KYSO Flash, Fictive Dream and X-R-A-Y Literary Magazine with work forthcoming in Moon Park Review and Flash Flood.

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Twitter: [@talktomememe](#)



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I watch from the shadows as she enters the building, her chosen dwelling place littered with things that reflect who she believes she is. All the captured happy memories and colourful decoration fades away in her presence. Her aura is a blanket of dull grey, smothering everything possibly joyful in its surroundings. The photographs of her are alien now. That smile long banished. She uses them to torture herself, to show what she was and what she will never reclaim.

Slipping off her shoes even the relief of small things is lost. Her mind too consumed and exhausted to notice the relaxation of her feet, the safety of her home and the usual mundane comforts. She makes herself a cup of tea, warmth the closest thing to a positive emotion that she can feel these days. The TV flickers to life and she lets other worlds become hers, anywhere better than here.

She was beautiful once. Not in the classical sense of symmetrical features and human desirability, but in that she was happy and free. To me she is beautiful either way. But then concepts such as beauty do not have universal rule and as such even contradiction can be maintained.

To put it plainly, something my kind is not usually wont to do, when happy she was beautiful like a sunny day and when sad she was beautiful like the dark ocean and neither of these have anything to do with appearance. But she has gone beyond sadness now and fallen into the abyss.

In her nightmares she desperately tries to save him. Yet she finds herself stuck wading through the black treacle of her own mind. It sucks her in and pulls her down until nothing but her hopelessness remains.

I wait for her to sleep. I had hoped that she would at least undress and find her bed but I should have known better. Sleeping pills, wine and the sofa have become a habit as the cold emptiness of the bed is now filled with maddening fear.

I carefully slither out from underneath the sofa, gently, tentatively coiling a tendril around her bare ankle. She does not stir as I touch her, a side effect of the pills. At least it means that I do not have to subdue her. I envelop her feet in the multihued miasma that is me and start to work my way up, forming limbs as I go.

Her clothing is no obstacle as I crawl under it where it is loose and simply soak through where it is not. Her skin and scars become known to me, forbidden knowledge inscribed on the parchment of her body. I take my time in exploring her form, careful not to pressure any point that would rouse her.

I can feel her nerves firing like a lightning storm underneath her skin, hairs raised at my presence, her body ready to recoil. Humans don't remember but the physical reaction is clear. Her adrenaline starts to flow as I caress her face, gently parting her lips.

I negate the would be terror by turning her physical attention to more carnal things, something she has been neglecting. Suckers and feelers form with ease as I manipulate her form, keeping her in that gentle, pleasurable place within the realms of sleep. Particular skills would allow me to whisper, to rouse her desire even whilst she is awake, to take part as she pleasures herself without her ever noticing as I enhance her experience and feed. Unlike certain others of my kind, it is not her arousal I am here for. Though I do find that conjoining improves the feeding experience.

But then isn't that always the way with love?

Oh yes, I love her. I cherish every moment of her bleak existence. We do not love like you love. We appreciate the brief, the inevitable, the reality of things. And right now her reality is a thick gloom, a beautiful feast that she has laid out just for me.

I gently force myself into her mouth, exploring all the damp crevices, a kiss deeper than mortals can go. She bucks slightly from the inescapable discomfort but settles quickly as I lighten my form and soak through. I coil snake like around her energy centres. The once bright balls of energy are now dark and murky, filthy things, filled up with sorrow and loss and an anger she won't admit to herself. She is a smorgasbord of suffering.

Saving her heart center for last I start to feed, slowly drawing out all the emotional grime. Her sorrow is like pure light, blinding and hot. Her anger a squirming struggling thing fun for me to hunt and consume. Her loss a deep rich dessert, the thick flavour of congealed blood and dying stars.

I start greedy as I have been waiting so long for this but I slow myself, savouring the little moments, taking all that she has to give me of her damaged soul and broken heart.

Pleasure, raw and physical, becomes dominant in her subconscious as I take away all other feelings leaving her energy centers grey and void. I feel the gentle rocking of her body as she sighs, a sign that I don't have long. I contemplate whether to let her climax or fall back into restless slumber.

Humans are complex things and it occurs to me that waking her with her own pleasure could cause her more turmoil, allowing her center to refill with the conflict and resentment that sustains me. Feeding would leave her energy centers empty, numb. An absence of murk is not the same as the rekindling of colour.

Bulbous and sated I withdraw from her core. I could just phase through her but I revel in the sensation of pulling my engorged tendrils out slowly, taking my time to enjoy the warmth of being inside something living. I slink down her body, heavier than before and yet still light as a ghost. My presence like atmospheric pressure against her skin. Her flesh prickles, all the tiny hairs standing upright in protest against my caress.

I must confess that her reactions excite me, evidence that we exist together, planes merging, if only for the briefest time. And on that theme I condense down into her lap like some large cloud cat, putting effort into manifesting my already busy feelers and pseudopods. Nerves trigger and pleasure builds. Her biological song an easy tune to play and soon her body spasms, breath hitching in an involuntary gasp of ecstasy.

Her conscious mind alights and I am away. I wonder if she saw me. What would she think? That I am a cloud, a smudge, a faint shadow, or just the work of her tired brain? I wish she could see me, but I know that doesn't end well for them.

Back in the safety of the under sofa I relax, digesting. She sparks alive with confusion, disgust, sorrow. Emotions cascade, boiling up to fill the void I left. Tears bounce on the wooden floor, her wracked crying a song to rock me to sleep.

About the Author:

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

Author Blog: [Eldritch Hollow](#)

Author Blog: [Eldritch Hollow](#)

Headache | *Patrick J Wynn*

Jack stood in the kitchen holding the sides of his head hoping the pressure would relieve the pounding in his head. Taking deep breaths to keep from throwing up he bent over to clean up the mess all over the floor. The mop cleaned up most of the mess and a little hand scrubbing got the rest, but through it all the headache grew. Finally he couldn't take it anymore and knowing it would only get worse Jack grabbed the gun off the counter and put it to his head. Pulling back the hammer Jack slowly began to squeeze the trigger hoping the tenth time would do the trick, he was running out of bullets and was really tired of cleaning up the mess.

About the Author:

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

The Lighthouse at the End of the World | *R.J. Meldrum*

The storm hit earlier than predicted, leaving Hardcastle, like us, stuck on the lighthouse. John and I didn't mind, we were on our normal three-month rotation, but Hardcastle was pissed; he'd come over from the mainland for a safety inspection. But now, with the sea full of cresting waves, there was no way for any boats to make it out to the craggy island where the lighthouse stood. Hardcastle would have to just sit it out. Luckily, we had a spare bunk and plenty of provisions.

I was making a cup of tea when Hardcastle entered the cramped kitchen. John had finished his watch and was asleep in the bedroom next door.

"Want a cup?"

"Yes, thank you."

He sat at the small table.

"I've been doing this job for ten years now and I've never been marooned before."

He looked round the cramped quarters.

"How do you stand being stuck out here for three months at a time?"

I shrugged.

"We have books, the internet and the radio to the Coastguard. We're not completely isolated."

"When do you think the boat from Foreness will be able to pick me up?"

I glanced out the small window at the sea. Grey water against a grey sky, the only contrast was the white flecks of foam.

"Hard to tell. Maybe a day or so. That's a heavy swell and they won't risk it unless we have an emergency."

"Don't you have a boat here I could use?"

"No, there's no safe place to dock a boat. The sea here would smash it to pieces and we couldn't land it, not on these rocks."

It was starting to get dark. Time for me to check the light. Hardcastle stood and looked out the window.

"Is that Foreness?"

He was looking at the twinkle of lights in the distance.

"Yup," I replied, "When you're stuck out here, it's nice to know the world is still turning."

He smiled.

The storm abated after three days. We woke to blue skies and calm water. Even before the kettle was boiled for the morning coffee Hardcastle had packed his gear and returned the few items of clothing we lent him. Three days of enforced solitude had been too much for him.

"What time do you think it'll arrive?" he asked.

John, just arrived in the kitchen, shrugged.

"Could be anytime. They know you're here."

"I'll take a look outside. See if they're coming," I said, grabbing the binoculars.

I walked outside onto the concrete platform. This was the only flat surface on the rocky island. The platform, some six feet wide and twenty feet long, ended with a set of concrete steps that dropped down to a small, narrow inlet where the supply boat moored on its fortnightly supply run. The lighthouse towered some hundred feet above me, cutting out the sunlight. In the near distance I could see the rocky outcrops that had caused the demise of uncounted ships in the centuries before the lighthouse had been constructed. The Middleton Rocks. In the far distance I could see the headland and, in the haze of the sunlight, the port of Foreness and the cliffs of Foreness Head. I could just make out the metal roof of the Coast Guard station. I looked through the binoculars to see if the boat was coming. No sign. I walked down the steps to the water's edge; the water was blue and clear. A few fish flicked lazily amongst the fronds of seaweed. About twenty feet from the edge of the dock, the real ocean began, the water becoming dark blue as the sea floor fell away into the depths.

Back in the lighthouse, I told Hardcastle there was no sign of the boat from Foreness. John suggested we check with the Coast Guard. Perhaps there'd been some damage from the storm; whatever it was, something was preventing the boat from coming out. I picked up the microphone and clicked the button to transmit.

"Foreness Coast Guard. Middleton Head calling. Over."

Static.

"Foreness Coast Guard. Middleton Head calling. Over."

Static. This was unusual. The Coastguard station was always manned. John shrugged.

"Maybe their mast was blown down or damaged in the storm. Try the harbor master at Foreness."

I clicked the transmit button.

"Foreness harbor. Middleton Head calling. Over."

Static.

"Still nothing?" said John in a perplexed tone.

"I'll check the Coast Guard again."

There was still no response.

"John, check online. There might be some news. Maybe something has happened in Foreness."

At this point there was no sense of panic or even real concern. None of us considered it was anything more than a localized issue. How wrong we were.

John sat at the dusty old computer we used to record our logs and went online. Most people wrongly guessed we spent a lot of our time online during our three months in the lighthouse, on social media and whatnot, but the truth was both John and I had chosen this profession for the solitude. The time we spent on shift was busy and when we were off shift we either slept, read or indulged in a variety of hobbies. Of course, we sent emails to family and friends and kept up to date with various news sites, but only once in a while. Solitude suits the lighthouse keeper.

John checked the local news reports and the Coast Guard website. There was nothing untoward, no reports of an incident in Foreness. It was Hardcastle who noticed the anomaly. None of the news websites had been updated since the first day of the storm. The news on these websites, in the age of 24/7 news channels and constant updates, was an unbelievable four days old. Hardcastle tried to use his cellphone, but there was no signal. We tried the radio again, John flipped the dial across the frequencies. Worryingly there was none of the usual radio chatter from ships, trawlers, the Coast Guard and weather stations; instead an ominous silence greeted us. Whatever had happened, had happened to more than just Foreness. John kept moving the dial, searching for some response, some contact. There was nothing.

Two days passed. The three of us tried to talk about what was happening in the world beyond Middleton Head, but we were overcome by lethargy and a reluctance to face the truth. On the second night, John came back into the lighthouse after his post meal cigarette and spoke.

"The lights of Foreness have gone out. The mainland has gone dark."

Hardcastle put his head into his hands.

"What's happened to the world?"

"I don't know, something bad I reckon," replied John.

We continued to monitor the radio and the internet, but apart from some meaningless Morse code on a high frequency, there was nothing. No websites had been updated, some were down. The news was posted from the day before the 'event', was mundane, normal; there was no hint of anything bad happening. Whatever had happened had been quick. And clearly bad.

John spent hours at the radio, moving the dial across the frequencies. Suddenly his hand froze. He ripped off the headphones and pulled the jack out from the receiver, so we could hear.

"Listen!"

There was a crackling from the radio, then a voice suddenly spoke.

"It hit us fast. The rest of my family are dead. I'm stuck in a basement, alone. I went out yesterday. Everything is dead."

John hit transmit.

"We are receiving you, over."

"Thank god! I thought I was the only one left."

"Where are you, over?"

"New York. Where are you?"

"Near Foreness. What caused this, over?"

"No idea. It came from nowhere. People dropped dead in the street. It's happening everywhere."

"We're on a lighthouse on an island, we're still unaffected."

"Are you still there? I can't hear you. Feeling dizzy. Head spinning."

"Are you okay?"

"Are you still there? Can't breathe."

The voice faded away. There was a soft thump from the speaker.

"Are you there?"

No reply.

John clicked off the radio. No one said anything.

The next day we watched as the town of Foreness burned to the ground. John turned away from the scene, looking seaward. Hardcastle cried. This was it, confirmation the world had ended. No one would let an entire town burn, not unless there was no one around to stop it. I wondered what has caused it; an electrical fault or perhaps a stove left on. Whatever it had been, the town was gone.

The day after the destruction of Foreness we started to ration the food. John called us together.

"If we eke out the food, and maybe do some fishing, we can last for about a month. The fuel supply will last about as long. The fresh water will last maybe two weeks. We have to start making plans to get off this island."

Hardcastle made a strangled sound in his throat.

"How, we don't have a boat? What do we do, swim? I'd like to see you try!"

John shook his head.

"The currents are too strong, and I doubt if any of us could swim the distance, but we can build a raft, we've got wooden pallets and extra life jackets. It'll be crude, but if we choose the right tide, it'll bring us into the shore."

"Shore? Why, just to die like all the others? We might as well die here!"

John shrugged.

"I don't know, but we have to try."

"What if it was radioactive, a leak or a bomb? A virus? That New Yorker said everyone was dead. What's the point?"

Hardcastle was starting to lose control, he was out of his seat leaning towards John, and his spittle splattered John's face. John grabbed him by the scruff his shirt and yanked him. Hard.

"Listen! I have a son and daughter on the mainland. I need to know what's happened to them, okay? Dead or alive, I need to know!"

He pushed Hardcastle back into his seat. Hardcastle mumbled.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know. I'm sorry."

John rubbed his forehead.

"No reason for you to know. Or apologize. Just remember I'd rather die there than here."

The next few days were spent with, at least for me, a growing sense of disbelief. Here we were on Middleton Head lighthouse, performing our normal daily duties. Every night the light was lit, every day the logs were updated. In a strange way following the routine we had always followed made it worse, not better. It reinforced just how much things had changed. The light, the life saver, no longer steered ships away from the rocks; there were no more ships.

John and I worked on the raft. The pallets we used to store the food were lashed together, along with various plastic containers we had. The life belts and life jackets were also used. It looked a little shaky, but we were confident we would make it to shore. But what would we find? John and I studied the tidal charts, deciding on the best time to go. We both agreed the twenty-sixth would be the best. The morning high tide would pull us into the shore, where we could no doubt maneuver into the harbor at Foreness.

On the night of the twenty-fifth, Hardcastle killed himself. Even though he'd been getting more and more moody and introspective, neither I nor John suspected he would destroy himself by jumping from the observation platform. I was asleep when I was woken by the scream. We found his body spread-eagled next to the raft on the concrete platform. We moved him into the store room, tidied him up and draped a sheet over his remains. John muttered a quick prayer. Neither of us had to speculate why he had jumped. We had a choice; die on the lighthouse or risk death on the mainland. He had decided to die on the lighthouse. Perhaps he was right, but perhaps not. Perhaps whatever had affected the world had dissipated, leaving behind a new world to be repopulated by the few survivors who had been at sea or on distant islands. Perhaps it was still there, killing any creature foolish enough to step foot onshore. We would know soon enough.

We are leaving today. John has dragged the raft down to the dock and is readying it for its maiden voyage. I am still at the lighthouse, shutting down the light for the last time, closing and locking the door. I have written all this down, my last testament. If anyone reads this, then you may know our fate. Perhaps you are our descendants, coming at last to Middleton Head to see where your ancestors lived and worked. Perhaps you have landed here from one of the outer islands, keen to find fellow survivors. All I can say to you is this place is safe from whatever cursed the mainland. John and I left this place on the twenty-sixth of June. John wants to find his family, his children. I want to find out what happened to the world. I hope we survive and prosper, find other survivors. I hope whatever killed the world doesn't kill us.

I hope.

About the Author:

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

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KILL Switch

TECH HORROR
AT ITS BEST



AS TECHNOLOGY TAKES OVER MORE OF OUR LIVES, WHAT WILL IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN, AND WILL WE FEAR WHAT WE'VE CREATED? WHAT HORRORS WILL OUR TECHNOLOGICAL HUBRIS BRING US IN THE FUTURE?

JOIN US AS WE WALK THE LINE BETWEEN PROGRESSIVE CONVENIENCE AND THE NIGHTMARES THESE ADVANCEMENTS CAN BREED. FROM FAULTY MEDICAL NANOS AND AI GONE BERSERK TO GHOST-ATTRACTING AUDIO-TECH AND A VERY AMBITIOUS MOW-BOT, WE BRING YOU TECH HORROR THAT WILL KEEP YOU UP AT NIGHT. WILL YOU REACH THE KILL SWITCH IN TIME?

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An angry scream jolted me awake. "Tom, Tom, Tom!" I lay flat on my back, panting under a green sky. With a Herculean effort, I sat up. "Who's there?" The screamer sounded as if I had cut him off in traffic or slighted his significant other. Who had commanded me to awake from my slumber?

As I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes, I had to move my long hair out of the way. *Strange, I always cut my hair short.* I wiped my soiled hands on my torn jeans, smearing dirt and oil on the denim. A grey flannel shirt hung loosely on my shoulders. The fabric was almost transparent from use. Aromas radiated from layers of sour sweat and filth.

How long have I been here? Am I a homeless amnesiac? Was I abducted then set free? I can't remember anything.

It dawned on me that I could have a head injury. That would explain my memory loss. I searched my scalp and face but could not find any trauma. While I checked myself for injuries and examined my worn clothes, my breath became rapid. Faster, shorter gulps of air. Panic snowballing. My eyes darted around, scanning for threats.

I'm open and exposed.

The air was dead still; no wind disturbed the leaves on the dark green grasses and shrubs around me. My breathing and heartbeat slowed as I gazed at the jade-colored sky. The heavens lacked a sun but shined a healing luminescence on everything below. The soft tone of the light soothed me. As I calmed down, I noticed that the temperature had a flawless quality, neither hot nor cold.

A thick grey fog surrounded me. The haze lifted and moved away when I stood. The retreating mist unveiled a strip of earth between a tall wall of stones to the right and a dirt slope to my left. A semi-trailer could move with ease in the middle. The grey fog obscured my view beyond a few feet in front and behind me on the wide path. A strange urge overcame me to climb the slope and reach the top.

I pulled on roots and rocks that protruded from the dark soil to ascend the steep incline. The moist dirt smelled as if recently unearthed. The odor reminded me of when my brother, sister, and I dug holes on the family property while growing up. We called it 'digging for treasure.' My siblings and I dreamed of exhuming a valuable stone or some ancient relic with magical powers. I grinned in fond remembrance of better times.

As I climbed farther up the gradient, my fingertips touched metal under the earth. I swept the dirt away and found a smooth metallic surface with faded red paint. I pushed away more loose soil and uncovered chrome trim.

Is it a car? Is this a trash dump?

Undeterred, I pushed off the metal find and continued to hike. I ascended a few feet, only to slip under the loose ground. Dirt made its way into my nose and mouth. A high-pitched wheeze accompanied each breath.

Once I reach the top all my problems will vanish.

I discovered more curious items: action figures from the eighties, a portable Walkman, and a scuffed football. After scaling a few more feet, I came across an old wedding ring and an arm. Without hesitation, I pulled the arm out.

I know this arm. The slender fingers and dark red nail polish.

The elegant hand had small calluses on the fingertips and palm. I gazed at the trail of discoveries down the mountainside. *All of this is familiar.*

I threw the arm down the steep incline like a discarded candy wrapper. After climbing only a few more feet, a strong wind began to spin around me. The wind picked up dust off the hill. The particles flew against my face and stung like tiny needles.

Then the whirlwind dissipated as if at the command of a magician.

"What are you doing here?"

My sister, Dawn, reached out from the hill. Her hospital gown blew in the furious wind. Dawn's brown eyes stared straight through me. Her hands opened and closed hoping to grasp mine. She needed me, but I was out of her reach.

My heavy legs weighed me down, sinking into the hill as if caught in quicksand. I screamed in agony as my sister reached out for me, her life preserver. My heart drooped, and I dug into the rocky soil that gripped my legs until my fingers bled. The futility of my efforts broke me. I scowled at the cloudless jade-green sky and roared. I shrieked like a pressure valve relieving tension.

At that pivotal moment, emerald cloud masses moved in with intense supernatural velocity. Electrical discharges erupted in the turbulent mass. Current charged the air, making strands of my long hair rise toward the tempest. A loud boom and crack originated from above. I shuddered then relief flowed through me as if unloading an incredible burden. A pale blue point in the sky pushed the maelstrom aside, growing brighter until it exploded into blinding light.

The next moment I stood on top of the mountain. I no longer wore shoes. In fact, my entire attire had changed. A pure white tunic replaced the foul shirt. Unblemished trousers matched the top in perfection and cleanliness. The clothes weighed as much as tissue paper.

I touched my bare scalp, not even stubble remained. Eyebrows and facial hair, gone too. The protective physical shell around my mind became a clean slate.

A ring of violent, dark clouds encircled the mountain, replacing the gentler emerald puffs. The storm raged at a considerable distance from me. An unseen force held the fierce tempest at bay. The gaseous ring flashed and glowed, ready to disperse its wrath. The danger that whirled around did not intrude on my internal serenity. I felt more like a passive viewer than a potential victim.

From the peak of the great mountain, I saw that it occupied the center of a small island surrounded by darkness. Not a shadow, but a dark void. To my shock and utter horror, I watched as the blackness consumed the sides of the island. Without stopping the sinister emptiness ate its way toward the center, to me. Great quantities of landmass shattered and dissolved into nothingness. My remaining sense of calm eroded along with the disappearing island.

The isle will be consumed in minutes.

"What is this place?"

At that moment the pale blue dot in the sky above grew brighter. The star swelled to fill most of the sky, but the temperature remained the same. The agitated storm spun with grand intensity around the mountain. Although the storm and darkness didn't speak, I knew that they wanted to consume me. Their thirst and insatiable hunger clawed at me through the air.

The sun transformed into a large flesh toned orb. A deafening rumble brought me to my knees. The sphere spoke, but I couldn't understand it.

"What do you want?"

"Tom!"

The giant orb opened to reveal an eye. The blue iris glowed with such intensity that it showered the island in blue light. I began to float toward the eyeball.

"No, don't take me!"

The nothingness below promised rest and reprieve from all that caused me hardship. A light flashed from the pupil and blinded me.

"Mr. Delinger, can you hear me? Tom!" said a bearded man in a white coat as he shined a light in my eyes. I moved my head to answer him.

"I'm Dr. Talbot. You collapsed at work."

After a few seconds, my senses returned. Machines connected to me beeped and displayed my vital signs. Nurses checked the devices and administered fluids on Dr. Talbot's orders. The doctor had me follow his finger and perform a few other tricks.

"Good." He took a closer look in my eyes. "Good. OK."

Dr. Talbot pulled up a chair. "You've had a serious neurological event." The tube in my mouth prevented me from speaking, but I nodded in acknowledgment.

"You passed out at the office, after an especially stressful meeting."

That's right. Now I remember; the project meeting. They scrapped the whole thing... An entire three years effort, gone...

"You fell into a coma and almost died. It was touch and go for a while."

Dr. Talbot went into a more detailed explanation of the event, and what to expect during recovery. My sluggish mind could not keep up with his instructions.

In the days and weeks that followed, I drifted to the terrifying visions of the island, the great mountain, the raging storm, and the devouring dark. The images made sense in the context of brain trauma.

Some say that they see a light at the end of a tunnel when they are about to die. Others have an out of body experience. I ascended a mountain that represented the totality of my memories, including my worst regrets and greatest pleasures. The island that I had escaped was my own mind pursued and devoured by a destructive force, death.

About the Author:

JH Adams has written many short stories and one novel. His fiction reflects the endearing influence of the Twilight Zone, Tales from the Crypt, and Tales from the Darkside. As for education, his degrees in Psychology and Molecular and Cell Biology lend him an interesting perspective on storytelling. JH Adams resides in the strange and electrifying city of Las Vegas, Nevada.

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Do you remember
the mesmerizing picture
the first image ever taken
of a black hole?

A giant leap for science
but what you don't know
is the part of the story
that was never told

The image was only a part
of a bigger project
we also collected data
to hear the sound
for the very first time
from a black hole

I still chill with fear
from the sound we recorded
it was a scream
a scream from a tormented soul
a scream from darkness hell

Since they we have discovered
the truth about black hole
we have listen to them
heard the screams, the pains
the pleading from beings
speaking with unnatural voices

We have come to the conclusion
black holes are gates
to the deepest hell
eternal prisons for humans souls
with no escape

We have come to the conclusion
black holes are gates
to the deepest hell
eternal prisons for humans souls
with no escape

What priests has told
since ancient times
about Heaven and Hell
and the afterlife
is true

Do you remember
the old movie slogan
'In space, no one can hear you scream'
so terribly wrong we were

We can never tell
such a horrible truth
we can never reveal
such a disturbing discovery
to the human kind

Who will have peace
in his mind
when he know
that black holes
are gates to Hell
and prisons for the human soul

About the Author:

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

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What came from his wife's womb was no more animal than man. It seeped and slithered out into his cupped hands without restraint, as though its bones could change shape, density, form. Its protruding, elongated head with sickly oval cat-like eyes stared idly up at him, as its slippery, oily tentacle-like appendages wrapped around his forearms. It was feather light, brittle, and the thin transparent flesh revealed strangely shaped bones and organs.

He stumbled, the world swimming, his mind reeling. His wife shouted from somewhere, "What's wrong, honey? What's wrong, is there something wrong with the baby?"

Minutes ago, he wanted nothing more than a child of his own, wanted to share his reading and writing with it as it grew, wanted to take it outside into the woods to teach it about birds and plants and Mother Nature, wanted to watch it grow and learn and live life, happily... Now, as his flesh crawled and a pounding began behind his eyes, he wanted nothing more than to be rid of it.

I shouldn't have tempted fate...

I shouldn't have played God...

His wife slowly slipped down from the towel-covered kitchen table, and neared him, keeping her balance by holding her arms out. "Baby, what's wrong? Let me see the baby."

He shook his head— or, he thought he did. He blinked back the haziness; his wide eyes unable to be freed from the sight he held. Faintly, like a smudge on a window, he saw his wife's trembling, thin arms reach for what she believed was her baby, their offspring, and a wave of heat and terror washed over him as he tore it away from her, pressing it against his chest.

"No!" he screamed, then muttered to himself, "It must be killed."

His wife stood so near, he was forced to stand against the floral wallpapered wall, clutching the abomination tightly. The stench of sweat radiating from him filled the small kitchen, intertwined with the sickly sour smell of birth.

It's not our child— it's not anyone's child— a man's mistake for the perfect child.

"Thomas, give me our baby," his wife said, her teary eyes wide.

"No—" he said with trembling lips, shaking his head, "no!"

"Thomas, babe, please give me the baby."

"This is—" he sucked in the palpable air, "isn't your baby, it's no— not anyone's baby—"

His wife lurched for the thing in his arms, but he turned out of the way, feeling her hand graze his shoulder. The oily thing slipped from his grasp, falling to the floor. His wife screamed and dropped to the floor, scrambling towards it, reaching with pale arms and thin fingers.

It must be done.

Not for me, but the world.

As his wife leaned over the monstrosity, accepting it into her shaking arms, Thomas removed the meat tenderizer from the drawer. He loomed over her and raised the tool over his head.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered, then smashed it against the back of her skull. His wife's body dropped to the floor, and the thing slid out from beneath her, across the linoleum.

"Must be... done...", he muttered, staggering around his wife, kneeling and picking up the creature, "has to be... done."

He shuffled into the entryway and collapsed onto his knees, lying the thing onto the floor.

"I'm so sorry, so very sorry," he said between sobs, tears dripping into his mouth, "I shouldn't have— I shouldn't have trusted them, the Ancient ones, shouldn't have— made the pact..."

He took the handle of the tenderizer in both trembling hands and raised it above his head. Through the veil covering his eyes, he looked down upon the thing he so desperately wanted to be his child, its tendrils curled and slipped across the floorboards, reaching for his knees, as its oval eyes blinked with a pale, transparent layer, then closed them.

For the world, not for me, but the world

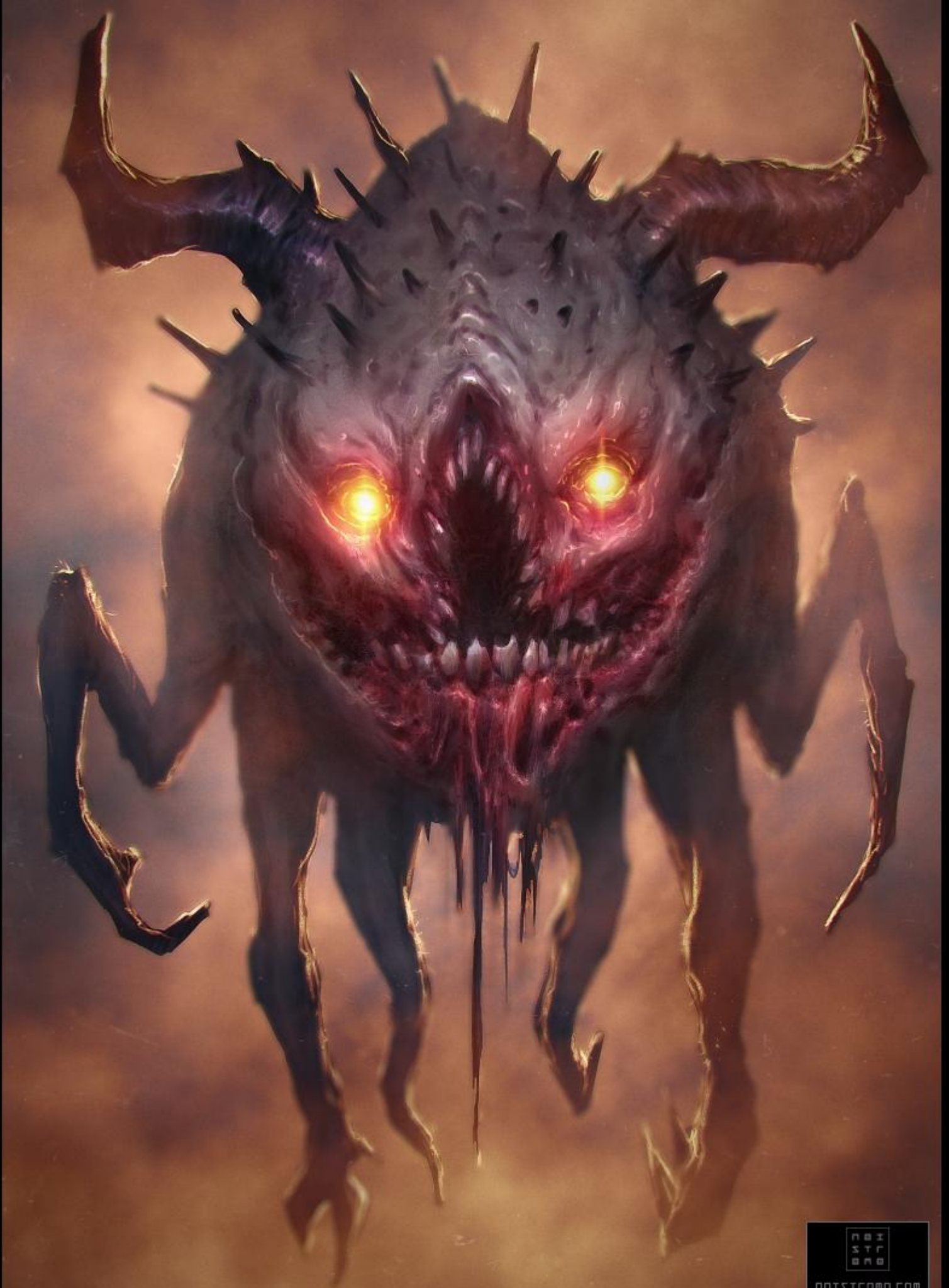
He started to scream, to hide the sound of the blow he would surely hear as he swung down with all the strength in his shaking arms.

About the Author:

Micah Castle is a weird fiction/horror writer. He has been published in various magazines and websites, and has three collections currently out. He enjoys hiking, playing with his animals, and can typically be found reading a book somewhere in his home

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Soft light reflecting from the dark blue surface of the pool danced and swayed on the glass-and-wrought-iron ceiling and on the shiny leaves of the giant pot plants that lined the water's edge. The proximity of lush vegetation to the edge of the water called to my mind a rainforest pond. Or a luxuriant fantasy of one. The water was, after all, chlorinated, and surrounded by a good three feet of travertine tiling.

I turned to my host. "Ferdy, this is lovely. I want to strip off and get in there right now."

"You'll have to wait. Supper's being served in ten minutes."

I almost laughed to hear him say that. Ferdy Stokes, who grew up on a council estate in East London, could never have dreamed he'd one day have all this. Wealth suited him, though. As did marriage to Susie. I'd never seen him happier. Or fatter.

Susie was on top form at supper. Her liveliness and sparkle kindled a spiritedness in Ferdy that I hadn't known since the earliest days of our friendship. You'd have thought that such a taciturn chap would have been overwhelmed into silence by her, but Susie was forever coaxing contributions out of him.

"Tell Philip about our neighbour, Ferdy," she urged. "You know, Old Long-Hair. The swimmer."

So Ferdy related the story of how this chap, Richard somebody-or-other, came to their door one day soon after they'd bought the place and announced that the previous owners had let him use the pool on a regular basis, and would Ferdy be so kind as to continue the arrangement. Ferdy had been taken aback by the fellow's twinkling eyes and humble demeanour and had agreed without really thinking. And now this Richard had become a bi-weekly visitor.

After supper, Ferdy and I removed ourselves to the lounge to partake of some of his VSOP Hennessy cognac. Susie declined to join us, citing the desire for an early night, what with her ceramics exhibition opening in a few days time. She knew we wished to talk of old times, bachelor days, and it was typical of her thoughtfulness not to intrude. The lounge was more akin to a medieval hall, with its hammerbeam roof, rug-covered stone floor and enormous hearth, where Ferdy soon had a fire crackling away.

We sat there in opposing armchairs on either side of the fire, which warmed our faces (as the brandy warmed our insides) and cast deep, flickering shadows around the room. We covered well-worn paths of reminiscence: school days, old friends, Saturday afternoons at the football, early business ventures. Eventually, he rose and stretched his heavy frame. "Well, if it's okay with you, old friend, I'm going to turn in. But take your time. Finish your drink. You know where everything is?"

"Susie showed me earlier. I'll be fine. You go to bed."

When Ferdy had departed, I put another log on the fire. I was feeling mellow, yet wide awake – certainly not ready for bed. I found a large book on an occasional table: a history of the locality, full of grainy black-and-whites showing horses and carts and people in flat caps. I was soon engrossed, as much by the pictures as the text. I was impressed by the dedication, the love, that had motivated the writer to explore in such detail the history of this small suburban backwater. Why travel the world, he seemed to imply, when you can find these riches in your own neighbourhood? So rapt was I that I failed to notice that I was no longer alone.

"Good evening," said the stranger in a deep baritone, nearly causing me to drop my balloon glass.

He was standing on the far side of the room, close to the doorway that led to the swimming pool. His large brown head was cocked slightly as he looked at me. Long, slightly wet grey hair hung around his shoulders. He was so still, he could have been standing there for ten minutes and I wouldn't have known it.

"Good evening," I replied uncertainly.

"I'm Richard. From next door."

So this was the mysterious water-loving neighbour Ferdy had mentioned earlier. "Mind if I join you?" He pushed his head forward as he said this and clasped his hands, as though I would be doing him a great honour.

"Of course," I said, putting down the book and gesturing to the vacant chair.

"Thank-you. Thank-you. I need to warm my bones."

He was a tall man of about sixty, with pale grey eyes and a thoughtful demeanour. A small, irregular twitch disturbed his gaunt brown cheek. His knees rose up as he sat on the low chair.

"Did you have a good swim?"

He didn't reply. I noticed he had no towel or bag with him. Perhaps he kept his kit here. His red shirt had dark patches on it: he hadn't dried himself very well. The man didn't appear inclined to chat – perhaps it was warmth, not company, he wanted. I returned my attention to the book.

"The world is very big," he suddenly announced. "You can only ever know a small part of it."

"You're right about that," I said. "In fact I was just thinking a very similar thought myself." I began to tell him about the book I was reading, but he cut through my words.

"And even the small part that you know, you can never know completely."

"Er, quite," I murmured, wondering what on earth the man was getting at.

"Think for a minute," he persisted, "of all those quiet spaces: the corner of a field in Sussex, a windblown acre of Russian steppe, a barren Antipodean hill, a patch of understory in a Brazilian forest."

"What of them?" I asked.

"So many uninhabited spaces all over this planet. What happens to them, in them, when people aren't around? Do they just exist? Even here in our home town – we think we know it. But we only ever know the smallest part. There are spaces in our own homes that we never visit. But they go on existing all the while, unobserved." His breath caught slightly on the intake, like a small sob. "This troubles me."

"I guess the world just goes on," I shrugged. "Most of it's pretty uneventful."

"It's wasteful. What's the point of something if it's not observed?"

"None," I agreed, "from a human perspective at least. But by that reckoning, the entire cosmos, apart from Earth, is pretty much a waste."

"If ..." he whispered, "you believe that nothing ever happens in those empty spaces."

I swallowed the remains of my cognac. "And you, I take it, don't."

His eyes remained fixed on me. "There's a corner of the swimming pool," he said. "On the far side – the deep end."

"What of it?" I asked.

"It's one of those quiet, uninhabited spaces we were speaking of. No reason ever to go down there. I've been swimming in that pool for over a decade now. I must have done tens of thousands laps, but I've never visited that space in the bottom left-hand corner – not even once."

"Why should you?"

"Why should I?" he echoed. "And yet these past twelve months, I've noticed..." He hesitated. "That space in the bottom corner is not so quiet. As I do my laps, I've sensed something – something watching me from down there."

"Watching you?"

"Of course, I tried to ignore it," continued Richard. "The mind can become overly susceptible at times. I always swim alone, late at night. And the lighting in that room can play odd tricks, especially when the water gets choppy and it sends reflections rebounding in every surface. It doesn't help that my goggles steam up after about sixty lengths, making everything a blur. And then the slightest shadow or movement in the corner of my eye can become, in my fevered state, something monstrous creeping up on me." He was agitated now, the twitch in his cheek becoming more persistent. "But this," he said, "was different. Have you ever felt like you were being watched, my friend?"

"Constantly," I replied with a smile, thinking of the cameras that had appeared on every major street. But then, seeing his strained look, I reconsidered the question. "No," I said eventually. It was one of those literary clichés – "the girl sensed she was being observed" – that I'd always found rather implausible.

"It's not about something seen or heard," explained Richard. "It's closer to the sense of touch. You feel a prickling at the back of your neck, a shiver all along your skin that has nothing to do with the temperature of the water. It's as real a sense as anything told you by your eyes. It is, even as I speak of it now, quite terrifying. And it began, as I say, about this time last year. This... *consciousness* that observed me, whatever it was, seemed to inhabit a space deep down in that lonely corner of the pool." He paused, perhaps to allow his heart to recover a calmer rhythm. "I developed a habit: after every deep-end turn, as I swam back towards the far end, I would glance back, just once, towards the left-hand bottom corner. I would see nothing, of course – nothing but dark blue tiles. This action, this twist of the head, began as a form of simple reassurance that the thing did not really exist or, if it did, that it would never manifest itself – heaven forbid – in a form that I could actually see! But after a time, the habit became more than a reassurance – it became a necessity. A powerful fancy took hold of me that if I didn't do the glance, the thing would suddenly appear in all its horror. It would swim up with sickening speed, seize hold of me and drag me down to the blue depths."

I reached for the bottle of cognac and poured some more of the amber fluid into my balloon. My mouth, I discovered, was quite dry. I offered the man some, but he didn't even notice my gesture. His eyes were now trained on the fire.

"I did the glance on every length. I did it without fail, even while the rational part of me cried out that it was all nonsense. A tiny glance, barely noticeable, just a little dip of the head, a check of the blue tiles, that was all. And I developed another habit: when I reached the deep-end wall, I always turned my body left. You see, this idea entered my

head that if I turned right, I'd be turning my back on the demon. And that might provoke it. So I always turned left before making my way back to the shallow end. I even timed my strokes so I'd be sure of touching the tiles with my right hand, making a left turn more natural – I did that to placate my rational brain. I didn't want to think that I might be going mad... And yet, despite all these precautions, I was terrified that, one of these nights, the thing would appear. The worst moments were when I was swimming away from it, back towards the shallow end. Those were the times – especially on the 98th or the 100th length, at the very end of my swim – when I felt most vulnerable. My skin would prickle in dreadful anticipation of a touch, the merest feather of a touch. The caress of a falling leaf from one of the plants would have been enough to send me mad."

"But why," I asked, "do you continue to put yourself through this torture? Why do you keep swimming in that pool?"

For a long time he didn't respond. He only stared at the juddering flames in the hearth. Then, in a soft, high groan, he said: "When you do something for long enough, it's hard to stop. You learn to live with fear. It becomes part of you. I continued to swim, and persisted with my mad, appeasing rituals – glance, left-turn, glance, left-turn, on and on... until tonight."

"What happened tonight?"

"Everything was going fine. I was on my seventy-fifth length. And then, for some reason, as I was swimming towards the deep end, I got my strokes mixed up – maybe I was distracted by some play of the light on the water. Whatever happened, when I reached the deep end wall, I touched the tiles with my left hand, not my right. With my body in this position, it would have been awkward to turn left – it would have been an open acknowledgement of my enslavement to this superstitious dread. I had to make a quick decision. I chose to turn right. I turned my back on the demon. It was an act of bravado, a demonstration that I was master of my fears. But as I began to swim back towards the shallow end, I was seized by a terror I cannot describe. That suspicion I had of being watched gave way to a certainty: I was now absolutely sure that something malign, something that wished me harm, was coming up very fast towards me. In panic, I pummelled the water with my arms, trying desperately to reach the other end of the pool and escape the inevitable touch of those icy dead fingers on my legs. If I could just reach the other end I might be safe."

"And you did it, didn't you?" I smiled. "You reached the other end. That's why you're here."

Richard suddenly rose to his feet. Turning to me, he said: "Thank-you, my friend. Thank-you for allowing me to sit here with you, and for listening to my story."

There was something odd about the look of the man as he stood there before me, though I couldn't say exactly what it was. However, it occurred to me then that he didn't actually know I was there. Feeling puzzled, I watched him exit through the door that led to the entrance hall. Then I got up and went through the other doorway, the one that led to the swimming pool. I'm not sure why. Perhaps I thought it might help ease my bewilderment about what I had just experienced.

The room was cooler than the rest of the house, and pitch dark. With some fumbling, I located the panel of light switches. As I pressed them, spotlights came on in various concealed locations in the walls and behind the plants, washing the room in subtle, green-hued light. The light reflected in the ripples of the dark blue surface of the water and gleamed on the brown skin of the body that floated there, face down, near the shallow end.

About the Author:

Alex Woolf writes children's books for a living, and horror stories for fun. During the winter of 2010/11, he had the opportunity to swim alone every evening in a private pool surrounded by plants, and that was the inspiration for this tale.

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No one enters Snap Alley. Not anyone, ever.

Everybody knows this. It's a canticle reciting in your head when you're near its narrow throat and its warnings scream in your mind, silent as falling snowflakes, but there never-the-less; mentally blinding you to its presence. Its only known entrance is on Harper Street; an oblong maw squeezed between high walls of red brick, the colour of dried blood. An urban canyon between derelict warehouses, its broken cobbled path winding out of sight, hiding around future corners. Devoid of bins or dumpsters, doors or gates. There are no streetlamps to reveal its inner gloom. Even growling dogs, creeping cats and worried rats, avoid its open gloomy mouth.

Nothing enters Snap Alley. Ever.

Until one autumn night ...

'Jimmy Fast Blade', savage with fists of gold rings, the ruthless administrator of shark bite loans and Duke of the street's drugs trade. He was the 'Cut Man', meanest of the mean. Take your pick of the honorific titles whispered softly by crony and desperate customer alike.

Jimmy knew about Snap Alley. Knew it wasn't quite right. And yet ...

He'd dared to dream a scheme about the brick squeezed track, unused by a cowed community already fearful of home-grown human nightmares. He challenged the caution his cruel brain dispensed, desiring places of concealment for deals and merchandise. A place where even cops avoided; a perfect H.Q. for an up and coming entrepreneur ...if he can face down his fears.

Jimmy trains his eyes to look straight into the heart of the alley's shadows, building up a resistance to the dire feelings it radiates. He swears he'll conquer the urban gorge, tread its crazed stone flag stones; discover its secrets.

How unfortunate his plans are suddenly overturned by events in his busy commercial life.

A rival emerges bringing issues over territory, attempting an aggressive takeover on Jimmy's lucrative businesses. The competitor faces Jimmy's quick blade at high mid-night, blood flows and a scream escapes into the dark. Suddenly, no more rival to the kingdom's crown and Jimmy's reputation upheld to the max. All's cool except for someone's ratted him out. Crimson stains on his designer clothing and usurper's blood splashed on his skin are a forensic scientists wet dream.

Problem. Cops searching the streets. His crew split, crawling under stones to escape from searching blue lights and the buzz sound of a cop helicopter. The Law knows his usual haunts; his safe places no longer safe. He needs another refuge where he can ditch the bloodied blade, clean up, wait out the storm of blue justice blowing around town. A sanctuary to think in, contact his sycophantic gang; arrange fresh clothing and solid alibi, avoiding the beckoning vision of hard prison time.

There's only one place.

A hide-and-seek half hour of street corners, doorways and crawling behind fences. Cops with dogs, tracking his blood smell, his sweat trail. Snap Alley emerges, its walled darkness's promising safety. He enters, the alley embracing him in its clammy cold comfort.

Jimmy wears the darkness like a shroud, breathing it in as it covers his existence. He moves forwards, looking back in frightened glances, admitting he's scared. Snap's entrance is framed in neighbourhood lights, wails of sirens giving music to the night.

Hesitant steps forward, the street glow from his own world dimming; sound becoming deadened. A turn of the walls robs him of his streets, the world where he dreams of kingship. Jimmy grasps his bloodied blade and our vicious Orpheus begins his journey to the underworld, blind in the black silent nothingness, desperation pushing him deeper into the alley. The taste of the streets fades in his mouth, senses becoming redundant in the utter night in this man-made ravine. He grabs a gaze upwards, hoping for stars or a moonshine blessed sky, but only darkness presses down, like the walls are bending over the gap, cutting away the cosmos.

Limited choices urge him on. The bricks change to black stone, bleeding out a fungi glow of tomb green fluorescence. He shuffles in the dead light across cobbles layered in slimy lichen.

His nerve decays, chest heaves, heart flips, groping his way along walls narrowing to a choke point. Fingers feel rock and old mortar. He's a shambling lost figure, tripping on uneven edges, searching for hope.

Impish thoughts sneer at his reason. *What if it's got no exit?*

Time melts away leaving him isolated in the dark. The walls rescinded their pus coloured light and flatpack terror assembles itself in poor Jimmy's brain. He feels shapes lurking in the-no-light, moving slivers of ... something.

He wonders at his madness, trying to reason. *Cops must be gone by now, turn back.*

His brutal intelligence donates an idea.

He fumbles for one of his phones. Not the business phone he does the dealing on; a phone for directing violence on those who cross him. The cops could trace it.

No. Best to use the other phone; his friendly phone; the one he uses to ring his mother, waking her from her failed sobriety; the sexy phone used to summon his dead head girlfriend who'll do anything for her fix. He yearns for the screen's brightness, a beacon guiding him from the confines of the alley.

Cold fingers fumble in panic across the switch. The alley is pierced by white light and jolly notes of the mobiles awakening.

Clarity is granted on his surroundings, and a final horrific revelation.

The alley is indeed a dead end in all sorts of ways, its perpetual resident revealed in the limelight; a thing which feeds on those foolish, desperate and delicious enough to trespass in its domain built of stone and brick. It smiles a smile which perhaps only Jimmy's stiletto blade could appreciate.

Poor Jimmy's screams turn to mumbled gurgles from a blood-filled throat. The friendly phone falls, shattering on the unfriendly hard surface of an unreal reality.

No one enters Snap Alley and certainly, no one ever, ever, comes out.

About the Author:

Martin P. Fuller took up writing five years ago. He confesses to being the wrong side of sixty. He has been a police officer, beer salesman, pallbearer and car delivery driver. At present 'just retired' he's trying to devote himself to writing. Mainly a writer of dark fiction, he has appeared regularly in the Horror Tree e-magazine and in other anthologies.

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"Come on, man! We really need to go to that bar! It's ladies night!" A blonde athletic young man jogged along the paved trail as he spoke into his wireless headphones. He was sweating slightly in the humid night air. Pools of brightness surrounded each lamppost along the path and the light ebbed and flowed over him in slow waves of illumination. Absorbed as he was in his conversation, he was oblivious to his surroundings.

The same could not be said for the eyes that watched his approach.

"What do you mean?" he continued between heavy breaths. "Classes haven't started yet! You can't have that much to do already. And it's Thursday night! You're not even working tomorrow."

A rustling sound in the bushes to the man's left finally caught his attention. He paused and pulled his phone out from the sleeve on his left arm. "Hold on a minute," he said before pressing the 'mute' button and activating the phone's flashlight function. "Who's out there?" He called loudly as he swept the bright beam of light around him.

Seeing nothing, he pressed the unmute button and replied to his friend. "Yeah, I'm still here. I thought I heard someone in the bushes. Probably a damn raccoon." He paused again before raising his voice. "Those things are mean! I saw this guy in the ER one time... Shit!" he called out as the shadows coalesced and surged toward him. He fumbled with the phone which clattered to the pavement at his feet while he backed away frantically. The screen shattered and went dark as the call disconnected.

His mind raced as he tried to make sense of the thing moving toward him. It looked like a massive pool of oily sludge but it shifted and stretched toward him. A pale blue mask rested in the center of the blob and shadowy hands ending in long pointed claws reached out from the mass. The thing made a horrible gurgling sound and the young man screamed in response as he tried to back away, but in his panicked state, he tripped and fell heavily to the pavement. A high pitched scream of pain and terror echoed through the quiet night as the creature's claws raked over the man's legs.

Moving on all fours, he scrambled away, his screams dropping to a whimper. The shadow creature surged after him, relentless in its pursuit. The man looked over his shoulder while frantically trying to get back to his feet. After a few desperate tries, he finally regained his footing and started to run but skidded to halt as a second shadow flowed into position a few yards in front of him.

Black hands stretched out to grab his arms and the mass swelled upward until the mask was level with his face. Inky black goo swelled out of the eyeholes and oozed down over the mask's wide grin. Another gurgling growl from the creature was answered by a whimpering noise from the student. Flailing with a strength born of total panic, he broke from the creature's grasp and turned to run. Blood flowed down over his legs and stained his socks and shoes.

Stumbling and gasping from the pain, he hobbled toward the trees only to cry out again as the first shadow intercepted him. He fell heavily to one side and collided head-first with a tree. Dazed from the impact, he blinked at wavering images before him. A third figure moved toward him, but unlike the others, this appear to be a tall man dressed all in black. There was a wicked smile on his pale face and the eyes gleamed with a brightly glowing yellow color. He nodded down at the young man.

"He'll do," he said in cold, passionless voice. "Bring him. The master will be pleased." Without another word, he turned and walked away while the twin shadows moved to grasp the student's arms. He cried out weakly and tried struggle but between the blow to his head and the loss of blood, there was nothing he could do. A few yards away, a jagged rift of blackness hung in the air. The tall man disappeared through the darkened portal and moments later, the shadows dragged the helpless student through the rift as well. With a soft squelching sound, the tear sealed shut behind them, leaving no trace.

From a branch on a nearby tree, a lone black crow looked down at the scene. It cocked its head to one side before letting out a loud caw that echoed through the stillness. Spreading wide black wings, it launched itself into the night.

The only evidence that anything had occurred was a soft buzzing noise and the blinking of a phone call that would never connect.

About the Author:

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

Author Blog: [J.W. Grace](#)

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They were twelve strangers seated at a single table, bewildered young men and women who, following a deep sleep, found themselves inside this drab eatery. There was no lunch counter nor were there windows, just a small sign on a barren wall: THE CAFE. Conversation was nil at the table inside an otherwise empty room.

Breaking the silence, Russell Tate turned to the nice looking blonde seated alongside him. She seemed as bewildered as everyone else.

"What is this place?"

"Since everyone's eating and not doing much else, I'll say a restaurant. Can't say much for the ambience."

A waitress appeared. "What's your pleasure, Mr. Tate? The burgers here are pretty good."

She knew his name? Okay, then. Russell answered, "Fine."

"You'll want to try the fries. Our house specialty. I'm Ethel, if you need anything." She headed for the kitchen.

He stopped her. "Where are we, Ethel? What is this place?"

Russell's question made her smile. She pointed to a well dressed old guy standing by the kitchen door. "That's the owner, Mr. Cross. He's about to tell you."

The elderly gentleman stepped to the center of the café, picked up a water glass, and tapped it with a spoon for attention.

"It's my pleasure to welcome you here. We prefer our patrons enjoy a meal before we get down to business. If all of you will think back for a moment, you may understand why you have been brought here." The old guy addressed Russell. "You, young man. Tell me the last thing you remember before your arrival."

Russell paused. "I believe -- Yes! I was being chased...by someone. I can't quite--"

"It was the police, Mr. Tate. New York's finest. You had robbed a convenience store, I believe. One of many."

Russell nodded.

"You resisted arrest, pulled a gun, and then Bang! You were shot dead." Cross turned to the pretty blonde.

"And you? Your name is Candace, I believe? Your men call you Candy?"

"That's right."

"I believe last night one young man shoved your cell phone down your throat. Didn't appreciate the service you provided and didn't like that you took his wallet. You choked."

Candace's face flushed.

Ethel set the burger before Russell. "Eat quickly. It's almost time."

Old Cross smiled. "Whores, pimps, dealers and crooks, that's what you folks are. So welcome, one and all! It's our pleasure to serve you a decent meal before..."

Russell had barely swallowed his first fry before the floor opened, revealing a screen mesh. The walls changed also. Hot oil bubbled below and the entire room moved downward toward it.

Cross added, "You people wanted to know what this place is. I think now that should be obvious."

Candace turned to Russell. "My God!"

"Close enough," Cross said.

Russell knew where they were, all right. He watched the burning oil below seep through the mesh.

"We're in a fryer!"

About the Author:

Ken Goldman has homes in Pennsylvania's Main Line and the Jersey shore. His stories appear in over 900 publications. Ken's tales received seven honorable mentions in The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror. He has written six books: anthologies of short stories, YOU HAD ME AT ARRGH!!, DONNY DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE, and STAR-CROSSED; and a novella, DESIREE. His two novels are OF A FEATHER and SINKHOLE.

Awakening, drenched in sweat,
tossing from the silent scream
that wanted so badly to be heard
I cover my face with my hands
to drown the noise that hums
a song like a hive inside my mind.
In nightmares I tear the skin
from my face, my lips, my eyelids,
my defining marks that indicate
who I am,
and become none.

The beast within cackles
in delight and torment
at the pain, the degradation,
the noise from which peace
is never found.
I could tear my clothes off
and run naked through the woods,
howling to be set free, but
instead I'm locked away,
a prisoner to society—
And I'll scream in high pitch
to make sure I'm real, but
only silence will echo in my room.

About the Author:

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

Author Blog: [Hook of a Book](#)

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Toothpick swung her wrench directly into the side of Bobby Woods' skull. Bobby, being the tough lad he was, remained standing, however, he was dazed. His blood splattered down on to sweet Jenny Mills' naked body.

Sweet Jenny Mills shrieked. She nearly passed out when she saw a bit of brain peeking out from Bobby's skull. She looked up to see Toothpick standing above her. Her eyes went wide realizing the legend was true.

Toothpick, the cannibal witch, was real. And she was indeed eight feet tall. She was also, like the legend said, thin as a rail. Her arms were no thicker than Sweet Jenny's index finger. Her waist as thick as a one-year-old birch tree. Her black hair was matted with dirt, covered in leaves and twigs making her look to have tiny antlers.

In her thin hand, Toothpick held her legendary thirty-six-inch pipe wrench. The wrench was long, thick, and covered in rust and blood.

The summer breeze blew and moved Toothpick's hair just enough for sweet Jenny to see her face. Another legend confirmed- the giant girl had half a face. Half her face was gorgeous, angelic in fact. But the other half, the mutilated, scarred part that exposed her teeth, negated any beauty one would ever see in dear old Toothpick. In fact, it was the sight of Toothpick's face that caused Sweet Jenny Mills to faint.

As for Bobby, well he continued to sway in the hot summer afternoon, bleeding out like the fool he was. His pants and undies were down around his ankles as his erection bobbed in the air. He wanted to say something but all he could utter was a confused whimper.

Although she had the vocabulary of a five-year-old, Toothpick spoke.

"Cat. Dog. Come."

A part of the legend which some forgot, or thought too outrageous to be true, became a harsh reality for Bobby Woods.

The boy could not talk, no not a word, but he could still feel fear. And he could still urinate, which was exactly what he did. His erect cock pissed out a glorious yellow stream all over the poor sleeping sweet Jenny Mills. If Sweet Jenny was conscious she'd been screaming bloody murder, uh-huh. Instead, she slept quietly as Bobby's urine washed his blood off of her. As for the reason Bobby's bladder let go-

Out from the brush, two bears walked forth. They rubbed up against Toothpick's legs as if they were giant kitty cats. She looked at the bear on her left.

"Cat."

She looked at the bear on her right.

"Dog."

Both bears answered her with a deep moan followed by an anxious whuff!

Toothpick stared at Bobby. He could only see one of her eyes, the dead one. She pointed her wrench at Bobby and spoke a single word.

"Eat."

The bears named Cat and Dog wasted no time. With a bellowing roar, Cat went high, opening Bobby's torso with her gigantic claws. Dog went low, his powerful jaws took a generous chunk from Bobby's left thigh. Bobby fell back onto the forest ground.

Both Cat and Dog chomped on the boy's now limp body. Dog's snout nuzzled into Bobby's midsection and he chewed on Bobby's guts. Cat crunched and played with Bobby's skull, cracking it open like a walnut and eating the brains directly out of the cranium.

Cat, being the hungriest of the bears, licked her chops and nudged at Sweet Jenny's sleeping body. Toothpick shook her head and commanded her daughter.

"No. Girl. Good. Leave."

The bear moaned, settling for Bobby's eyes, nose, cheeks and lips. Meanwhile, Dog ate Bobby's heart.

As the bears dined on the boy's carcass, Toothpick sat and watched. Once the bears had their fill, Toothpick commanded them once again.

"Home."

She walked into the brush whence she came and disappeared with in thick forest. The bears followed their adoptive mother.

It was almost a month later before Sweet Jenny Mills spoke. Sweet Jenny told the cops that Bobby Woods was raping her. If it weren't for Toothpick, sweet Jenny would have been just another victim, a statistic of sexual assault, which was Handsome Bobby Woods' calling card.

See, Bobby Woods wasn't some prince in shining armor, no sir, he was a debonair devil with a smile so bright he'd make just about any gal's panties nice and wet. He'd woo'em and screw'em, never takin' no for an answer.

Just so happened that Bobby chose the wrong woods to do his dastardly deeds in that day. He paid no mind to the legend that Toothpick roamed them woods, no sir. See, another bit to the legend of dear old Toothpick is she never harms innocents. Never. Being she was once innocent herself, she only murders the worse of the worse. Rapists. Murderers. Pedophiles. That lot of scum. You bring any of that unsavory bullshit into her woods, and I guarantee you will be counting worms real quick.

Only a few know the truth of Toothpick. Sheriff Robinson Gillespie is one, as is the swamp witch Alessandria Sparks. They both knew her back when she had a family, a mom and a dad. Back when she had somewhat of a normal life. They knew her when people called her by her birth name, Madison Celeste Sawyer. Toothpick, well that was just what the ignorant called her. Those that didn't understand her condition. But that is another tale for another time. For now, you best remember- Toothpick is out there. She is waiting. She is watching. She is hungry.

About the Author:

Justin Joseph is an American author who writes supernatural terror and thrillers. He has been writing (and drawing) since childhood when he first saw the card series Garbage Pail Kids. Since then, he is never without pen and paper, always creating. His love for writing and creating is only bested by his love for his family- his wife, and daughters.

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Ongoing Screams | *Olivia Arieti*

Screaming was the only thing Meg could do; whether hysteria or insanity, the wild outburst of horror and macabre excitement kept shaking her body. Before her lay her lover still hot with blood and passion and already as cadaverous as the ghost he had turned into. Nothing more alluring than the sight of the knife plunged into the brawny chest.

Surely, they would hear her, come for her and lock her in.

She hoped they would also manage to keep her from yelling as it seemed to have become an irreversible condition like the red saliva dripping from her mouth.

About the Author:

Olivia Arieti lives in Torre del Lago Puccini, Italy, with her family. Besides being a published playwright, she loves writing fiction. Her stories appeared in several magazines and anthologies like Enchanted Conversations, Enchanted Tales Literary Magazine, Fantasia Divinity Magazine, Cliterature, 100 Doors To Madness, Forgotten Tomb Press, Black Cats Horrified Press, Death And Decorations Thirteen O'Clock Press, Infective Ink, Pandemonium Press, Pussy Magic Magazine.

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Mr. Miller's house was the last one on the left. The lawn was wild, and the driveway was vicious with large rocks planted for tires to meet them. The house was in bad need of new paint, and most windows were covered with shade. The porch furniture was dusty and vacant, and the fence barricading the backyard was tilted downward, revealing more chairs along the grass, surrounding a plastic table. In the center of the plastic table was a hideous, porcelain pig.

Mrs. Miller died last year. None of her children lived in the area. Only the husband lived inside the house, and unlike all his other neighbors, he was not interested in selling. He first politely just said, No to the man knocking at his door, but now he stayed inside, refusing to answer the door and the phone. The deadline to sell was approaching fast.

"Mr. Miller, it's Bram. I hate to keep bothering you, but I need to talk to you about your house." Bram placed his long, black coat over his arm, and he knocked once more on the front door. "I spoke to your bank. You're behind on your mortgage. We're willing to pay you double for this house plus a \$50,000 dollar deposit. All I need is your signature on these documents that I have." Bram pulled out a folded roll of papers from the pocket of his coat. He waved the papers across the family room window. It was the only one that didn't have the blinds pulled down, and he was sure that Mr. Miller was standing in the room, listening to him. "You can walk away with a lot of money. Maybe, go live with your children. You have no one here, and your neighbors all signed. The development will be built, and we're trying to do you a favor."

"Go away," Bram heard Mr. Miller say from the family room. "Leave me be!"

"Mr. Miller, if you don't sign these papers, I will have no choice but to go to the bank and pay off this house, and then this house will belong to us. And you will have to leave without one cent, and I am trying to spare you from that. I am trying to help you."

"I don't need your help! This is my home, and I am not leaving here. I will not sell to you locusts. Now, get off my property before I call the cops."

"I'll leave the papers on the porch for you, Mr. Miller." Bram placed the folded roll of papers on a nearby chair. "Please, consider signing them. I'll give you the week, but that's it. Then, the deadline has passed."

"Over my dead body will I go, so take those papers. Shove them up your ass," and Mr. Miller slammed the blinds down over the window.

"Fine. Be like that." Bram stormed off the porch. He was about to walk toward his car when he looked into the backyard. He stared at the hideous, porcelain pig on the plastic table. "You don't want to sell to us?" He glanced at the window, wondering if he was still being watched, as he walked into the backyard. He grabbed the hideous, porcelain pig off the plastic table and tucked it under his long, black coat. "We'll take this house from you anyway and leave you on the side of the road."

Bram threw the gear into reverse and peeled out of the driveway. The car hopped over a large rock and made a funny noise. Bram gritted his teeth together, glaring at the house in front of him. Such a bastard, and to think that Bram almost felt bad about Mr. Miller losing his wife. But now he didn't, and he would be laughing when Mr. Miller's house was torn down.

Bram drove along the dirt road. Most of the trees were torn down now. All the houses had a white and yellow sign by their driveways, screaming, SOLD. The neighbors took the money and ran. They saw the writing on the wall, but Mr. Miller had to be the defiant one. Well, that would be his end, and Bram glanced over at the hideous, porcelain pig. He smiled to himself.

The rest of the day was a series of phone calls. The first was to the bank that Mr. Miller had to pay for his house. Bram knew that he wasn't going to sign the documents, so he may as well get the process moving on taking the house. The bank representative was at first resistant to giving into him, but Bram greased the wheels. Money talked, and the representative bent. The process was in motion, and if Mr. Miller wasn't happy about that, it was no longer Bram's problem.

Bram sat in the diner and gorged himself on eggs, bacon, sausages, and pancakes. He slurped down his third cup of coffee and wiped his mouth with the white sleeve of his shirt. He knocked crumbs off his beard and onto the plate, and then he licked his lips. He ordered a large slice of apple pie.

Once the phone calls were done and the last of the paperwork was processed, Bram headed home. He never had a need for a wife that didn't listen, and children were too much work. He rather his privacy, and he dropped the hideous, porcelain pig on the floor by the front door. The rest of the night, he planted himself on the couch and laughed at the news. So many idiots in the world, and the world would be better off without them.

At ten-thirty p.m., Bram called it a night. He threw his clothes into a pile on the floor near his bed. Every Sunday, the housekeeper would come to clean the house, and do his laundry. She would also go grocery shopping for him, and if she stepped out of line like last time, he would cut her pay. If she quit, he would find another illegal to do her job, but this one seemed to stay a lot longer than most of the others.

It was barely midnight when Bram woke up abruptly. He thought he heard something. It must be his imagination, and he pushed himself into the mattress. He shut his eyes. He was just about to drift off to sleep when he heard a noise. It sounded like a squeal.

"What the hell?" Bram sat up in the bed. He waited for the sound to repeat, but nothing happened. He continued to listen to the noises outside his window, the ugly rasping of nature, a car speeding by, and then silence. Maybe, he was imagining it, and he lied back down in the bed. He heard a loud squeal. "What is that?"

Bram stormed out of his bed. He nearly tripped over his clothes that were scattered across the floor. He cursed under his breath and turned toward the nightstand. He reached for the lamp, but that's when he heard something coming up the stairs. Whatever it was, it made an ugly squeal.

"Hello? Who's there?" Bram inched toward his bedroom door. He felt like something was standing outside the room. "Show yourself," but no one did. "I'm not playing games with you," and Bram forced himself to step outside. But nobody was there. Instead, he heard more squeals coming from downstairs. "That's it. I had enough." Bram hurried down the stairs, ready to silence whoever was tormenting him. "If you don't get out of my house, I will end you. I will bury you in lawsuits," but nobody was downstairs.

Bram walked toward the front door. He stared at the empty space on the floor. Where was the hideous, porcelain pig? He knew that he didn't move it. He wasn't going to get rid of it. He was going to give it back to Mr. Miller right before they destroyed his house, but the pig was gone. Where did it go?

"That's not possible," Bram declared. "Where the hell is the pig?"

Suddenly, Bram was surrounded by squeals. They were ugly, harsh sounds, and with each sound, it felt like a knife slicing across his flesh. He screamed and tore up the stairs, and he slammed the bedroom door shut. He locked the door, and he dove under his covers. He pressed his hands over his ears, but he could still hear the squeals.

"Go away! Go away," Bram screamed, and suddenly he fell asleep.

Bram awoke to sunlight shining in his room. It was morning, and he heard the birds singing outside. There were no squeals. The bedroom door was still closed and locked. Maybe, it was just a nightmare, something he ate, and Bram threw open the bedroom door and peered out into the hallway. But no one was there, and maybe the pig was still left by the front door. But Bram could not bring himself to check. At least, not right now.

Bram yawned and scratched his large stomach. He stumbled into the bathroom and closed the door. He lifted the toilet seat up and urinated. Some of the urine went on the floor, but the housekeeper would clean that. Then, he walked over to the sink, turned the knobs, and waited for the water to become warm. He bent down, cupping his hands together, and he splashed his face. When he touched his face, he felt something protruding outward, something like a snout, and Bram looked up into the mirror. And he let out a loud squeal.

About the Author:

Melissa R. Mendelson is a Horror and Science-Fiction Author. Her short stories have been published by Sirens Call Publications and Dark Helix Press, and her short stories have also been featured on Tall Tale TV. She recently self-published a Dystopian Short Story Collection on Amazon called, *Better Off Here*.

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Manifestation of blackened tongues burnt in ages regarded gladly gone, the sound returns twisting sweet dreams into nightmares. Cotton candy clouds tinting grey begin to rain for the first time in decades. The long-ignored promise spoken in flames; the curse assuring darkness is hardly gone.

Some feared the hags' hideous laughter would echo forever, and for years it did, the mad cachinnation of the damned embracing fire devouring flesh. Those witnessing tried not to think of pig roasts – flesh on the spit spewing grease as heat splits – yet the image burns into brains. Haunted by the sound of hyena cackles, they wonder if what's best is always best done. A few dead cows, and touch of plague seems a small price to pay never to hear that laughter.

Yet time corrodes even memories. The distortions allow witnesses to hide from facts. Grandparents recollect being braver than they were, so the children told tales have no fear.

Certainly, no one threw up when Georgia O'Toole started choking on blood; gargling up steaming foam from charred lungs. (See, breathing in the heat torches the tubes, so soon the evil is suffocating – doomed.) And Steve Simmons definitely didn't lose control of his bowels when Wendy Falkirk fixed a dagger glare through the inferno – who would suggest such a thing? The priest didn't reach toward the temptation to renounce Christ, half expecting the flames to part like a curtain revealing Satan come to save disciples who benefited from proof their master not only existed but cared.

So it is, decades pass pacifically with fear foolishly diminishing. That curse thankfully forgotten the town thrives. Focusing on the living rather than dwelling on the dead makes it easier to believe the best days are ahead. Such a small town, none would think it could evolve from nearly nowhere to a city worth mention on television; travel guides print and online.

One wrote, 'There's almost a siren quality to this cozy metropolis. It's like coming here infects with the desire never to leave.'

Sure enough, visitors linger turning from tourists to residents without batting an eye. The why never pops into mind, save for a few who possess a pessimistic view. The sour faces that never lost the howls of haunting laughter; that horrid cackling passed down in the blood, they suspect the worst. Yet, cash and a growing skyline does well, cutting them off from the attention of city leaders, who insist they know better than 'horror stories about devil disciples cannibalizing babies' to fly; see the future; bind hearts; bring the horizon.

Gears chewing seconds devour second chances. Every opportunity to deal with the dagger descending – the Mayor is busy cutting a ribbon for a new strip mall – city on the rise; the local bishop can't be bothered rectifying past sins of the Church, which were mistakes, he admits, though never publicly, especially because there are more – *ahem* – modern dilemmas 'afflicting' the clergy; the head of the historical society hates hearing about the witch burnings, except in October, when exhibits are begrudgingly set up to satisfy tourists, so, "There's no way in hell I'm just giving you a historical artifact."

"But it could be the key!"

"To what? A ghost story?"

Somehow the mocking laughter, predictably on cue, is worse than any nightmare of Lucretia Bellanova, queen atop the pyre, laughing loudest of all. Her eyes shone like coals, burning bright with hate. Her hair in flames, she headbanged whipping sparks into the sky. To this day grey patches of snow, when all else is pristine, are assumed to be ghostly echoes of her ashes. For, as the story goes, they found no trace of her in the aftermath. Her corrupted body burned entirely, or so they told themselves, once upon a time, to get some sleep at night. Never mind the tap-tap-tapping at the window. It's always just a crow with a smoldering crimson eye.

Though come to think of it, present day pubs sometimes fill with chatter:

"Have you seen these freaky crows? They all got like pink eye or something."

"I saw one last night. Tapping at my window around midnight. Fucking creepy, man."

"I know whatcha mean. I was like, half asleep, and thought it was this freaky old lady, scratching with a fingernail."

"There's a whole murder of them by the river."

"Didn't used to be."

"Well, there are now."

"I'd like to see that."

Joyful, "Let's go!"

So, day drinkers depart never to be seen again.

Subtle signs dismissed by some; others see overflowing implications. Yet, the Mayor is occupied with a meeting about renaming a bridge; the bishop is out of town, visiting the Vatican to receive instructions and thanks regarding the handling of recent – *ahem* – improprieties; the historical society refused to return calls, or waste time with cranks. The handful left who can sense what's coming feel a creeping dreadful inevitability, a terminal prognosis. Then it arrives.

A whisper first almost a hush stitching itself to an eardrum so it can accompany every sound. Short few days later, the hush becomes a howl; becomes the only thing one can hear. Leave town – it lingers, an aural cancer. The howl warps frenzied by pain distorting every aspect into a hideous reminder: when the laughter stopped the screaming started. And now those screams haunt the whole town.

Long slender needles, steak knives, screwdrivers, pencils and pens, broken wine glass stems – “Hush, baby, hush.” – (sniffle) – “Mommy is going to make it go away. It's going to be okay.” – stab deep hoping deafness will remedy... blood drips from ears that can only hear the screams now. Soon the suicides start. The city goes silent, and a world is left to wonder what went wrong. The only clue to a cause is graffiti; scribbled notes; panicked emails; voice messages left by those shouting over the sound only they could hear, “The screams! The screams!”

About the Author:

J. Rohr is a Chicago native with a taste for history and wandering the city at odd hours. In order to deal with the more corrosive aspects of everyday life he writes his blog and makes music in the band Beerfinger.

Author Blog: [Honesty is Not Contagious](#)

Twitter: [@JackBlankHSH](#)

Night Terror | *Terry Miller*

She was there in the darkness. I couldn't see her but I could feel her gaze. As much as I fought, sleep came upon me.

I could hear her in my dreams, whispering in my ears to come find her. After many tired nights of walking through my mind searching for her, she stood before me.

I awoke to the horror which knelt on top of me, my limbs useless.

"After all this time, you wanted to find me?"

Her inquiry bewildered me. Her nails sunk deep into my skin.

"So now I shall be reborn."

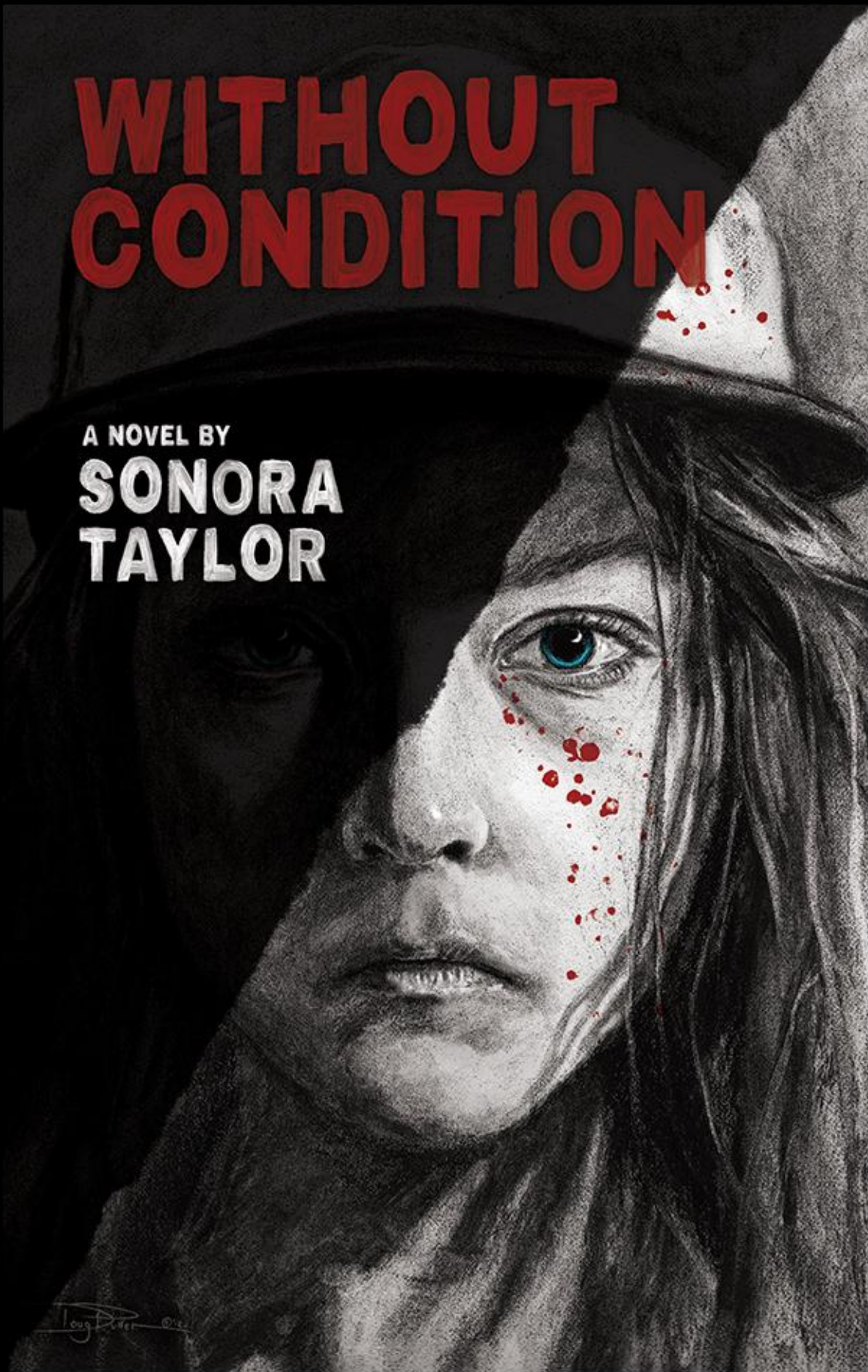
She slowly entered me.

About the Author:

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

WITHOUT CONDITION

A NOVEL BY
**SONORA
TAYLOR**



Available on Amazon

An icy wind blew off the dark water of Pingvallavatn, the largest lake in Iceland. It worked its way among the jumbled rocks that covered the surrounding lands. Storm clouds lurked on the horizon north of the lake, threatening to add to the ice and snow already present. Near the lake sat a cluster of tents and trenches, an archaeological dig site from Reykjavik University. A lone figure was visible, observing the distant storm.

Ingrid Langstrom hoped the inclement weather would stay to the north. She tightened the drawstrings of her parka's hood and let out a resigned sigh. Her wishes wouldn't change the weather and she had work to do. She turned from the storm and trudged across the broken land. The dig site was a series of parallel trenches surrounded by light poles. A pair of large, geodesic tents – one red, the other blue – provided on-site work space and shelter. Ingrid squatted at the lip of the first trench and said, "Rudi, how's it going?"

Rudi Karlsonne was on his knees, clearing away dirt from a pottery fragment. He looked up, yawning. "Fine. It looks like this isn't someone's rubbish pile. The items I'm uncovering look ceremonial. I think your theory is right."

Ingrid smiled, self-satisfied. "Okay then, get back to it. I'll bring you some coffee." She stood up and went to the red tent. She pulled back her hood. A thick ponytail of blonde-white hair tumbled down her back. She poured herself a cup of coffee from a thermos and sat on one of the cots.

My theory, she thought, taking a few moments to warm up. Evidence of an unknown pre-Christian religious site. If the dating is right, the first settlers may have arrived earlier than we thought and been more widespread.

After Ingrid brought Rudi his coffee, she went to the blue tent. It was crowded with tables and storage bins. Julio Salazar -- a visiting professor from Mexico City -- was examining a piece of delicate silver jewelry that had been uncovered yesterday.

"That's lovely," Ingrid said.

Julio nodded. He used a dental pick as a pointer. "See this?" He moved the tip of the pointer along a sinuous tangle of silver wire.

"A serpent?"

"That's what it looks like. I've never seen anything like this. Have you?"

Serpents were a significant part of the Norse religion, but there was something odd about this representation. She could make out swirling lines along the body and the head was more like that of a worm. "I'm not sure."

There was a shout from outside. "Hey, everyone, get over here." It was the voice of Piers Andersson, the final member of the team. He was in the main trench.

Ingrid and Julio arrived at the lip of the main trench. Rudi joined them moments later. At their feet was a complex mosaic. Bits of glass and colored rocks depicted a black mountain range silhouetted by orange fire. Skeletal trees surrounded a lake of black water out of which rose a thick dark column of twisting coils. Runes ran along the bottom edge.

"It could be a representation of Ragnarok," Rudi said.

Ingrid said, "I've never seen it depicted like this."

Ingrid experienced an unsettling sensation. The orange and red tiles flickered and waved, like the inferno they represented. She rubbed her eyes, convinced it was a trick of the waning light; but the impression of movement didn't end. The column rising from the lake pulsed and uncoiled. The pit before her grew into a black void. She experienced a feeling of vertigo.

She reached out and grabbed Julio's arm to steady herself. "Is everything okay?" he said.

She looked into his eyes. For an instant, the irises appeared to bleed black filaments into the sclera. They looked like worms, wriggling on snow. The vision passed. "I'm fine. This is just overwhelming."

Julio nodded. "This is an amazing find. It looks like you were right."

She felt her composure return and let go of his arm. "Thanks. I'm going to sit down for a minute."

She went back into the blue tent and sat at Julio's worktable. She saw movement out of the corner of her eye and looked at the pendant. The wires shimmered in the glow of the work lamp. The head turned towards her. Her limbs felt heavy. She raised one leaden arm, her fingers stretching towards the pendant.

"Are you okay?" Piers said as he entered the tent.

Ingrid felt a moment of disorientation and then the weight was gone. The pendant looked like an inert metal lump. She took a deep breath and placed her hand on the table.

"I'm okay." She touched the pendant with the tip of her finger. Nothing happened.

That evening, Julio and Rudi boarded the van that would take them back to Reykjavik. Ingrid didn't want to leave. The urge to stay had been growing all day. Piers volunteered to stay with her, eliciting knowing glances from the others.

As Ingrid and Piers watched the lights of the van receding, he said, "Why do you want to stay here?"

Ingrid shrugged and looped her arm around his waist. "Maybe I just wanted to get you alone."

Piers laughed. "You could've gotten me alone in my apartment. You've been off all day. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just didn't want to drive back tonight. We have a lot to do here. Could you work on translating the mosaic text?" "Sure."

The walls of the tent shuddered as the wind whipped them. Ingrid settled into one of the chairs and picked up the pendant. The intertwined loops of metal shimmered in the light. She felt warmth spreading from her palm through her body. The vertigo she

had experienced at the pit returned. The head of the serpent turned to look at her. She lurched back in her chair and dropped the pendant.

Piers looked up from his work. "Everything okay?"

"Okay?" She muttered. "Yes. Yes. I'm fine."

"You might find this interesting," Piers said. "I've translated some of the writings. You were right. This was the site of a temple. It's odd though." He motioned her over. She walked over to his work table and looked over his shoulder. He was pointing at the string of runes directly under the serpent. "This implies the temple was dedicated to Fafnir."

"The dragon?"

Piers nodded. "Fafnir is an adversarial figure in Nordic myths, not an object of worship. Have you ever heard of this kind of thing?"

"No."

Piers looked up at her. "Maybe there are more inscriptions."

"That makes sense. Tomorrow, we'll expand the main trench."

"That sounds like a good idea," Piers leaned back in his chair. He gently placed a hand on the small of Ingrid's back. "Do you have any more work you want to do? Or, would you like to do something else?"

Ingrid grinned. She kissed him. "Something else. Why don't you warm up the sleeping bag?"

Piers gave her a kiss on the cheek and left the tent. Ingrid waited a moment. She looked at the image of the mosaic on Pier's laptop. She traced her finger along Fafnir's dark body before closing the laptop and following after Piers.

Piers woke up. The walls of the tent hissed from the sleet pelting them. He became aware of another sound, a loud, rhythmic thumping. He sat up. "Ingrid." He whispered. After they had had sex, Ingrid went to her sleeping bag on the other cot. "Ingrid." he said, louder. There was no response. He felt around on the floor until he found his flashlight. He turned it on. Ingrid's sleeping bag was open and empty. He slipped on his boots and coat and went outside. The frigid wind cut through his coat and pants and sleet stung his face. "Ingrid!"

Because of the howling wind, it took a few moments to isolate the thumping. It was coming from the main trench. He carefully made his way across the ice covered ground.

Ingrid was in the trench. She was nude and her silver-white hair swirled around her head. She was methodically shattering the mosaic floor with a pick.

"Ingrid!"

She stopped swinging the pick and looked up at him. Her eyes were unbroken orbs of sky blue that glowed in the dark.

Piers backed away, slipped on the ice and fell into Rudi's trench, landing painfully on his back. Ingrid appeared at the edge of the trench, still holding the pick. A blast of wind cleared the veil of hair from around her face. Her blue eyes pulsed and she was smiling. Something black and sinuous stood behind her. He screamed as she leapt into the trench.

Ingrid woke up in her sleeping bag. She glanced at the other cot and saw that it was empty. She wondered where Piers was. The last thing she remembered was him showing her the translation of the runes.

She dressed and emerged into a crisp, clear day. Sleet and snow covered the ground. She carefully made her way to the blue tent. It was empty. She felt concerned, but only vaguely, like the memory of an emotion.

When her colleagues arrived, they found her in the tent, drinking coffee and looking at the pendant.

"Where's Piers?" Julio asked as he poured himself a cup of coffee.

"Hiking," Ingrid replied. *Why did I say that?*

The pendent squirmed in her hand. A sensual wave passed through her body.

"Well, he had better get back soon," Julio said, "We're supposed to get another storm today."

The tent flap opened and Rudi poked his head in. "It looks like there was some damage done to the mosaic."

Julio and Ingrid followed Rudi to the main trench. He had cleared away a layer of sleet, revealing the holes that Ingrid had made.

"I thought we covered it," Julio said.

Rudi nodded. "Yeah, I secured it myself. But the tarp wasn't here. The storm must have been pretty bad."

Ingrid felt a sinuous twisting in her stomach. The holes in the mosaic widened, until there was a yawning pit at her feet. She saw movement in the darkness, something long, smooth and black. She tightened her fist, the sharp points of the pendent digging into the skin. She went back into the tent.

Ingrid's acting strange, Julio thought, I wonder if she and Piers had a fight? He looked up at the advancing storm clouds. *We aren't going to be able to stay here long.* "Hey," he said, "once you get that cleaned off, secure it. We need to find Piers and head back." He went into the tent. "I'm getting worried."

Ingrid was staring at an image of the mosaic. "Worried? What about?"

"About Piers. We need to head back soon. Maybe we should call the park service."

That won't do, she thought.

Ingrid smiled coldly, a tight curl of the lips. "I think you're overreacting a little. Piers knows the terrain and is smart enough to come back before the storm hits."

"I'm concerned that he might have hurt himself."

Ingrid sighed. "Fine." She stood up and put on her coat. "You're right. Let's go look for him."

They emerged from the tent. Ingrid motioned towards the red tent with a nod of her head. "I need to get my gloves. It will just be a minute."

Julio watched the sky growing darker as the storm approached. *We might never find Piers*, he thought. *I should just call this in to the park and let them handle it.*

He was pulling out his phone when Ingrid called for him. "Julio, could you come here for a second? I need help."

He entered the tent, ready to be annoyed at whatever Ingrid wanted. "We need to start searching now before it's too late."

Ingrid was naked. She was standing in the center of the tent, her legs slightly spread. She was smiling. Her hair — now pure white — framed her pale face.

It took a moment for Julio to find his voice. When he did, he stuttered. "What the hell are you doing?"

Ingrid took a step forward. "The way you look at me. I know you want me." She took another step forward. Julio was so shocked, he couldn't move.

"Ingrid," he said, "I don't know what this is, but we need..."

She laid a slender finger across his lips. "No talking. Letting you talk was a mistake. It was better when you didn't. It was better when the world was silent."

Ingrid slid her hand around the back of Julio's head and grabbed his hair. He couldn't move; he wanted to but his limbs felt numb. His eyes were wide with confusion and fear.

"Better," she said. "Better."

She closed her eyes. When she opened them, they were solid blue. Julio opened his mouth to scream, but he found he couldn't make a sound. She dug her nails into his flesh. "Isn't this better?" The sound coming of her mouth wasn't her voice. It was a deep, moaning wind. She bit into his throat, teeth sinking into the warm flesh. Blood spurted out, running down her chin.

Not me, Julio thought, *not happening to me.*

Ingrid jerked her head, pulling a chunk of steaming meat and cartilage with it. She let go of Julio. Blood cascaded down his parka. He stood motionless, watching Ingrid chew and swallow his flesh.

Ingrid whispered, "It's better this way. It's better that you don't live to see my world."

He collapsed. He weakly clutched at the gaping wound in his throat. Ingrid watched as he died, the last trickles of blood running between his fingers.

She heard Rudi yelling. "Are we getting out of here or what?"

She smiled, a wide red grin.

Yes, time to get out of here.

As Ingrid left the dig site, it collapsed with a hollow roar. She did not need to look back to know what emerged. A black column flowed from the dark pit. It stalked behind her, urging her on, step by agonizing step. She walked dozens of miles. Stones dug into her feet. Hail, driven by a howling wind, stripped bits of flesh from her body.

When she reached the peak of Mount Esja, the storm ended, the clouds melted away. Sheets of green auroral light writhed in the night sky. The blood covering her had long since frozen, creating a dark mosaic that sparkled in the shimmering light. Across the waters of Flaxa Bay, Reykjavik glowed warmly.

Behind her, the column rose into the sky. It towered over her, a worm of flowing shadows. A great maw opened at its tip. Rows of ice teeth picked up the light of the aurora. Its roar shattered windows and drove people mad.

A voice squirmed in Ingrid's brain. She screamed as it whispered to her. Tears ran from her eyes, freezing on her cheeks.

Now is the time for my world. Frozen. Silent. Forever.

About the Author:

Jeffrey Durkin is a writer living in Arlington, Virginia. After 14 years of Federal service as a computer engineer, Jeff transitioned to full-time writing in 2013.

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It'll Go Away, Eventually | *Patrick Tumblety*

Teeth grow from the side of my neck.
They pull or scratch out easily enough,
but if I excise too many the wound bleeds.
If they get too big, or too many grow,
they'll pop out on their own.
Doctors say they're not sure of the cause.
Specialists have prescribed a series of skin creams and antibiotics.
They shrug and say it'll go away, eventually,
but I have been wiping them from my pillow
every morning for the last fifteen years.
I know my co-workers notice.
Once, during a meeting, a tooth loosened and fell to the floor.
Eyes averted as I pretended to 'accidentally' drop my pencil and pick it up.
One of my co-workers constantly asks if I 'said something,'
but she just wants an excuse to look.
However, I'm beginning to suspect otherwise,
because last night I was awakened by a scream,
and I'm pretty sure it wasn't mine.

The Gurgling | *Patrick Tumblety*

My murderer drowned me in water.
Though agonizing, it allowed me to come back
as a wonderfully quirky haunter.
Whenever the drunkard is near a body,
bubbles carry my screams to the surface.
Pop.. Scream! Pop.. Scream!
Pop.
Scream!
He's had to stop drinking beer
(the habit that lead to my untimely demise),
which I guess is a good enough solution.
Unfortunately, he never takes baths,
but he does miss going to the beach
during summer, and that gives me
a tiny drop of restitution.

About the Author:

Patrick Tumblety has been published in a variety of anthologies, including Tales of Jack The Ripper by Word Horde Press, Flame Tree Publishing's Gothic Fantasy series, Fossil Lake, edited by Christine Morgan, and the historic Weirdbook Magazine. His work has been described as being able to deliver both "genuine fear and genuine hope" (Amy H. Sturgis - Award Winning Author and Professor of Narrative Studies).

Amazon Author Page: [Patrick Tumblety](#)

Twitter: [@Peak37PT](#)



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The problem started, as these things often do, with a fly. Buzzing along the baseboard of a window, up and down the ridge of glass, befuddled by the purported escape always a moment away. Charlie surveilled the fly's attempts to escape, then swatted it down. He pulled off one wing, intrigue and satisfaction battling across his face as he monitored the fly's reaction. He pulled off the second wing. Then he pinched off its head.

Not a pleasant behavior. But not necessarily condemning in itself—many children do such things when coming to terms with the fragility of life.

Next were frogs, tiny moss-green creatures no larger than the shooter aggie in Charlie's pocket. He pushed and pulled and tore off legs, eventually settling for a slow squish that left guts peeking out of rigid mouths.

Then came the rats. He showed admirable ingenuity with the traps he constructed for the purpose: strong enough to capture, gentle enough to keep them alive. Still a behavior one might justify—rats are vermin, after all. Disease-carrying pests with no redeeming value.

I gave him the idea for cats. I mentioned a feral colony that thrived in the abandoned warehouse next to my office building, and how several of my co-workers fed them during their lunch hour. Described how it took weeks to gain the cats' trust, first by leaving food behind for them, then by sitting ever closer while they ate. The very next day he spent his allowance on a case of food and set off on his bike, some pre-teen pop obsession pounding through his earbuds.

He was brilliantly patient, sitting for weeks while they accustomed to him. And still I tried to believe his intentions might be good.

Finally, a mangy orange tabby approached, one ear scarred from an alley brawl and ribs poking through his fur. When the cat rubbed against his hand, Charlie grabbed the fur at the scruff of his neck, flicked his switchblade with a pop, and thrust it across the tabby's throat.

My heart burst with both pride and despair. So tragically parallel.

Because his newly-tested technique mirrored my own practiced one: I grabbed Charlie's hair, pulled his head back and sliced his jugular with the same pop and thrust of my knife, long perfected to keep blood spurting away from me.

Because the pool of his blood melded with the cat's, their wide, surprised eyes staring off in the same direction.

Because the apple fell so close to the tree.

About the Author:

Michelle Chouinard was published in her local paper when she was eight, and she fell in love with Agatha Christie novels not long after. While pursuing her career as a research psychologist, the stories rattled around in her skull, and for sanity's sake, she released them. She writes crime fiction, horror, and women's fiction. Her debut novel, *The Dancing Girls*, was released on May 15th.

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She sat down with her cup of peppermint tea and reviewed the list of chores. Sweep and mop floors – check; vacuum – check; clean bathroom – check; dust – groan. Dusting was all that needed to be done and Cynthia could certainly stretch it out over a significant amount of time. All she was doing was distracting herself from the fact her friends had yet to contact her on Skype like they had promised. They were more than an hour late. She sipped her tea and looked out the window in time to see two cardinals at the feeder before they flitted away.

Her laptop on the table chirped and she drew it toward her. She touched the screen and there they were. “Finally! I was beginning to worry.”

“So sorry, darling. We went on a cave tour this morning and it went longer than we expected,” said Vanessa.

The other three women crowded into the shot; they wore shorts and sleeveless tops. “We can’t wait for you to get here,” said Rebecca.

“Wow, look at your tans,” said Cynthia, feeling overdressed in her jeans and wool sweater. “My project is going to finish on time, so I will be there next week.”

“That’s great. By the time you get here, we’ll be ready to just sit on the beach and read with you,” said Joyce.

Charlotte described all the activities they had done during their first week at the resort. “There’s entertainment every night and you won’t believe the disco.”

“This week, we’re going on a snorkeling trip and a tour of Santo Domingo. Those weren’t things you wanted to do, right?” asked Vanessa.

“That’s right. I’m not a strong swimmer and a city tour would be too much walking for me,” said Cynthia.

“Okay, well, we’ve got a reservation for dinner at the French restaurant. I’m going to get ready,” said Joyce, standing and disappearing from the screen.

Rebecca and Vanessa said their goodbyes, leaving Charlotte alone. “We’ll go to the French restaurant with you, too. I’m so glad you’re going to make it this time. We’ll see you next Sunday.” She waved and closed the program.

Cynthia sat staring at the screen, then picked up her cup and took a sip of the tepid liquid. This time, she was determined to go on vacation with her friends from university, like they had promised each other on graduation day five years ago. She met the four friends at the University of St. Andrew’s in Scotland which she attended on scholarship. While Cynthia returned to Toronto upon graduating, the others scattered throughout the world: Rebecca to Hong Kong, Vanessa to Delhi, Charlotte to London, and Joyce to Sweden. Every year they planned to meet at a resort to spend a few weeks together. Cynthia had not been able to make it the past four years, but this year was different. She could finally afford one week at an all-inclusive resort and get the time off work.

She rose from the table and went to her bedroom, forgetting about the dusting. Opening the closet doors wide, she reached up and took the suitcase down from the top shelf. She began sorting through her summer clothes, deciding what to pack for a week at Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic.

As the week progressed, Cynthia’s excitement grew. She couldn’t tell if she was more excited about the actual vacation at a hot spot in February or about seeing her friends. She concluded that it was probably about the same and could hardly separate one from the other.

By Saturday, her suitcase was packed and her carry-on bag outfitted with her passport, some American money, two novels, a book of crosswords, pens, gum, and granola bars. She had arranged a taxi to pick her up at her apartment at 6 a.m. to take her to the airport three hours before her scheduled flight time. She set her alarm clock and the alarm on her phone. Her clothes were laid out so she could jump out of bed and throw them on.

That night, Cynthia woke in the dark. She thought she heard a rumble but the apartment was quiet. There were no street noises, which was odd in itself. The digital clock showed that it was 2:46. She lay there hoping to get back to sleep, but had a strange feeling, like someone was watching her from the open bedroom door, a door she was in the habit of closing at night. Cynthia sat up and reached over to turn on the bedside lamp.

When she looked back, she screamed. A blood covered Rebecca stood in the doorway. "We were in the disco," she said and disappeared.

Cynthia was stunned. "Rebecca?" she whispered. She pulled the covers back, slid her legs out and stood up, reaching for her robe which lay on the end of the bed. She put it on as she walked out the door into the living room. In front of her, the room was in shambles: concrete blocks littered the floor, coloured lights sparked and fizzed out, strings of bright dayglo paper decorations blew about. The scene dissolved and Cynthia stood in her cramped but tidy living room, lit by the flashing neon sign from across the street.

She was not alone. Joyce and Vanessa stood with their arms around each other. They broke apart, holding hands, and looked at Cynthia. "We were having such a good time," said Joyce. "This hardly seems fair." She took a step to the side and vanished, except for her hand still holding Vanessa's.

"I guess you won't be able to join us after all," said Vanessa, her arm pulled by Joyce through the doorway to somewhere else and she was gone.

Cynthia slumped down on the sofa. She reached forward, picked up the remote from the coffee table, and turned on the television which was set to the weather channel.

"... 8.3 magnitude earthquake off the coast of the island of Hispaniola. This is the worst earthquake since 1946 when the Dominican Republic was hit by an 8.1 magnitude earthquake and an aftershock of 7.6. We are awaiting reports of damage and deaths," said the announcer just prior to a commercial break. When he returned, the announcer said, "We've just received reports of a tsunami hitting the north-eastern coast of the Dominican Republic. The devastation will be incredible with deaths expected to be in the thousands."

Cynthia turned off the television. Tears welled in her eyes and streamed down her cheeks. When her vision cleared, she saw Charlotte sitting across from her, dripping water onto the rug.

"Can you imagine surviving cancer and then this happens?" asked Charlotte.

Cynthia shook her head.

"I'm glad I got to see you before I go. Be good. Be happy." Charlotte smiled. "Oh, get a cat or two. Name one after me."

Cynthia nodded and watched her friend dissolve into nothing. She remembered then the other compact the five friends had made one drunken night in second year. Their conversation had turned morbid and they agreed that the first to die would find some way to let the others know what came next.

About the Author:

Carrie Connel-Gripp lives in London, Ontario, with her husband and two cats. She has an MLIS and Honours BA in English Language and Literature from Western University. Her short stories have recently been published in the literary magazines *Synaeresis* and *The Novice Writer*, and the print anthologies *Fterota Logia 1*, *Tales From the Realm*, *Volume One* from Aphotic Realm, and *NOPE Horror Quarterly* from TL;DR Press.

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Honey sat across from Asmo and studied his dark brown eyes. She'd been delivering her sought after goods, when he stopped her. He told her she was the most beautiful creature he ever laid eyes on. She smiled and invited him over for lunch and iced tea. She showed him her bee hives and they talked over peanut butter and honey sandwiches. When he leaned in for a kiss, she recoiled.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare ya." Asmo held his hands up.

"It's alright. I just never...I never kissed anyone before." Honey cast her eyes downward and blushed.

"Never? I reckon you're kiddin', right? A girl pretty as you?"

"I never have, I swear!"

"Well, I can change that for you, if you want? I won't bite." Asmo chuckled.

"Bite?" Honey gasped.

"It's a joke! It's a sayin'."

"Alright, then." Honey closed her eyes and leaned in. His beard tickled her face. When his lips touched hers, they were warm and sweet.

"How's that?" Asmo grinned.

"It was...nice." Honey was glowing.

"So, tell me, is your name really...Honey?"

"It is. My Daddy named me that. Mama thought it'd be cute, on account of their honey business and all. If you can believe it, my Daddy's last name was Bea. When they passed, I took over the business. Been tending bees all my life. It's peaceful work. I really enjoy it."

"You're tellin' me that your name is, Honey Bea?"

"It is."

"If that ain't the sweetest thing!" Asmo laughed and slapped his knees. He looked around the quaint living room. The couch was worn and made noise whenever you moved. It was obvious she hadn't redecorated since her parent's passing. He noticed there was no television. "No TV?"

"Daddy said they were the worst things that were ever invented. We mostly worked outside, listened to music, or read books. I wasn't lacking if that's what you think. I didn't mind being outside or losing myself in a good book. You can't miss what you never had...Mama always said that."

"Hey, no judging here. I'm just surprised is all. No siblings?" Asmo studied the pictures on the bookcases and walls. They were mostly of Honey through the years, what he assumed were her parents, and some family pets.

"No, just me. I always wanted a sister or brother, but Mama couldn't have no more after me. What about you?"

"Same. Well, I ain't got no siblings I know of. I don't much talk to my Pop, he's been locked away for years and my Ma, well, she ran off with some fella when I was small."

"I'm so sorry."

"It's no biggie. Life, ya know? So, Honey Bea, what do you want to do now?"

"I...I don't know." She felt herself grow warm as he gazed at her.

He leaned in and kissed her again. She let him stick his tongue in her mouth this time, gently, then more hungrily. She dug her fingers into his strong back and moaned when he grazed her neck with his mouth. Soon, they were pulling each other's clothes off like they were on fire and they made love right there on the couch. He kissed her forehead, then she took his hand and led him to the bedroom.

They made love again, then lay side by side on the worn double bed. They were silent for a while and watched the dust dance in the afternoon sunlight. She peeked over at Asmo, who noticed and smiled.

"I never thought my day would've gone like this." He whispered.

Honey sighed, "Me either."

"Honey, how old are you? If you don't mind me askin'?"

"Thirty-five."

"I would've never guessed that. You have the fairest skin I ever saw. Like pure whipped cream. Actually, with your strawberry colored hair, you're just like a bowl of strawberries and sweet cream. Just perfect."

"That's the nicest thing anyone ever said to me. Thank you."

"I have to tell you something—I should've told you before, well, before we did that. I haven't been able to tell no one in a long time. I've been running too long. You're so lovely and when you offered to have me over, I was just so darn happy..."

"What is it? You're married? You have someone else?" Honey sat up and pulled the sheet to her chest. Tears sprung in her eyes.

"No! Nothing like that. It's something else—something I'm afraid to tell you. And now that we, well, you know, I feel you should know. I really like you, Honey. I know we just met, but I feel a real connection. I wouldn't want to take this further or hurt you..."

"What is it? Just tell me, I can take it! Was it me? Was I horrible?" Her lip quivered and the tears spilled.

"Oh, no darlin! No, course' it's not you! Are you crazy? You were magical and wonderful! The best I ever had the pleasure of acquaintin'. That's why I reckon you know before anything else happens."

"Just tell me then!" She sobbed into the sheet.

"I'm a...I'm a werewolf." Asmo muttered.

"You're a what?"

"A werewolf. A wolfman. A lycanthrope." He got off the bed and pulled his pants on. Waiting for her to throw him out.

"A werewolf?"

"Yeah. Do you know what that is?"

"I've read a book or two that mentioned them before. But they were fiction." Honey got off the bed and pulled her dress over her head.

"I assure you, we're the real deal."

"I may be a bit wet behind the ears, but a werewolf? You're trying to make something up to get out of this. You got what you wanted—Mama always told me to be careful and I was...till you! Get out!"

"Honey, I swear to you! I'm a werewolf and I've been runnin' for a long time. Men are trying to hunt and kill me!"

"So, you went grocery shopping? Why would a werewolf do that, huh? Why did you need lunch meat? Why're you in this town anyway? I never seen you before today—you preying on me then? Am I the simple small-town country girl that gets eaten by the wolf?" Honey bawled.

"I was passing through! I ain't got no money, so I went in the store to see what I might be able to fetch. I used the water fountain and I saw you, the most beautiful..."

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! I don't believe a word of it!"

Asmo came around the bed and tried to hug her, but Honey shoved him away. He tried again, but finally retreated when she shrieked. He grabbed his flannel and began to button it up back up. Before he turned to leave, she quietly asked, "What happens when it's a full moon?"

"I turn."

"Do you—have you hurt people?"

"I reckon I may've, but I can't recall what I've done when I wake the next morning. It's all a blur."

"How'd it happen?"

"All I know is, I was camping by myself in the woods a few years ago, and somethin' attacked me. I ain't been the same since."

"Why didn't you report it?"

"Well, look at the way you reacted when I told you. I can't tell just anybody. That's why I've been so afraid...I don't wanna hurt nobody, it's just who I am."

"Then why'd you come here?"

"I don't know, suppose I couldn't resist strawberries and cream."

Honey sauntered over to him. She kissed his chest and breathed into his shirt. It smelled like grass and wood smoke. She ripped it open and again they made love. A few weeks went by and they were like teenagers in love, they talked late into the night about their future. He helped her with the bees and they lived harmoniously without any more talk of werewolves. The romantic whirlwind died down the week Honey knew a full moon was looming.

She'd been keeping track on the same calendar she kept track of everything on. The little moons and their phases were in the upper right-hand corners. She was hoping he would've mentioned something to her by now, but he hadn't. She brought it up over dinner.

"Asmo?" Honey asked.

"Yeah, Honey Bea? By the way, this cornbread is spectacular!"

"Is there something you should tell me? That I should know or prepare for?"

"Like what? What're you going on about?"

"Well, tomorrow's a full moon."

"Oh."

"Oh? That's all you have to say is oh?"

"Well, I didn't realize is all."

"You didn't realize? Shouldn't you know this kinda thing, don't you get like, a tingle or something?"

"I've been a little distracted by a certain female as of late. Perhaps you cured me!" He chuckled. He wiped his mouth and took a long sip of tea.

"It's not funny, Asmo! What should we do? Is there anything I should do? Do you need me to tie you down or something?"

"Well, don't feed me any grapes or chocolate." He teased.

"What? Is that a joke? Asmo, I'm being serious!"

"Alright, alright. Look, I'll leave the house. I'll just need some money and an extra set of clothes."

"You can't do that! What if you hurt someone?"

"Better them than you, right?" He scarfed down more corn bread.

"Just stay here and I'll watch over you. We'll figure it together. I want to be there for you. I need to know how it happens. I...I love you, Asmo. That means I love every part about you."

"Me too, Honey Bea. You're my perfect gal. Now, can we just enjoy dinner and not talk about this anymore?"

Honey wasn't satisfied, but kept quiet for the rest of their meal. *Why's he being so easy going? He's going to turn tomorrow night! Why's he not more concerned? Maybe he's worried and doesn't want to worry me?* She waited until he slept and then went into her Daddy's old study and unlocked the safe. She found what she was looking for, brought it to her bedroom, and put it in her dresser drawer under several pairs of underwear.

The next day went rather quickly and by early evening, an anxious Honey felt the sweat under her arms saturating her pink cotton shirt. Asmo hadn't spoken a word to her about tonight, in fact, he hadn't chatted much to her today at all. He fell asleep on the couch after an early dinner of fried catfish and okra. She felt a pang of melancholy as she left him there in one of her Daddy's old shirts and overalls.

It wasn't quite dark yet, but it was getting there and the big golden moon would soon be high in the sky. She crept to her room and into her drawer. The gun was a bit a bit heavy, but her Daddy had shown her multiple times how to load, clean, and shoot it. She walked back to the living room, the metal invitingly cool in her sweaty hand, sat across from him and waited in the blackness.

Asmo grumbled in his sleep. His back hurt from the old sunken in couch. He knew he had to go soon before things got too serious. *Perhaps grab a few things on my way out. Wonder where she's at? Maybe she fell asleep in the bedroom, good, makes it easier.* He forced himself awake, yawned several times while cracking his neck and stretching his legs. He didn't see Honey sitting across from him when he stood up and began to pop his back.

Honey heard him groaning and knew it had begun. His body was shifting and she heard what she thought were his bones snapping. She stood up soundlessly and pulled back the hammer of the gun. She aimed it and spoke to the beast, "Asmo? If you can still understand me, it's me, Honey. I love you. These past three weeks have been the happiest I can remember. I just wanted you to know that. Say something if you can still talk? Please?"

Asmo stiffened. He didn't say a word as he tried to squint to see her, but his eyes hadn't adjusted. His mouth was dry and his stomach hurt. *Fried food always gives me terrible indigestion.* Before he could stop it, a huge belch escaped, but he didn't even have time to say excuse me, before a bullet went straight through his forehead.

Honey heard him growl and she pulled the trigger. She screamed and dropped the gun when she heard him fall onto the coffee table. When she could finally move, she turned the light on and cradled his limp body in her arms. Other than the bullet hole in his forehead, he looked the same. She rubbed her face on his beard. *He must've turned back. My poor sweet, sweet, Asmo. I hope you're free now, my love.*

The shot had been heard by a passerby who was walking their dog and they called the police. They banged on her door and when she opened it, Asmo's body could be seen behind her. The law held their guns on her, told her to put her hands up, then handcuffed her. She was unable to form words. She sat in the back of a police car shaking and sobbing uncontrollably wondering if she did the right thing.

One of the officers recognized the dead man who lay on the floor. He'd grown a beard on his face, but it was him. "No shit," he said before he went to get the detective. "Isn't that the guy wanted for murdering those women in the Carolinas and Virginia?" The officer asked.

"Looks like him. If it is, she's done everyone a service." The detective said.

It didn't take long to make a positive ID. When Honey came out of shock, she explained what happened over a cup of coffee. They assured her he wasn't a werewolf, but he was another type of monster who preyed on women. They told her he was a serial murdering psychopath named, Asmo Ripley. She shook her head and insisted it wasn't true. The detective told her she was really lucky and that no charges would be filed. He even told her she was a hero. They all recommended she get counseling, but she refused.

Honey stopped making deliveries for a while due to the constant attention she garnered when she went into town, but when the gleam wore off, she resumed. Although, it was getting harder for her in her condition now. She rubbed her swollen belly through his flannel, thankful for the little treasure inside. *He'll need so much from me. My little monster, Asmo Ripley Jr.*

About the Author:

Vivian Kasley lives in the land of the strange and unusual, Florida! She was an educator for several years before she left to write and travel. Her short stories have appeared in Gypsum Sound Tales, Dark Moon Digest, Castrum Press, and Sirens Call Publications. When she's not writing, she's enjoying time with her other half, snuggling her fur babies, or reading during a thunderstorm.

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/vivian.kasley>
Amazon Author Page: [amazon.com/author/viviankasley](https://www.amazon.com/author/viviankasley)

By the time Matt reached the office his headache had subsided and now slumbered somewhere behind his right eyebrow.

"I hate dream hackers," he said to Nicole by way of greeting.

"I know, we had a very bad night too. Irene was so grouchy."

"But you guys are with a different provider, right?"

Nicole shrugged. "Maybe they hit all major dream services this time." She went to the coffee machine.

Matt leaned over his damn desk and woke up his damn computer.

The higher the alleged prestige of a company in this business, the more they insisted you appear in the flesh, as opposed to working from your sofa at home. Of course, a mere two days a week in the office wasn't all that bad, when compared to places ran by real status junkies.

Bruce, surprisingly, was already here, as in not late. He stopped pretending he was doing something useful on his computer, and said: "I don't mind the constant adverts in the dreams I order, but is it too much to ask for their security to be...you know...secure? I mean who knows what the frigging hackers can do. Mess with our minds."

Nicole came over with a steaming cup in hand. "I heard there's a city somewhere in Italy where they programmed the whole population to drop their pants at midday."

"Spain, Nicky, it was Spain," said Bruce. "Yes, I saw a vid online. Harmless stuff, but still. Who knows what they can do next time."

"Get us to send them all our savings?" said Matt.

A second later he and Nicole were mouthing soundless commands to their implants, while old-school Bruce tapped his wristband.

Their accounts were fine. No sudden movement of money.

Maybe they implanted a command for us to go nuts and have sex with each other, thought Matt as he watched Nicole take another sip of coffee.

Janet walked in, all breathless and dynamic. "There's a new client on the horizon, kids. My office—now!"

They took their places around the conference room table.

Nicole sneezed, and went on the usual hankie quest within the unfathomable depths of her handbag. She took out a pack of paper hankies and placed it on the table, following it with a plastic box with what was probably healthy snacks, a reading device, lipstick (or perhaps some lipstick-shaped appliance), and a knife. A sawtooth breadknife with two sharp points at the end.

"Nice," said Bruce, and also took one out from his man-purse. A very outdoorsy, hunting type thing, with a slightly curved blade.

Matt automatically patted his breast pocket. The thin upturned boning knife was there. He pulled it halfway out, then pushed it back in.

"Boss, you got a knife too?" he asked.

Janet's expression became sheepish. She placed a cleaver on the table.

"You think it's normal we all brought knives?" said Matt.

"Well, there *has* been a crime wave lately," said Bruce.

"I took it instead of a comb," said Nicole.

"You wanted a comb," said Matt with some force, "and went to a kitchen drawer, and took a knife instead? And you, Bruce, suddenly brought a knife on that same day because of crime? Hello? These are obvious rationalizations."

"You're right," said Nicole. "It's the dream hackers. This time they've implanted something ugly."

"Now let's not get carried away," said Janet in her no-nonsense boss voice. "I appreciate your concern with this night's dream-hack, which, by the way, I also suffered, thanks for asking. Totally screwed up my Martian Pirate adventure, which I'd been looking forward to for some time now. However...."

"Sorry, I'm leaving," Matt declared. "And so should you all. This knife thing gives me the creeps. Better sit this one out at home."

Four sounds erupted simultaneously. An energetic pop song, a mellow pop song, a loop of a cat meowing, and a news podcast.

Matt, Nicole, and Janet moved their lips. Bruce poked his wristband. The sounds stopped.

"Funny, I don't remember setting an alarm," said Bruce.

"Me neither," said Matt.

Nicole picked up the breadknife, weighed it in her hand, let out a breath, and tensed up.

But Janet started first.

About the Author:

Emil Eugensen is the author of *Hour of the Jackals*—a paranormal espionage thriller about a fascist takeover of Europe, with a hint of postmodernism.



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Featured Artist | *Noistromo*

We're honored to have Marius Siergiejew, who brands himself as Noistromo, return as our featured artist for issue number 45 of *The Sirens Call*. He's been featured in two of our previous eZines, and even provided the fantastic cover art for our anthology, *Monster Brawl*. We wanted to give our readers a chance to get to know him a little better, so without further adieu, Noistromo!

Q: What are some of your main influences?

A: Other artists' works, movies, and, of course, my imagination fed with creepy stuff.

Q: What mediums do you work in?

A: Digital art - 2D (Photoshop, Corel Painter) 3D (Blender, ZBrush).

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

A: 3D Printing (could be great to print some of my monsters) is one. Another medium, or tool, is an airbrush, but some really good setup like Iwata, quiet compressor and high quality paints. I've tried an airbrush but it was some cheap hardware which often got stuck and the compressor was loud and quite often overheated.

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

A: A lot of them but I don't want to give any specific name because all of them are awesome artists. Okay, I can give one name as it's not possible to work with him anymore: master H. R. Giger.

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

A: Well, usually I feel bad because in my head most of the time a piece looks better ;), but I try not to compare what I see with what I imagined. I love moments where a piece looks better than what I imagined, those kind of happy accidents are awesome.

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

A: Sadly yes, :(I haven't found a perfect solution for this yet. In my case, artblocks come from overthinking and comparing my work with other artists', other times my ambitions are to always create something awesome so when I don't achieve this I feel bad. A good way for me to break through it is to just doodle, without thinking, just doodle, sketch whatever without judging each stroke.

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

A: I don't have a favorite piece of artwork, maybe I could say the *Playing Card Deck - Nightmares*. It was designed by me, contains my monster illustrations, box design, the whole of it. Why is it special? Because it's a complete design, finished, printed and you can use these cards just for normal card games. You can check it out at my portfolio page (link below).

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

A: There is so much artwork that I like that it's very difficult for me to choose a favorite, but I think the designs made by H.R. Giger for the Alien series are my favorites.

If you'd like to contact Noistromo for commission work find him on Facebook at the link below. You can also follow his artwork online:

Artist Website: <https://noistromo.com>

Facebook: [Noistromo](#)

Instagram: [Noistromo](#)

There was a boy hungry for something sweet—
thought he'd get some candy and trick-or-treat.
He set off with his plastic pumpkin in hand
with a route thought out, all plotted and planned.

But it wasn't yet then Halloween night,
and there wasn't another kid in sight.
Still, he knocked on the first house's door,
dressed up with tusks to look like a boar.

"Little pig," the bent but kind old man said,
"come, the candy is all out in the shed."
So the boy agreed, eager for sweets;
he followed the man far from the streets.

"You'll come back later, too, for the feast?
Your folks are coming, there's room for a beast."
The boy grunted like a boar to say "yes"—
This man threw the best feasts for all of his guests.

In the shed the boy saw only plums,
and suddenly he felt so very dumb.
Looking this way and that, not a treat was spied.
Plums were not candy—the man had lied.

He saw he was trapped as he tried to leave
for the man pulled a knife out of his sleeve.
The boy dropped his plastic pumpkin pail.
He opened his mouth, wanting to wail.

The knife went up, the lights went out,
the boy dropped dead before he could shout.
How'd the idea of sweets get in his head?
You can't eat candy when you are dead.

The youthful boar was stuffed with fruit.
On a platter he was served as a brute.
His parents shared a slice of belly,
slathered with a scoop of plum jelly.

"Have you seen our son this evening?"
The boy's parents asked, their lips bleeding—
with jelly. With jelly, and a bit of child.
"Probably stuffed already," the man said and smiled.

In a room thick with darkness,
an inky, stirring starkness,
you see the form—four corners,
like a block of night, but starless.

On the far wall of the room
a window of light is burning.
It makes all the shadows dance.
The floor seems as if it's churning.

The room is thick with darkness, still,
for the window light does nothing.
Because it's not a floor beneath you,
it's a thousand spiders running.

The swarm of spiders creeps on all,
the walls are hidden from view.
The door is black as the window now,
and you're crawling with spiders, too.

Skeleton, be still | Russell J. Dorn

I always knew you'd leave a beautiful outline,
for you are purity in all its imperfection.
Your small chest once caged a heart for me,
but horror! Mine still beats a tune for you.

Those hollows, once eyes, breathe passion
into my gaunt skeletal limbs, my buried organs.
The wind whistles familiar tunes through you.
The rain whittles away your roughness

and blooming from between your grinning
teeth, like a sick and knotted tongue:
doomed leaves come autumn,
pruned away by time.

The Hand that Feeds | Russell J. Dorn

Don't ever bite the hand that feeds or
it'll serve you things most foul.
Green and slimy things, and centipedes
that will make you want to howl.

Should you ever try to eat your fill
from a hand with a mind its own,
you might get a mouthful of something
that'll make you want to groan.

The hand might feed you nasty things:
like vegetables—rotten not fresh.
That's how you know it's not your muscles
writhing beneath your flesh.

If it's even food it's trying to serve,
of which, you'll have your doubts.
You'll find yourself saying, pleading,
“Please! Not the Brussels sprouts!”

Don't ever bite the hand that feeds or
it'll serve you things you can't stand.
Since it won't behave, you'll know you'll have to—
there's no choice—you'll have to eat the hand!

With the bones and nails, the hand
is quite the disgusting meal.
The fingers claw all the way down,
and there's all the pain you have to feel.

Don't ever eat the hand that feeds,
or you'll eat your meals off a hook.
What's that at the end of it?
It's gross! It's coming! You can't even look!

About the Author:

Russell J. Dorn's work has appeared in numerous online and print publications, including, most recently, *Asterisk Anthology: Volume 2*, *This Book is Cursed*, *Horror Bites* and the forthcoming issue of *Unnerving Magazine* and *Exquisite Aberrations* anthology.

Author Blog: www.russelldorn.com

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

"I'm glad you could meet with me today, Mr. Iris," George Gleason said, extending a hand across the steel-gray table. "I need a good lawyer."

Gleason smiled at me with perfect white teeth and sky-blue eyes. His thin fingers closed over mine and the chains of his cuffs clinked. I gave his hand a quick squeeze and then released it.

"I'd like to go over your case first, Mr. Gleason. I haven't agreed to take you on as a client yet."

I leaned down to retrieve the first of two briefcases. The locks opened with a loud *click*, and I pulled out a thick folder.

A large horsefly buzzed past, making its rounds of the room. It landed on the table and then took off once more.

"There's a lot of evidence here, Mr. Gleason," I said adjusting the spectacles on my nose. "I've sifted through it and I think I've found a few things which may help you. But, first things first. I heard you had some trouble with your memory?"

He bit his lip. "A little. I was sick you know. I got out of the infirmary yesterday. That's when I found out they'd removed my lawyer from the case. The warden recommended you to me."

"How far back can you remember?"

Gleason shrugged. "I don't remember coming to the infirmary. I don't even know how I got into this prison. The last thing I remember, I was out driving and a cop stopped me for speeding."

"Do you remember anything before that? Your college years? High School? Your childhood?"

"I had a happy childhood. Did well in school. Had a couple girlfriends. Pretty hum-drum, I guess."

"Did you do well with the girls?"

"Are you asking if I'm a ladies man?"

"Yes."

Gleason chuckled. "I wouldn't say that."

I reached into my briefcase and removed the electronic tablet from it. A press of the button and the device powered on. I handed it to Gleason.

"This might help you recall a few things. Just touch the screen and swipe to the right when you're ready to move on to the next picture."

Gleason studied the first picture. Three teenage boys and a blonde teenage girl smiled up at him.

"Do you know the boys?"

He shook his head.

"What about the girl?"

"That's Mary Simpson. I went to school with her."

"Swipe to the next picture, please."

Gleason obeyed. This time one teenage boy smiled from the image. He stood beside a blonde girl, her hair parted in the middle. Judging by their formal attire, it was a prom picture.

"What about these two?"

"I...I don't know the guy. I know the girl. She was a couple years behind me in school. The name is Callie Jacobs."

The horsefly landed on Gleason's hand. He didn't seem to notice its exploration of his skin.

"Next picture."

Gleason swiped to the side. A girl smiled at us. She too had blonde hair which parted in the middle. She sat at a table in what looked like a French or Italian restaurant.

"Her name was Gladys Richards. We dated for a while." He looked up. "Next picture?"

I nodded and he moved on.

The next picture depicted a blue-eyed woman sitting on a bus. She was dressed in jeans and a sweater, her blonde hair parted in the middle. She seemed to be immersed in a paperback book.

"Her name is Elsie. I...I can't remember her last name. I don't think I knew it."

"Why is that?"

"We had a one-night stand and I never saw her again. Dreamed about her a lot though."

I reached across to slide the next picture into view. Another blonde, her hair parted in the middle, appeared. She lay on the beach, dressed in a black bikini.

"What about her?"

"I want to say Moira. Don't know her last name either."

"Another one-nighter?"

"Yeah." A smile played over his lips. "Yeah, she was."

"Mr. Gleason, do you remember why you were arrested?"

His face grew red. "I think the police were out to get me. They seemed to think I was someone else. They kept harassing me."

"Who did they think you were?"

"A guy called Red Burns," Gleason said. He cradled his head in his hands. "I went through school with him. We even went to the same college. That guy...he was a real piece of shit."

"What did he do?"

"Jesus...my head hurts." He glanced up toward the door. "Did you hear that?"

I paused. "I don't hear anything."

"Are you sure? It sounded like...screaming."

"Are you all right, Mr. Gleason?"

"I'm ok. What was your question?"

"I asked what Red Burns did."

"Oh, yeah. Let's see. There was a case of breaking and entering, a charge of attempted rape, and a couple kidnappings." He leaned forward. "I heard he did a lot of other things but he never got caught for those. I used to run around with him which is why the cops came after me. A lot of people judge you by the company you keep."

I took the tablet from Gleason and slid back to the first picture, the one with three boys and a girl.

"Do you recognize any of these boys now?"

"Oh, my...that's him. That's Red Burns." He pointed to a red-headed boy standing beside Mary Simpson.

I nodded and placed the file back in my briefcase. The click of the lock seemed louder this time.

"What...what are you going?"

"I'm afraid I can't take your case, Mr. Gleason."

"What? Why?"

"For several reasons."

"I don't understand."

I pointed to the remaining boys in the picture. "That's Chris and Clancy Gleason. They're your brothers."

"Th-they are?"

"Do you know what happened to Mary?"

"No."

The images sped by beneath my fingers. I paused when I reached the one following Moira. Gleason gasped.

The black and white photo contrasted with the color one we'd seen moments before. Mary lay alone in what looked like a forest, eyes glazed, a wound in her throat.

I switched to the next picture. "Callie was Clancy's girlfriend throughout high school. Until they found her face down in the ditch."

Gleason stared at the picture. He licked his lips.

"And, Gladys, Elsie, and Moira, well...worse things happened to them. Strange how you remembered them and Red Burns but not your own flesh and blood."

I picked up the tablet. Gleason reached for it, looking as though he might tear it from me, but then dropped his hands to his lap.

"It wasn't me," he said. "It was Red Burns. He did it. He killed them."

"All of them?"

"Yes."

"That's impossible."

"It was him! I swear!"

"Red Burns died when he was 13."

I picked the second case up and opened it. A set of scales lay inside and I quickly assembled them.

"What are you doing?" Gleason asked.

I set a feather on one side of the scales and then turned to the man before me.

"Do you remember what happened before you wound up here in the infirmary?"

"I told you I don't."

"You were executed, Mr. Gleason. Two-thousand volts went through your body in a matter of seconds. You're dead."

The color drained from Gleason's face.

"I've come here to measure the darkness within," I said as I approached him. "Though my initial investigation has informed me the guilty verdict is true, I must make sure no innocence resides within your heart. If it weighs less than the feather, I'll have to let you go."

Bones cracked as I reached into his chest. He gazed at me, eyes wide as I withdrew the lifeless heart from his breast. I set it on the scale.

The heart fell, the feather rose.

George Gleason screamed.

About the Author:

Naching T. Kassa is a wife, mother, and horror writer. She's created short stories, novellas, poems, and co-created three children. She lives in Eastern Washington State with Dan Kassa, her husband and biggest supporter.

Naching is a member of the Horror Writers Association, Head of Publishing and Interviewer for HorrorAddicts.net, and an assistant at Crystal Lake Publishing.

Author Blog: <https://frightenme.weebly.com/frighten-me-blog>

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The sun is a great, bloody crescent on the horizon, gilding the jagged teeth of the broken window in liquid gold. Its light creeps towards me, catching bright sparks from the glass shards and twisted steel rails radiating outward from the remains of the door. It is inexorable, burning away the pearly gray light of false dawn in a molten flow. I watch it, and I don't know that this is the last time I will ever see the sun rise.

Heidi seats herself gingerly on the edge of my bed; it's either there or the floor, since I'm sitting on the only chair in the room. Her gaze is steady on my face. "It's Halloween," she says.

Is it? I glance sideways at my computer, at the date and time stamp in the corner of the screen. "So it is," I say. I'm not good at reading Heidi's expressions, but I think she might be looking at me expectantly. Since I have no idea what she might be expecting, I simply stare back at her.

"We like to go out," she says finally. "All of us."

"That includes me," I say. "I gather."

"Yes. All of us."

It's mildly interesting that she's come to my bedroom, alone, to tell me this. It's mildly annoying that she pretends like I have any choice the matter. "All right," I say obligingly. "Do we wear costumes?"

Her eyes narrow a bit; perhaps she suspects me of trying to be funny. "No," she said. "Just something nice." Her gaze lingers on my face. "And makeup."

I haven't worn makeup since the last time they made me *go out*, which was some time ago. There is literally no reason to care what I look like anymore.

"Sure," I say.

Heidi is waiting for me at the foot of the stairs. She doesn't move out of the way, so I'm forced to stop on the last riser. She's staring at my face. "You're so beautiful," she says, and even I can hear the wistfulness in her voice. "Even though you're older."

My lips twitch up at the corners; I'm seldom amused anymore, so I enjoy the sensation, fleeting as it is. "Thanks," I say. I look over her shoulder; when she said *we* and *all*, she really meant it. Ian and Kurt, Candace and...I blank on his name. I've only met him a few times before. But they're all here too.

We climb into the van. I sit all the way in the back; I don't get carsick anymore, which is nice. I don't dwell on it though, because then I might start dwelling on all the other things I don't get anymore and the night would probably not end well for me.

There is no small talk. I wonder if they make any, when I'm not around—if my presence casts a pall over the festivities. Kurt grins at me for the entire drive. Candace is a simple creature; I can't imagine what her small talk might even consist of. I don't know No-Name at all. And I spend as much time as possible not thinking about Ian. Ian is driving right now, with Heidi in the passenger seat. As if she can feel me looking at her—and she might be able to, who knows?—she twists around and gazes back at me. She looks like a sweet young woman going to a church social, with her smooth light gold hair pulled back into a bun and her lacy white dress falling to her knees. Her hair color is real, all her own; I've almost never met anyone over the age of twelve with hair that color that didn't come out of a bottle. Her eyebrows aren't much darker, which gives her a quizzical air. It suits her solemnity, and her small-mouthed prettiness.

We park across the street from a club. It's not one I recognize, which isn't that astonishing as I was never much of a clubgoer. The majority of the crowd is costumed, and younger than me by ten or fifteen years. I would have felt a little uncomfortable before, coming here, especially with a group of kids, which might have been how I would have characterized Heidi and Kurt and Ian and Candace and No-Name once upon a time. But things change.

Ian finds us all a low table surrounded by couches. I end up with Candace on one side of me and Kurt on the other. Kurt's leg presses into mine. Candace is as absolutely uninterested in me as I am in her; her gaze sweeps the crowd in a metronome of flat hunger.

"Look," says Kurt in my ear, and I follow his gaze; a boy and a girl (a *man* and a *woman*, but they look so young, so vulnerable to my eyes) are leaning up against the wall, away from the dance floor, kissing with sloppy, earnest passion. "Want to join them?" His face is barely a breath away from mine; he's still grinning.

"No," I say, sinking back into the deep cushions. "You go."

"I'll wait til you see something you like," he says. He is as fair as Heidi—fairer, really; his hair is more flaxen than gold, but maybe his does come out of a bottle because his eyebrows are dark.

"Okay," I say. I have no intention of playing whatever game he's indulging himself in with me tonight if I can help it.

Heidi and Ian leave, presumably to dance, though I don't look for them to confirm that. Kurt eventually tires of waiting for me to display any interest in anyone and leaves the table; I spot him a little while later gyrating to a slow beat on the dance floor with a painfully thin redhead dressed as a woodland fairy. I am left sitting next to Candace, with No-Name on the couch opposite us. He is looking fixedly at Candace, who is ignoring him as utterly as she's ignoring me. I lean my head back into the couch back; the cushions cradle the entire back of my skull and mold to my spine, cool and rough against my bare shoulders. I close my eyes.

Someone speaks, close to my ear; I open my eyes unhurriedly and am actually surprised to see Ian sitting beside me in Kurt's vacated spot. Candace and No-Name are gone, singly or together I have no idea. I manage not to flinch away from Ian; I'm a little pleased with myself for that, though it helps that he isn't quite as prone to thrusting his face mere inches from mine as Kurt is. "I'm sorry," I say loudly over the music—I always make an effort to be as polite as circumstances allow to Ian (and to Heidi whenever Ian is around, but a quick sideways glance confirms that she isn't back yet). "I didn't catch that."

"Go find someone," he says. His eyes, limpid aquamarine surrounded by a ridiculous volume of tangled black lashes, are flat and steady on my face.

"Soon," I say.

He nods, but doesn't leave; he settles back against the cushions instead. I don't want to stay snuggled into them beside him, so I stand up, pretending to let my gaze sweep over the crowd. He stands up beside me. Even in my heels, he is a good five or six inches taller than I am, and heavily built—it's impossible to ignore him.

I step away, onto the dance floor; I don't think Ian is following me, but a sure way to incline him to do so would be to look back and check, so I don't. I let the rhythm of the dancers draw me into the crowd. The deeper I move onto the floor, the more incidental touches I receive—hips and shoulders bumping mine, the occasional faceful of long, sweet-smelling hair, and none of these are problematic.

But my arms are bare, and so are a lot of the dancers' arms, and that is a problem. My chest expands and my shoulders pull back, arching my neck and spine. Blood rushes to my face, flushing my cheeks and making my lips tingle; involuntarily, I lick them. I can feel the eyes all around me begin to focus on me, on that movement. I think I've embedded myself far enough into the crowd to be difficult for Ian to spot, and I risk turning and looking back—I can't see him anymore.

I hunch my shoulders in and duck my head and push determinedly through until suddenly I am out of the milling, entangled bodies and on the far side of the dance floor. I ignore the sign at the end of the short corridor that reads EMPLOYEES ONLY and slip through the door. Seconds later I am outside, in a tiny cramped alley behind the club. The night air is damp and cool, the pulsing beat of music muffled; the heat, the *need*, is easier to control now that I'm alone.

I back away, deeper into the maze of alleys behind the club. I can sense the rats, the feral cats populating these nearly lightless spaces, but they don't draw me. I imagine, just for a second, that nothing is in fact drawing me, that I have the choice of simply walking away into the darkness. But it is unsustainable, because something *is* drawing me now. And helplessly I follow it, my veins rushing with my simmering blood, my stomach clenching in self-hatred.

The alley I emerge into, the final one, reeks of old grease and ends in utter blackness beyond the bright light spilling out of an open basement doorway. I look at that shining portal, then back slowly away into the darkness beyond the rusting dumpster flanking the door. But the spike heel of one of my shoes catches in the broken asphalt of the alley floor; my ankle twists under me and I lose my balance and tumble into a heap behind the dumpster.

The smell back here is so intense I am almost surprised it doesn't cushion my fall—what does, is something gelid and probably unspeakable. But I can't wait any longer. "Help!" I scream. It's harsh, rusty—I cough loudly, then choke out, "Oh, *help me!*"

A head pokes out around the basement door, wearing a white cap atop lank black hair. A cook, perhaps. "'Alloo?" says a sharp voice, heavily accented. "Who is there?" Beneath the sharpness is a thread of fear. But he is a good man; he can't simply turn his back on that plaintive, pain-filled woman's cry, and this is what drew me to him—my blood is boiling now, the hunger opening wide like a flower in the golden blaze of him, of his soul or whatever it is that he has that I don't anymore. He steps out fully from the doorway.

"Please help me," I sob, and slide one of my hands out of the shadows, to rest just inside the pool of light from the doorway. His head swivels, his gaze finding my fingers and then tracking upward to where my arm fades into darkness. He steps out, down the two steps from the door to the ground, and, after casting a narrow-eyed look at the mouth of the alley, reaches down to grasp my hand.

I am leaning against the side of the van when the rest of them emerge from the club's entrance; they stop on the sidewalk, staring at me, then hurry across the street. Kurt has brought his red-haired fairy along, and Candace has acquired a tall plump brunette in a schoolgirl uniform. No-Name grasps the brunette's arm, so perhaps they're sharing her. Ian unlocks the van for them while Heidi approaches me. "You're filthy," she says.

"I'm sorry," I say.

Ian returns to her side, then reaches out and grabs my arm; his fingers bite deep, a harbinger of things to come. Heidi's stare bores into my face. After a moment, she turns her head sharply away and climbs into the van. Ian's grip tightens even more on my arm. "I'll clean you up when we get back," he says.

"I did what you told me to do—"

"Not really," he says. His eyes are slits in his broad, bluntly handsome face; he really is furious with me. "Heidi wants to care about you." He pauses. "You remind her of her mother."

I am startled enough by these statements, and the way the words seemed to wrench themselves out of him, to lose my focus on blocking the pain of his fingers gouging my arm and tears flood my eyes. I blink them back, but he sees them, and the muscles around his eyes relax a little. Likely the rest of the night would pass much less horrifically for me if I would just allow him to hurt me right off the bat, but I already know I won't. "Do I remind you of yours?" I ask him instead, because I hate him so much and it's obvious that no amount of courtesy will save me now.

"No," he says, expressionless once more. "Get in." And he shoves me towards the open door.

My room has no windows, but I can feel the sun beginning to rise outside; in my mind's eye, I see that last florid blaze of crimson and gold through the shattered glass, and remember the way my life felt trickling out of me into a terrible flowering pool on the floor. I am lying on my bed, now, on my side; I have regained some ability to block out pain in the hour or so since Ian left, and likely I will be fully healed by the time the sun sets again and my body awakens once more.

They won't tell me, Ian and Heidi and the rest, what it is that they are, what it is that I've become. I can imagine the obvious answers, of course—*vampire*, *demon*, *alien*—but none of those are real answers. Long, long ago somebody dreamt up the ideas of them to entertain or frighten or control somebody else, and millennia more of storytellers with all their own motives built upon the edifice of those first ones until a rich and incredibly contradictory canon of the supernatural is now an ineradicable part of every culture. I don't know if any of it is actually true, or none of it is. I don't know what I am. I don't know how to end what I am.

But Heidi had a mother. Heidi was once what I was once. This is more than I knew before tonight. It's a starting place. *Heidi had a mother*. The lightless void that isn't sleep is pulling me down, blotting out my consciousness. The last thing I see is my computer, screen dark but power light glowing steady green, beckoning. Tonight, I'll begin my search for Heidi's mother.

About the Author:

Lisa Short is a Texas-born, Kansas-bred writer of fantasy and science fiction. She has an honorable discharge from the US Army, a degree in chemical engineering, and twenty years' experience as a professional engineer. She recently started a blog for her writing and is working on her first novel. She lives in Maryland with her husband, two youngest children, father-in-law and cats.

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For its face, it might have passed as a child. A pretty, upturned nose, high cheekbones, and a dimpled chin complimented its oval shaped head, and the contour and placement of its eyes would not have given anyone pause were it not for their colors: the left solid yellow, the right burnt-umber. Two rows of small pointed teeth hid behind thin lips. Black hair fell against its long neck, and its broad, muscular shoulders and chest tapered, wolf-like, to a small waist attached to fat, dog-like legs. Coarse hair covered most of the lower part of its body, and its polydactyl feet presented with extraordinarily long toes. Its arms, long and sinewy, blossomed into broad paws with retractable claws. It didn't stand erect but, upon finding the gate of its dwelling ajar, quickly realized it could run swiftly on four limbs. Its tail bounced on bald-blue simian buttocks as it disappeared into the copse of black poplars that covered Mott's hill.

Inside, a man called Filcher unbuttoned his shirt as he looked at the half-undressed woman on his bed.

She pouted, lazily, "You promised you'd let me hear them sing."

Filcher pulled off his shirt and scratched the gray hair on his chest.

"Well they don't sing until they wanna eat," he said. "And they ain't hungry 'til the sun's set. So I reckon we got plenty of time."

A crow's mile away, Mama played a hymn on the old piano; its tinny, untuned twang curdled against the draft from the open window. She no longer knew the words; the hymnbook was long ago burnt for fuel. It had been so long since she had sung. Papa never liked it. She imagined what her voice might sound like now, strangled from the violence of his words, starved, rusted from tears, worn down like her threadbare dress.

Danny glanced at his mama as he went quickly toward the front door. Papa cleared his throat and sat up on the davenport.

"Boy," he said, "You best be in this house by dark."

"Yessir," Danny said as he went out the door. Papa leaned over and spit, splattering tobacco juice on the filthy floor, then tipped a bottle of whiskey to his lips.

The shadow of the wind turbine grew long, its enormous blades falling, then ascending again, stubbornly beating time against the circadian rhythms of the day. Danny was a speck against it as he ran across the field, then down a dusty road to where Mott's Creek flowed under it.

Leena had seen him coming, and hit him with a rock as he crossed the bridge.

"Hey squirt," she said.

Danny rubbed his head, then put his hands into his pockets as she walked up to him. In dirt-caked bare feet, she stood a foot taller. She dusted off her hands on her overalls.

"Where you goin'?"

"Nowhere."

"Nuh uh," she said, "You're comin' with me. We gonna go listen to Filcher's pets sing."

She took his hand and led him up the creek until the trees thickened and the path went upward onto Mott's hill.

"Hey Danny, you wanna see 'em?"

She released him and cupped her bosom with her hands. Danny stepped back.

"I see 'em just fine from where I am."

"Not that fine," she said. She laughed as she charged at him. Danny tried to run up the path, but a hard root struggling from the soil caught his foot and he fell. Leena sat down on top of him, pinning his hands with her legs.

"I'm still bigger than you," she said. "Now look."

She unbuckled the top of her overalls and let the straps fall. Then she lifted her shirt. Her breasts hung on her pale skin, her aureoles wide around small button nipples.

"Say they're bigger than last time," she said. "Say it!"

He said it, then pushed her off as she rolled onto the dirt. She laughed loudly.

"You still a little man," she said. "I bet you can't even make yours straight."

Something rustled in the woods, and a cold breeze bent the bows of the trees. Leena stood up and fastened the buckles.

"We should go back now," Danny said.

"Well ain't you a pretty little chicken! Come on. It's gettin' time."

From the vantage point atop the hill, Danny and Leena flopped on their bellies on a mound of soft grass. Below them: a brick house, rows of wickiups, a chicken coop, and a large steel shed.

"There's a hole in the roof of that steel one," she said, pointing. "It's where Filcher keeps it. He takes money from the men who want to lie with it, and then puts its babies in them shacks. Filcher does it too."

She turned to him, speaking in a soft, secret whisper.

"I watched him once. There's a hole in the roof and I climbed up there and waited 'til he came in. It was white and slimy, like a slug, with arms that moved around. Filcher came in there and took his clothes off and laid down on the thing right there. I could hear him makin' sounds I heard mama and daddy make when they's upstairs in their room."

The clouds turned crimson; the trees around them bent toward the farm, and the chickens began to cluck loudly as a man passed into the coop.

"What are you afraid of?" Danny asked.

She took his hand and they held their breath in the moments before the singing began.

Sometimes the song hits you, takes hold of you. Not an instrument, not a voice, not a language. It flows so sweetly upward, then bursts like a fragrance and you open yourself to it and drink it deeply. Mama closed the piano lid, her fingernails chipped like the old ivory keys, listening as she looked out the window, stroking her cheek gently as she smiled. Papa paced the front porch, watching the land go black. He snapped his belt against the porch rail, its paint swatted away long ago. Somewhere, in the distance, a dog barked.

About the Author:

Tim Jones writes poetry, short stories, and novels. He has worked as a symphony orchestra cellist, junior high orchestra director, and college English teacher. In 2018 he was selected as a Juried Poet for the 2018 Houston Poetry Fest. Formerly from Texas, Tim and his wife, Cindy, have recently replaced the dysfunction of Houston with the calm, wide-open spaces and cool weather of Laramie, Wyoming.

Author Blog: [Wander Naked](#)

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The Right Place | G. Allen Wilbanks

The middle of an empty highway seemed an unusual place to collect a soul. He checked his chronometer. The face display was red, indicating he was in the correct location, and the numbers were almost finished with their countdown. Several vehicles passed around and through him as he waited. Through the windshield of a blue pickup truck, he could see the driver's eyes grow wide in surprise. The truck veered to the left to avoid him.

"Odd," he muttered aloud. "No one should be able to see me unless...." Then, he understood.

He turned in time to see the collision.

About the Author:

G. Allen Wilbanks is a member of the Horror Writers Association (HWA) and has published over 60 short stories in Deep Magic, Daily Science Fiction, and other magazines, anthologies, and on-line venues. He has published two short story collections, and the novel, When Darkness Comes.

Author Blog: [Deep Dark Thoughts](#)

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ZERO *PERSPECTIVE*



Lee Andrew Forman

Available on Amazon

Anonymous Screams | *Angela Yuriko Smith*

They could hear us...
through the near-vacuum
between celestial bodies
seeping between milky ways
riding the dust tails of comets.

They could hear us...
trapped on our waterlogged
behemoth—soaked in acid
and ash—a breath between
hope and annihilation.

They could hear us...
tuning their audio array
to pick up our mega hurts
eavesdropping on final
phonic agony.

They could hear us...
our wordless requiem
an impermanent epigraph
scrolled across galaxies in
momentary flashes of nuclei.

The famous last words
of a people, a race, a species
no more than anonymous screams.

About the Author:

Angela Yuriko Smith is an American poet and author. Her first collection of poetry, *"In Favor of Pain,"* was nominated for a 2017 Elgin Award. Her latest novella, *Bitter Suites*, is a 2018 Bram Stoker Awards® Finalist. Currently, she publishes *Space and Time Magazine*, a 52 year old publication dedicated to fantasy, horror and science fiction.

Blog: <http://angelaysmith.com>

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The biggest draw in every high-grass yokel town was the freaks. The carnival bally-men shouted over one another, competing to see who could make just the right pitch that would push the jam of gents, women, and children through the curtain of the freak tent for the two-bit part of the show. Working misfits first, then the oddities, but it was the twisted bodies--born or made--the rubes really wanted to see. Men and brave women only, no children allowed.

Today was no exception. The first part of the show was done, and the crowd was primed and panting for more. The magician appeared, white gloves glowing, his tuxedo lined in red. He was the inside talker and he called himself, 'Professor Praetorius.'

"Gentlemen, and ladies, I draw your attention to our special added attraction not advertised outside, and to prepare you for what you're about to see, let me tell you a story..." And he lowered his voice, spoke with familiar intimacy in sentence fragments, mixing medical jargon with mythological allusions, hinting at horrible things hidden in riddles--frog eggs and human pregnancy tests, amphibians and fetal tissue, maternal terror, murder, and fatal childbirth. He expertly paused--many of the women moaned and covered their ears or shouted with anger and herded their children away. He spoke of secret laboratories and insane Nazi scientists--the war having ended only five years before. "What you are about to see--for only FIVE DOLLARS--is more than a freak of nature, a creature so frightening it will give you nightmares for the rest of your life. No, this thing is an abomination, a very challenge to God in Heaven!" He waited the precise amount of time before inhaling deeply and proclaiming loudly, "If you dare ... grown men and women only ... right this way!" And he pulled back an emerald velvet curtain revealing a dark passage. His blonde partner, squeezed into a green bustier and full, frilly skirt, bobbed and smiled the sweet-talk beside him while she collected the money.

The cake-eaters entered complete blackness, and moved until the first few bumped against the edge of a makeshift stage, the rest pressing behind, jostling, coming to a stop when they hit the people in front of them. Their whispers echoed like a hiss in the close space. Then there was light.

A bright spot illuminated the platform. The men and women in the audience shaded their eyes and squinted.

"Gentlemen, and ladies," a voice bellowed from above, or behind, or beside them, they couldn't tell. "Please prepare yourselves. I give you...." There was a pause, something moved behind a black curtain. 'Rana Superba!'

It shambled into the light; something not quite right or understandable. Seven feet tall, with green, shiny skin and a ribbon-like tongue that flipped like a whip but was recognizably human. It posed with its barrel-wide chest expanding, deflating, its throat throbbing like a puffy balloon. The men in the front row leaned away, pushing those behind them so that the entire crowd seemed to sway backwards.

"What the fuck?" a man cried, his voice cracking. "Holy Mother of God," someone else shouted. The air smelled like a stagnant pond.

The thing was completely naked, and as it shifted, then half--turned, the audience could see a large, red human-like penis erupting, thrusting above a sagging, uneven grey-green scrotal sac. A collective groan, a mumble of expletives assaulted the stage.

"Someone's fainted," a man called, but no one fell as the squeeze of bodies kept even the unconscious upright.

"Is he human, or is he amphibian?" the voice intoned. The creature slowly circled in place, flexed the sleek, sculpted muscles of its elongated arms that nearly reached to the floor. Its thighs were thick, its knees locked, the shins slightly bowed. The hands and feet were webbed, but the audience could see distinct human fingers and toes. It looked out on the stunned, disgusted faces below and blinked its dull, black nodular eyes set side by side in the front of its head. "Brekekek, brekekek," it said, and flicked its pink tongue.

"It's fake, it's a fake," a high-pitched male voice yelled. A man vaulted onto the stage. "This is horse shit!" In an instant, a hunting knife flashed and he was hacking and slicing at the creature, his motions and the creature's defensive contortions jaggling like a dance between the shadows and the light. Screams and a thought-shattering, piercing "EEEEEEEEEEEE" engulfed the crowd. Sticky, foul-smelling purplish blood spurted in all directions. Crisscrossed strings of bare incandescent bulbs flared overhead with a pop and a static buzz.

The cake--eaters, the rubes, the local yokels--shrieking and gagging--pummeled one another to reach the exit, the assailant among them.

Except for a faint gurgling noise and the sizzle of a bulb, the tent fell silent.

The magician hovered, half-hidden in the opening between the curtains. He took a few tentative steps onto the stage. His eyes were round, his skin clammy and ashen, his mouth slightly open and slack. He pressed his palms against his temples, stared down at Rana Superba lying on its side, writhing in a spreading pool of foul-smelling, viscous body fluids, one wrist almost severed, its genitals mutilated, deep gashes and hacks and tears in its chest exposing yellow pleura and violet gore. The man's lips mouthed the soundless words, "He's real, he's real, he was real...."

About the Author:

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

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"Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead."
—Isaiah

Ever since the Truce you'd think people would change, but no the same old bastards keep hounding us like they always did. Take Pete, he's sitting there across from me, cross-eyed, nose up in the air, his freckly face pock marked and pimply; his tongue sucking at the pencil dripping from his puckered lips; the flabby fingers on his right hand doing the wave across his desktop like a sign bearer in a football series playoff bearing the letter 'Z' for zit. His face is turning bright red, beet color more than tomato, with his red hair fuzzy and afro-fake bobbing like an apple in a Halloween water-barrel as he contemplates the computer screen in front of him. You'd think he was a rocket scientist about to discover a new theorem for some anti-gravity system by the looks of all the complex drawings flowing across the screen, but one knows already its part of an ad campaign and he is the agent in charge of creating a new series of signs for the refurbished Mall down on Clinton Lane.

I'm his partner; he draws, I write. He doesn't have the wit of a tortoise when it comes to words and phrases, so they hired me to infest the world with pungent quips and quotes; fake verbiage for a fake world. But it pays well, so who cares.

Pete turns around in his webbed chair, one of those ergonomic jobs, the kind that hugs your body like a plush Ferrari as if Pete needed such a thing with the folds of flab around his midriff sinking down round the levers pushing into the hand rests from his extravagant potbelly. The boy loves his beer, an all American pastime: key to the flagrant excesses of stupor and greed.

He catches me eyeing him and says: "What you looking at, boy?" As if I were his son, a thick southern drawl lisping out of his blimp mouth. He frowns. "Never mind punk, don't say anything. I got your number. Better watch your step, boy. I'll have you out on your ears in a flash if you're not careful."

I smile. That gets him every time. He sniffs at the air with those wide pig-flanged nostrils of his as if he were smelling roses, then gives me one of his snarled jibes – "Fuck you and the horse you rode in on," he says; grumbling to himself, turning away from me to his screen again. He knows full well he can't do a thing to me, it's part of the contract. I've been given this position as part of the Truce, which makes all these corporate types angry. But, hey, what can you say, being a Zombie has its benefits.

Who knew the Resurrection would come to this? I doubt those Old Testament prophets thought it would turn out this way: rotting flesh, dribbles and eye baubles dangling out of half skeletal skulls. Who cares, at least I'm alive. Isn't that what matters? Hell, eternal life as a Zombie isn't so bad. It has its fringe benefits. Cannibal delights, Popsicle brains in the corporate fridge. Plenty of food for us all. That is if you don't chop off the hand that feeds you. Yes, we ended the Zombie wars a few years back. Part of the deal was a good job, plenty to eat, work, a nice home in the suburbs. Life is good. Of course working for the corporations is dull, but at least it pays well. I said that before.

The living still have issues, though. It's funny; I work in a cryo-vat assembly plant for rich fucks who think the next resurrection will bring them to some transhuman vision of the Beautiful People. What a joke, they'll probably end up in human cattle farms at some point, food for the newly risen. Oh, I'm joking, don't take me seriously. I know they hate us, but it doesn't matter. Writing ads to get the lame elite to park their corpses in nitrogen for eternity seems a sad affair, when all they need do is pop their dead bodies in the ground and join us in a festival of hell. I joke. Life as a Zombie is sweet, if you can stand the stench of humans.

The immigration was another matter. So much human fear and anger. For years we lived in these make-shift camps until they'd decided what to do with us. They'd tried to exterminate us over and over, but the faster they killed us the faster we multiplied. It was like some accelerating law of return, quite like their economic system: supply side demand I think you call it, the earth seemed a seedbed for the dead as if nature in her rebellion against the living had decided to throw us back out again in increasing numbers. "Nature, red in tooth and claw," the old poet Lord Tennyson remarked. Maybe he didn't realize just how close to the mark he really was.

Then one day the call out was made. Join us in the cities, unite with humanity and forge our destiny to the stars. A pitch we couldn't refuse. So began the mass migrations from the outlands, the deserts and uninhabitable places of the world. Trudging in our outworn clothing, smelling of decay, we marched to the cities of the north. Some in flotillas, others from the hot-bed jungles of the southern reaches of Africa, South-East Asia, and South America. Onward to Europe, China, Russia, and America - our battle cry: 'Live long and die healthy; live again, sink your teeth in flesh for life;

a brain a day keeps the flies away!’

They all took us in. Not without a fight, though. There were those in power who thought such immigrations were a bad deal. They withdrew from the pacts in patchwork states, islands of unrest and civil-strife, to battle against the migrations of the dead. Some of us slipped past these death dealers, others were chopped up and fed to dogs. The enemy was all too real in those days. Yet, many of us managed to escape the creeping malaise of those lost humans. We took their gambit, played dead for real, then woke them in their sleep and ... well, enough said, you can imagine the atrocities on both sides.

That was the beginning of the last Zombie wars.

A few of us made it to the safe zones before the barbed wire fences went up. Others were corralled into prison camps (‘It’s for your own good,’ they’d said; as if being in a rat-infested hell-zone without food or clothing were paradise. Hah!)

I was quicker than most, I had a brain intact. I could remember things. I was a veritable memory bank of one liners and high/low culture, if not philosophical bric-a-brac. Well, I should’ve been, I was a renegade philosopher when I was alive. Used to travel the circuits, speaking engagements at the most lucrative universities and other late capitalist junkets. People love clowns, and I provided them with a provocateur’s slap-jack humor with my toxic mix of truth and cynicism. Some said I was ‘the most dangerous philosopher in the world’. An epithet I wore proudly on my lanky black and white T-shirt. Others called me a ‘depressive realist’ whose mind plunged the depths of human misery for profit and fame. My beard and hair graying and unkempt kept me under the surveillant eyes of police everywhere. It was like living in a cosmic joke.

I think what people fear most about us is the subtle truth of death itself. Let’s think about this for a moment. For as long as humans have documented history they’ve sought one thing through pre-religious, religious, and post-religious visions of society: immortality. People want to live on, not die; living forever as the little egoistic morons they’ve always been with their perfectly inane lives intact. This notion of getting our little ego’s into some kind of permanent vehicle beyond organic decay has been at the core of all religious systems from the beginning.

In the natural order of things dying is no big deal, it’s just a part of the process, the way of things. Every cell in our body is in continuous movement between being born and dying. In fact, every cell we were born with has long ago disappeared into the good night without a trace. No fanfare, no sorrow. It’s one of those facts of life that humans like everything else in this blasted universe will all die; we’ll all end up in some cosmic junkyard, flat-lined dust motes in an eternal sea of darkness. But no, there are those who want to stay around, live forever in their flesh; go on and on and on... Can you imagine that?

Even Jolene, my wife, was surprised. Sitting on her grave, her once gorgeous raven hair mussed up like a rats nest full of leaves cried for joy. My boys Charley and Bo chasing around the tombstones jumping and hollering. It was a sight to see. A family picnic affair, a weekend outing, we’d gone to the lake and spent hours in the sun, skiing, roasting marshmallows on coat hangers, singing all the old foolish songs. Nostalgia. Homeward bound after sunset I was tipsy from the wine; no biggie, right? Wrong. The semi hit us head on, I’d drifted off; never knew what hit us; boom. Hell, they’d given us a great funeral service. Friends, co-workers, family. Like a holiday or festival, a wake in which we the newly dead were trussed up in our finest livery and put on display in windowed coffins. I think most were actually happy for us. Of course my old Dean wasn’t too happy, he’d have to find a replacement for the remaining semester. Not such a big deal. Only thing I regretted was my dogs. My brother took them in, a good man even if he was jealous of my life. All in all our short happy lives was one to book in the records. But who was keeping notes.

The moment my eyes popped open I said: “Oh, shit,” along with a few other anal remarks. It was like waking up from a long sleep into a nightmare without end. Alive. A mystery. Well let me tell you I’m not an Immortalist. I had no pretentious dreams of living on forever in some paradise with all these earthly imbeciles. Nope. I once believed the end was the end. Now mind you I don’t mind that I’ve returned, but it was quite a surprise. But I’ll admit Death becomes me. I feel almost relieved that I’m here, even if I’m a little ripe around the edges. Seems only fitting for all those who once believed they’d end up in some strange heaven or hell. Instead here we are together with our old comrades in arms, the living and the dead, sharing an eternal bond forged in hellish delight. Immortalists without a cause.

Maybe they’ll invent a new religion for us, write a new chapter in the Book of the Living Dead.

Now don’t get me wrong, I, unlike many of my fellow resurrectionists once assumed there was nothing of the sort. I considered myself a man of the Enlightenment, a bearer of Reason and Faithlessness. I was a die-hard, card carrying Atheist when I was alive and proud of it. I used to tell my friends what the old Roman, Lucretius, poetically voiced: we have nothing to fear from death but death itself; death’s sting bites for a second then is gone, an infinite leap

into the Big Nowhere; once dead we'll never know what hit us; gone forever it'll be a complete blank in the light of the nihil night: no god, no devil; just a big sign on the wall of nothingness in neon flashes saying The End: caput, *finito*.

I was wrong. Oh, me, how I was wrong... let me count the ways.

About the Author:

Resistance Blogger, Poet Short Story Writer and Philosopher. Off-Beat Humorist. Retired living in the mountains near Yellowstone with my lovely wife, dogs, and horses. I've had a few short stories published, along with essays etc. Am having an essay on Thomas Ligotti published in Vastarien: The Literary Journal. Enjoy a variety of horror forms, but have a penchant for comic satire of which this piece hopefully hits the mark.

Author Blog: [Social Ecologies](#)

GAEA | Sheri White

In the beginning, we treated her with kindness and respect.
Some of us called her GODDESS.
Some of us called her MOTHER.
She gave us all we wanted and asked for nothing.

In time we became greedy.
We took her for granted.
We took her for *everything*.
She cried in PAIN and FEAR, but we didn't listen.

We poisoned her water, her food, her air.
Some tried to help her, heal her, nurture her.
They BEGGED us to stop our gluttonous ways.
There are always heroes. We ignored them.

We continued to use her, abuse her, neglect her.
She finally screamed in SORROW, in AGONY, in DEATH.
Too late we realized we destroyed what we had once loved and worshipped.
In the end, ALL OF US screamed along with her.

About the Author:

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

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It had been a tough year. In January my older brother, Danny, came home from Iraq. Well, part of him came home. He'd lost both legs and an arm. Burns covered three-quarters of his body. There'd been some brain damage.

The doctors told us Danny should be in a long-term care facility but Mom insisted she'd take care of him. I was away at college most of the time but knew she had it tough.

I came home myself that summer and in mid-July my brother passed away in his sleep. The docs had taken one of his eyes because of an infection and the ceremony was closed casket. A month later, Dad had the heart attack that killed him. It happened a week after I returned to school for the fall.

After Dad died, I dropped out of college for a semester to stay on the farm with Mom. She'd always hated being alone in our big old house at the edge of the woods.

I figured with a semester off I could help get the farm ready for sale and then move Mom into a smaller place in town. She still wouldn't want to be alone at night, but maybe if we made enough from the sale of the land she could hire someone to stay with her when I went back to school.

It was still warm in Arkansas when I returned home. The Bradford farm hadn't been a working farm for quite a few years but we still had a few cows and chickens. I took care of those and started fixing up things around the house to make the place more appealing to buyers.

Mom dealt with realtors and insurance companies. It was good that things kept us busy and we were both tired enough in the evenings to sleep. At first.

When we were kids, Danny and I had always slept out on the back porch in the summers. I slept out there now. It was shaded by broad-trunked oaks. Screens kept out the bugs. A breeze often arrived in the evenings. And the porch was...quieter.

I understood Mom's trepidations about the old house. It stood two stories, with high-ceilinged, square rooms that were always drafty. It must have really been gloomy when Mom and Dad had first married and moved in. They'd only had gas lamps to burn against the dark.

Even modern electric lights never quite got rid of all the shadows, and at night you could hear the place groan and creak as it settled. You didn't hear it as much on the porch.

If truth be told, I hadn't much liked being in the house alone either when I was little. More than once in those days I'd thought I heard footsteps coming down the stairs when no one else was home.

Dad said it was squirrels living in the attic and dropping acorns down between the walls where they'd bounce off the struts. I believed him, of course. There's no such thing as ghosts. The sounds still bothered me some, though.

It was different on the porch. I'd always slept well there. The frogs and whippoorwills would serenade me into dreamland. With all the work around the farm, I fell right back into that habit. For about ten days at least. Then the trouble started.

At first I blamed my sleeping difficulties on being upset over Dad and Danny's deaths. Mom seemed to be taking it better than I was. I figured I'd adjust too, but as August melted into late September my sleep still didn't return to normal. Night after night I lay there, eyes open while I stared up at the shadow-mottled ceiling.

Even when I slept I didn't feel rested. You ever have those dreams where you're arguing with someone all night? And you wake up tired as if it were real? That's the kind of dreams I had.

One morning, Mom asked me why I looked so exhausted. I told her. She suggested I go back to my room upstairs, said maybe a change of scenery would help. She said she'd be fine downstairs by herself. She didn't seem as scared in the house now as she used to be, so I agreed to give her idea a try.

Around ten that night, just before she went to bed, Mom surprised me with a glass of milk and a plate of chocolate chip cookies. It had always been her cure for insomnia when Danny and I were little. It worked again. Soon, I was drowsy.

I started up the stairs, then began thinking about things and came back down. Another reason I'd been sleeping on the porch was because Mom and Dad's bedroom was next to it and it helped Mom to have someone close at night.

It helped me a little too. She was all I had left, and I could listen to her snoring and know she was all right. I decided to give the porch another go and around eleven slipped quietly into bed. The milk and cookies worked their magic. I dozed right off and never had a dream before I woke up again around two in the morning.

It might have been a sudden silence that awakened me. I had the distinct impression that the chorusing frogs had just....stopped. And the whippoorwills, too. I heard a last bird cry out in the distance, and then nothing more.

I remembered Mom telling me that the whippoorwill's call is, "Chick fell out of the willow." It had never occurred to me before how creepy that sounded.

I sat up. The moon had risen but the nearby oaks blocked most of its light. Just enough silvering remained to birth some weird shadows. Two beds stood on the porch—mine and Danny's. One set of odd shadows clustered on Danny's bed. It looked very much like a person lying there.

I stared hard at that shape, trying to pierce the darkness and identify it. I didn't remember if there'd been anything on that bed when I'd climbed under my own covers. There must have been. The question was, what?

The only possibility that occurred to me was that Mom might have washed a load of clothes and dumped them there until she had a chance to fold them. As soon as the thought came, I knew it had to be the answer. I smiled at my own silliness, lay back and closed my eyes.

But why did the frogs and whippoorwills stop calling?

My eyelids lifted again. I turned my head toward Danny's bed. The shape looked different.

"Stupid!" I muttered to myself. "You think it sprouted new parts while your eyes were shut? You're letting your imagination run away with you. Don't be ridiculous."

I threw back my sheets, got up and stalked over to the other bed, then reached down and touched the 'shape'. It felt soft and cool; it pressed downward under my hand. Nothing grabbed me. It was clearly no more than some jumbled clothes. I shook my head at myself but still took a moment to mash the pile's curves flat so it wouldn't look like a person anymore.

Getting back into my own bed, I shut my eyes again and began taking deep breaths to relax. It didn't quite work. Unbidden images crept up from my unconscious.

I had to chuckle as I visualized the flattened pile of clothes inflating slowly again, restoring the shape that had lain on Danny's bed moments before. Would it now have a face of moonlit silver?

"Stupid," I muttered again.

But I opened my eyes and looked toward the other bed. No shape lay there now. The bed was completely empty. No clothes. Nothing.

Nothing!

It felt like I'd been doused in ice water.

Someone's in the house, I thought. Then, *Is Mom OK?*

I leaped up. Mom's door was closed. I threw it open, stepped through. My hand reached for the light switch, but I heard Mom's voice snap: "No light."

I froze. "Mom, there's someone in the house," I whispered. "We've gotta get out of here."

"No one's in the house who shouldn't be," she said. Her voice was strange. It echoed.

I moved toward her bed. Her figure slowly resolved from the darkness. She was sitting up, her head turned in my direction. A thick shadow lay on the sheets beside her. I thought maybe it was a long pillow. But it was so bulky.

Then it moved.

Goosebumps rippled across my scalp and shoulders and down my arms. My whole body thrummed. I couldn't stop a shout.

“Mom!”

“Calm down, Ben,” Mom said firmly. “Don’t have a heart attack like your father did.”

I took a step back from Mom’s bed—then another. “Who? What?”

On its own, my hand seemed to leap to the light switch. I flipped it on. Brightness stunned. Mom winced, threw her hand up to block the light. The shape beside her hissed and twisted off onto the floor. I heard a thump as it landed. I caught only a glimpse but it looked like a pile of knotted rags.

“Ben!” Mom shouted. “Turn off that light! He was scared because something was on your bed. He didn’t know it was you. I told him you’d be upstairs.”

“Told him. Him! What the hell are you talking about? What is that thing?”

Mom lowered her hand. Her gaze met mine. “It’s your brother. It’s Danny.”

“Mom, that thing isn’t Danny. Danny’s dead!”

“He was dead,” she snapped. “The house brought him back.”

I put my back against the wall. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I didn’t know what to do.

“We’re not selling the house,” Mom continued. “I didn’t actually list it with a realtor. I’m sorry. I would have told you. In time. You know I used to be scared in this place. But that was before I realized what it was capable of.”

Mom smiled then. It was horrific to see. She reached her hand down off the side of her bed. I heard a kind of...whine, and something bumped against her fingers like a dog seeking to be petted.

“The house brought Danny back to me,” Mom added. “To us.”

My heart thundered so hard I could scarcely breathe. I wanted to run. But Mom was here. In the house. I couldn’t leave her.

I forced myself away from the wall, inched toward the bed. Closer. Closer. I saw the thing nuzzling at Mom’s hand. It was Danny’s old clothes—and something inside them that had nothing to do with Danny.

A sick taste filled my mouth. “Mom, I— We—”

A sound stopped me: clunk...clunk...clunk. It came from beyond the living room. Beyond the hallway. I recognized it. I’d heard it before. Footsteps.

Someone was coming down the stairs.

I whimpered to myself, as I’d done when I was a child and heard that sound. But Mom heard it and reacted differently. Her face lit with love and hope.

“Oh,” she said. “Finally. That must be your father.”

About the Author:

Charles Gramlich writes from the piney woods of south Louisiana. He has authored the Talera fantasy series and the SF novel Under the Ember Star. His stories have been collected in, Bitter Steel, Midnight in Rosary, and In the Language of Scorpions. He also writes westerns as Tyler Boone. His books are available at Amazon and Barnes & Noble.

Author Blog: [Charles Gramlich](#)

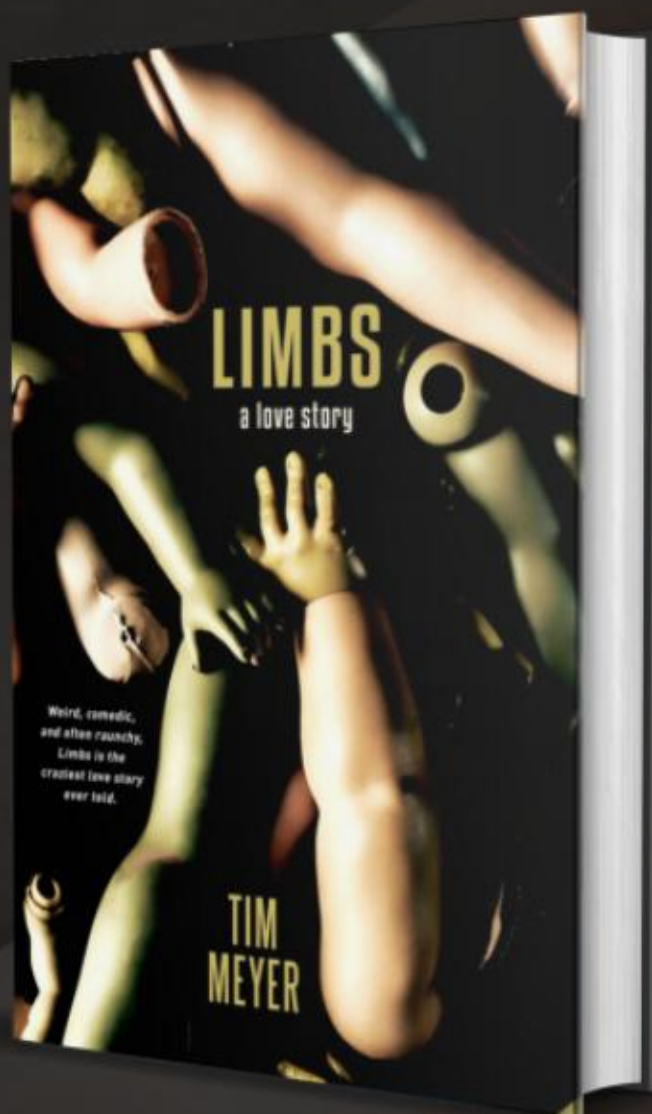
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FROM THE AUTHOR OF "THE SWITCH HOUSE" AND "KILL HILL CARNAGE"

The craziest love story ever told.

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GRINDHOUSE
PRESS

Once the car's lights had been killed, Cyrus realized just how alone he actually was. It was just him and the empty parking lot. Most of the light poles were dead and long neglected. The wind, which had been unusually cold all week, cut through the night like a blade and sent several discarded food wrappers and plastic bottles over the embankment and back into the woods.

Cyrus opened the trunk and counted out the necessary objects—a pack of tarot cards, a few black candles, a bottle of vodka, and a large hunting knife. He also made sure that more personal necessities, especially a flashlight and some water were, also on hand.

Cyrus bundled up all of the items and headed towards the sinister structure in front of him. The Eastbank Mall.

The mall had stood abandoned for several years. The reasons for its closure were numerous. A slew of newer, cleaner malls and strip malls had rendered Eastbank redundant. Also not helping matters was the fact that several of the store chains inside of the mall closed up shop, thus giving Eastbank a half-vacant feel.

The next big blow had been an investigative report done by a local news station. The Chinese buffet-style restaurant located in the mall had been found guilty of serving up road kill to unsuspecting customers. The final blow had left the building possessed, or so Cyrus and few others believed.

The mall had been empty for most of Cyrus's life. Only a few hardcore adherents of a certain website thought about the Eastbank Mall at all, and their interest was decidedly malevolent. To them, the mall was the perfect portal to the other side—an abandoned vortex dripping with evil possibilities. That's why Cyrus had come.

Cyrus had printed out the website's detailed instructions for conjuring magick. The steps, it said, had to be followed in the proper sequence. The instructions also demanded an aesthetically strong individual. That meant that Cyrus had abstained from alcohol, meat, and masturbation for a full month prior to entering the mall. His body felt clean for the first time in years. His fingers twitched with excitement, and despite his best efforts at self-control, Cyrus kept salivating at the corners of his mouth. He did not wipe the evidence away because there was no one there to complain or mock him.

The mall's main doors opened with an audible creak. The hinges were so rusty that Cyrus feared that they might snap at any instant. He walked gingerly into the building. The first thing he noticed (and enjoyed) was just how loud his footfalls were inside of the empty relic.

Cyrus surprised himself by how much he enjoyed walking through the empty department stores. Most had nothing in them but dust and dirty carpets. However, the one large space that had once been a J.C. Penny's still had evidence of its former glory. A few ragged clothes displaying the garish patterns of late '90s fashion were scattered on the floor. Obviously nobody had wanted these t-shirts and sweaters when the store went belly-up. Cyrus did not want them either, but, for a few minutes, he stood in the space and imagined people shopping inside.

Cyrus's generalized dream turned into a specific memory. He saw that hot August day during the town's chicken wing cook-off. The mall's parking lot had been packed with local vendors selling not only chicken wings, but also beer, soda pop, kettle corn, and cotton candy. It was heaven. Better yet, Cyrus got all the free chicken wings he could ever want because his mother, a radio station personality, was one of the contest's judges. She'd pretend to eat the drumsticks, but would wrap them in napkins and hand them to Cyrus, who greedily inhaled the wings while enjoying the summer sunshine behind the judge's tent.

That was one of the few good memories Cyrus had of his mother. A few years later she was dead—the victim of her own recklessness and addiction to prescription drugs. Cyrus had been forced to live with his biological father, who, being himself an alcoholic, gave up Cyrus to his parents. Since then, Cyrus had lived in an old world with old people. Cyrus knew more about 1970s television characters than he did about friendship, love, or basic human contact.

Cyrus consulted the print out. He completed the first of the thirteen steps by walking to the furthest point north in the building and placing a lit black candle there. Cyrus repeated this step for points east, west,

and south. Then, once he had found the true center of the mall, he pulled out his hunting knife and made a small cut on his finger. With his blood he drew a pentagram and placed a lit black candle in the center. To his dismay, the pentagram was imperfect because Cyrus had gotten one of his frequent cold shivers that caused him to slightly twitch at the shoulders. Therefore one of the pentagram's points was rounded and dull rather than sharp.

Subsequent steps involved chanting ritual incantations, all of which had to be repeated seven times. By the last step Cyrus was hoarse and more than a little thirsty.

He took a large swig from the bottle of cheap vodka. He took a second, smaller sip before refilling his mouth then spitting out the alcohol on the central candle. The table was now set. It was time to break the seal.

This required Cyrus's complete concentration. He had to render his mind blank. Once this had been accomplished, he reopened his eyes and pulled out several news clippings and a worn, dog-eared paperback. All of them detailed the tragedy that had occurred inside of the Eastbank Mall on December 12, 2000.

Cyrus visualized that black day. He had read so much about it that it was easy to see the events as they unfolded. At five o'clock, a 19-year-old named Lee Bonaventure walked into the Eastbank Mall. He carried in his hands a guitar case. This was normal, as Lee was known as a local musician in a semi-popular rock band called 20 Eyes. However, the guitar case carried ammunition for a 9mm handgun that Lee had tucked inside of his pants. Lee's black backpack also housed a scoped hunting rifle, which Lee had stolen from his best friend's father.

At five o'clock, while people were busy doing their Christmas shopping inside of the Eastbank Mall, Lee's best friend and his father were a feast for flies. Lee had stabbed his best friend to death with a pair of scissors and had shot the older man to death with his own rifle.

At 5:01, Lee Bonaventure opened fire with the 9mm pistol. He was not a trained marksman, so his first volley did not do much damage. His second round of firing proved more deadly as Lee's initial jitters wore off. He walked calmly through store after store. He shot at anyone that tried to run away. A few survivors would later say that Lee wore a bored expression on his face, almost as if the killing was just 'another day at the office.'

Once he had exhausted his pistol ammo, Lee transitioned to the hunting rifle. He used that weapon to coldly pick off customers who thought that hiding behind food court tables or clothing racks could save them. They did not stand a chance. Once again, Lee said nothing as he coolly and deliberately targeted exposed heads and chests. He did not even smile or look angry. He didn't appear to have any human emotions at all.

Lee's last act came once the local police had finally surrounded the building. Since it was the days before September 11th, and since the small town's police had mostly ignored the lessons learned at Columbine, the cops treated Lee's massacre like a hostage situation. They tried to talk to Lee through a bullhorn. To Lee it was all background noise. He had no intention of leaving the mall alive.

Lee left the blood-soaked scene after an hour. He approached the police cordon with two pipe bombs in his hands. The first one turned out to be a dud. It made a dull clank as it hit one of the blue and gold Crown Vics. The second bomb did detonate, and it embedded pieces of shrapnel in the arm of Patrolman Pat Stanczyk. Lee might have enjoyed wounding the cop, but it didn't matter. By that point he was already dead from several .38 and 9mm bullets fired from angry and scared officers.

Cyrus focused on all of the details of the massacre. He played and replayed the killings from every angle until the whole picture had been visualized. Only when it was all done did Cyrus open his eyes.

The first feeling Cyrus felt was disappointment. He read the instructions again. Specifically he read the final sentence again and again: *The demon that possessed Lee Bonaventure will be seated before you.*

Cyrus scanned the gloom and found no demon or ghost. The abandoned mall felt the same, sounded the same, and smelt the same as when he first entered it. Cyrus resisted it at first, but the conclusion was obvious: the whole thing had been a pathetic bust. The ritual had failed.

A repetition of the whole ordeal would mean that Cyrus would still be busy conjuring as the sun rose. Sunlight would ruin everything, so to start again would be pointless.

As Cyrus left the mall after extinguishing the candles but leaving the bloody pentagram unwashed, he thought about the stupidity of believing that a website and its forum users actually knew anything about demonology or the other world. Cyrus actually came close to crying as he drove back to the house that he shared with his grandparents.

All lights were off inside. That was not surprising; it was four o'clock in the morning after all. Cyrus used his key to open the cellar door that lead to his basement apartment. He threw his supplies down on the floor in disgust. All he wanted to do was go to bed and forget everything.

Instead, Cyrus walked back upstairs in order to make either a sandwich or fix a bowl of cereal. Cyrus usually slept ten hours or more, and he liked eating something before his daily hibernation.

The kitchen upstairs was as spotless as usual. Grandma Jewell was a perfectionist when it came to cleanliness. Grandpa Rick was also cleaner than most men. They more than made up for Cyrus's slovenliness.

Cyrus placed two pieces of rye bread on a section of paper towel. He layered one side up with ham, turkey, and pieces of pepperoni. He placed a slice of Swiss cheese on the other side and smothered both with bright yellow mustard. Had it been any other night or early morning, Cyrus's next move would've been to grab a beer and had back downstairs. Instead, this time Cyrus's attention was drawn to an abnormally loud buzzing sound. It sounded like nothing less than like an invading army of bees or flies.

Cyrus left his sandwich on the kitchen counter in order to find the source of the cacophony. He did not want his grandmother to wake up and accuse him of letting his filthy lifestyle ruin the family home. Cyrus moved from room to room until he realized that the sound kept moving. It was only when he stood still that he could discern the sound's concentration point. His grandparents' bedroom proved to be the source.

Cyrus gently pulled back the sliding door that lead to the bedroom. The comforting smell of Grandma Jewell's lilac-scented candles danced around in Cyrus's nostrils. But, after taking a step into the room, Cyrus smelled something foul and malefic. It was the combination of sulfur and rotting meat. On top of that, Cyrus's entrance coincided with the sudden end of the buzzing. While he could see the flies, he could no longer hear them.

The flies looked like chocolate chips on the beige duvet that his grandparents shared. The covers were undisturbed except for the flies and the blood splatter. Grandma Jewell's face had been partially eaten, with horrific teeth marks left behind in lieu of her nose, chin, and right ear lobe. The muscles and tendons of her neck were likewise exposed.

Grandpa Rick's face had been obliterated. The only reason that Cyrus knew that it was the remains of his face was because of thin strands of gray hair that ringed the red, gray, yellow, and black mess.

None of this caused Cyrus to vomit. Rather, the sickness came up from his stomach and out through his mouth because of what he saw above the bodies. On the headboard above his grandparents' bed was a blood red pentagram with a familiar hitch in its design. It was almost as if the drawer had shivered during the design's creation.

About the Author:

Benjamin Welton is a freelance writer based in Boston.

Author Blog: [Literary Trebuchet](#)
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Cold starlight and winter winds, the only caress on a faded cheek. Memories slither through the gaps in the trees to people the night. She hadn't walked this path for a long time. The first time, she had been young; half a smile at that, bitter now, an uneasy motion of lips that have forgotten softness. *Weakness! The softness, or the forgetting?* She wonders, just for a moment, shrugging off the answer. It doesn't matter. None of it matters any more. Just one more nail in the coffin.

She is too old for this.

Even the spade is too heavy. Cursing arthritic hands, she uses it as a cane instead. At least it has rained. The ground will be wet...

Through the broken gate and into the woods. There would be bluebells in spring. Now, though, the place looks forlorn, draped in ivy and the last brittle leaves. The sack hits a stone. She winces. It is getting too much for her, but there is no one she could ask for help. No one left.

She had never asked. There had never been anyone who would have understood. So she has never told...

A fallen trunk gives her a place to rest. Warm breath makes ragged ghosts in the night. She would have to stop soon... maybe this will be the last time she would visit the woods. Or... maybe not.

Not far now. Her handiwork begins to surround her. Exotic trees of all ages flower out of season, the planting of half a century makes a spiral of colour in the moonlight of the little clearing. Children play here in summer, finding fairyland under the blossom, poets find inspiration in its delicacy and lovers a secret bower of beauty when the moon is full...

For a little while she walks through the trees, reaching out a hand to caress the bark, the tenderness of a lover in her fingertips. She can lose herself in memory here...

Not tonight, though. Soon the frost will come... and there is another tree to plant.

Weary already, she carefully cuts the turf and lays it beside the sack... winter green against the fragile pink branches that peep from its opening. When she is done, the sapling will grow undisturbed. Evergreen, this one. It will outlive her, she knows. She breaks the earth and begins to dig. Deeper and deeper. A satisfaction in the ache of muscles long accustomed to the work. Slower though, now... after a lifetime...

Finally it is deep enough. Just wide enough for the roots to be spread, but deep, very deep.

She drags the sack closer, taking out the sapling and gently spreading root and branch she lays it aside. It will be a beautiful addition to her secret garden. Then she tips the body head first into its narrow grave. *He'd lasted longer than the others...* as the earth closed over him. *He deserves an evergreen...*

About the Author:

Sue Vincent is a Yorkshire-born writer, painter and award winning poet. She is also one of the Directors of The Silent Eye, a modern Mystery School. Sue lives in Buckinghamshire, England, having been stranded there due to an unfortunate incident with a pin, a map and a blindfold. She writes of myth, magic and the ancient landscape of Albion, the hidden country of the heart.

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No one was sure exactly where the thing came from, although the general consensus gravitated toward the city junkyard, which was less than a block away.

Regardless of its origin, the creature, which was about the size of your average German Shepherd, skittered out onto Lovely Lane without warning, forcing driver Julia Ryder to slam on her breaks and swerve at the last second. Her efforts were in vain, however, as impact with the beast was imminent, resulting in a dented front bumper and the sickly crunch of an exoskeleton on the part of the jaywalking animal. It died instantly, being knocked onto its back and sticking its sextet of legs skyward in a death pose stereotypical for its kind.

The trouble was, no one knew what bug it was, or why it was so big for that matter.

After the police finished with their accident report and Ms. Ryder was free to go, the Crime Scene Investigation team took over, to determine exactly what species of gigantic insect it was lying in the middle of Lovely Lane, and where it came from. Time and discretion were of the essence, since the peculiarity of the situation was drawing a bit of a crowd in the early evening suburban setting.

"Alright beautiful," said etymologist Cora Scorpo, kneeling down beside the hit-and-run victim, "let's see what you are, shall we?"

"Shouldn't you move it to your lab?" one of the policemen asked, worried about crowd control.

"No, we run the risk of compromising the body. It's already fragile due to the car impact. Best to do an initial analysis here before we cart it away and lose evidence." Opening a box of what looked like surgical tools and booting up her laptop, she began her examination.

"What evidence?" one of the onlookers asked like comedy club heckler. "It's a gall-durn road kill cockroach. Any damn fool can see that. Probably grew humungous on sewer waste or something."

"It might look like a cockroach because it's on its back," one of the ladies in the front of the crowd argued, "but look at those stripes, and that thing sticking out of its tail. You can't tell me that's not a bee."

"Bee schmee," a third party piped in. "All kinds of insects have stingers. The segmentation of its body clearly indicates it's an ant of some kind, probably a fire ant."

"Fire ants don't sting, they bite," the first man pointed out. "And how would a fire ant end up in a place like this?"

"That thar's a 'skeeter needle," said a fourth, "an' don't tell me t'ain't."

"Folks, please," the police officer hushed. "Let's leave this to the experts, shall we? Why don't you all go on home? We have the situation in hand."

"Actually," Cora said, double-checking her results, "that might be a bad idea."

"A bad idea to go home? Why?"

"Look at these readings." She pointed to a series of numbers and graphs that were pretty much Greek to everyone else.

"I don't understand." The cop moved closer to the screen. "What am I looking at?"

Cora guided her finger across the readouts so he could follow. "First of all, looks like everyone's a winner when it comes to species. Traces of formicidae, apis, culicidae, blattaria and other insects."

"English, please?"

"It's a hybrid of some kind. I've never seen anything like it, large or small. And look at these numbers," she moved her gloved index finger over. "This is the Geiger assessment. The readings are off the charts."

"Wait, are you telling me this thing is radioactive?"

"Highly," Cora confirmed.

Some members of the crowd took several steps back while others suddenly saw reason to leave all together.

"What in the world would cause that?"

"Well," assessed the bug expert, "I would need more data to be sure, but from what we know, what do

you think would cause a mutation that would combine several different insect species together, make it grow to twenty times its normal size and emit high levels of radioactivity?"

The man who claimed it was a roach had a thought. "It's nuclear waste. It's gotta be. There was a time that they was a-dumpin' the stuff at the junkyard, what, twenty years ago now I guess? Perps got hefty fines and had to clean it all up. Maybe they missed a tank or two."

"Or maybe they never cleaned it up at all," the argumentative woman with the bee theory countered.

One of the other CSIs walked over and confirmed, "Radioactivity trace does lead back to the junkyard. If it's not our point of origin, then it at least went through that way to get here."

"Alright." Cora stood up. "Officer, I suggest we start an evacuation of the town, seal off the borders and contact the National Guard right away."

"What? Why?"

"Because," she said matter-of-factly, "insects by themselves are nuisances. Combined, gigantic and full of radiation," she gestured to her patient, "they're certainly deadly. Imagine if you will a creature that has the weapon of a bee, the bloodlust of a mosquito and the armor of cockroach, all inflated to this size, emitting radiation and on the prowl for food."

"It would be...indestructible," the talkative man in the crowd concluded.

"Or at least difficult to kill, unless you hit it with your car," Cora amended.

"What makes you think there's more than one?" the cop asked.

"When was the last time you saw just one bug?"

Still confused, the cop added while looking at the thing, trying to understand, "And you think they're looking for food?"

"Yes. That's the ant part. It's scouting."

"And what food would something of this size and construct be looking for?"

Further down Lovely Lane a woman started screaming.

A few blocks away the sound of screeching tires and a crash could be heard.

Several car alarms start going off all over the neighborhood.

Panicking, the crowd disbanded.

"Us," Cora told the cop.

About the Author:

Kent Rosenberger is the result of too many candy bars, Saturday morning cartoons, '80s rock, breakfast cereal and classic science fiction books and films. He likes to write things that make people see ordinary events in a slightly skewed way.

Amazon Author Page: [Kent Rosenberger](#)

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Broken Flowers | *Alexis Child*

I am interrupted by a stranger's shadow
picking patterns in chaos, tense as a violin
string under the unyielding weight of serotonin's
symphony as the imperious conductor's baton
shivers and spins a whirling dervish of words,
screaming through my hair and blood, surging
wildly like a lash of electric bolts through skin.

The whipping wind of steel-and-hooves fight
against unbreakable bonds chaining him in mind.
Without rule over his spirit, he is broken down like
a city without walls. The obscured eyes of Jekyll
and Hyde fall into distinct darkness hiding the sun,
and only sudden exposure to light will spare our life.

About the Author:

Alexis Child lives in Toronto, Canada where horror is in its purest form and is haunted by the memory of her cat. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in numerous publications. Her first collection of poetry, a dark and sinister slice of the macabre gothic, horror, surreal, and supernatural—DEVIL IN THE CLOCK—is available on Amazon.

Website: <http://www.angelfire.com/poetry/alexischild/>

Facebook: [Alexis Child](#)

Space Invaders | *Timothy Hosey*

There are space invaders festering inside the empty
cavity of the cranium.
Their writhing entrails during the Summer Season,
as larval stages closes near,
encased in their slug-like cocoon skin for months.
The lingering scent of decay draws them,
Their mandibles writhing with delight,
for that they are the carion of the dead:

they are a lonely species and must feed,
like every species of fly that needs a host.

About the Author:

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

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The one hundred and thirty-eighth rejection of Grey's zombie novel was the straw that finally broke the camel's back. *Other writers offering far inferior work could get published, why couldn't he*, thought Grey.

Those bastards, those smug, self-satisfied bastards. They'd taken their books to the fabled 'Palace of Publishing,' snared an agent, secured a publisher, been paid an advance, and stepped into the express elevator to literary success. They thought they were so clever, with their story editors to sharpen their plots and their copy editors to tidy their punctuation. And here he was, still unrecognized, hawking his first three chapters to literary agents, who either brushed him aside or took his lovingly prepared proposal, and dumped it into the waste bin as soon as they got back to the office.

Things were going to change though, he'd show them, he'd show the lot of them. He had their addresses. They'd been published in error in the brochure of the Annual Suffolk Literary Festival. He'd got hold of petrol, rags and a number of old, wide mouthed milk bottles which he'd found in their galvanised crate on a farm rubbish heap.

He knew who would be first; that bastard, Mike Wattam. He didn't need the address list to find him; he'd known him for years, and his house was in a village only a few miles away. Four books he'd published, all detective novels, all earning the handsome royalties he boasted about every time they bumped into each other in the local supermarket. Bloody detective novels, not even proper literature. He might as well have been writing bodice rippers or chick lit under an assumed name. Why should he have all the gravy?

It was midnight, and Grey had driven to Wattam's village and parked as close to his house as he dared. He opened the boot of the car, half-filled four of the bottles with petrol, stuffed in the rags, and placed his Molotov cocktails into a bag. He was all ready to 'toast' the Great Man.

The thin hedge scratched him as he pushed through it and into the author's sizeable garden. The house loomed, a darker patch against the midnight sky. Wattam could only afford it because he'd married the right partner, a spinster from the local farming community, a dumpy woman who hung on his every stupid word and probably thought he was a bloody genius. Good luck!

Grey approached the back of the house, stopped on the lawn and placed the bag of incendiaries at his feet. He took out a bottle and shook it to wet the rag. He struck a match, lit the rag and drew back his arm to throw the bottle through an upstairs window. Then he remembered the thatched roof. How could he have forgotten that the house was thatched; what a blaze it would make. The fire service would never arrive in time to put it out. It would even be visible from his own house three miles away, once he'd quit the scene.

The flaming missile somersaulted lazily upwards onto the roof. The thatch should have caught light instantly but it was still soaked from the previous night's heavy rain. The flaming bottle rolled back down the steep incline, bumped over the gutter and dropped two stories before smashing over Grey's head.

Instantly he was a man of flames, running in circles shouting, "Mike, Mike, help me, help me," before he crashed screaming back through the hedge and onto the lane. He struggled blindly towards the bridge, hoping to douse himself in the village stream, but after a dozen steps he fell to his hands and knees, crawled briefly forward, then collapsed and lay still. The flames slowly died and smoke drifted from his blackened flesh and charred clothing.

Back at the house a light came on at an upstairs window, it creaked open as Wattam thrust out his's tousled head, supported on his scrawny neck. He peered myopically into the darkness as he struggled with his spectacles, and sniffed the air.

"Rather late for a barbeque and all this noise," he called out grumpily at whoever had disturbed his sleep. He paused to listen, when there was no answer he grunted, withdrew his head, closed the window and pulled the curtain.

The Moon shone over the timeless Suffolk village, with its stream, its humpbacked brick bridge and its round-towered flint church. Nothing moved in the author's garden or the churchyard it adjoined. There was peace, silence, and a surprisingly appetizing smell of roasted meat.

About the Author:

Roger Ley's stories have appeared in about twenty ezines in the last year. His books include: "Dead People on Facebook," a recently released collection of flash fiction stories in various speculative genres including Steampunk, Horror, Sci Fi, Time travel, a little magic and one Romance. "Chronoscape," a science fiction novel about time and alternate realities.

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

Hildie St. Claire shuffled down the aisle of the deserted convenience store viciously kicking at the candy wrappers, cigarette butts, and drug paraphernalia littering the floor. Cursing at the futility of life, love and ambition, she was startled by a sound that stopped her cold in mid "sh-". Amid the whirring and clicking of freezers struggling to keep the ice cream hard on a sweltering night, she detected a chuckling, soft and sinister like a snake with asthma.

Shuddering, Hildie fearfully went in search of the noise. She took a shaky breath and announced in a loud shriek, "I'm tired of being browbeaten by this stinking city, and I'm tired of being afraid. I refuse to be intimidated anymore!"

With a surge of courage, she ran back to her cash register and grabbed the manager's gun from the drawer underneath. She smiled and thought, *I'm done being oppressed and I won't be frightened anymore, not by those hairy rats hiding in the back room, or junkies shooting up in the alley, or by this lousy city that's sucking the talent from my feet and brain.*

Armed with both bullets and bravado, Hildie wandered the quiet and seemingly empty store. Alert for danger at every corner, she suspected that she was only over-reacting from the stress of this minimum wage job and the knowledge that she was a failure. In the ten years that she'd been here, she'd never once gotten even a call back, let alone a part in the chorus line of a show. Now, on top of that, she discovered that Bucky, that two-timing piece of crap who wasn't even good enough to grace her cesspool, had married Maryjane McCoy last weekend.

Hildie leaned against the soda case and snorted with disgust as she thought about their tearful farewell. There she'd been, boarding a bus, suitcase and purse in one hand, tap shoes in the other, and Bucky sniveling at her feet.

"Don't go Hildie," he sobbed. "Oh, baby, the city will eat you alive!"

"But Bucky, I have to go," she said prying his fingers from her arm. "I have got to prove to all these hicks that Hildie St. Claire is just too good for this poor excuse of a town."

Then pausing to pose dramatically on the bottom step of the bus, she tossed back her blond mane and announced, "I've got the looks, I've got the brains, and I've got the talent to beat the odds and become a star!"

Pounding on the door as it closed with a hydraulic hiss, Bucky bellowed, "Hildie, I love you, come back to me!"

She blew him a kiss from the grease and bug smeared rear window as the bus pulled away and shouted loud enough to bother all the other passengers, "Wait for me, Bucky. I'll send for you when I get famous."

"Wait for me," she muttered, back in the present once again. "That slimebucket must have been jumping old Maryjane ten minutes after I left town."

She tiptoed down the baby food section angry at herself for even being in the store at three in the morning. "How did Juan talk me into working the graveyard shift again, anyway?" She muttered. "How the hell did I end up working in a dump like this instead of dancing my way to the footlights?"

Turning a corner, she stopped abruptly. Her eyes widened with fear. There, in the breakfast food section, all the cereal boxes had been emptied into a monstrously huge pile; a pile of living, moving, groping wheat and bran flakes, oat crispies, raspberry red, lemon yellow, orange orange, rice and corn puffs, with a rainbow assortment of marshmallow treats.

The sugar and starch blob seemed to turn toward her and laugh. "Cackle, crackle, pop," it hissed and started dragging itself to the refrigerated case half an aisle away.

Terror clawed at Hildie's paralyzed throat. She tried to scream but no sound came out. Hildie dropped the gun and all pretense of bravery and weakly fell to her knees. She wanted to crawl away home, home to that hick town, home to admit defeat. She realized that pride meant nothing when facing death.

The creature blocked her way to the door and the emergency exit was chained. Scrabbling desperately like a crab in heat, she headed to the coffee counter to hide in the cabinet underneath.

Crouched into a ball next to the filters in the soft, stifling darkness, she breathed softly though her mouth trying not to make any noise. She could hear the refrigerator door opening and liquid gurgling. Then came an ominous crunching, slurping, slushing sound drawing closer and closer.

Glaring light blinded her as the counter was violently knocked over. Hildie finally found her voice and screamed as loud as she could in both horror and pain as steaming coffee scalded her back and shoulders. She continued screaming, knowing it was hopeless, but unable to stop.

She felt slimy tentacles of cereal growing soggy in milk grab her, grope her and drag her from the hiding place. Hildie screamed on as she opened her tightly closed eyes to stare at the milky, wet monster towering over her.

"Oh lord, help me," she whimpered as she finally stopped her shrill cries. Then giving up, Hildie opened her arms to the slimy mass that enveloped her. Gasping for the breath that would not, could not come, Hildie felt squishy tendrils jam into her mouth, and nose. As she sucked frantically, breathing in and choking on her killer, a wave of darkness descended upon her blotting out everything.

Just before dawn Sergeant James Wilton and Lieutenant Charlie Crabb stood next to the body of Hildie St. Claire still lying in a pool of curdling milk and mashed cereal. "I never get used to it, ya know," Crabb said turning away.

"Yeah," Wilton agreed. "This is the seventh case in the last month and they're exactly the same, death by suffocation. I guess it's time to admit it.... We've got cereal killer on our hands."

About the Author:

Diane Arrelle has had more than 250 short stories published as well as two short story collections: *Just A Drop In The Cup* and *Seasons On The Dark Side*.

Author Blog: [Arrelle Writes](#)

Facebook: [Diane Arrelle](#)

Psychosomatic screams dissipate | R.A. Smith

Ignore fictitious demons
Pharmaceutical therapy will correct you soon
Release now, completely transcend

Ignore fictitious demons
Calm the turmoil and have a drink
Release now, completely transcend
Unsung shade of anonymous renown

Calm the turmoil and have a drink
Bleach sanctifies unsavory deed
Unsung shade of anonymous renown
Nightmares will become counterfeit

Bleach sanctifies unsavory deed
Pharmaceutical therapy will correct you soon
Nightmares will become counterfeit
Psychosomatic screams dissipate

About the Author:

R. A. Smith is an Australian author, poet and voice actor. He co-authored the *Everly is Everywhere* series of children's books and currently publishes *Space and Time* magazine, a 52 year old publication dedicated to fantasy, horror and science fiction. His current novel, *Shadow's Lament*, is set to be released in 2019.

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

DIANE ARRELLE SEASONS ON THE DARK SIDE



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

You do dumb shit as a kid, which is why we stood there on a cold Halloween night all those years ago. Before us was The Shuttered Shack. Kim had said that year she'd planned something cool, and because we weren't Big Kids yet, Ronny and I believed her. Kim was someone that wasn't afraid to knock four times on The Shuttered Shack's door. After all, she was a Big Kid.

"I said I didn't want to get grounded because you made us do stupid stuff again," Ronny said as we regarded the shack, its rotting frame watching us from behind crumbling walls. Behind us a hundred tiny ghouls and warlocks knocked on strangers' doors for sweets. Nobody knocked on The Shuttered Shack's door, not even jokingly, for fear Old Jones would slice them up from beyond, as rumor said he'd done to his wife and kids.

Nobody knocked except us.

"Don't be a big baby," Kim said, hands firmly on her hips. "Nobody's been inside for sixty years. Even Old Jones' ghost will be dead by now."

"You sure 'bout that?" I asked. The house's cracked boards and unkempt lawn sent fresh shivers down my spine.

Kim raised an eyebrow. "Want me to tell Jenny you were both too scared to go inside?"

"No way, José," I said. Jenny Adams' lips were worth fighting ghosts with bare hands for. Damn Kim for managing it, but my mind was made up in the instant of seeing Jenny's face in my mind. "Ronny? You coming in?"

"Um..."

"Let's leave him here, Dan. He's obviously too much of a scaredy-cat."

"I am *not* a scaredy-cat. You take that back!"

"Then come with us into the house."

Ronny looked at the house, up and down the street, then back at the house. "Doesn't look like I've got much choice."

Kim smiled. "That's more like it."

I took a deep breath as, under the watchful shadow of The Shack's withered oak, we approached the front door. Kim's hand trembled as she took the cold black handle and swung the required four times as according to legend. Old Jones' ghost hopefully appeased, we opened the door to the gloom. Kim and I stepped reverently over the threshold. Ronny waited nervously outside, cloaked in Halloween's black and orange.

"Jenny Adams is puckering up, Ronny," Kim said. That was all it took for him to scamper inside. The door swung shut behind the three of us apparently of its own volition.

Kim handed us wind-up torches and we began our investigations. Shadows fled from our torch beams before regrouping behind. Everything in the house was draped in a thick carpet of dust and the furniture wore veils of cobwebs. Every object was a ghost, half a century old; phantoms from a world long dead.

We wandered through the dark house like explorers of an ancient crypt, our weak torchlight prying feebly into the alcoves and recesses. The shadows and pools of darkness that the disjointed architecture created could have founded myths about the place long before Old Jones had started hearing voices in his head. Before, the legend says, someone climbed inside him and began to kill.

We found nothing on the ground floor, the sound of our heartbeats never diminishing. It was Kim, disappointed with the ground floor's lack of evil, who took the first creaking steps up the crooked, ramshackle stairs.

"You sure this is safe?" I asked.

"Of course it's safe."

I didn't believe her, but I remembered Jenny's lips. And besides, I wasn't a scaredy-cat. I slowly followed her and, almost whimpering, Ronny brought up the rear. None of his usual colour had returned to his face since we'd entered. He was paler than virgin death.

After climbing the staircase with my hand white-knuckle-tight on the rail we stopped dead on the landing. Orange light spilt from under one of the doors like blood.

"Someone's here," Kim whispered.

At this, Ronny started his retreat. "Nuh uh," he said. "No way, José. I ain't doing this no more."

"Don't you dare leave now," Kim hissed.

"Come on," I said to him, now swept up in Kim's fever of adventure. Blood pumped feverously. "You're my support."

Ronny shook his head. "I ain't having Old Jones chop me up jus' to be your support."

"Jenny will think you're a scaredy-cat," Kim whispered. "Dan will get her all to himself."

Ronny stopped, considering. "You know what? He can have her, if you make it out alive." With that he left the house, the two of us now alone to face whatever was in the orange room.

"We going after him?"

Kim didn't even bother answering. We both knew that he had backed out and left us, and as such, we had to continue on our own. We had no time for those that couldn't face whatever the world threw at you.

We advanced carefully, an eye always on the stairs in case we needed an exit, pronto. Kim crouched and put an ear to the door. I held my breath. After an eternity she tentatively pushed the creaking door open.

Inside was a great black cauldron in the center of the old master bedroom. Bottles and jars sat in the hulking shadow. A dozen candles flickered in eerie incandescence, and the bookshelf of ancient tomes looked well used, spines cracked and fading. A broom was propped up by the boarded windows.

I made the sign of the cross and tried to follow Ronny.

"Just a crazy nature lady," Kim hissed, pulling me back inside. "Come on."

"Witch," I mumbled. "It's a witch."

"There aren't any witches, anymore. They were all burned years ago," Kim said. She walked to the cauldron and peered inside. The cauldron, for now, was empty. Kim reached into the vials by the side of it and picked up a thick black tome that lay open beside it. It felt evil, even across the room. "Wow, this nature lady really *is* crazy."

I didn't need much convincing of that. I threw my torchlight onto the rack of jars filled with herbs and animal parts. Wing of bat, eye of newt, blood of wolf, they were all genuinely there, lined up like gobstoppers and strawberry laces at a sweet shop. Witch or not, whoever lived there definitely thought they were one.

"Mimicry," Kim read. "How to steal voices, as first described by Salem Craft." She flicked to another page. "And here, listen. On the Art of Possession, by Ashtareth. Damn, she's definitely cracked, has this one."

From the corner of my eye I saw a candle flicker out in an absent breeze. I felt the shadows take a step closer towards us, threatening to put black hands on our throats. "Let's go," I said. "We've explored, dare finished. Now let's get the hell outta here."

Kim ignored me. "Imitation, The Disembodied Voice, Witchcraft 1641." As she read the names out I felt the floorboards under the black tome creak, as if the book was suddenly heavier.

Our torches switched themselves off in our hands.

Banging them against our palms did no good; they were definitely dead. Another candle flickered out in the still air. We turned to watch as the candles died one by one, as if someone were extinguishing them with a thumb and finger.

"Time to go," Kim said.

"Finally."

In the dim light we saw a small shadow beginning to climb the stairs. Panic gripped our throats. We looked around frantically in vain for an escape. Spying an old wardrobe in the corner we slipped inside as the final candle flickered out.

Terror gripped us as we waited. Waited. Holding our breath.

Footsteps. Light and careful. Kim's hand clamped over my mouth. Silence embraced us like a winter chill.

"Dan?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. Ronny had come back. I relaxed and went to open the door, and as the tiniest sliver of ghastly moonlight spilled through the crack I saw Kim's eyes wide with fear. She pulled the door shut again, fingernail stopping it clicking. In the faintest whisper she mouthed: "Stole his voice."

"Where are you?"

The book. The one whose aura of evil had grown as the candles had been snuffed out. Mimicry.

I wanted to argue, to open the door and show how stupid she was. Even my nine year old brain knew that it was Ronny outside, not some witch that had stolen his voice. But Kim was a Big Kid. She knew things that I didn't yet.

And I had seen her eyes.

I've never seen such terror in someone's eyes. It was the distillation of pure fear in all its glory. The shadow we had seen could have been Ronny, or it could have been a withered witch bent over. I'd seen enough movies for me to shudder at what could happen to me if she found us.

"Kim? You guys already gone?"

Until I opened that door, I had no way to tell if that was Ronny standing there or if he was being forced to speak through *her*. Sweat dripped down my face into my eyes.

The footsteps stopped outside the wardrobe.

I squeezed my eyes shut. It could be Ronny out there. But if I opened the door I could be sliced up by Old Jones as Ronny had said I would be, bones dropped in the cauldron. For my life, I had to assume that it was a monster out there.

"Dan?"

The voice was so close; it could have been in my head. Right then I imagined that there was nothing outside the door, that I *was* only hearing Ronny inside my head. I felt the tension begin to ebb away from me as I accepted something I couldn't verify. Perhaps the reason I've never told this to anyone is not because no sane person would believe me, but because of my shame at that moment. My shame in doing what I had to do, what no nine year old boy should ever have to do.

I let him go. In my mind, he was dead. I killed my best friend in the whole world.

My shoulders dropped. I stopped holding my breath and let out a silent sigh. As the tension ebbed away from my bones I imagined Ronny floating out on a tide of mist. He faded into the gloom of things lost to play with his favorite paper and footballs from the distant past.

The footsteps moved away from the wardrobe and, after a few minutes, left the room altogether. Silence dropped over the room like a bat swooping down from the dark and it stayed there, waiting for us to give ourselves away.

We didn't stir for ten minutes, huddled there in the wardrobe's womb-like protection, Kim's hand still clamped over my mouth. Slowly she opened the door. A second later we slipped out into the room.

Kim rushed to the door to see if the coast was clear, but I didn't go too quickly after her. To me, if the Voice-Snatcher came and ate me, it might be well deserved. I noticed as we left that all the candles were lit again. Whether *she* had lit them, or if they had sprung back to light, was anyone's guess, and another thing that I never discovered. When we got outside to the hustle of civilization, where witches were plastic and cauldrons were filled only with Dairy Milk and Wine Gums, we split without saying a word. It was as if someone had stolen our voices.

I told the police the next day that I hadn't seen Ronny since the afternoon at school. Kim hadn't seen him either. They wouldn't have believed us anyway.

When I saw a small, windup torch on the steps to The Shuttered Shack two weeks later as I passed by, smattered with browned blood, I didn't question it. She knew. With a new coldness in my heart I picked it up and went home. I should have disposed of it immediately, but it's still here, sitting next to me right now.

As I said, you do stupid shit as a kid.

About the Author:

Kieran Judge is an MA Creative Writing Student at Aberystwyth University. He writes non-fiction for many online sites, including HorrorAddicts.net and thefilmagazine.com. His fiction has appeared in issues #41 and #44 of *Sirens Call* previously, along with DarkFireFiction.com. More of his work is slated for appearance in *Lovecraftiana*, and numerous anthologies, throughout 2019.

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Fill in for Fate | *Lydia Prime*

Fragile as rose petals, the tomes must be rewritten, rebound; the lifeblood of those who've gone before, wasted. Their scent causes my eyes to water, the text itself brings on a feeling of burning within my soul. Who began these works? I wonder while I glance at the shelves surrounding me. My tears stain the sheet as they drop from my face. Another page I must rewrite, Why does this ache so much?

As the night wears on and the candles fade, I do too; my chest heaves deeply. Who else would willingly take on such a task? My mind wanders to all those who'd ventured this chamber before. "Work quickly," words slither through my ears as venom does my veins; the only advice received from the other.

I carefully ink the final page and feel my soul slowly fading from my body. I chose this, I know, but to parade as one of the fates seemed much more glamorous than how this wretched task feels.

Shallow breaths, my pulse in my ears; one word left, I don't wish to do this. A language that has flown so freely through my mind to my hand, one I will never speak, yet I have written so clearly. Shedding tears for myself, I scribble the last of it, breathing has become a chore; the warmth grows deep from within.

Wailing, my fingers twitch and I can feel my body shutting down. My skin feels as through it's slipping off my bones; my spirit ready to escape. As I lay down the scribe, through shimmering vision I see another tome claiming its form.

About the Author:

Lydia is that friendly monster under your bed just waiting for you to stick your limbs out from beneath the covers. She tends to frequent the nightmares others dare not tread. When she's not trying to shred scraps of humanity from the unsuspecting, she writes stories and poems of the horror and dark fiction variety.

Instagram: [@Helminthophobia](#)

Twitter: [@LydiaPrime](#)

Comrades on the Road | *Edilson Afonso Ferreira*

I believe there is a conspiracy ongoing
involving all of us.
I don't know when or where it began,
nor who initiated it.
They occult from me their talks
just I approach one of them.
It seems to me a stealthy fellowship,
a strange one, of saints and demons,
angels and warlocks, even goblins.
They congregate to rule all people,
fighting for our souls, one by one.
Someone has been told it is a caste
that rids humanity from wrecking
and leaves it alive on the road,
leavening us before ultimate battle.

About the Author:

A Brazilian poet, Edilson Afonso Ferreira, 75 years, writes in English rather than in Portuguese. Largely published in international journals in print and online, he began writing at age 67. Nominated for The Pushcart Prize 2017, his first Poetry Collection, *Lonely Sailor, One Hundred Poems*, was launched in London, November 2018, by Olympia Publishers.

Author Blog: [EdilsonMeloFerreira](#)



NOISTROMO.COM
M. SIERGIEJEV

It began on a Wednesday in north London. The door was open at the investigation agency so I strode into the office without knocking. My boss looked up, frowned and dropped the postcard he had been studying into a desk drawer. On the card I glimpsed a photo of a starry sky. He slammed the drawer shut, said "Read this" and flung a folder across his desk.

The dossier held information on a missing persons case but I preferred surveillance of a cheating spouse or bugging someone's phone. Safe and simple suited me. I told my boss "No way."

He reminded me he was also my landlord and that taking on this job would cancel my arrears. Dabbing his sweating brow with a polka-dotted handkerchief, he said "Stopping for a drink, young man? It's on the house" and laughed, but not in a warm way.

On Friday my train arrived at dusk in a small town in the south-east of England. It was near the coast but lacked a view upon the sea. The empty station had neither staff on duty nor taxis waiting so I left on foot. It was autumn and I had assumed accommodation would be easy to find but I saw no boarding houses, only terraced homes with curtains closed. The crumbling side streets looked grim to spend the night in and I didn't want to be relieved of my wallet or knifed while sleeping. Life was already too expensive and too short.

The town was unnaturally quiet and the absence of cars or pedestrians suggested the curfew of an occupying army. I ventured down an alleyway to see if it would lead to a busier neighbourhood. From behind a stack of cardboard boxes, an animal growled and my pulse rocketed as a pit bull terrier stepped into view. A leather cord knotted to its collar was clutched at the other end by a large fist. The owner of the fist peered out from inside an upended box and a mask of bandages hid his face. In a croaking voice he said,

"This town's not safe for someone like you. Stay with us and we'll look after you. Don't fret. My mutt was never near those damn meteors."

I wasn't sure of the man's motives or which meteors he referred to so I told him I'd return tomorrow. It was possible he had information that could help me find the missing couple but I sensed he wanted something from me. As I left he said,

"Mate, could you spare a bit of change for some food? We haven't eaten today."

I trudged through the rain until I came to a row of derelict houses. Many of their windows were smashed and in the roof of one was a large circular hole as if a cannon had been fired at it. At the end of the block was an intact building with a neon sign declaring LODGING HOUSE. A placard hanging behind the glass of the front door said FULL UP and I hoped that someone had left it there by mistake. Evening rain was needling my hands and face as I peered in at the crimson-lit reception desk and the drizzle was not getting warmer. I took a chance the placard was left in error and turned the brass doorknob. It was as greasy as if somebody had slapped it with a pork chop. I advanced inside and heard a saxophone crooning in the background. On the desktop was a bell made from the same grease-smeared brass. I rang it once. In response, a woman of unguessable age ambled out from between curtains behind the desk. She was pale and gaunt and her manner was slow and regal. Her eyes scoured me with suspicion, creating the impression of an exiled queen in a hostile land. She peered over my shoulder, checking that no one else was lurking outside.

"Madam, I am looking for lodgings for the night. Are there any vacancies?"

"You didn't see the sign, honey? We're full. Most of the residents here are permanent."

The image of the alleyway and its occupants still disturbed me.

"I don't know this town. The weather is dreadful. I really don't want to sleep on the street."

The woman pondered. "There's a small room up the top, but there's no view."

"That will be perfect. Should I pay you now?"

"Pay when you leave. You look honest enough to me. I'll just go and get the keys so grab a seat by the fire and switch the radio off if it's bugging you. And don't let anyone in at this time of night."

She sauntered away again. From the antique wooden radio, a melancholic trumpet sobbed and I settled in a fireside armchair. Logs sizzled and snapped, the chair was well sprung and comfortable and a bunch of lilies in a vase made the place welcoming. I set down my backpack on the floor and took out a photo of the missing couple. They were fresh-faced and blonde-haired, wore matching white tee shirts and had carefree expressions. I replaced the photo in my backpack, wondering why the hotelier had not returned. I stood up and wandered over to a sideboard where there was a bottle of hazel-coloured liquid along with an empty tumbler. Was it some kind of whisky? The writing on the bottle's label was in a language I could not decipher and above the enigmatic script was an image of a planet similar to Saturn but coloured red. Obviously it was a trademark. I looked behind me to check I wasn't being watched, unscrewed the cap and sniffed the contents. It smelled slightly sweet, like tequila and I was curious what the drink might be. Knowing I was doing wrong, I raised the bottle to my lips and took the tiniest sip of a sugary liquid with a searing, chemical aftertaste. Rapidly I put down the bottle and screwed the cap shut and returned to my seat. At least this place was safe from any threat and I could relax without anxiety. Somewhere outside in the rain, a dog barked. Immediately afterwards came the sound of someone shrieking. 'Not my problem' I told myself. I felt too relaxed to care about anything, anymore and my eyelids became heavy.

Nausea. Weakness. My forehead pulsed. I opened my eyes and spluttered. I was lying in a tiny room. A bare bulb cast a dim glow and a brick wall blocked the window's view. When I tried to recall the end of the night before, my memory yielded nothing. Had there been something toxic in that drink? Perhaps it wasn't for human consumption but I only had myself to blame. I swung my legs off the bed and staggered three steps.

The door handle was coated in grease and it wouldn't budge. When I knocked, no one answered. My boss could not advise me as my technophobia had stopped me buying a mobile phone. I thumped the door. Silence replied and I slammed the door with my shoulder.

"Yar yar yar!"

The sound of barking made me recoil. Creaking as if propelled by a rusty mechanism, the door slowly opened. In the corridor, no animal was visible and only a closed room opposite confronted me. I was quivering in fear after hearing the aggressive canine. I slowed my breathing, preparing to flee when a voice rasped from along the passageway,

"Careful, mate! The dogs are out to play. If you let them touch you they'll burn your skin."

"Which dogs? And who are you?" I shouted in reply.

"Any dogs that went near the damn meteors. Get in here with me, mate. There's strength in numbers."

The hoarse voice reminded me of the denizen of the alleyway. After drinking that peculiar drink, had I become intoxicated and let him and his hound in off the street? My thoughts were interrupted as the door opposite mine swung open.

On the bed crouched a blonde-haired young woman and a blonde-haired young man. The woman stared at me and said in a dazed voice,

"Are you here to rescue us?"

They were the missing couple. Her boyfriend turned to discover who she had spoken to. I wished I could have unseen what I saw next. The skin of his face was a shambles of folds and pouches. His shrivelled nose and the remnants of his lips barely covered bone and teeth. His eyelids were missing and his eyes lay exposed in their sockets. He outstretched one hand and opened his mouth to produce a croaking sound. The building trembled and their door closed. I stumbled and retched.

The premises became silent. After I had regained some self-possession, I wandered out into the passageway. Once I had escaped I would contact the police and they would catch whoever had mutilated the young man. Dogs that could burn flesh were clearly a fantasy and the inventor of that make-believe was trying to conceal his crime.

All the other rooms I saw were shut and my surroundings had become so soundless I felt like I was trespassing in someone else's dream. I crept to the end of the passageway. Facing me were red-painted shutters that reached from floor to ceiling. A brass latch fastened them. Like other fittings in here, it too was covered with a greasy substance. I forced the latch upwards and pulled the shutters open to reveal a window.

Through the window I saw a colossal table lamp radiating crimson light. Beside it was a wooden radio with shipping crate proportions. Alongside the radio was a towering bunch of lilies displaying petals like marble shields.

The corridor in which I stood began to shudder and the thunderous words of a woman's voice rang out around me:

"Hello, honey. You've come for your money?"

The view through the windowpane swivelled to show a shadowed doorway where a man stood and nodded in response to the question. He dabbed his brow with a polka-dotted handkerchief. It was my boss, staring at the floor, looking guilty. The view from the window moved again to face an oval mirror. In the mirror was a reflection of the landlady's smirking face. It was not a window I was staring out of but one of her eyes. The proprietress, whoever or whatever she really was, had imprisoned me inside her head.

Behind me there were footsteps. I turned away from the 'window.' The couple I had come to find were strolling towards me. Despite his wizened countenance, the young man formed a wretched grimace. His girlfriend grinned and said to me,

"We made a contract with our hostess. She's letting us out in exchange for you. Your boss was happy to set you up when the price was right. Have fun in here, loser."

Along the corridor I heard barking and someone whimpering.

About the Author:

Ruairi MacInnes is from Scotland and lives in London, UK. His short fiction has been published in The Horror Zine, Theme of Absence, Schlock! WEBZINE, Murky Depths, Bewildering Stories, Planet Prozak, Eunoia Review, MicroHorror, The Cynic Online and The Rusty Nail. He is currently working on a dystopian novel with a redemptive ending. He plays electric guitar in the band Johnny Mode.

Facebook: [Ruairi MacInnes](#)

SoundCloud: [Acoustic Diary](#)

It was Billy's idea.

He came out with it one night when the two of us were drinking cheap wine down by the river Clyde.

"It'll be fucking cool, man. We get some camping gear together, fuel up the Sub and just take off!"

The Sub was what Billy called the old, yellow VW camping van that his mother had given him for his eighteenth birthday.

"I dunno, Billy. It's October. It's already getting cold down here in Glasgow. It'll probably be fucking freezing up north."

"Don't be a pussy. We can build a fire. And we'll take a good supply of the auld electric soup.' He brandished his bottle of Thunderbird in my face, took a big swallow and burped loudly. "C'mon, man, what do you say? I'll pay for the petrol myself."

Despite the bravado, there was a look of almost childlike supplication on his face. It was an expression I was only too familiar with. We'd known each other a long time. Ever since our first year in primary school.

"You don't have to do that, Billy. I'll pay my share."

He grinned. "Next Saturday?"

"Aye. Fuck it. Why not."

We decided to head for Loch Stornem in the north west, mostly because Billy had been there before when he was a kid and had good memories of the place. As he drove the Sub up the M80 at a steady seventy, he told me a bit about it.

"My old man used to take me there to fish. There's a ruin on the shore of the loch. It's a cool place. Totally deserted. And you have a view right out across the water."

"No local pubs?"

"We won't be needin' pubs. Take a look in there."

Billy nodded at the glove compartment. I opened it. Inside was a white plastic bag. It was tied in a knot and someone (presumably Billy himself) had drawn a skull and crossbones on it in black ink.

I took it out. "What do we have here, then?"

Billy grinned widely. "Magic mushrooms – liberty caps. Over two hundred of the little beauties!" He slapped his hands down on the steering wheel. "Aye, that's right, me old mucker! We're off to see the wizard! The wonderful wizard of fucking Oz! And do you know why?"

I couldn't help but smile. This was an old routine.

"Because of the wonderful things he does?"

"Darned fuckin' tootin', bro!" Billy beamed. "Darned fuckin' tootin'!"

Billy hadn't been joking when he'd said that the place was deserted. The nearest village was around ten miles away, and even after parking the Sub as close as possible, we still had to carry our gear another half-mile down a steep, tree-lined path before we caught our first sight of the loch. It was bigger than I had imagined, a vast expanse of dark, featureless water surrounded on all sides by steep rolling hills swathed in pine forests.

We walked for around twenty more minutes before reaching the ruin. It was situated at the end of a narrow outcrop of land that jutted about forty or fifty yards out into the water. It looked old. Really old. We dumped our gear on the shore and went out for a closer look.

"My old man told me that nobody knows why it was built," Billy said as we started walking along the length of the promontory. "He said they did some digging years ago and found bones."

"Human bones?"

"Yeah. Animal bones, too. Horses mostly. They were all mixed up together. The old man said they had marks on them."

"Marks?"

"Knife marks."

"What? Like they'd been butchered?"

"That's what he said."

"Fuck's sake."

We reached the ruin. I followed him through the arched doorway into what that had once been the ground floor but was now just an open square of land overgrown with weeds and bushes. In one corner there was a tree, a big gnarled fucker whose upper branches overreached even the highest remaining sections of wall. Opposite the entrance was another open doorway. When I walked over and looked through, I saw that there was nothing on the other side but a straight drop into the loch.

The water looked deep.

And dark.

"Hey, check this out," Billy said.

He was staring at the building's north wall. There were patterns carved into the stone blocks – whorls and crosses and weird-looking astrological symbols.

"I don't remember these," he said. "I think they might be new."

"Fucking creepy."

He shook his head and pointed to where some empty beer and cider cans lay in the long grass. "Nah. Probably just some daft wee Goths doing their thing. They have to keep themselves occupied. You know – between pissing their beds and listening to their shit music." He turned and started back towards the entrance. "Anyway, we should go back to shore, get the tent pitched."

When the tent was up, we got a fire going and started on the mushrooms, washing them down with gulps of Thunderbird red label.

"You think it's true, Billy," I asked – "that stuff about the bones?"

Billy took a deep drag on his cigarette and shrugged. "That's what the old man said, anyway. But he also told me once that his job with the Post Office was only a front, and that he was really an MI5 spy called Reginald Wickdipper."

That got me laughing.

Billy smiled ruefully. "Mind you, there was some truth in that. Years later my old dear found out the fucker had been dipping his wick all over the South Side."

Just as every journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, every storm, no matter how big, starts with just one solitary gust of wind.

I felt it just after we'd finished the last of the mushrooms. Both of us did. It came sweeping out of the north like a dissonant musical chord, causing the whole glen to resonate in weird harmony as it shivered across the surface of the loch and went whispering through the surrounding hills.

A minute or two later, we heard the distant voice of thunder.

"There's a storm coming," I said.

Billy grinned, his eyes already glassy with the effects of the T-Bird. "Aye, man. A storm. How fucking cool is that?"

The mushrooms were coming on strong by the time the first of the thunderheads loomed into view, marching in over the northern hills like an army of angry towering giants. In the west the sun was almost down and, as it sank below the horizon, I could actually see faces leering out of the clouds, their monstrous twisted features glowing red and greyish purple in the deepening twilight.

"Jesus," I said. "I don't like the look of this, Billy."

"You're stoned," he said. "It's just a storm."

He was wrong about that.

The tempest hit the glen just as the sun finally vanished from view, bringing gale-force winds and cold stinging rain. With each flash of lightning the darkness gave way to an eerie world of brilliant blue light and black, writhing shadows. Then there was only the smoky red glow of our drowning fire and the enormous sound of the thunder as it went ripping through the valley in a series of rumbling explosions.

"FUCKING AWESOME!!" Billy shouted above the racket.

He had stripped to the waist and was standing in the driving rain, his head thrown back, his arms outstretched, his fists clenched in defiance.

Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Mad Dog Billy Mullen. Craziest fucker this side of the Highland/Lowland divide.

I went to my tent and fished a torch out of my rucksack.

"BILLY. LET'S GO OUT TO THE OLD HOUSE. GET SOME SHELTER FROM THE WIND."

Billy looked at me and grinned, and for a moment it seemed to my drugged eyes as if his face was actually melting in the rain.

"RACE YOU THERE!" he shouted.

And then he was off, running towards the old ruin like a man with the devil on his heels.

I didn't even try to catch up. I just walked through the storm at my own pace, swallowing from my bottle of T-Bird and wiping the driving rain out of my eyes. Up ahead, Billy sprinted on, his pale torso appearing and disappearing repeatedly as gigantic forks of lightning slashed through the darkness. When he reached the remains of the old house, he turned and waved and called something back to me, but the words were carried off by the wind. A moment later, he disappeared inside.

I walked until I reached the ruin, then stepped through the arch and turned on the torch I had taken from the tent.

"BILLY?"

Nothing.

I panned the torch. Rain teemed and shadows danced, but there was no sign of him. The beam reached the doorway on the far side of the house and shot through into the darkness beyond.

I thought about the drop. The drop and the deep, dark water.

"BILLY!"

"UP HERE."

He was sitting in the tree at the far corner of the ruin, perched on a branch that was at least fifteen feet above the ground.

"JESUS, BILLY. GET DOWN FROM THERE. IT'S DANGEROUS – THE LIGHTNING."

As if to emphasise my point, the night was suddenly flooded with ten billion watts of brilliant white light. The resulting thunder was instantaneous and deafening.

As darkness once more descended, Billy whooped with delight. "FUCK THE LIGHTNING. C'MON UP."

"YOU COME DOWN. I'VE GOT WINE."

It worked. He climbed down from the tree and came towards me, hand outstretched.

I passed him the bottle. "That tree's one big electricity magnet, Billy. Didn't you ever do any physics in school?"

He laughed so hard that he almost choked on a mouthful of wine.

"Yeah, okay," I said. "Stupid fucking question."

The lightning was flashing every few seconds now, the thunder a continuous deafening cacophony. I noticed that with each burst of light the symbols carved into the west wall of the old house were thrown into sharp relief. When the light faded they left imprints on my retina – weird, geometric patterns that swirled and eddied in my mind's eye.

I turned the torch on them. "You know, Billy, I don't care what you say. These things are fucking creepy."

"Nah. *This* is creepy..."

He reached out, snatched the torch from my hand, and held it under his chin, lighting up his features from below. He started giving it his best zombie impersonation.

"UUUUARRRRHH. AAAURRRRRHH."

I would have laughed, but just then there was a flash of lightning and I glanced over his shoulder and saw the figure.

It was standing about twenty-five yards away, on the outcrop of land between the house and the shore, a dark, unmoving silhouette framed in the arched doorway like a medieval artist's vision of death.

I took a step backwards. "Jesus!"

Billy laughed, pulling the torch away from his face. "C'mon man. It's not that fucking scary."

"There's something out there," I said, pointing.

As Billy turned his head, there was another flash of lightning. This time, however, the stretch of land leading to the shore was deserted.

He looked at me. "It's just the shrooms. You're hallucinating."

Another flash. The figure was closer now, maybe only ten yards from the doorway. It was a woman, I saw. A tall, slender woman dressed in a black, hooded robe. Her face was pale and impossibly gaunt. And she was smiling. An intimate, malicious smile that made my testicles want to crawl up inside my body.

This time, as the vision vanished once more into darkness, I actually had to choke back a scream.

Seeing my panic, Billy turned and pointed the torch beam through the doorway. Its feeble yellow light showed nothing but darkness and billowing rain.

He started walking.

"Don't go out there, Billy."

He ignored me. As he reached the arch there was another flash.

"I SEE IT!" he shouted over his shoulder.

"SEE WHAT?"

Billy didn't answer. I watched in utter horror as he walked through the doorway and on into the churning darkness.

I should have gone after him then. But I didn't. Instead, I only stood there, paralyzed with fear. For several seconds, I could see nothing except the bobbing yellow light of the torch. Then an enormous bolt of lightning arced across the heavens and for a split second everything was as clear as day.

There was an animal out there, I saw. A black horse. It was standing no more than a hundred feet away and Billy was walking towards it, his naked torso gleaming bone-white in the cold glare of the lightning.

At the sight of the animal, a deep primordial terror tore through every cell in my body.

"BILLY!!!" I screamed. "COME BACK!!!"

The words were swallowed up in an avalanche of thunder.

I started out after him then, moving through the rain-filled darkness towards the flickering torchlight.

'Surely he'll realize,' I told myself. 'Surely even Billy will realize that no normal animal just stands calmly in the middle of a thunder storm. Surely—'

I stumbled suddenly and went down, sprawling forward onto my hands and knees. As I struggled back to my feet, the sky above the glen erupted with sheet lightning, a series of enormous blue flashes that flooded the valley with horrible garish light.

Billy was standing next to the horse, I saw. He was standing next to it and he appeared to be petting the animal, talking to it.

The beast was wearing a saddle.

I watched as Billy put his foot in the stirrup.

No Billy. For God's sake, no.

Darkness once more descended

The next thing I heard was Billy screaming. That and the thunderous noise of hoof beats. Both sounds came out of the darkness together.

They still do sometimes. When I'm dreaming.

In the dreams I also see the strobe lightning that began to flash at that moment, illuminating the creature as it charged towards me through the driving rain, plumes of stinking vapour belching from its flared nostrils, its hideous, white-yellow eyes writhing in the deep sockets of its putrid, decaying head.

If I do not awaken then, I leap aside, just as I did on that night, and scream with terror as the beast thunders past. I see again the rotting, skull-pommed saddle and the mane of living serpents swarming around Billy's face and neck. I see the serpents tearing at his flesh and the streams of black blood oozing from the wounds on his pale skin.

But worse of all, I see Billy's eyes, the eyes of my oldest friend, wide with unspeakable terror as the demon carries him past me and on into the jagged ruins of the tower.

On through the dark doorway beyond.

On into the black, icy waters of Loch Stornem.

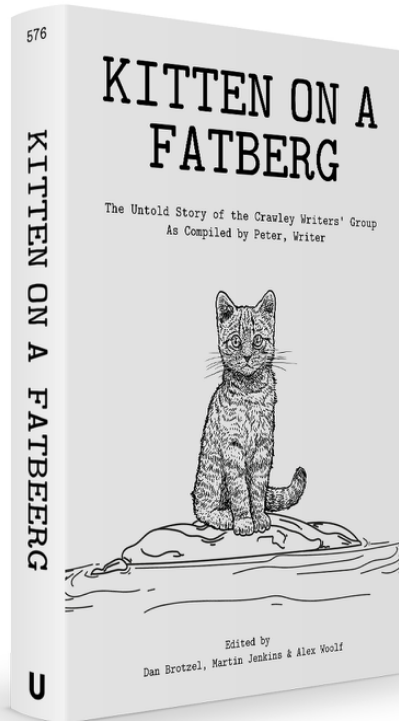
About the Author:

John Vander is a Scot currently living in the town of Nancy in North East France, where he plays music, writes, and struggles to come to terms with the miracle of existence.

Facebook: [John Vander](#)

KITTEN ON A FATBERG

They've all got a book in them. Unfortunately.



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attack in the fog | *Linda M. Crate*

the loud clanging of metal on metal
sounded almost like a screech,
and she closed her eyes
to block out some of the sound;
upon opening her eyes she realized she was
not at her work place but in some realm
filled with fog—
as she wandered listlessly in the dark
every broken twig, every whispering leaf
felt like a crescendo of some solemn song
warning of evil;
yet as she whirled and twisted nothing
could be made out of this deep darkness—
this must have been some strange
nightmare,
but when she pinched herself she did not
wake from any dark dream;
continuing on in the darkness she found her
fate sealed when a devil with fast reflexes
able to move without making a single sound
grabbed her around the waist
fangs screaming against her neck in an agony
that made her wail without sound
for death came too quickly for her to realize.

monsters exist whether or not you believe | *Linda M. Crate*

she heard the cries of the vultures
louder than the screeching of
a murder of crows,
but knew they couldn't be calling her
for she were still alive;
so pressing on
into certain darkness she tried to drive
the noise out of her ears
after all there were no such things as monsters
just people in masks pretending—
yet why did the hairs on the back of her neck
stand at a perfect tension
as the distant owl hooted a somber song?
stop worrying,
her brain insisted as she willed herself forward,
she was going to enjoy this night in the forest as she had
any other and she wasn't going to let her imagination
get the better of her;
breathing sharply in and then out
she twisted around as she thought she heard a twig snap—
there was nothing there and none to be observed,
but she looked back as she walked just to be safe;
nearly screaming as she ran into a
beautiful stranger
yet his blood red eyes told her death was certain
terror took her before his fangs did—
"monsters exist whether you believe in them or not,"
he told her, "much like love and magic."

no sort of hero | *Linda M. Crate*

their playful cries
would turn into mournful screams
once they saw what she
was capable of,
but she let them retain their ignorance
so she could make her escape;

they said children should retain their
innocence and ignorance was bliss
would they still say the same when they found
their happy homes were smashed to bits,
bones of their beloved families stolen from their
sinew all for an old and wicked woman's stew?

well, she wouldn't wait around
long enough to be caught
because every action
was wrought with consequence,
and the old hag knew it well;

when she heard the bewildered screams of the
children she gave pause with a slight smirk
now they would know
some things in this world weren't wonderful,
and some could argue that she had taught them
one lesson they wouldn't have otherwise learned
in fact they should call her a hero.

some mysteries are better unsolved | *Linda M. Crate*

no one could be found in this town
everybody was laid to rest
she couldn't fathom
what had happened here in this silent town

still and full of secrets
the mystery pulled her in,
what could kill an entire town
in just one day?

was it some sort of virus or disease
airborne or passed on by touch?
was it some sort of curse
that had yet to be broken?

she needed answers,
and so here she was masked and cloaked
covered from head to toe,
wondering if this might be how a flightless bird felt?

restrained and slowed by the safety
precautions she pressed on
finding that all the organs were healthy,

in every victim;

the only thing missing: their blood—
every neck looked like it had a viper
that had attacked their throats,
but everyone knew vampires lived in books only;

"ah, but you see, my dear, if that were truth
you wouldn't be here with all your questions."
before she could protest, she was pulled into
the arms of a vampire and her screams fell onto

a town full of deaf ears and hungry monsters
each of the latter jealous they hadn't jumped
before he had at the chance of young blood
having entered the stagnant waters of this ghost town.

triton's melody | *Linda M. Crate*

the sky was full of mourning
screaming with thunder
ravaging the skies
with the slashing swords of lightening
dancing through the day
making it seem more like night,
and he was caught in an unforgiving sea;
he saw figures swimming beneath
the tiny fishing boat he was trying to keep
from breaking into ruin as it
kept being pushed toward the rocks—
they weren't the kind mermaids
who saved sailors
their eyes and intentions were quite darker,
but he saw their annoyance as they
each tried to seduce him and failed;
"sorry, i'm not much a fan of women"
the sirens each pulled faces—
"good thing i'm not a woman then,"
came a dark voice from the shadows
a triton with striking dark hair and hungry eyes
sang a song he could not ignore,
and he felt the teeth before his body could
will him awake and toward reason;
he knew this would be the last scream he heard
as thunder shrieked again.

About the Author:

Linda M. Crate is a writer whose works have been published in numerous magazines and anthologies both online and in print. She is the author of six poetry chapbooks, the latest of which is: *More Than Bone Music* (Clare Songbirds Publishing House, March 2019). She is also the author of the novel *Phoenix Tears* (Czykmate Books, June 2018).

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Stephen was always surprised as the glass towers of Island City slowly changed as he got closer to the water: first to stone birthday cakes, then to stone oblongs, to stone dwellings, to brick, and, finally, to squalid wood shacks. These latter lay under the elevated highway that surrounded the island. The progression always pleased him, somehow. However he had neither the time nor the inclination to ponder this phenomenon. He was hungry.

Stephen had not fed for almost a month, and he was long past the time when any kind of animal food would satisfy him or even tide him over. The impulse was past growing. It was fully grown. All Stephen could think about or make himself act about was feeding. Hence he passed unnoticed from the glass towers all the way to the wood shacks. He was searching for food, desperate enough to hunt in the open.

He saw the woman about a block away. She looked thin, fleshless, standing on a corner. No cars were passing in either direction, no passersby were on the street. Stephen felt a vast emptiness of that tiny part of the city.

As he approached the woman, he suddenly became aware of how he looked. Hair thin and gray, stooped over, almost dragging himself down the street. Part of it was his lack of food. Part of it was, he had to face it, he was old. As he approached the woman, she looked even thinner. She was wearing a long, black coat, almost a cloak. She was facing him as he came closer.

"Evening" she said to Stephen.

"Good evening," Stephen said.

"You looking for something?" she said.

"Sure."

"What do you want?"

"What are you offering?"

She sighed. "You buying or BSing?"

Stephen came closer to the woman. "I'm buying."

"Sex, drugs, rock 'n roll? What is it you want?"

"Meat!" Stephen said, his voice getting rougher.

"Meat?" the woman said.

"That's right."

"You talk funny," she said. They were both quiet as a lone car went by. In a moment, as before, there were no vehicles or people within a couple of blocks and a great silence.

"C'mon." The woman gestured with her head towards the doorway of a three-story wooden building and started towards it. Stephen followed her dumbly. They walked towards the building and walked up the three steps to the street door by the light of a streetlamp. The woman opened the door without a key, and Stephen entered the building behind her. The streetlight lit up the foyer dimly. The woman turned to Stephen.

"You want meat?" she asked Stephen.

"Yes!" Stephen said.

"What kind of meat?"

Stephen was breathing so hard he couldn't speak.

"You want leg, thigh, breast, ass?"

"Yes," Stephen gasped out.

"So do I!" she said. With a quick, smooth motion, she pulled a knife from under her coat. With a practiced swing, she cut off Stephen's left ear and caught it in her hand, held it to her mouth and took a bite out of it.

"Better than an apricot," she said to Stephen.

"What?" Stephen shrieked as he put his left hand to his head, only to have the hand sliced off, cleanly. It fell to the ground. "Why?" he gasped out.

"You know why," she said. "There's no fool like an old ghoul."

About the Author:

David Berger is an old Lefty from Brooklyn, now living in Manhattan with his wife of 25 years, Ms. Blu, the finest jazz singer in NYC. He's a father and grandfather. David's been, among other things, a caseworker, construction worker, letter carrier, high school and ESL teacher, a legal proofreader and is currently a union organizer. David loves life, his wife and the world. He hopes to help the latter escape destruction.

Barbara reveled in the music of suffering—the most classical of symphonies. The limbless, mutilated houses for the soul writhed in their own excreta as they sang agonized tunes. *Such instruments*, she thought, *my delightful chorus of worms*.

She walked through the field of screaming torsos wrapped in barbed wire. She inspected each one to see that it contributed to the melody her beautiful creatures conducted. If they became too weak to vocalize their pain, only then would she cut the chords from their throats. Tired and dried up notes had to be snuffed out to maintain quality; anything less would be unacceptable to her listeners.

She wondered what played in their heads, if they remembered her face before the eyes were removed. She liked to think so; it spawned a warm satisfaction between her thighs to think of all those minds imagining her at once.

Innumerable red eyes blinked in the darkness of the tree line. *They're watching*, she thought, bemused by her audience. *They always watch*.

At the edge of the field she came across a straggler who'd rolled himself away from the rest of the group. She tied a rope around his neck as he gummed her arm with a toothless mouth.

"You silly thing," she said with a laugh. "Why do you think everyone has their teeth removed?"

She dragged the body to reunite it with the rest. After undoing the rope, she pressed her foot against his chest. Razor sharp barbs sunk deeper into his flesh and got him singing again.

Pleased with her work, she sat on the damp grass and stared into the forest. The glowing eyes blinked out one by one, her congregation of shadows lulled to sleep with the musical wailing of her ensemble of worms.

About the Author:

Lee Forman is a fiction writer and editor from the Hudson Valley, NY. His work has been published in numerous magazines, anthologies, websites, and podcasts. His debut novella, *Zero Perspective* is available from Amazon and other retailers, as well as a collection of dark fiction, *Fragments of a Damned Mind*. You can find more of his work at his website.

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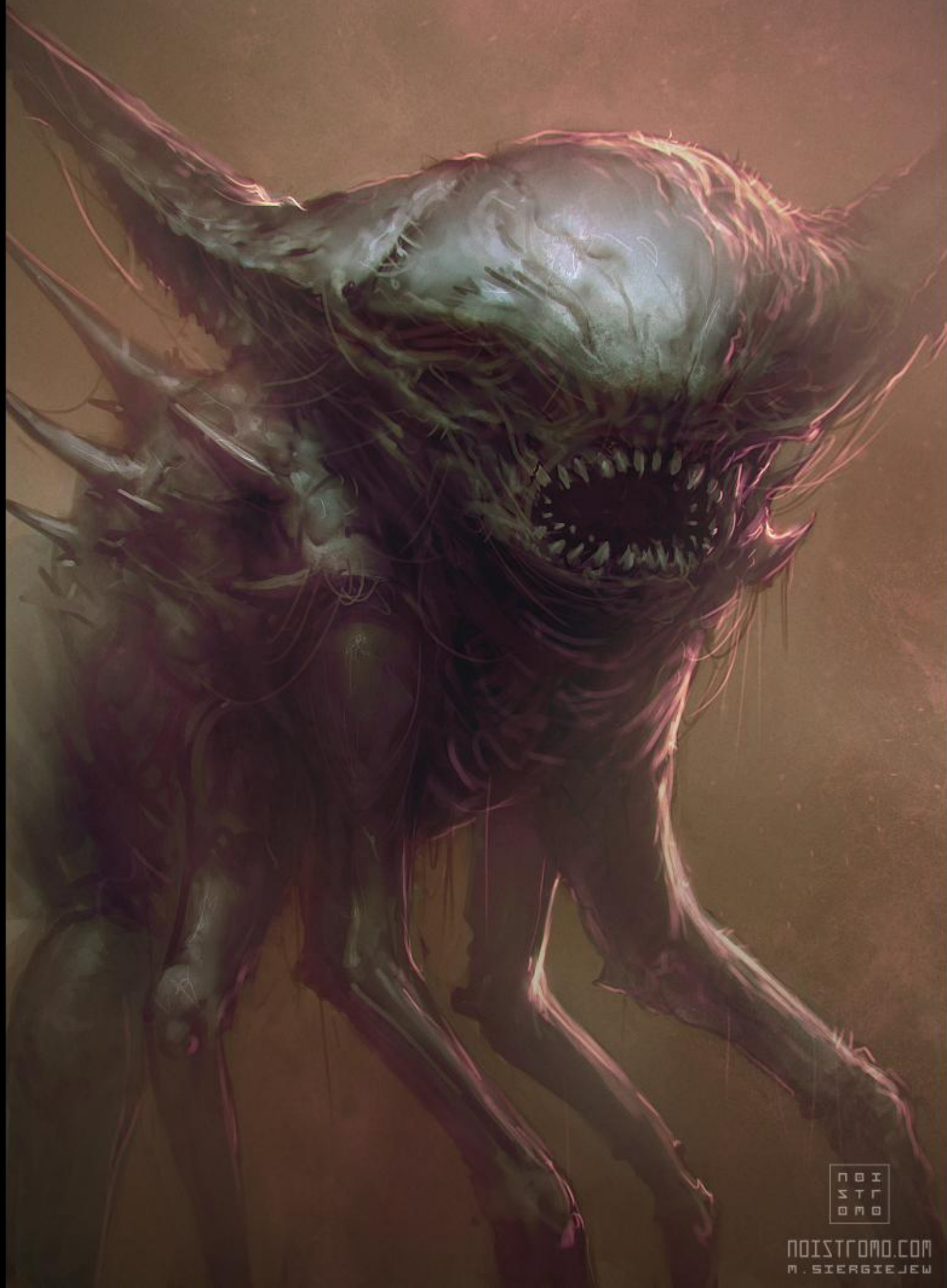
Facebook: [Lee Andrew Forman](https://www.facebook.com/LeeAndrewForman)

The Rule | Patrick J Wynn

Lia tried her best but the broom was heavy and long. Her small five year old hands were having a hard time sweeping with one hand while trying to hold the dustpan with the other. Her father had given her the chores for the day and first off was sweeping the attic. Finally getting most of the dirt pile into the dustpan she leaned the broom against the wall and slowly picked up the pan full of dirt then carried it toward the trashcan she'd brought up the stairs. Her bare feet shuffled across the old wooden boards that served as attic floor and second floor roof. As she concentrated on the pan filled with dirt trying her best not to spill its contents she failed to notice a jagged splinter of wood peeled up at where the boards were nailed together. The filthy wooden splinter caught Lia's foot just behind her toes and buried itself inches deep. The dust pan fell to the floor, dust and dirt exploded out in a cloud. Lia fell to the floor her small callused hands grabbed her foot and were immediately covered in blood. She turned her foot over gently, the wooden splinter fully buried in her foot was barely visible through the blood and torn skin. Grabbing the splinter Lia grunted and began pulling with one hand as the other covered her mouth holding in the screams of pain. She knew better than to cry out, her father's rule that children should be seen and not heard was strictly enforced. To remind her of that fact all she had to do was look up to where her older brothers and sisters were nailed to the rafters.

About the Author:

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



NOISTROMO.COM
M. SIERGIEJEW

Leaves crackle under my weight as I walk the path to the Candy Girls.

I saw them first in a dream, a fever-pitch reality that left me clawing to the surface for escape.

Their eyes are glass. Their eyes are glass, I hissed in harsh breaths, throwing the comforter from my lap and wiping sweat from my brow.

The image faded, as dreams do. Their milky skin and translucent eyes dissipated into the recesses of my mind, and I went on with the normal course of my day no worse for wear.

Later that night, however, as I tucked my legs beneath me in the cozy confines of the sofa, content with a fresh bowl of popcorn and a steady stream of Netflix originals, I saw one.

From the corner of my eye she appeared in the shadows, hair as white as cotton and sharp as daggers. It tingled faintly as she rocked, the sweetness of chimes dancing in a breeze. Her body was the color of honey, hardened through the process, but sheer. A crystalline shell I was terrified would shatter if I looked directly at her.

But you have to, she whispered. *You have to look.*

"No," I said, "I won't."

You will, she whispered. *You know you will.*

She was right. I could feel my resolve fracturing. And when I looked, turning my head slowly, her rocking stopped. I stared into her eyes, through them, to the wall. They were made of glass, beautifully fragile and empty.

You must come, she said. *We need your help.*

"Who? Who needs my help?" I asked.

I knew the answer, though. No one. The last person I thought needed me had left weeks ago. The note was simple enough, two words and an empty house proving my deepest fears to be true.

I'm sorry.

You're needed here. You're wanted here. Come to us.

Her jaw cracked open then, grating down to her chest and revealing two identical lines of razor teeth.

"Where can I find you?" I asked, my focus locked on the glass teeth. They pulsed in their sockets, threatening to explode. I couldn't look away, mesmerized by their throb and the complete lack of movement from the rest of her.

You already know, she whispered.

"I don't—"

My objection was cut short by her shriek, fierce and pained and void of reason. I wanted to cover my ears, but my hands stayed frozen on my lap. Tears ran gulleys down my cheeks, and I was certain I felt my own eyes stiffening. They were made of wet sand and she was lightning, striking my core in a juxtaposition of unity and destruction that was anything but natural.

Then she was gone, leaving nothing of her presence except two sooty smudges in the spot where she stood. Spidering like neurons or bare branches reaching ever towards the heavens.

I knew where she wanted me to go. We all heard the stories growing up. Learning the local legends is a rite of passage in every small town. We dared each other to go into the woods, past the dilapidated row of houses that crumbled and moaned, past the downed trunks and thorny overgrowth, past the cluster of leaning grave stones, their surfaces unmarked and forgotten by time.

Into the clearing that shouldn't have been, had no right to exist, the one where the Candy Girls lived. Everyone had a friend who knew a girl who took the journey and was never seen again.

I fought the urge, pushed against the idea with every ounce of fortitude I could muster. Tried to talk sense into the maddening rush ordering me to *GO*.

I hallucinated, I told myself. I must've dozed off. There is no woman made of honey and glass.

Then how do you explain the marks? A voice cooed in return.

Scuffs is all, I said. Or a rust stain from an old planter.

That magically appeared in the same place where the woman from your nightmares spoke to you?

She wasn't real.

Are you sure?

Sliding off the couch, I crept to the corner and ran my fingers along the smudges. They were cold and wet and sticky to the touch.

And they smelled. Like lilacs and caramel. Roses and butterscotch. Lilies and vanilla. Each inhale produced another combination more intoxicating than the one that came before it.

The last of my doubts melted with clover and cinnamon.

Come to us.

I grabbed my keys and drove to the base of the escarpment, ambivalent to the fact that it might be the last time I see my home.

The path isn't much, a narrow line in the dirt that occasionally disappears into the bushes. There are other trails here, more populated and clear of debris. In autumn, the entire area is swarmed by leaf peepers from Vermont and amateur photographers documenting the change in colors, rusts and ambers and golds.

Tonight, however, I am alone.

What am I doing here? I wonder. I'm not outdoorsy under the best of circumstances. Traipsing through the wilderness in the middle of the night? That's not me.

I hear her again, the Candy Girl. Her voice is round and melodious. *Help us. You're needed. You're wanted.*

It beckons me through a jagged row of pines and I follow, dazed and determined.

But then I'm falling.

The steep incline catches me by surprise, and I collapse into a violent tumble. Rocks and prickles and broken branches tear at my clothes and dig at my sides. Any place that's exposed to the elements is shredded and smashed.

I don't cry, afraid that if I open my mouth, she'll find me. Yet I'm equally afraid that if I remain silent, I'll fall forever.

You're almost here, she whispers, but now there are other voices mixing with hers, a well-synched choir of encouragement. *You're so close. Welcome home.*

My descent jerks to a halt at the edge of a field. A circle of willows guards the perimeter, limbs bent low, shielding their secret from the world above with lazy sways and hushes.

"Hello?" I ask, wiping grit from my tongue. I graze rough scrapes on my chin, but I don't think anything's broken. A miracle, I think, taking in the drop, with its vertical slope and treacherous terrain.

"You made it."

My head swivels in the opposite direction, towards the willows, and I see him. The man standing at the tree line is neither tall nor short, handsome nor crude. His eyes are soft but dangerous, and I realize I'm trembling.

"Who are you?"

"I'm the Artist."

He releases a puff of air, white and ethereal, that smells of lavender and cloves. Desire fills me, and I want nothing more than to go to him, run my fingers through his hair, touch his face. Breathe him in.

"Why am I here?"

The Artist smiles and holds out his hand. "Come with me."

My feet shuffle forward, seemingly of their own accord, and I ignore my gut as it twists and moans, telling me to run.

As I take his waiting hand, the Artist sighs and shoves a red lollipop the size of a marble into my mouth.

"This way," he says, and leads me past the trees.

I want to spit it out, but it sticks to the insides of my cheeks. I can't speak, and a swell of panic surges forward. I'm choking, gagging on the sweetness, and still he pulls me along.

"It'll pass," he reassures me in a soothing lilt. "But what comes next is oftentimes worse."

In the center of the clearing, the Candy Girl observes us. *You made it*, I hear her say, but her lips don't move. I'm grateful, as I'm afraid another glimpse at her pointed fangs will cripple my sanity.

The lollipop is almost gone. Globes of honey-flavored sugar cling to the stick. Her glass eyes scan my face.

"Your test is about to begin," the Artist says.

Run, my gut shouts. *Please.*

It's too late, the Candy Girl whispers. *It's already begun.*

She's right. Fluid sloshes around my stomach. The cramping comes next, sudden and debilitating. I keel over, on my knees now, and the first wave of vomit escapes.

I am at its mercy, lurching forth and helpless. The pain is exquisite, a phrase I've never understood until this moment. Bittersweet and all-encompassing, every nerve in my body responds to the sickness. The Candy Girl doesn't offer help or reprieve. She raises her arms to the sky and rocks gently, left to right, left to right.

The Artist watches in euphoric anticipation as the hot red liquid continues to ooze out. The retching subsides after a few more heaves.

"Wonderful," he says, clapping and tilting his head back.

"What's happening?" I ask. "What did you give me?"

He laughs and shoves another lollipop into my mouth before I can turn away.

I see then that there are others. More Candy Girls swaying in the background. The one I think of as mine has joined them. Their bodies are honey-colored, too, but varying shades. Some lighter, some darker, but all tinged in the golden hue and crystal eyes.

"Don't fight," the Artist says.

Yanking the stick proves to be futile. The sugary slop adheres to the soft skin of my cheeks as I pull at it, tearing flaps of flesh in my haste.

Muffled screams mix with my tears. Cramps wrack my body again, and the Candy Girls march forward. Each one extends a red bucket.

"What value do you possess beyond this space?" he asks. "Nobody wants you. Nobody sees your true worth. You are unappreciated and ignored. Criticized and shamed. Your size dictates how others see you, how you see yourself. My girls were once like you, consumed by their insecurities and flaws."

I shake my head as something inside wrenches free. I imagine my intestines unraveling, stretching out and unwrinkling, as I lose control of my stomach and vomit into the buckets. With every heave, part of me drains away. There are solid bits in the swill now, and I'm sure that whatever is in the lollipops is ripping me apart.

"But now, my girls are priceless. Worth more than the most expensive gems in the world. They've given themselves to the process completely, and you will do the same."

My head buzzes. A drum roll of confusion and the Candy Girls are chanting, indiscernible words that ebb and flow like the changing tides.

"Or you will die," the Artist says. He points to the left, and I'm acutely aware of the stench emanating from the woods. It should be impossible. Only minutes ago I was sitting in the brush, but as a third lollipop is stuck into my mouth, I understand that time means nothing in the clearing.

The blackened trees have been replaced by a swamp. I crawl towards it anyway, grabbing fistfuls of stiff grass for purchase. Gravity seems to be working against me, and by the time I reach the putrid murk, I'm exhausted, out of breath and pale from exertion.

The pit is full of decomposing bodies in various stages of decay. Those with faces are twisted in rage and disbelief. They're covered in gore. Congealing lumps and fatty pearls of peeling tissue cling to their bloated corpses, desperately trying to float above the unimaginable darkness of the corporeal quagmire.

"Those are the ones who suffered for nothing. Who rooted to their old ways and refused to see the beauty of transformation. Those are the bodies of women who failed."

Their chants surround me. More snaps and breaks from my core reverberate in my mind as another round of nausea pummels me. I roll onto my back, unable to bare the pressure on my stomach, and stare into the glass eyes of the Candy Girls.

A succession of vomiting begins, one after another bending over and spewing amber bile into the bucket.

I add my own to the melee and wonder how much of myself has been lost already.

"You will be beautiful," the Artist says.

He reaches into his pocket and removes several white sticks. Crouching next to the buckets, he dips one into the slough and twirls it around.

Scoop, stir, dip. Like a candle maker working the wax.

"No," I say, but speaking is like swallowing glass. My words are shards, slicing into my throat and drawing blood.

"A few more of these and you won't remember what it was like to be forsaken." Dip. Stir. Dip. He slowly pulls the stick from the bucket and shows me the final product. A red lollipop, in the perfect shape of a marble.

The Artist titters, an unhuman sound that's somehow more unnerving than the visceral lollipops.

I pinch my lips together as he approaches, but the candy slides through easily, an eel slithering beneath the depths, indifferent to my tortured pleas.

He lifts me effortlessly, puts me onto my feet beside the others and steps back to admire his creation.

"Marvelous," he says. "How can you possibly deny the wonder that you are when I've shown you all you can become?"

Their eyes are glass, I think.

"So are yours," the Artist says.

He holds up a mirror, framed in branches that are really the limbs of failed women, and forces me to gaze upon myself.

Cherry-red blood drips from my lips. The lollipop protrudes like a bony finger, a singular accusation of guilt. My skin is softening, becoming iridescent and shining at angles like honey. At the same time, I'm hardening. My body shrinks and gnarls into trunk-like rigidity.

"Here, you will be beautiful," he says. "Here, you will be loved."

My eyes aren't clear, but close enough. What color they used to be, I can't remember. That, too, has been taken. Soon, they will be fractals. Yesterday or tomorrow, it makes no difference.

Moving is difficult and sends jolts of agony railing up my spine, so I stay as still as I can, gently swaying with the night breeze.

I take comfort that we are together, the Candy Girls and I, the urgency I once felt to run a forgotten dream. There's no need to run when staying is so easy.

The Artist kneels before us, scooping and dipping and lifting, stopping at intervals to adjust the buckets, wasting no drops of the precious batter.

I exhale, a delicate cloud of gingerbread and orchids, and wait for dreams to come.

About the Author:

Mandy McHugh is an author from upstate NY. Her works have been featured in The Mark Literary Review, Zimbell House, and The NoSleep Podcast. Her debut novel *Like Monsters of the Deep* is forthcoming from Magnolia Press in late 2019. When she's not writing, Mandy can be found loading up on iced coffees and planning adventures for her family.

Goodreads: [Author Page of Mandy McHugh](#)

Twitter: [@WriterACMcHugh](#)

Graveyard Shift | *David Lewis Pogson*

"Are you still on shift, Sarge?"

"Someone has to man the station. You're needed too, son. There've been reports of disturbances in the Church Cemetery. Probably just kids or drunks. Get down there now and I'll check on you around 2 a.m. I might bring you a flask. It looks like snow so use the Groundsman's old hut. You can see the graveyard from there. Here's the key. Don't forget your radio."

"Yes, Sarge."

It was the perfect observation point: window at the front overlooking the graveyard, door at the rear, battered old potting table and a chair. He wiped the window clear of frost and cobwebs. Outside the snow settled silently on the trees, over the cropped grass and onto the gravestones until everything was a pristine white under the moonlight. Nothing moved.

He may have nodded off but he was wide awake now. The hairs on the back of his neck were standing up. Backing quietly towards the door without taking his eyes from the window, he reached for his radio.

"Can you see anything, son?"

The radio crackled and he breathed a sigh of relief as he recognized the voice on the other end. "Yes, Sarge"

"What is it?"

"They're not leaving any footprints or marks in the snow. Where are you?"

"Not far away. I'll be with you soon. I repeat, what can you see?"

"Bodies ... climbing out of open graves ... staggering across the Cemetery towards me."

"Describe them."

"Bodies. Teeth, claws, red eyes, no footprints. Hurry up. It's looking serious. Where are you?"

"Hold them off as long as you can."

"What – hold them off? Where are you?"

"Just remembered. I forgot your flask. I'm going back to collect it."

"Sarge ..." A scream, then radio silence.

About the Author:

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

Author Blog: [David Lewis Pogson](#)

Twitter: [@DavidLPogson](#)

Clear broth and noodles, my lunchtime ritual tethered to stability, shake violently with every whistle, pop, and explosion that soars over the rooftops. The air from the open windows already smells like sulfur. By 10a.m., on the Fourth of July, the fireworks have begun and I long to take shelter, with the cat, under the bed. My spoon, filled with rich, salty soup, trembles over the bowl. A high-pitched sound like a siren slices the air and I lose it, spilling my bowl all over the floor. There's nothing I can do. There's nothing anyone can do. Fireworks are allowed on the Fourth of July in unincorporated areas, despite the dry conditions, which have persisted unmercifully for over eight weeks. Once, I tried to take solace in the Internet by searching social media sites for others in my area who hated the fireworks wars between neighbors much as I do, but all I found were loud, angry voices that believed that shooting off firecrackers anywhere and everywhere within close quarters is a natural-born right:

"But what about the pets that are frightened by the noise?" someone asks online.

"Tranquilize 'em." "Move!" people reply.

"What about veterans and people who suffer from PTSD?" someone else asks.

"They can move!" "Kick 'em out!" are the responses.

"What about fires?"

"Quit bein' a wuss."

I put my lunch away and reach for a beer. It doesn't help. I drink two or three more. The fireworks crackle and sizzle overhead. Eventually, I'll need more beer.

I'm out of beer, but it looks like the neighbor across the street might have some. I tell myself that I'm frightened for no reason at all and that I should be outside, meeting the neighbors and enjoying myself. Still, every loud bang and clamor in the sky sends me running for the door, though when I open it, I'll just be in the middle of the crossfire. The entire neighborhood, and every neighborhood within a five-mile radius (and beyond), is exploding. I have no choice, but to go outside and meet the people who whoop and holler and let their toddlers stumble about with sparklers.

Please don't drop sparklers onto the lawn. Please don't drop sparklers onto the lawn," I whisper to myself.

The house directly across the street is boarded up with plywood. No one lives in that house that I'm aware of. The boarded-up house is overgrown with weeds and some kind of mold is spreading over the outside walls. Children rush by on scooters—their bodies twisting and their faces wincing as they're hit with poppers from both sides of the street. No one holds their fire. Anyone caught in the middle of the street is fair game, so I make a beeline for the yard across from mine. Some foolish neighbor has found a parachute shaped lantern of sorts, which he lights and sends directly over the rooftops. It flies dangerously low above the peaks, and it's full of flames. Eventually, it has to drop, but the fire does not look like it's going out anytime soon.

I must look absolutely horrified because there's a man standing in front of the boarded up house and he's waving at me. He offers me a beer and tells me to relax. I want to trust him because I also want to believe that all will be well. I take the beer from his hand and thank him.

"What the hell is this all about?" I ask.

"Ah—welcome to the neighborhood. I'm Sam."

"Connie—so, umm, this is kind of dangerous, right?"

"Oh, yeah—it's definitely dangerous," he says, and then he smiles as he looks up into the sky.

"Do any of the houses just burn down?"

Sam doesn't answer me. Instead, he continues to stare at the sky.

"So, who lived here in this house?" I ask, trying to change the subject.

"I do. I live here now," he says, still looking up at the sky.

I hadn't noticed before, but I see now that his shorts are torn and that his arms are covered in deep purple scars. Up close, his dirt-streaked shirt smells like motor oil.

"How long have you lived here?" I ask.

The sky is growing darker now and people seem to be dipping into their commercial grade reserves of fireworks. The night will most likely not end anytime soon. The streets are littered with charred bits of paper. My own garage door is studded with black dents.

"Hard to say," he says.

This time though, when he turns his face, his eyes glow a shade of red I've never seen in nature before. This red is deeper than blood and sharper than the feathers of a red-winged oriole. The scent of motor oil, mixing with gasoline,

grows stronger when he hands me another beer. All around me, children still play in the streets. All around me, smoke hangs in the air.

I pop open the top of the can and take a sip. I should be trashed by now, but my jangled nerves, unfortunately, keep me alert, awake, and aware.

"Yeah, I live here," he says, pointing to the boarded up house. In the light, his fingers and arms seem to fade in and out of existence, shimmering in the heat rising from the ground. I blink twice to make sure I'm not seeing things.

"In the boarded up house?"

He turns his head to look back at me and the blood in my veins turns cold. His red eyes flash with anger.

"What boards?" he asks, in a low, strange voice.

I'm not sure what to say. Laughing nervously, I take another drink from my beer.

"People look like they're having fun," I offer, but something inside me wants to run—to just get away. Still, I don't want to take my chances with the poppers that the children aim directly at those who try to cross the street, so I remain where I am.

Sam's face does not soften, but he motions for me to follow him as he walks around to the back yard of his house. I know better than to obey, but there are so many people out—so many neighbors in plain view. Surely someone could help if I needed it. The smell of sulfur intensifies and above it, the scent of gasoline settles.

In the backyard, Sam has a cooler of beer. He pulls one from the half-melted ice. A beer is the last thing I need right now, but I take one anyway and thank him. That's when I realize that the entire backside of his house is charred and probably has been for quite some time. Loose boards cover up the bare spots. He sees me staring at the backside of his house. I say nothing. This time, when I sip from the can, I begin to taste lighter fluid, or kerosene on my tongue. I can't have anything more to drink tonight.

The sun has completely set and I can barely distinguish Sam's frame from the night sky, but his eyes continue to glow red, sending a shiver through my bones. When the night is through, I'll never come back here again, I tell myself. Never.

The foolish neighbor on the other side of Sam's house sends more flaming lanterns into the sky while Sam laughs wildly, piercing the thickening clouds of smoke with his raspy voice. Right before me, the faint outline of his body begins to grow, reaching into the sky—as high as the lit lantern—and he's still laughing. He turns his head back over his shoulders and looks down at me. His eyes now take up most of his face. His dead, dead eyes stare past me and into me. I fear for my soul. I fear it's turning into fuel for fire.

He steps a fraction of an inch closer to the lantern, just enough to catch the outline of his body on fire. I watch in terror as he writhes and contorts his body into agonizing configurations, with each penetration of a flame. His flesh bubbles and peels. His lips and face swell and expand. I drop to the ground, my eyes burning—and I pull at the grass, crying for help. Sam's figure is slowly eaten by the flames. I see flashes of skull, melted skin, and singed wisps of hair before the body turns to an unrecognizable carbon-colored heap. The terrible and wretched smell of burning meat fills the spaces where I scream, and the smell of gasoline clings to my body.

The foolish neighbor with the flaming lamp just watches me as I pull at the grass in Sam's yard with my fists. I can't control my anger anymore.

"Why didn't you do anything?" I shout as I charge at him. "You saw him! You saw that hideous thing and you just stood there and did nothing—and it was on fire! Fire! Right near your house! A fire you set!"

The man just stands there, grinning stupidly.

"You must've met Sam. He don't mean any harm."

"Who the hell is Sam?"

"A good neighbor, that's what. He was a firefighter—loved the Fourth of July—loved fireworks—set them off every year, 'til he lit his own house on fire. But his soul, which is most likely damned to hell the way he carried on, comes back every year just to watch over this place—keep us all safe during the Fourth. We let loose and nothin'll happen to us—not with Sam around."

All around me, the neighbors are packing up their folding chairs and heading inside. They smile with satisfaction—like they've provided another good show for the children and neighbors. The streets seem narrower, closer. Bodies feel as if they're pressed up against me and I can't breathe.

"That's what Sam would've wanted, in fact," he tells me, "Anyone who don't want to participate—who causes any trouble, well. . . that's not very neighborly—and trust me, you want your neighbors lookin' out for you—'specially this time a year," he says, with a wink.

Just a few houses down, a woman laughs hysterically as she hoses down a burning ember caught just under the eaves of her roof. This is what it means to live here, I guess—to become comfortable with fire—and with others' mistakes. They mean well, after all. Her laughter falls all around me, tightening in my throat, choking me. I still taste the gasoline on the tip of my tongue. Smoke settles in my hair.

About the Author:

Cecilia Kennedy earned a doctorate in Spanish and taught for 20 years in Ohio before moving to Washington State. Her short stories of dark fiction have appeared in *Headway Quarterly*, *Gathering Storm*, *Coffin Bell*, *Maudlin House*, and *Open Minds*. However, she reserves her “scariest” writing for her DIY blog, “Fixin’ Leaks and Leeks,” where she describes her humorous attempts at cooking and home repair.

Author Blog: [fixinleaksnleeksdiy](#)

Twitter: [@ckennedyhola](#)

Harsh Weather | Rickey Rivers Jr.

The wind is a ghostly howl.
It teases the mind.
I am a child in its grasp.
I am small and unsure.
Sleep eludes.
Rain joins the band of instruments.
They swirl and surround the house.
I am called to write of this fury.
Windows take poundings.
Please protect the gutters.
A light flickers.
Outside I hear a scream.
I want this now to be a dream.
It is warm.
It is winter.
This is not winter weather.
Pain upon the house,
perhaps it is a pleasure?
Soaked, unprovoked,
the wind seems to calm
but the rain is everlasting.
It goes on and on.

About the Author:

Rickey Rivers Jr was born and raised in Alabama. He is a writer and cancer survivor. His work has appeared in *Three Drops from a Cauldron*, *A Twist in Time Magazine*, *Neon Mariposa Magazine* (among other publications).

Author Blog: [Stories You Might Like](#)

Twitter: [@Storiesyoumight](#)



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Three hours since he left Anahuac and Skip had no clue where he was except for being the only car on an empty stretch of highway with no end in sight. Should be dawn but the storm clouds hovering above the asphalt sucked up all the light. He must've gotten off the highway, an unmarked ramp that looked like another lane.

Should've taken the toll road, but cheap was hard wired in his genes and reinforced by memories of his old lady clipping coupons while speaking aloud to the characters on her soap operas and the old man on the couch, the frame straining to hold his fat ass off the floor, rolling a cigarette from a bag of Kite and telling Skip "Never pay when you can take it for free."

Free meaning the dumpster behind the Walmart where the old man and his buddy Gopher took the pickup once a week and stood hip deep in refuse looking for pizzas, six-packs, Cheetos and Twinkies tossed after the expiration date passed. Cops found the old man's body sprawled in the garbage, dead from a heart attack at forty-two. Walmart's revenge for stealing their artery-hardening pre-packaged junk food, helped along by breathing refinery fumes every day while sitting on a reinforced stool forty hours a week to watch one gauge. So much for the good life on Texas' oil coast.

Skip's route had diverted him so far in the boonies that his radio couldn't fix on one station. It cut in and out between Patsy, Willie and a Pentecostal preacher promising hellfire if Skip didn't turn his life around. He'd like to, but he hadn't seen a turnaround, exit ramp, or a sign of civilization for the last fifty miles. Who'd've thought? Especially in East Texas where developers paved every inch of God's green earth, and when that last inch of green earth disappeared, they paved over asphalt, rock, and neighborhoods too poor to bribe their zoning commissioners.

The station flipped again. "[Noise]...waitress, bring me some Kafka. Make it...[noise]...can."

Skip recognized that song. His stoner buddies in school would play the band's CDs on their boom boxes in the days before mp3 players. What was their name? Something with 'lounge lizards'. The band even wrote a song about Anahuac that was popular with the stoners. How did it go? Something about falling so low even Anahuac's high society glue sniffers looked down on him.

Sounded like Anahuac, all right, where the men graduate to the oil fields, the women to shit work, the stoners to meth. Booze, weed, meth or glue. The four food groups of the oil coast.

The engine cut out. Skip fought the wheel to pull the car safely off the road. He lifted the hood and oil smoke billowed out like a refinery smokestack. Crapola. Crap, crap, double crap. He kicked the fender, and it dropped from the frame to the gravel, ripping his pants and scraping his leg.

He released the gear and pushed the car onto the shoulder, only it wasn't a shoulder but the parking lot of a roadside diner, and not just any diner. A greasy spoon; rancid at that. The sign burned out, the windows so filthy the light couldn't escape into the surrounding storm clouds, two other cars in the lot—both of them more useful for spare parts than driving.

Might as well grab a cup of joe while he waited for the tow truck.

A bell tinkled when he entered the diner. Another angel earned his wings. Or, as his old man would say every time they watched 'It's a Wonderful Life' at Christmas (tipping his beer toward the TV in a toast), "Or a devil earns his horns."

Skip dropped his ass on a counter stool and fished his cell phone from his pocket. No signal. Not even an icon where the signal should be. A shadow fell across the counter and a coffee mug dropped next to his knuckles.

The waitress filled the mug with sludge so thick Skip would rather swallow crude oil. "Tow truck's on the way." Her nameplate read, Brandine.

"Excuse me?"

A wad of tobacco stretched her cheek like a balloon. She spit into a trash can. "Nobody stops by this joint if their car will take 'em someplace better."

How much of the diner's pie had she filched to reach that weight, Skip wondered. He'd seen wart hogs that looked trimmer than her. Her yellow uniform gapped at the button across her breasts whose shadows hid the stains from coffee and chocolate pie filling.

"Menu's on the board behind me." She gestured with her thumb. "Everybody orders the special."

Her thumb pointed to a faded print of the painting that popped up everywhere. Like kudzu. The one of the ghost on the bridge with his hands over his ears.

The bell jingled again. Must be a good night for the angels.

A bald man wearing overalls and a second coat of grease hovered at his shoulder. He'd tucked a Perro Loco cigar behind his ear. Still lit. The smoke drifted past Skip's nose, serving a bouquet of dog turds and scorched motor oil. He shoved the clipboard into Skip's hands. "Sign here."

Skip scratched his name on the line. The ink blended with a damp coffee ring. "Any estimate?"

The driver snatched the clipboard. "You kidding? You think I looked under your hood?"

A plate slammed onto the counter. Skip glanced down. "I didn't order pie." Especially not this pie, with charred crust and filling so watery it pooled in the center of the plate.

"Course you did, hon. Everybody orders pie."

At the end of the counter a scarecrow of a man held up his plate to prove her point. His suit fell off his shoulders, a blue-checked suit straight from a fifties Sears catalog. Cigarettes tumbled from the ashtray next to his mug, many of them with coals still glowing.

The bell rung. Third angel of the day. Skip turned to question the driver, but he'd vanished. The noise from a diesel engine faded into the gloom that pressed against the grimy windows.

Skip pushed his pie to the back of the counter. "Is there a hotel within walking distance?"

Scarecrow coughed. Someone laughed in the kitchen. Skip surveyed the diner. The only other patron sat next to the far window, head buried in his arms next to an ashtray piled so high with butts he thought it would compress into compost.

The waitress collected his plate and tossed it into the garbage. Plate, pie and stainless too. "Honey, there ain't no hotel within driving distance. But you can see from Bodean over there by the window that the booths are good for sleeping."

He checked his watch. Ten o'clock. He'd left at six and the sky outside was still as black as a moonless night. He expected a thunderclap, a bolt of lightning, but the air currents remained as dead as this diner. Who'd've thought he'd be nostalgic for Anahuac?

He checked his phone. No Internet either. "Is there a copy of today's paper I can read while I wait?"

The waitress turned from the pie case with a glob of cherry pie filling dripping from the corner of her mouth. "There ain't no news to read, hon. Nothing ever happens around here."

Skip checked his watch. One o'clock. How the hell did three hours pass so quickly? He'd expect his time in this joint to stretch seconds into hours. Or days. The phone next to the register rang.

Brandine hooked her thumb. "Gotta be for you, hon. Nobody orders take out from this place."

"This place." What the hell was the name of this place? Skip wondered.

He remembered the song on his car radio, about being stuck in a roadside diner for the damned. That would be this place.

Skip picked up the receiver, an ancient landline phone, black plastic with a rotary dial. He didn't know they existed anymore. "Hell's Diner. How can I ruin your day?"

"Hardy har," said the disembodied voice. "Just wanted you to know we were poking through the briefcase in your trunk. Must be a hundred thousand in there. Should cover the cost of the new engine and power train."

"Who gave you permission to go through my trunk?"

The line crackled, like static. Or burning wires. "Hey, you signed the contract. And what do you want us to do with the human head in the cardboard box? You'll never guess who it is. Oh wait, it's your head. In a box in your trunk. No need to guess."

Skip stopped short of smashing the receiver on the counter. "What contract? I signed my name to an estimate. I don't remember signing any contract."

"Nobody remembers signing the contract, bro. But we all do." The line disconnected.

Maybe Skip should've asked about the head.

Christ, what a mess. That briefcase was his ticket out of the oil coast. Anyone would've snatched it, sitting on a table, open and stuffed with hundred-dollar bills. His buddy Floyd, the cook, focused on brewing his batch and babbling about aliens, Africans, chemtrails, lizard people, 911 and Obama's birth certificate (wasted breath in Skip's opinion since everyone knows it's a fake). Floyd wouldn't have noticed if a hurricane swept the trailer home to

Kansas. If the cartel cleaners hadn't pulled up just as he rushed through the door, no one would be the wiser. Talk about earning your wings. Skip deserved a pair for getting out of the situation with his head still on his shoulders.

The bell jangled. Promotion four. A black woman with all the weight of a toothpick and wearing a hooded robe floated to the first booth. She brushed a mound of cat hair from the seat with long skeletal fingers and dropped into place. A rusted spring poked through the vinyl of the bench across the table.

She coughed her words like a death rattle. "Bring me some Kafka, Brandine. Make it as strong as you can. And a slice of pie."

Skip dropped the receiver into the cradle. It tumbled onto the counter, the dial tone pulsing in cadence with the headache throbbing in his skull. He slapped his forehead, pulled his palm across his scalp. "Kafka? Is she kidding?"

Brandine pried the coffee pot from the burner. "We don't kid in these parts. Didn't you read the menu?" And there it was, written on the blackboard above the window to the kitchen:

Bottomless Kafka. \$2.

Pie of the day. Don't ask and we won't tell. \$3.

Kafka Lait: Equal parts steaming Kafka and frothed angst. \$4. \$5 With pie.

Management accepts no liability for intestinal or existential distress.

Bodean stirred from his slumber, dropped a quarter into the Wurlitzer jukebox in his booth. A beetle crawled through a crack in the glass. From the speaker, Howlin' Wolf screamed spell casting lyrics and battered the keys of his honky tonk piano.

The woman in the hooded robe laid a scythe on her table. "Where's my goddamned order?"

Every nerve in Skip's body screamed. His muscles strained against his skin, looking for a seam or tear they could force and break through to freedom. He cast another glance at his watch. Still one o'clock. That couldn't be right.

Brandine plucked a long red hair from a slice of pie and flicked it onto the counter. "Not much point in that watch, hon. You must've checked it a thousand times in the three weeks you been here and it ain't got your car any quicker to being fixed."

Three weeks? Impossible. He dashed for the door. Three steps. One. Two.

Seated at the counter. His stool seat leaned to the left.

Brandine slid the pie the length of the scarred linoleum. It stopped halfway over the edge, wavered between solid counter and empty space. Would it stay or would it fall? "Might as well relax, hon, 'cause it looks like you're going to be here a while."

About the Author:

Phillip T. Stephens taught writing and design at Austin Community College for 20 years. His writing and art appear in anthologies, online, print and peer-reviewed academic journals—most recently *Maintenant* and the *horroraddicts.net Kill Switch* anthology. Phillip and wife Carol built a rescue habitat in the shade of their oaks for austinsiameserescue.org. They've matched adopters with more than three hundred abandoned pets.

Author Blog: [Phillip T. Stephens on Medium](https://medium.com/@stephens_pt)

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

Their piercing red eyes, that's all I can see. God, why are they staring at me like that? What do they want from me? An infectious scraping sound and a flurry of high pitched squeals surround me. I feel as if the walls are closing in on all sides and I am about to be crushed in a haze of matted fur and teeth. I scream until my voice cracks, I press my hands tight against my violated ears, perforated by this nightmare. I just want it to stop. I want their eyes, those piercing red eyes, to close, to stop their tormenting harassment.

The mauve Egyptian cotton sheet, it is soaked through with my sweat from yet another nightmare. Why do I keep envisioning these beasts every night? Sinister, rampaging rodents, they haunt my dreams nightly. I can't do this anymore, I can't focus. I can't concentrate on my job. What is happening to me? Even awake, I feel as if I am being stalked by these creatures. I can sense them, following me, stalking my every movement. I can hear the snuffling of their hideous forms right now. I know they are in the walls. Am I crazy? Is this what insanity feels like?

I can see them, I can. Their elongated bodies darting from corner to corner, they hide in the shadows as if they don't want to be seen. I can see them.

Fearfully I step out of bed and take swift motions towards the bathroom. Locking myself in I feel a sense of relief, of freedom, if only for a second. I can hear them trying to get in. They are scratching at the doors now, hundreds of them, I know it. They are chewing their way through the wood at an inhuman speed. I scream over and over for them to stop. I hold my head in my hands and pray that they will leave me alone.

Work is as dull as I remember and thankfully it's not too taxing at least. My nightly demonic visitors are disturbing my sleep, keeping me from being able to function properly in my daily routine. I ponder my life while looking over the previous day's bank reconciliations. It is not an arduous task but it does take some focus, which I am sadly lacking presently.

Completing the bank-rec takes a little longer than normal, I am a little out of sorts I guess. I just can't get my mind of those things, my scurrying nightmares. A sound from behind me, something has clipped the waste bin, causing it to wobble a touch. A black shadow vanishes behind the filing cabinets. They can't have followed me to work, this is impossible. Yes, of course, I'm just tired, I'm seeing shadows.

Another shadow scurries under my desk. I leap from my inadequate swivel chair in one swift motion, sending the chair clattering into the cabinets behind. My colleagues look up from the desks, their quizzical looks focusing on my terrified face. I make some half-hearted joking excuse about a spider and hurry myself off to the ladies' room.

Sealing myself in a questionably clean cubicle I pop the seat down and take a minute to right myself. I can't have witnessed what I thought I did, not here. I make a futile attempt to justify my visions and sleep deprivation. Even my tired mind doesn't believe me. But how? I ask myself, how are they here? I am crazy, I know I am. I step out of the cubicle before the rolling eyes of a co-worker. She quickly looks away from me in a desperate attempt to dissociate herself from the crazy person. I make it back to my desk, retrieve my chair and continue through the day ignoring the whispers and glances.

Tentatively I turn the key and edge myself through my apartment door, looking for the lurking shadows. I can't see or hear anything out of place; even my duvet is still in the heap I left it in. I toss my bag in the corner of the bedroom and change into my pajamas. An early night I think will do me good. I make myself a quick slice of toast and wash it down with a large glass of red. That should help me sleep. I can't help feeling unsettled as I head back to my bedroom.

A familiar sound stings my ears. No, not again I scream at myself, chastising my mind as if it were a naughty child. I scurry into my bedroom, ripping the duvet from the floor as I attempt to hide myself away in bed. I can hear the scratching and the squealing as they clamber over each other. I can hear the furor as they amass within the walls surrounding my bedroom. They're coming. I scream into the duvet, tears wetting the edges of it. I can't do this, I can't take this. I can see shards of plaster fall from the ceiling and paint flecks detaching from the walls. They are nearly through.

I stand almost upright in bed, steadying myself against the back wall. I fall when the vibrations of the beasts breaking through cause me to lose my grip. I run to the window and hammer at it, screaming for someone to help me. They are in the room now, I have nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. They are going to gorge themselves on my flesh, their salivating teeth shining in the street lamp's orange glow.

I shimmy the window open a fraction, it has been stiff of late with the warm weather. I am screaming into the street, no one is coming to help me, why won't they help me? Can they not hear me? Edging myself out farther as these beasts close in, I envision them devouring me. There must be hundreds, hundreds of starving red eyes looking at me as if I were a prime cut.

They are snapping at me toes, nipping my ankles. Their razor-like teeth are shaving the skin from my feet. I shriek and push myself out on to the ledge fully, my toes dancing gently off the pipe just below. My grip is tenuous, I just pray they won't follow me and that they will go and dine on someone else. I beg forgiveness for even thinking that unworthy thought.

The larger of the pack, a giant fat hideous creature with teeth at least three inches long, lunges forward and grips the inside window ledge. Its wide mouth and ravenous eyes take a final leap at me. I fall back, scrambling for anything in vain to hold as the beast latches onto my wrist. It holds me for a few long seconds before, I swore it grinned, it drops me. I fall for what feels like an eternity while focusing on the Cheshire Cat-like grins of the beasts at my window. Some of them even follow me to my doom. I hit the tarmac with a sickening thud. My blood spills out around me, caressing my dying body with its warmth. I feel the firm bodies of my killers as they rain down on me, the coup-de-grâce. Have I not suffered enough?

I hear faraway screams, commotion and bedlam as people run over to me. A man is on the phone to the police, he is telling them that the woman has jumped. "She just jumped.... I don't know why... she just jumped...." he whispers.

About the Author:

Lesley-Ann Campbell was born and raised in Southport, Merseyside. She still lives there today with her husband Andy. Horror is her passion; she loves reading, watching and writing horror. She finds inspiration from authors such as Tim Waggoner, Hunter Shea and John F. Leonard. She is currently working on her first novel and a range of short horror stories that she hopes to publish as a collection.

The Demons' Symphony | *Josie Dorans*

When the first pit opened, locals were huddled in their basements waiting out the storm they knew had taken a turn for the worse. The sky had been steel gray and heavy with thunder all day. It made perfect sense that the rumbling was the approach of a world class tornado. None of them saw the ground fall away into an abyss so dark it felt alive. None of them were there to witness the hot expulsion of air from the pit. It shot into the towering thunderhead above it forcing the clouds away in a ring and leaving a bright hole in the sky that only seemed to emphasize the darkness of its twin below. Hot winds screamed through the eaves of houses, ripping away shutters and roofing.

The people huddled and waited. They didn't see the dark figures pour out of the hole to crawl on land that had been denied them since the time of creation. Faceless and filled with long pent up violence, the creatures surveyed their new domain. The light burning from the now cloudless sky was alien. With no eyes to process its worth, they found it a nearly constant source of annoyance. It drove them to seek the shelter of darkness.

There were screams from the humans when the creatures from the dark discovered their hiding places. 'Demons!' the screams called them. They liked the name. They liked the screams better. So demons they were and hunters they became.

With each soft, fleshy human they found, the demons discovered new ways to bring the beautiful, high-pitched notes out longer and stronger. Families became quartets. Groups of workers became choirs. The world became a dark stage filled with symphonies of terror and pain with a crescendo followed of sudden, ringing silence.

When the notes stopped, the useless, human instruments were left behind in blood soaked piles. Any survivors stayed in hiding, too afraid to even bury their dead.

Over and over it happened throughout the world. The details might be different surrounding each pit but the outcome was always the same. By the end of the day there were far too few humans left to care about the particulars.

We couldn't stop them. The war was over before we ever knew it had begun. The opening of the Gates of Hell took our numbers from over seven billion down to a few, terrified thousand.

And they were still hunting.

About the Author:

Josie Dorans lives in the mountains of West Virginia with her very own "That Guy" and far too many cats to be considered rational. Her alter ego writes and illustrates children's books, makes roses out of pine cones, and gleefully funnels all of her mean-nasties into Josie's writing for a well-balanced life. Yes, she has other books and stories out there to find.

Facebook: [Josie Dorans](#)

Twitter: [@JosieDorans](#)

CAFÉ MACABRE

edited by Leah McNaughton Lederman



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for more information visit <https://leahlederman.wordpress.com/cafe-macabre/>

The Untrodden Path | *Linda Lee Rice*

The black veil softly shrouds my shoulders
silken touch like a spider's caress,
my world now a gossamer shadow
a breeze stirs it lightly against my face

Ebony surrounds me; darkness is my heart,
since my beloved died three days ago
just a skeleton, as he lay on the bed
withered away to only skin and bones

He had become lost in the uncharted woods
ere a fortnight or so ago, or was it more?
came back home to me, disoriented, confused
not the hearty man that he once was

In his agony, he writhed in his sleep
my love shrieked and screamed
one sentence he moaned over and over
"Oh, those terrifying burning red eyes!"

So, now I in my window's weeds turn,
slowly walk down the untrodden path,
searching feverishly for those red eyes
to put an end to my grieving pain

She Who Is Not Me | *Linda Lee Rice*

I look through the dirty glass
reach out, I touch nothing
but the smooth cool surface
of this reversed image world

I scream, bang harder, painful thuds
shatter the crystalline pieces,
jagged shapes slowly fall to
glisten on the worn boards below

Trapped on this side of non-reality
she who is not me, my doppelganger
laughs viciously on the other side
smooths her hair, straightens her dress

She glances backward and grins evilly
as she sees me who isn't she,
trapped within her cold, gloomy world
while she basks in the warmth that is mine

About the Author:

Linda Lee Rice aka Ruzicka has poetry published in Twilight Times, Dark Krypt, Fables, Descending Darkness, Writing Village, Spine and Page, Muses Gallery, Bloodbond, Lycan Valley Press Publishers, Alban Lake, Highland Park Poetry, Rosette Maleficarum, The Siren's Call, Edify Fiction and June Cotner anthology, "House Blessings" and "Garden Blessings". Short stories published in The Grit, Reminisce, Haunted Encounters: Friends and Family, FrostFire Worlds and Mamalode.

Facebook: [Linda Lee Rice](#)

My Dearest Vickie,

I only implore your forgiveness, for I have made a horrible, life altering mistake.

It all began the Tuesday before last. I was out at the Tavern having a few pints when she walked in. I admit I was immediately caught up in her charms. She must have sensed my eyes upon her, as she made her way across the room. She moved like she walked on water, I don't think her feet touched the floor. Within seconds, every guy in the Tavern was upon her, vying for her attention. But she shrugged them off and took the seat next to mine.

I pried my eyes away from her, and tried to focus on the bottom of my drink, which was running on empty. Then I felt her fingers lightly touch the back of my neck. Startled at the unexpected touch, I knocked my glass over, spilling what was left of its contents all over the mahogany bar.

"I am truly sorry, my dear, I didn't mean to startle you." The woman told me. She sat up straighter on the barstool, shrugging the dark navy blue shawl from her shoulders that she wore like a cape. Underneath, the woman wore a very low-cut black dress that hugged all her curves. She turned to me, and picked up my spilled glass as the barkeep rushed over with a dirty rag to wipe up my mess. Or more than likely, to get a closer look at the woman.

"It's...It's alright." I managed to stutter. I allowed myself to glance back in her direction. My sight fell on her large, pronounced bosom. "I um..I need to get home." I told the woman, feeling guilty for just being in her presence.

I tried to stand but she placed her hand on my chest, stopping me. With the exception of her chest, she was a petite thing, which I should have been able to move with ease, but for some reason, she held me in place.

"I would like you to stay with me. For just a little while longer." she purred. Her voice melted me like butter on the fire.

"My wife... Vickie. She needs me at home." I found her eyes and they swallowed me. I felt like my soul had fallen into them.

"Now, now. You stay right where you are. I haven't had a single drink tonight and I would very much enjoy your company," she said as she rose from the stool. Standing next to me, she barely came up to my shoulders, but she compelled me. I couldn't move from the bar.

"Hey honey, it doesn't seem like he is man enough to keep you company." A stranger said approaching from the other side of the Tavern. "Why don't you let me take care of you tonight?"

Without removing her hand from my chest, the woman turned her head toward the stranger. I can't tell you what he saw in her eyes, but he backed away quickly, tripping over his own two feet. The stranger fell backwards into a table, smashing it to pieces. His head cracked against the hardwood floor with a sickening thump, that will haunt me as long as I live.

"My name is Gwen." she said turning her gaze back to me. "It is awfully noisy in here, why don't you escort me back to my place. Then you can get home to your wife."

I wanted to tell her no, but I couldn't let her walk home alone in the dark. At least that was what I told myself at the time.

She scooped up her shawl and flung it back over her shoulders. It reminded me of a cape. All eyes were on us as we made our way out of the Tavern and into the night.

It was humid. Sweat pasted my hair to my head as we walked in silence for a few moments. A warm breeze stirred a newspaper into flight. It landed at my feet. I was able to make out a grisly photo of a man found dead. I already knew the story though. It was the talk of the Tavern. Another body found drained of blood. Superstitions were running rampant throughout the town. I wish I would have given the rumors more credibility. If I had, then I probably wouldn't have been escorting the beautiful, mysterious, Gwen, to an unknown location.

She led me further than I believed until my eyes fell upon the little wooden sign for the Inn. It was on the other side of town, but it only felt like we walked for a few moments. "This is where I am staying tonight," she said breaking the silence.

"I... I guess I will bid you farewell and goodnight then."

"Don't be silly, won't you please escort me up to my room?" She took my hand in hers and led me through the doorway. I felt the plump, Mrs. Roswell's eyes burning on me as Gwen pulled me to the staircase on the furthest side of the Inn. At the top of the staircase, she retrieved a key that was hidden somewhere on her person. I felt the heat rise to my face as I thought about where it could have been.

"I really should be going now." I told her, pulling my hand from her grasp. Her eyes locked on mine while the tip of her tongue slowly came out of her mouth. It worked its way around her red lips, moistening them. My heart pounded furiously in my chest. I hoped to God that she couldn't hear it.

As I tried to turn away, her hand reached out and grabbed me by the collar of my shirt. She pulled me to her and I felt my lips on hers. Then the tongue that only a moment ago, she used to moisten her lips, now snaked its way into mine. I want to tell you I resisted her temptations, but I found my mouth opening to allow her deeper inside.

The next thing I knew, the door was open and I was on my back on her bed. The dark shawl that she wore like a cape was gone, along with the tight, black dress. They now rested on the floor.

Her kisses stung like bees, pricking my neck. I closed my eyes and imagined blood pouring from the holes. When I opened them back up, I saw that I hadn't imagined the prickling sensation, for my blood, in fact, stained her lips. She straddled me on the mattress that felt like it was made out of stone, and licked her damp lips.

That was when I noticed her teeth.

They were long and very sharp. I tried to push her from my body, but my hands only found her breast. I cupped them. The mysterious Gwen moaned as she arched her back enjoying my touch. My head spun. I thought at first it was from the drinks I had. The last thing that I remember was those teeth coming back towards me and then darkness.

I awoke several hours later, with the sun burning brightly outside. My eyes burned from the golden rays that poked in through the dirty draperies at the single window along the far wall. I stumbled to my feet and managed my way over to the window. As I pulled the fabric tighter together, my arm was exposed to the light. Oh the agony that it caused. I quickly ducked back into the shadows and examined the spot on my arm. An almost bruise like circle had appeared, darkening the area. Stupidly, I poked the spot with my finger which sent an explosion of pain throughout my body.

My knees buckled and I dropped to the dirty carpet. My stomach heaved, threatening to spill up the last thing that I had eaten, which I couldn't even remember at that point. Once the heaving passed, I took in my surroundings trying to piece together where I was and what had happened.

I closed my eyes and her image popped into my head. Then it all came back to me. My night of ill repute. How I have failed you my dear, my love. My indiscretions have turned me into a monster that I can't even fathom.

I passed the day in pain, both physical and psychological as I tried to figure out what had happened to me. Once the sun had begun to set behind the dirty draperies, it finally occurred to me what the mysterious Gwen was and what I came to be. Once in my head, the word seemed to float there, ever present.

Vampyre!

I tried to deny it, wanted to deny it. But all the pieces seemed to fit. Accepting the fact, a smile formed across my dry lips. If in fact I was now a vampyre, I could give you what I had always wanted, what I always promised you.

Forever.

We can be together forever.

With that realization, I made my way home to you. The moon hung high in the sky as I crept into our small, humble place. You were already asleep in our bed, looking so peaceful and beautiful. I longed to kiss you, to taste you like I have never done so before. I made my way from the shadows to the bed, and leaned over your sleeping form. My hunger rose. I could hear the heartbeat in your chest. It sounded like a bomb going off. The pulsing in your neck taunted me. I had to have you.

All of you.

As I bent over you, your eyes shot open. In that moment I was so ashamed of what I had become. I was a disgrace to God, and worse yet, to you. But it was too late, I would fulfill my promise to you. We would be together forever.

Now I implore your forgiveness for my actions that led us to this point. But once you read this, seek me out at the Inn where I will be awaiting your arrival. Then we can begin our lives together once again. This time it will truly be forever, sealed with my eternal kiss.

About the Author:

Dusty Davis is an author of poetry and dark fiction living in East Liverpool, Ohio. He is a former professional wrestler and according to his wife, is obsessed with Batman.

Amy was lost as a leaf in autumn, drifting on a breeze of melancholy. Her almond shaped eyes watched the street as the ghostly neon streetlights flickered to freeze a snapshot of cold gray light. A steady wind gusted through the North Philadelphia neighborhood, strong enough to rattle the walls of the townhouse and toss trashcans like drunken bulls along the street. The apartment creaked and groaned as a draft relentlessly infiltrated between hidden cracks.

Amy resisted setting the heat higher than sixty. It was chilly for sure and wearing scant attire didn't help. Pulling herself from the window, she walked the cracked floor to the couch. If she couldn't see this plan to the end, she didn't need a hefty heating bill waiting at the end of the month.

In the stray distant light, the sofa retained an old dignity, the stains and burnt marks were badges to lost good times. Her cell phone held down the pile of bills and notices.

She wondered. Was it time?

The phone display lit up a stream of dust as it buzzed with an incoming call. Any call from either of her brothers after two in the morning was a herald of trouble.

For the final time, she received the last of these calls.

"Ah, Amy. This is Mike." Her older sibling stammered, "Ah, hum. I need a ride..."

Her eyes squinted as she held the bridge of her nose in fustigation, "Mike, I can't. Dave took my car, remember?"

His annoying coughing broke up the long pause. "Oh, fuck, yeah. He stole it. I need... like a ride. And some cash..."

"How bad are you?" A slight thorn of sisterly love broke her stoicism.

He laughed, "Fuck, I don't, don't know. Some shots... fuck... car bombs... But no smack... Need cash... Could you bring cash?"

Amy pressed the phone against her chest as she stifled the urge to break down in tears. She answered, cold and direct, "No. I don't have any cash. Dave and you stole enough from me. Even now you are flailing around to drag me into your hell."

"I'm at, you know, at Oakies... Could you be a sweet gal, pick me up? Oh, fuck. Dave fucked you with the car... Could you get me an Uber? Or get a bus here? At Oakies. Bring cash."

"Goodbye, Michael." She ended the call while clenching the phone. A strange relief took hold as he killed her doubts.

Unlike her brothers, she made peace with her mistakes. When life offered an unbelievable do-over, Amy obliged. The appointed hour had arrived.

As Amy mic dropped the phone, it bounced on the stack of papers. Her last issue of the American Journal of Archaeology slid onto the floor. Without troubling to lock the door, she left the apartment behind. Before she could run the stairs, Chris ambushed her.

"So, why are you stepping out at this late hour?" He bolted out of his apartment. A blast of sweet air sank into the hallway. Just once, could she talk to someone not stoned tonight? Chris blankly leered at her, holding onto the wall, "Dressed like that?"

"Move!" Pushing by him. She kept the outfit simple, a tank top and blue-jean shorts, and sandals. Compared to Chris, she was dressed to the nines.

"I'll save you the trouble of walking for rent. There is warm cash in here." He eyed back into his apartment.

Amy sneered, giving it up to losers would end tonight, "I'm done with this!"

As she tried to walk around him, he lunged forward trying to grasp her by the waist. She cringed as his oily palms only managed to caress her bare skin. Reaching the stairs, Amy thundered down towards the front door. A disposable second to open the door and exit the townhouse marked this milestone of her life.

"It's cold!" Amy shivered, walking through waves of dried leaves driven by the biting wind. She reconsidered this decision.

Laurel Hill Cemetery was just under a mile west from the townhouse. Normally a twenty-minute fast walk for her. The freezing wind jetted across the vacant, burnt-out lots assaulting her body. Any decrepit stragglers wandering the street recognized a broken leaf crushed by deceit.

Three blocks from the graveyard the streets were lined with barren trees haloed in murky orange light from battered streetlights. Once past the cemetery walls, she'd have a new life.

She saw the stone wall that bordered the graveyard. Built into the hillside, the wall was perhaps ten feet tall. After that was the sloping hillside giving another fifteen to twenty feet to overcome. Amy scanned the gray street. By running across Ridge Road, she would get the momentum to jump the wall. She risked being seen.

The main entrance was a few blocks south. The cemetery had night-watchmen patrolling the grounds. Undependable as to whether they cared about doing their job. She had to consider if by chance the police drove by. She heard the rumors. The things the police did with people like her became the new urban horror stories told in coffee houses late at night.

Amy crouched behind a dumpster out of the glare of traffic. The rumble of a train gave her a way in. A rail line went along a part of the northern edge of the graveyard. Just before it did, the line went over the road by a bridge. There was a place to crossover undercover.

It didn't take long for her to reach the bridge. The location was perfect. The brick wall extended to the rusted hulk of the bridge in terraced layers. She would have to jump ten feet, then climb over the hill onto the grounds.

Amy sweated. This was her life-changing moment. If caught, it meant real jail time. Any future career choices would be just shredded dreams. Going back to regret wasn't an option. She would make this jump.

Amy sprinted, gaining speed for the jump. She timed just right to scamper over the brick, pushing upward, and climb the hillside. Crawling forward, she slipped on the wet grass, falling onto a white marble gravestone.

Panting, she slumped backward. She did it! She looked at the grave marker, it glowed under the streetlights. She read the epithet.

"The death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world."

The Laurel Hill Cemetery's charm was its aged hidden grandeur of history and culture. It drew people in, whether for the color rich gardens of summer, or the stark architecture of the mausoleums built into the hillsides, or the copious displays of Egyptian imagery of obelisks and Greco-Roman friezes.

The folklore that haunted the cemetery brought the people. Amy followed 'ghost walks' exploring the grounds over the past year as they soaked up stories of gray stones. Stories that were shadows of the truth. She explored those truths to discover freedom.

Amy walked along a battered white stone wall built into the hillside that towered over the Schuylkill River. Seven small mausoleums built into the hillside with a larger one at the far end which was open. The hillside was a mob of trees. They hid in the shadows, among the trees, always watching the grounds.

"Porcelain," Amy called out, feeling his presence.

"Have you closed your affairs?" The stern and steady voice broke as he flowed from the dark like spilled ink on paper. Amy nodded with a quick eye glance to the sides. They waited and watched.

"I'm done."

A gale swaggered Porcelain's dark monkish cloak to reveal flashes of snowy features. "Are you prepared to sacrifice yourself?"

A cold hard question that Amy answered with a firm, "yes."

The trees protested in long creaks and groans yielding to the wind that created an audience shadows which within Amy detected three silhouettes slipping through the rows of branches.

"Are you certain?"

She walked into the open space in front of the tombs as dried leaves circled her feet. "Yes. I did everything that was required, and all that I wanted."

"Tell us two," His arm rose, the bare skin extended from the robe's cuff. Its distorted form gleamed in the thin light.

How many were out there? Amy broke into a sweat. Her heart pounded as she declared, "I screwed Maria, my closest friend. I sent a detailed e-mail to various agencies exposing the artifact stealing and trading involving Archeologists from the local colleges. Maybe my name will be redeemed now."

"We do not give redemption."

She took in a deep icy breath, "I know."

He invaded into her personal space to loom over with intense pale eyes. "You discovered us, broke our masquerade, making you extraordinarily dangerous to us."

As if she'd won an award, Amy stood a little straighter while looking at the tomb. "The inscriptions gave you away. Honestly, how no one else noticed is surprising."

A crackling noise lumbered around them, like laughter after a joke. Porcelain grinned widely, “Runes and symbols from ancient of days when people knew the weird and trembled. All forgotten, driven into folklore.”

“Not really, if you know where to find it. You’ll be surprised what most professionals will dismiss.” She lowered her head, “We need to move on.”

“You have anything to say?” He glided several feet away.

Broken leaves twirled around Amy’s feet. It was time to step forward into the truth. She removed her clothes, “I come naked to stand before you. I seek truth, balance, and belonging. The bridge behind is burnt. I give myself to you.”

“What you seek is ours to give. Do you forgo your life?” Porcelain’s cold voice chimed in the wind.

“Yes.” A dark white from fog broke from her lips.

The others emerged from their hiding places. Several lumbering bodies approached her. Bygone creatures that perched on lofty spires of Gothic cathedrals and buildings. Their wings flexed out in a display of strength. Amy marveled at the gray luster of their skin, a fine pattern of stonework. They closed the circle around Amy as Porcelain stepped aside.

Amy wanted to feel the feral essence of fear. Instead, she surged in satisfaction as the largest Gargoyle’s teeth pierced her throat. They feasted on her. Her blood coursed into their mouths. She descended into bliss.

Slowly they pulled away to lift her up. The brightest stars were visible until brought into the dark crypt. Soon they laid her on a pile of small stones. Her mouth was forced open, hot coppery blood oozed down into her body. Then she felt the weight of dry earthy stones.

The scorch burned through her body as muscles tensed and twisted against their bones. They splintered and shifted in an endless hard echoing crack. Her spine twisted, each vertebra popped as she twisted and coiled on the ground. Protrusions ruptured her shoulders, Amy screamed as the agony overtook her mind.

Slowly, Amy focused on her senses. First, she heard the voices, just loud enough to know that there were four people behind the wall. Her vision cleared, adapted to the low warm of candle lighting. A shuffle in the corner caused to her crouch low to the ground. Her fingers clawed into the stone floor like old fashioned chalk on a board.

A rat scurried into the corner, hissing and squealing at her.

Amy sympathized with its absolute terror. The most animalistic feeling between predator and prey. She watched as it scampered along the floor into a crack in the wall.

She was in one of the vaults of the mausoleum. On the walls where thick candles that created just enough light for her see.

The change brought strength into her body. In her clawed hands and talon feet, her skin hardened into a rockish texture.

Then she felt the load on the shoulders. Protruding from her back were wings, leathery and dark. It hurt to move them. They were weak from newness.

The door opened with grating of crushed gravel. Porcelain stood in the frame, gesturing for her to follow him to the main vault. There the others stood in the warm glow of flicking lights. Hanging by the feet were several nude bodies of men and women.

Amy languished in the delight of belonging.

About the Author:

Gregory L. Steighner is an enthusiastic writer and photographer who draws inspiration from the Western Pennsylvania region. His first published short fiction has appeared in issue 45 of The Sirens Call eZine. He resides outside of Pittsburgh with his wife, mother-in-law, three cats, and a host of stories to tell.

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The first spadeful of wet mud struck her chest. This was followed by palm sized rocks. She could barely struggle due to the thick hemp ropes binding her arms to her sides. She dug her naked heels into the dirt from the pain. Her screams were muffled because of a hollow bamboo reed inserted through a moldy wooden bowl directly into her mouth. Numerous biting creatures fell into her hair and onto her face from the putrid surface of the receptacle. The reed was her only breathing life-line. The bowl had then been inverted over her tearful face.

Tarpeia remembered rolling across the floor in midst of the throngs of passion. The floor of the chamber of the Vestal Virgins wasn't the most comfortable to experience intimacy, but Cornelius was so spontaneous. While laughing like a small child seeing a kitten for the first time, she had bumped into the Vessel of the Sacred Flame. It tipped over and extinguished.

"Sister repent and accept the axioms of our goddess Vestia," intoned the two young male priests. "Let us just seal you in the Campus Sceleratus with a few days of food and water. Let Vestia determine the outcome of your fate. Don't make us bury you alive."

"Cease your chatter," yelled Pontifex Maximus. "Tarpeia, daughter of the house of Spurius Tarperiga doesn't deserve the loving justice of only immurement from our Goddess. This Vestal Virgin not only committed intercourse with a consecrated collige priest but allowed the sacred flame to go out on her watch." The Pontifex glared and shook his scepter at the two young priests. They trembled and didn't lift their heads up to look at him.

The priests continued to pile on the dirt as the Pontifex berated them. The mixture now completely covered her filthy legs and feet. A burial shroud had replaced her magnificent silken vittae. Her medals of honor had been stripped off. A torn cotton plain sack now would be her final covering.

The weight of the stones and dirt began to crush her chest. Each breath in became as difficult, as when she used to wear a binding Minoan snake priestess corset. The cold wet mud slowly enveloped her in a new shroud. The frigid material slowed her heart, like a toad hibernating for the winter under a pond.

"Repent, repent," chanted the two priests. "Admit your sins, so we don't have to entomb you!" They continued to pile dirt, forming her tomb.

Tarpeia flashed back to her short life. How could a young widow stay chaste after initially tasting the joys of sex with her husband? She loved Tiberius with all her heart and was devastated after he died in battle. No children blessed her. Being a failure, her father then sold her to the Vestal Virgins, since it was considered a huge honor. Anyone could be a 'Virgin', if they swore to now remain chaste. Being 'chosen' was an enormous credit to her political rising family. She had not agreed.

A young priest Cornelius helped console her over her husband's death and she soon fell to his charms. Now he was dead, whipped to extermination in the city center square. She cried and screamed as the skin was flailed off his back with each blow. First there were rivers of blood from his body, then torrents of tears from herself.

"Repent, repent," continued to chant the young priests. They seemed to be now enjoying her torment. They smirked as they watched her squirm in anguish. The pile of dirt next to the grave was rapidly diminishing. Pontifex laughed at her agony.

Tarpeia knew she shouldn't have flinched when Pontifex leaned over to bestow his holy kiss on her forehead at the initial ceremony. But his fetid breath, leering smile and rotten teeth turned her stomach. She was not upset that she spurned him later as he tried to impart a different portion of his divine body on her. She knew the hollow reed wasn't just to allow her to breathe for a while longer under her tomb of soil. It was to keep her from voicing her accusations.

She now felt the creatures of the filth beginning to explore her body. Their gentle touches at first felt similar to the caresses of Cornelius. Then their biting mouths brought agony to her wriggling body.

The other Vestal Virgins had hinted at the licentious nature of Maximus. Unfortunately, they hadn't warned her sufficiently. She would die picturing his devilish leering face.

The mud and stones now covered her up to her neck. With every breath in, she almost couldn't take one out. The weight of the entire world was upon her. When she tried to inhale through her nose, the foul moldy smell of the bowl reminded her of her torturer. Plus, the diminishing fresh air inside the bowl made her head spin. She tried to continue to suck miniscule gulps of air through the hollow bamboo reed.

The trial was a sham. Discovered by the other Vestal Virgins In flagrante delicto, next to the extinguished Sacred Flame, she was immediately judged guilty before the goddess. The usual punishment was being sealed in the Campus Sceleratus with just a few days of food and water. The goddess herself would pass final judgement on the guilty Virgin. She would determine if the Virgin could leave the cave alive.

But Pontifex could not allow the chance of her trying to denounce. Too many personages would have been able to hear accusations from the cave. He immediately decreed the unique punishment 'bury her alive'.

The muck now began to rain down onto the inverted bowl covering her face. The drumming of the stones wasn't pleasant like a summer drizzle, but like hail pounding down on her palace roof. Once the bowl was covered, the priests finished shoveling.

As soon as the deluge of debris stopped, the silence was profound. The only sound she could now ascertain was the muffled gulping of shallow amounts of air through her narrow lifeline.

Pontifex Maximus reached down and pulled out the reed.

About the Author:

Scott Blanke is starting his second career as a writer. He is recently retired from the Mayo Clinic, as a surgeon. He used to slit throats for a living. He lives in La Crosse Wisconsin with his wife, Heidi. He is an avid gardener, photographer and amateur gourmet chef. He has three grown children and two grandchildren. This is his first published work. He's thrilled.

Comings | *Harris Coverley*

Lift me high above my bed
Let my toes drag across the under-sheet
Off and down along the floor
And out the window into the unpitying night air

I'll dance with ghosts and drunks and dog-walkers
Stumbling in a trance as you try to lift me higher
Underneath my armpits, my pants, you hoist further
And drowsy in stance I fly through the pale hum of the mist

You kiss me firmly with blue lips
And I giggle boyishly, sluggish, violated, chilled
But now I have to go home and sleep for real
For you must know the day is darker than the night

About the Author:

Harris Coverley is a member of the Weird Poets Society, and has been published in their latest anthology, *Speculations*, edited by Frank Coffman, as well as having poems recently in *Scifaikuest*, *Bewildering Stories*, and *Oddball Magazine*. He has also had short fiction recently accepted for *Curiosities*, *Theme of Absence*, and *Mystery Tribune*, amongst others. He lives in Manchester, England, where he pretends to be busy.

Author Blog: [Harris Coverley on Medium](#)

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The Girl Who Couldn't Scream | *Sonora Taylor*

Once there was a girl who couldn't scream. When she cried, her tears fell in silent rivers down her cheeks. When she was scared, her mouth opened like a deep cave, but nothing came out but air. And when she was in pain, her skin would flush and her fingers and toes would curl, but no scream would appear.

The girl began to find her screams from other places. She loved the screech of her rusty screen door when she went outside. She went to the woods and delighted in the cacophony of crows that cawed in clusters. A violent wind through the trees, signaling an oncoming storm, made the girl close her eyes and open her mouth, hoping she could scream like the wind.

But nothing came out of her mouth. It only filled with rain.

Still, the woods were her favorite place. She spent more and more time in the forest, using the screams of birds and breezes to fill her void.

One morning, as she stood in the woods before an oncoming storm, a man approached her. "I've been watching you," he said as he withdrew a knife. "I collect girls like you."

The girl backed away and tried to scream – but of course, nothing came out. The man laughed as he came closer. "A silent one," he said. "I like those girls best."

He moved toward her with the knife and she darted away. He stumbled on a root, and the girl pushed him to make him fall. The knife fell from his hand, and the girl seized it before he could. She sat upon him and placed the blade to his throat. A single cry came from his mouth.

The girl felt a lump in her throat. She opened her mouth, and a single cry fell out like a drop of rain.

The man furrowed his brow, then grabbed her wrist. She scratched his cheek with her free hand. He yelped in pain, a longer scream. The girl felt a buzzing from her hand to her throat. She opened her mouth and his scream came out. It felt warm and crackled like lightning in the sky.

She loved it. She wanted to feel it over and over again.

The man stared in confusion. His grip on her wrist loosened long enough for her to free her hand. The girl grinned, then plunged the knife into the man's side. She opened her mouth as he screamed, and felt his terror seep from her mouth. Over and over, she stabbed him and swallowed his screams, releasing them into the air as his blood poured into the dirt. The forest joined in on her glee. The crows cawed in the air, the thunder drummed through the clouds, and the wind whistled through the trees in time with each and every one of her cries.

When the girl knew the man's time was almost done, she pulled the blade in one slow motion from his neck to his abdomen. His cry was weak, but she still felt it sizzle and steam in her throat. She threw her head back and screamed, a cry that was louder than any noise in the woods.

The screams didn't last beyond her moment of triumph, but the girl didn't care. She carried the memory of what it was like to scream – and the knowledge on how to do it again. When she visited the woods, she carried that man's knife. And when she felt the urge to scream, she knew what it took to do it. All she needed was an errant man who wasn't expecting her.

About the Author:

Sonora Taylor is the author of *The Crow's Gift and Other Tales*, *Please Give*, and *Wither and Other Stories*. Her next book, *Without Condition*, will be released February 12, 2019. She lives in Arlington, Virginia.

Author Blog: [Sonora Writes](#)

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In the House | *Michael D. Davis*

It was either a creak or a crack, I'm not sure, but it was definitely the wood floor. The sound came from the living room. So far as I knew I was the only one in the house. I slunk forward through the kitchen, grabbing a butcher knife as I go. I keep my back against the wall and when I'm close to the room stick my head around the corner. There is blood everywhere and several dead bodies on the floor. Some of them are ripped open. I let out my breath, the room is as I left it.

All Cosmetic | *Michael D. Davis*

The house was in budget. A Queen Anne in a great neighborhood with so much potential. It's in good condition with no major problems, but how much can you tell from a walkthrough? Sure, it smelled now, but spritz some perfume and it's beautiful. We just need to do some cosmetic stuff, fix the place up. Put a little bit of money into it and make some damn good profit. The old shack just needs a new coat of paint, some new kitchen cabinets. We'll fix up the bathrooms really nice and stop all that screaming coming from the basement.

The Art in The Act | *Michael D. Davis*

Phillip's father scolded him. "You're doing it all wrong. Making a mess of it, you have to find the art in the act."

"I'm doing my best," Phillip pleaded.

"Please, you have blood all over the place and you've just been chopping at the neck. If you did it the way I told you, it would have come off in one move."

"I think this knife is dull."

"Bullshit, never blame your tools. I could take out a lumberjack's bloated liver with a butter knife. It's about skill. Look at the way your mother has skinned that pesky neighbor boy."

About the Author:

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

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In perfect harmony, their voices rose high into the rafters of his church, the acoustics allowing the song to echo from all corners of the building so there was no escape from the assault of that sweetest of sounds. They'd only been together for two days and already the girls were well-trained and none made a mistake. Soon they would be ready for his audience but still he had the nagging feeling something was lacking.

Andrew tapped his baton on the music stand and indicated they begin again. Without a murmur of complaint, the women obeyed his every flourish, all eyes fixed firmly on his. As always, they wore crimson robes, as befitted the choir's name - The Scarlet Ladies – making every night a dress rehearsal. The deep shade contrasted admirably with the pallor of their skin. *His* women stayed out of the sun, whatever flaws they had remained hidden in the gloom.

As they sang, he listened intently. Nobody had missed a beat. Yet ... there it was, an absence, right at the top of the scale. He would have to hold another audition ... and soon. The performance they would give was going to be a once-in-a-lifetime show, one night only.

One more audition.

He dismissed his choir and watched them sink into their chairs, their eyes still focussed on him, ready should he suddenly change his mind, but with a curt goodnight, he turned and left. What they did in their free time was their own business but he doubted they would move, would simply sit in quiet contemplation of his return.

Outside, it was dark and the gas lamps had been lit to guide the unwise traveller. The streets however held no fear for Andrew, this was his home and even the dense fog swirling around him felt like an old friend. He walked the cobbled pavements, passed by raucous ale houses, turned his attentions to the rookeries. He had a feeling he would find his girl there. As if on cue he heard a scream pierce the air. A scream in these parts was nothing unusual but this one, its pitch rose to that lofty scale he was missing in his choir. He turned in the sound of its direction, moving swiftly to reach the woman before whoever assailed her finished the job.

"Ah, Jack. Thought it was you," said Andrew. "Only you know how to make them sing like that."

"Hello, little brother," said Jack, dressed in black, he towered over the woman currently struggling in his grip. "What brings you out on a night like this?"

"Oh, the usual, the usual."

They both laughed but their good humour did nothing to soothe the woman. Instead she struggled harder, prepared to scream again. Andrew clamped his hand firmly over her mouth. She had already passed her audition, he didn't want her to waste her voice.

"Ah, that's the way of it, is it?" asked Jack, his tone indulgent. "What do you want her for this time?"

"She's perfect for my choir. That pitch, that range. It's what's missing."

"And what do I get in return?"

"Front row seat?"

"Hmm," said Jack. "I had been hoping to have a little sport with this one ..."

Andrew saw the knife. "Later, perhaps" he said. "Taking a break will do you good."

Jack sighed. "Family does come first I suppose."

Andrew grinned. Jack could always be relied on to support him in his ventures, no matter how outlandish, and he reciprocated in turn whenever he was needed. His brother helped Andrew with the woman until they reached the main road and then he summoned a hansom cab. The driver wasn't at all concerned by her semi-conscious state, he assumed she was drunk, like so many in these parts. In fact, he reckoned she was lucky to have friends like the two gentlemen to see her home. It wasn't safe on the streets these days.

"Church?" queried Jack, as they went through the lych gate. "Never figured you for the God-fearing type."

Andrew laughed. "Don't worry. I haven't changed. It's been standing empty since they built that brand new one down the road. No one comes here anymore and I didn't like to see it go to waste. Thought it would be a perfect stage for a little musical entertainment. Happy Birthday, Jack."

Jack chuckled. "I thought you'd forgotten."

"Never," said Andrew. "Wanted to give you something different this year. Something special. Take a seat. Front row, remember!"

Waving Jack away, telling him he was a guest, Andrew half-carried, half-dragged the woman to her seat in the choir. Everything had come together perfectly and now he was desperate to hear how she would sing, how she fitted in to his repertoire. He wanted it to be just right for Jack. He fixed the thin wires to her wrists, legs throat and spine as he had to her companions and then fed the wires to a pulley system which linked, like the others, to his baton.

Andrew took his position in front of them and tapped the music stand. The movement jerked the wires which in turn pulled at the women, tearing into their flesh a little more, deepening the colour of their robes.

"Ladies," he commanded, "tonight is *the* night. Let me hear you sing until lungs burst and your heart bleeds, let us give my brother Jack, the performance of a lifetime!"

He lifted his arm and swept his baton to the right, the wires pulled tight, cut in again. On cue their voices cried out in the empty church, a heart-rending appeal to an absent God. Another flourish, another deeper cut, this time causing cloth to rip and display the flesh beneath, reveal muscle and tissue. Faster now, Andrew's arms waved through the air, a bizarre puppet master, creating a scale of horror which no one else except the two brothers could hear or see. More rips and tears, almost eviscerating the singers, revealing the bone of them. Higher and higher their screams went and still he continued to conduct, and when he heard his latest addition, his heart swelled with joy. Then they began to fade, as he knew they would. They had lasted as long as he had needed them to and now he would let them rest. Finally the song ended, not with a scream but a whisper.

He placed the baton on the stand and turned to face his brother.

Jack was standing, was clapping wildly. "Bravo, little brother. Bravo."

With tears in their eyes, the brothers embraced.

"Thank you," said Jack. "That was perfect."

"The evening's not over yet," said Andrew. "Why don't you take one of them to play with ... Oh, I almost forgot, here." He handed Jack a leather apron. "Hope you like it. Happy Birthday again, Jack."

About the Author:

Stephanie Ellis writes dark speculative fiction and has been published in a variety of magazines and anthologies. She is co-editor and contributor at *The Infernal Clock* and also co-editor of *Trembling with Fear*, HorrorTree.com's online magazine. She is an affiliate member of the HWA.

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It Ends with a Scream | J. M. Meyer

The ceaseless screams, carried on the back of the eastern wind, grew louder daily. There would be no more running. We reached the sea, finding the promised boat a lie and sheltered in tents and cars. Plugging our ears with fabric, sand, and mud did nothing to stop the sound of the screaming world approaching. Despite enough nourishment, we continued to diminish. Crazy friends opened their wrists, couples walked into the ocean, and families jumped off cliffs onto the slick rocks below. The rest of us waited to join the screaming chorus as the wind filled our lungs with anguish.

About the Author:

J. M. Meyer is a writer, artist and small business owner living in New York, where she received her master's degree from Columbia University. Short stories by O. Henry and Ray Bradbury have greatly influenced her writing. Jacqueline enjoys the company of her husband Bruce and their children, Julia, Emma and Lauren. Jacqueline's mantra: It's never too late to try something new, unless you're dead.

Author Blog: [J. Moran Meyer](#)

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

GHOSTS OF THE SEA MOON

Book I
Saga of the
Outer Islands

A. F. STEWART

Narrated by Alyson Grauer

Available on Amazon

Dusk soaked,
mossy moored,
the boy stands-
stone struck
as if in flight.

The shadows sip
at his silhouette
and Ivy entwines
his collar and cuffs.
Choking him with her passion.

Stone clogs crack,
rock lungs gasp,
lips open
to consume fronds of fragrant
moon beams.

Moon clothed
the boy revives.
Roots tear,
Ivy rips,
weeping verdant sap.
Her silent scream.

Night eyes watch,
unblinking irises reveal -
the boy has slipped his
stone prison.

Unshackled, he roams free.
Light of spirit,
he swims amidst
the vacant-faced lillies.
Rides the gravestones' backs
as chargers into battle
though death always wins.

Dawn draped
his shoulders stiffen,
his curls freeze,
his linen shirt becomes
his mourning shroud.

He ascends his pedestal.
Ivy kisses him.

Heavenly Prisoner | *Alyson Faye*

You took me from my nest
clipped my feathers,
dimmed my lights,
stole my progeny.

Wrapping me in tarry ropes
You kept me caged,
poked by your nurslings' sticks,
spat at by angry atheists.

Inside my fire still burns.
The aviary calls to me,
I am pulled by
their passion, by their pain.

Time means nothing to me.
I wait, suckling on
the dregs of sunshine
glittering between the bars.

In the darkling hours
you will not hear -
my heart's beat
nor my wings' fury.

I will be avenged
I will return,
with the angelic hordes.

About the Author:

Alyson lives in the UK, writes dark fiction, which has appeared on the Horror Tree site, in varied anthologies like *DeadCades*, *Women in Horror Annual 2* and her own collection, *Badlands*. Her latest story is published via Demain in the Short Sharp Shocks! series, *Night of the Rider*, available to buy on amazon.

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Andy hopped on the 215 and plonked himself in the nearest window seat. The multi-coloured lights outside shone through the rain streaks on the glass, making pleasing twinkles that calmed and relaxed him.

The office had been hectic that day but the bus was quiet. The journey wasn't a long one, and Andy was enjoying the peace. Sam was probably back from work. Maybe she was setting up dinner. The word *dinner* set off a whine in the pit of his stomach that ended in a low groan. She'd probably only make a salad or something light, not when her big dinner was in a few days.

She's so weight conscious in the winter months. Andy smiled. Sam hadn't gained or lost a pound since they met four years before. She exercises, she doesn't drink too much, and she eats right — with an exception of her monthly big dinner of course.

Andy shifted on his seat, giving his numb buttocks some relief. He, on the other hand, was a big fatty. Big arse, flabby arms, and the beginnings of an old man jowl, despite him not being technically middle aged yet. But, compared to his gorgeous Samantha, anyone would look like crap he thought to himself, smiling.

The bus slowed and sidled into the stop. A woman fought to drag a pram decorated with bulging shopping bags up the steps. Andy made a move to get up, but was beaten to it by a younger, more able man, who helped the woman onto the bus. The worn out mother gave Andy a small smile before crashing onto the seat parallel to him, keeping one hand on the pram.

The bus started up again, and the shopping bags swung in harmony with the curvatures of the road as it re-joined the slow traffic. Andy watched the tiny infant in the pram, gumming on a rusk, mesmerized by the colourful mobile hanging above its head. Andy and Sam had briefly spoken about having children of their own. They were unsure she could even conceive, given her unique diet. But they were happy, just the two of them, they supported each other, they would do anything for each other. Andy smiled wistfully and looked out through the window at the rain as it started to lash down harder. He would die for her. He would kill for her.

The doors wheezed open and the rain intruded the dry warmth of the bus as Andy stepped out, pulling his hat down to his brow. The walk home wasn't long, but after a few moments his clothes were sopping wet. He kept his head down, and only looked up when he was at the edge of his driveway. The living room curtains were closed.

His eyebrows furrowed under his hat and he searched for his keys as he made his way up to the porch. His hands were cold despite being stowed away in his pockets, and he fumbled with the keyhole numbly before finding purchase.

Immediately the familiar metallic smell hit him and he sighed, already predicting what he'd find in his living room.

"Is that you babe?" Sam called out.

"Yeah, I'm just getting my jacket off!" Andy called back. He slipped his jacket off and hung it on the banister. Pulling off his hat and ruffling his thinning hair, he stuck the hat into the jacket pocket. He would have left the hat out to dry but he had a feeling he'd have to venture out again soon.

Andy opened the door and greeted Samantha's face with a grin. The grin quickly slid into a grimace when he saw a black cat, mangled and broken, hanging lamely in her hands.

"Sammie, what have you done?" he asked weakly.

Sam held the cat up to him, and he saw its face, contorted in terror, its bright green eyes dim in the way only death can manage. It had died in distress, and Andy knew exactly how that would look, having seen many a cat and dog brutally killed at the hands of his girlfriend.

Sam stuck her bottom lip out in that way she knew softened Andy.

"I was so hungry," she whined gently. Andy softened of course, and sat on the arm of the sofa. He sighed.

"Sammie, your big dinner isn't until this weekend," he said patiently. "We had a plan. We have to be careful. You know this."

Sam played with the limp corpse; the cat's head flopped around sickeningly. Its neck had been broken, and was stretched out like a spaghetti noodle. Andy watched it swing distastefully.

"I just couldn't wait that long," she said timidly.

Andy stood up. "Well it's done now. You better put the plastic sheeting down."

Andy took the corpse from her and felt that it was still warm in its midriff, just behind the ribcage. Some of the ribs were broken, snapped inwards. Samantha hurried to the kitchen cupboard and pulled out the plastic sheeting. It

had faint pink stains all over it. She laid it down and sat in the middle of the large sheet crossed legged like an excited child.

He gently laid the cat in front of her, and turned away as she lifted it up and bit into its neck. He turned to go upstairs and grab the shovel. He looked back over his shoulder at his beautiful girlfriend, and she looked back at him beaming. Her perfect teeth and dimpled chin dripped with fresh warm blood.

Andy adjusted his hat to keep the worst of the rain out of his eyes. His wellingtons did their job keeping his feet dry, but made his steps clumsy and for the third time he tripped over a large branch and landed face-first on the forest floor.

He picked up the shovel again and continued on. Andy recognized the cat from a few doors down.

They have a kid, Andy thought sadly.

No kid should have to lose a pet. At least it will look like it had run away. Better than what really happened. His wellies snagged another branch and he stumbled.

The things I do for love, Andy thought as he stopped at the clearing.

He slid the backpack off his shoulders and set it down by his feet. He scanned the ground, looking for a spot that didn't already have a body buried underneath it. He found one by the overgrowth and started his monthly dig.

"Monthly *work-out*, more like," he said mirthfully and let out a little chuckle to himself.

He dug long into the night, anticipating getting home to his beautiful girlfriend who was waiting for him.

About the Author:

Laine Slater has lived in Kent, England all his life, and will continue to until he is discovered by the authorities. The majority of his work is set in Kent and the surrounding areas, and is currently a Creative Writing student at Canterbury Christ Church University. Some people tell him his writing is too dark. He agrees.

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Peg | J. M. Meyer

When I first moved in with Jasper, his mom, Peg, was not totally cool with my witchcraft. She was a sad solitary woman who never spoke about Jasper's deceased dad, George. She came around to accepting me last Halloween, when I invited her to my annual séance.

After our small group gathered we quickly summoned a spirit.

"Peg, the spirit is screaming your name in agony. Should I tell him to leave?"

She smiled. "Is he calling me Peggy?"

"Yes."

Peg stood and yelled with glee.

"You can't hurt us, George! You're where you belong, and I'd kill you again."

About the Author:

J. M. Meyer is a writer, artist and small business owner living in New York, where she received her master's degree from Columbia University. Short stories by O. Henry and Ray Bradbury have greatly influenced her writing. Jacqueline enjoys the company of her husband Bruce and their children, Julia, Emma and Lauren. Jacqueline's mantra: It's never too late to try something new, unless you're dead.

Author Blog: [J. Moran Meyer](https://www.jmoranmeyer.com)

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The chirping of my car's engine grew louder and louder as I edged closer to my new house. It was late, with the last sun rays disappearing behind dark clouds. A storm was moving in. Lights started coming on in the dashboard and various dings rang out. It came to a stop with a cloud of smoke leaking out from under the hood. I got out and opened it, smoke escaping in a black plume. Fearful of a fire, I didn't get back in. I'd have to call someone in town to come tow it in the morning. For now, I was stranded. Turning around, I realized with a start that the car had died in the right spot. I had arrived.

I'd only seen pictures of the house when I bought it, moving across states in what most would think of as a spontaneous move, but here we are. What lay ahead of me was not at all what I was expecting. I counted twenty stone steps leading upwards. The doorway itself arched like a mouth open wide in terror. The windows were eyes, crying in the storm that had just began. The house had a face twisted in horror, glaring at me, trying to scare away anyone who dared enter. I was the brave, or rather stupid, one planning to not only enter, but stay. Standing in the rain seemed like a better idea.

The massive building had a steeply pitched roof and pointed windows. It was like an ancient cathedral or castle straight out of a fairy tale with dark grey wood panels, a violent-purple door, black window shutters, and a wraparound porch bedazzled with pots of dead plants, sticks standing in dirt. The trees surrounding the house were ancient, with wide trunks protruding from the ground. Large branches reached out like hands. Mounds of mossy bits dangled down. The rest of the property was hidden behind the curtain of rain. Details too blurry and uncertain.

Getting my suitcases from the car, I hurried up the steps. The key I had opened the door in complete silence. No squeaky hinges, no echoes radiating into the house. Just pure quiet. I lingered in the doorway for a moment, a deep sense of unease running through my body. I was home.

All that could be heard was the rain hitting the roof. It was a loud banging. The carpet and heavy wallpaper should have muffled any sound. I walked further in trying to figure out why it sounded like rocks were pelting the house, full-force. I came upon a round, narrow staircase at the end of the entryway. It twisted in a spiral, reaching upwards into the belly of the beast, up through the high vaulted ceilings, up into the inside of the witches' hat shape that could be seen from outside. The hat was all glass which explained the banging from the large raindrops. The stairs climbed in a circular fashion against the walls. I left my suitcases and began to climb the red-carpeted steps before I saw them.

Two Sphinx cats sat mid-way up the stairs. One cat was black with green eyes, the other white with blue eyes. These hairless, huge-eared, wrinkled aliens were as still as statues, gargoyle-like, watching me. Where did they come from and how were they living inside a house that, from what I'd been told, had been empty for years? I walked towards them, hand out, making soothing sounds to not frighten them. They ran, of course, up the stairs, into the dark.

I followed, missed a step, and stumbled. That's when I noticed the light deeper within. It wasn't there when I came inside. Leaving the stairs, I wandered into the heart of the house. I found a large room with a grand fireplace and a fire burning. The slight crispy pop and crackle could now be heard along with the rain. No other human being was here. How could there be a fire? There were other rooms that branched off from the hallway, but all I could focus on was that mysterious fire.

Large, greenish, pillowy couches and chairs sat around the fireplace. Hanging above was a portrait of a woman. She had long dark hair, high cheekbones, and startling green eyes. I resembled her. A name was on the bottom of the picture. Evelina Zara Malik. My eyes were drawn to the ring on Evelina's hand. It was a silver band with a strange-shaped green stone. The stone wasn't smooth. I knew this not by appearance alone, but because I wore the same ring. Mesmerized by the lovely face that mirrored my own, I almost didn't hear the soft tune that slowly began playing on the piano in the corner. It was subtle, soft, a smooth melody blending in with the rain and the logs crackling in the fire. It wasn't unfamiliar. I felt myself sway with it, eyes locked on my ancestor. I wasn't alone here, that much was certain. I began to feel like the siren's song of the house was luring me in. That thought, that lone thought snapped me out of the trance-like state. I watched the piano keys moving, with no visible hands to supply the force. I looked up at the portrait of the ancient Malik and it winked at me. My brain hurt like I had been studying chemistry or algebra equations.

"Very funny," I mumbled. To the ghosts. To the house itself. I went back to my suitcases and dragged them behind me back to a room on the third floor, up far away from whatever crazy was happening downstairs.

A loud hurricane-like scream thundered down the hallway and doors began to open and shut. Mine locked itself, a soft, but unmistakable click. It didn't budge. I slid down the wall opposite the door and pulled my knees to my chest. I sat that way until I caught my breath. My chest hurt with that familiar baby elephant-sized weight sitting on top of it. I had pills for that.

I was safe here. I don't know why I even had that thought, but either way I knew I could sleep. I didn't even bother changing my clothes or looking for a bathroom. Exhaustion took over. I climbed into bed. The fact that it wasn't dusty and felt fresh from the dryer didn't bother me in the least. In fact, I wasn't even surprised about it. I fell asleep to the lullaby of the pitter-patter of rain that had started back up.

The candles on the night table blew out on their own.

My ringing cell phone woke me the next morning. I answered, not sure who could possibly be calling me.

It was a tow truck. Only I never called anyone. I ran a brush through my hair and went down the spiral. Outside the man was already messing with my car. I'd left the hood up to keep it from catching fire. I had also forgotten to take the keys with me. He had the car running, no smoke, no chirps. Just a normal sounding car.

"You fixed it!"

He turned to me and gasped. His face paled. "Evie," he whispered.

"I'm Lara." I reached out to shake his hand. He did not take it.

He looked back to the ground. "I'm not sure what was wrong with your car, but it's running fine now."

I explained what happened and he just shook his head.

"How did you know I needed your help?"

"You called and left a message." When I disagreed, he pulled out his cell phone and let me listen to the message. It was my voice. I didn't remember making the call though. That's not something I would forget.

"If that's all you need, I'll be headed out."

"What do I owe you?" I asked, not wanting him to leave just yet. Maybe he could tell me more about this strange house.

"All I did was put the key in."

"Right," I said, embarrassed that I'd wasted his time. "Do you want some coffee maybe? It's the least I can do since you drove all the way out here." I hoped there was coffee in the kitchen. A room I had yet to go into.

"Thank you, that is nice of you to offer, but no. I won't be setting foot in that house."

"I could bring it out to you, if you want to wait?" I didn't want to beg. I was nervous about going back in myself, the night before slowing coming back to me.

"Ma'am, you are lucky I came out to look at your car. No one else would. Now that my work is done, I'd like to be on my way."

"I'm sorry. Thank you for coming." I turned and began back up the stone steps.

"Wait. That's not very neighborly of me, is it? I apologize. Let me give you my card." He walked up the few steps to hand it to me. Visible shakes were raking through his body, seizure-like. "If you need anything, have any trouble, please call me. You do have a friend in town."

"Thank you. Can I ask, why are you afraid?"

"You live in Circe's Manor."

"I saw the sign, but so what?"

"Circe was a witch. You live in the witch's house, and you look like her. You could be one of her children, but they are all dead. You *will* have trouble making friends here."

"Her children are dead? How could you possibly know that?"

"I was there when their bodies were pulled from the lake. I don't know who you are, but people *will* be afraid of you. I think you should be very careful now that you've returned. There are a lot of secrets that may not be happy for you here." He was looking up at the house as he spoke. Something caught his attention and he backed away down the steps.

"Wait! I'm not one of her children. I've never been here before."

“Visit the graveyard,” he said as he moved back to his truck. He had seen something that spooked him. I watched as he drove away, fast. I sat down on the stone step. My two little shadow friends appeared from nowhere and meowed on each side of me, rubbing their hairless faces on my legs.

He had been wrong. I’d never been here before. I ran the rest of the way up the stairs and back inside my haunted house. I wasn’t going to let fear get the best of me. I tripped over the doorway, landing on my leg in an awkward position. The door was standing wide open. Had I forgotten to close it? It seemed I continued to forget things when inside the house.

The fire was lit in the fireplace. I could see it. The pitter-patter of rain slowly started up again.

A shrill whistle began. It grew louder and louder like a train was headed right for me or a tornado. I looked up and saw that the spiraling stairs were in motion. They twirled and danced straight for the roof, but stopped, mid-spin, right before making contact. They began to spin backwards. Back and forth, up and down. On the second floor, the shapes of a woman and child hovered, pencil outlines of people not fully colored in yet.

The piano roared to life. A sweet melody began to play. I looked at the floor ahead of me and saw wet footprints on the carpet. Someone had come in before me, opened the door, and started a fire. Their footprints were there as evidence. But just as I thought that, the footprints disappeared as if the water had evaporated.

I covered my ears with trembling hands, the roaring blasting through the house, hurting my ears. My ankle throbbed. It was on fire and now the size of an apple. I reached for it, screamed as my fingers touched it. As soon as my cry reached the air, the house stopped. It realized I was hurt. The ghosts had gone too far.

The stairs settled in their original spot. The door slammed shut behind me. The fire went out. The piano’s music was gone. A single rose fluttered down from the clear roof, landing beside me, perhaps an apology. I sat in stunned silence. My face wet with tears. The house was quiet once more. All that could be heard was the constant pitter-patter of rain. It was a lullaby.

“Thank you,” I whispered and meant it. I didn’t think I could stand. “I need help,” I called out. My voice echoed up through the house. I said it again and again. Three times. “Please, help me.” I cried over my ankle and for my sanity. To think this haunted house would help me was crazy.

Or so I thought.

A loud knock came to the door. Again and again. Three times.

“Come in. Help me!” I yelled. I couldn’t be certain what would walk in. I cringed, thinking of what I might be inviting into my home. All rational thinking was gone.

A man opened the door. A man with worry lines etched on his forehead. He reminded me of someone, but I couldn’t quite place him.

“Hello, Lara,” he whispered as he knelt beside me. “I’m here to help you.”

The man picked me up, gently carried me further into the house, and sat me down on the green couch under the portrait of Evelina. The ring on her finger seemed to glow. Mine lit up in response, a wink, a slight flicker of light that was gone before I could even comprehend that it happened.

I didn’t ask how he knew I needed help or why he’d come here in the middle of a storm. He probably would not have known how to answer anyway. But I knew. It was an instant realization and I smiled with my newfound knowledge.

I, Lara Malik, lost ancestor to the witches who once dwelled here, asked for help.

Circe’s Manor heard my cry and called him to me.

About the Author:

Melissa Ramos is a writer, proofreader, and aspiring authoress living in Florida. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Tampa, and her work has appeared in Luna Luna Magazine and Quail Bell Magazine. When she isn’t reading fairy tales or ghost stories, she can be found in Starbucks sipping her favorite latte and working on her first novel.

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It could have been leaning here for years; or just moments ago come to a clattering stop. It looks positively utilitarian, like something you might buy at a hardware store. Perhaps something that has been kept for spare parts. Yes, it could be here to be over time slowly cannibalized, the life of it picked out unit by unit and added to something that at least will turn the evicted pieces into a marketable use.

Oh, there is no dust. So it must not have been here all that long. You can imagine it following its predefined course down the street, perhaps a minor battery failure rumbling in its belly. First the secondary systems go, then eventually it loses its sense of self; core gets fiercely lonely, the end point of its intended journey winks out, and for lack of imagination it just stops, and soon drains cold.

But you do not know. Maybe you have disturbed a band of robot rustlers, and they are watching you from the next corner, wishing there were a market for biological units, at least one not beyond their current logistical means. You do look into the corners: an empty can of lubricant, the shield where a cable has been shied back.

If you are truly alone, there is salvage here. If you can get him to the car, someone will want the removable parts. His model is not so old. His better pieces are probably not missing. This would be a cash transaction.

Then you see, there, just at the neck line, that apparently, for unfathomable reasons, he has been turned off. Unless switch positions have been reversed for security, or for foreign sale, someone has left him powered down in the alley on purpose, making him easy prey. If only you had an anti-gravity lift, or a good wheel barrow!

But, against your better judgment, you lean forward and finger the switch. Perhaps he can be reasoned with. Perhaps he will come up in a reboot state that will accept anonymous administration. He is otherwise too heavy, and you came into the alley expecting only urination and the clarity of leaving your excess DNA for someone else to wash away. Why not try?

So you press, hopefully, the button. And his head comes up, the calamitous O of his mouth forms: a song, a screeching, an alarm, a welcoming, all start at the same time. You step back, not thinking to fight for the switch, to stop his merciless cacophony; to throttle his voice formed like the voices of a thousand penitents, each perhaps with bladders like yours, his canticle-shearing voice theirs: the noise of the Masters armored in all their arts, yet captured in his claxon. His ringing wakes the dog you did not see when you first stepped into the alley, and without guilt or guile, your bladder gives way with you unprepared. And even that is merciful.

About the Author:

Ken Poyner has put out three books of mini-fictions, and two collections of speculative poetry, all of which can be had at Amazon and other book selling sites. He has had recent work in "Analog", "Asimov's", "Café Irreal", and other places, both print and web. He worked 33 years as a systems analyst, and now assists his wife in her world class powerlifting career.

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The Noisy Neighbors | J. M. Meyer

Sara sat on her couch in her condo to eat popcorn and watch her favorite reality TV show when she became annoyed by the familiar muffled scream coming from the wall behind her. She banged on the wall.

"Stop, noisy neighbors. I can't hear my show."

Before long, she heard the noises again and angrily shot off the sofa, spilling the popcorn onto her carpet.

"That's it."

Sara went into the closet and grabbed her axe. She hacked at the fake paneling and through her neighbors who she lured, tied up and stuck in the wall yesterday. The screaming stopped.

About the Author:

J. M. Meyer is a writer, artist and small business owner living in New York, where she received her master's degree from Columbia University. Short stories by O. Henry and Ray Bradbury have greatly influenced her writing. Jacqueline enjoys the company of her husband Bruce and their children, Julia, Emma and Lauren. Jacqueline's mantra: It's never too late to try something new, unless you're dead.

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The Graveyard of Skulls | Holly Saiki

The Graveyard of Skulls was the town of Shadowgale's number one tourist attraction. The townsfolk never knew who built the horrid site, but they knew an obvious moneymaker. Had they known the true story of the Graveyard, Shadowgale would have called in a whole army of Holy men to nuke the site back to the primordial past.

One chilly, moonlit night, a mysterious black mist oozed out of the eye and nose sockets of the yellowed skulls that formed the ancient, circular mound. The force of the movement caused the withered old grey sticks that served as a crude barrier to tilt at sharp angles. A few of the skulls rolled away from the mound. As the inky black mist congealed into a blob, he rasped an eerie chuckle. After all of the years slowly wearing away at the prison his traitorous subjects had locked him into, he was finally free. Once he gathered enough strength, he would get his revenge on his ungrateful subjects. Then he would rebuild his empire, the foolish mortals would again learn to fear the Emperor of the Hungry Shadows. The blob trembled in excitement at all of the blood he would gorge on.

Before he could implement his plan, he needed a good disguise, so that the idiotic mortals wouldn't detect him. He went over a few ideas before discarding them all as too obvious in their supernatural appearance. The blob glowed in black frustration, he needed a suitable form and fast.

A small furry creature darted in front of him. He glided towards the creature, the shadow enveloping the being before it even had the chance to react.

"You must have been so scared being out in the forest all by yourself," Jane said, who loved to take in stray cats.

"Don't worry, I'm going to take you home, where you'll have a nice warm bed to sleep in."

The Emperor almost laughed at that remark. The stupid human was totally unaware she was carrying a mighty being who would eagerly gorge on her life's blood. Nobody would ever suspect that the Emperor of the Hungry Shadows would willingly use an animal as his vessel. He licked his lips as he savored the irony.

"You must be starving. Don't worry, little one. I have plenty of cat food stored in the attic. You're going to love it here," she said.

Oh I will, in more ways than one. The Emperor of the Hungry Shadows thought gleefully, the cat's eyes temporary transforming into black orbs of shadow and poor Jane never noticed.

About the Author:

Holly Saiki is a part-time retail worker living in Kapolei, HI on the Island of Oahu. Her work has appeared in Café Irreal, The Stray Branch, Ink Stains Anthology, Brilliant Flash Fiction, TANSTAAFL Press' "Enter the Rebirth" and is forthcoming in Black Hare Press' "Monsters" anthology and Words and Brushes Volume One.

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FEAR IS FUN

Why do we horror?

I know I'm using our beloved genre as a verb right now, but seriously, I want to know: why do we do it? Why do we subject ourselves to images and concepts that are specifically designed to frighten and disturb, challenge the limits of what our human spirits can handle, and force us to tell ourselves (and each other) *it's only just a movie* or *it's only just a book* or *it was only just a nightmare*?

Why do we intentionally scare ourselves? Is it because we're constantly seeking escape from the real horrors out there, the daily doses of dread that worm their way into the evening news, that dominate social media, the terrible things that take place in our own backyards? If that's true, then there are plenty of alternate outlets and genres you can find solace in, places that don't depict monsters and ghouls, books and films that are designed to spiritually uplift you, not fill your brain with the doings of psychotic murderers and bloodthirsty beasts. Surely there are more pleasant journeys to explore, stories that won't shock, repulse, or make your skin crawl.

While escaping the terror of reality is a popular reason why people may turn to the macabre, it's certainly not the only reason. I think, for the most part, it is simply because *fear is fun*. Some of my fondest childhood memories are the feelings I experienced while watching terrifying feature films that I probably shouldn't have, according to societal norms. *The Exorcist*, viewed when I was just a pup, frightened me so badly I couldn't sleep for three nights. I never wanted to see that movie again or even think about it. Spinning heads and green vomit and the in-your-face blasphemy - it was all too much for my pre-teen mind to handle. And... I absolutely fucking *loved* it. Became obsessed with it, actually. I discovered that these things existed, that this *feeling* existed, and it took place inside of me and it was mine and no one else's. These experiences were like digging up buried fortunes I'd never known about. I had unearthed true fear, and it was amazing.

Same thing happened with *Jaws*, however, much earlier on. I saw it at a relatively young age (seven or eight, maybe), and I never wanted to step foot in the ocean ever again, and this was coming from somebody who grew up on the Jersey Shore and spent the majority of my summer vacations on the beach and in the water. As much as Spielberg's film disturbed me, I went to the library and checked out every Peter Benchley book I could get my grubby little hands on.

Why? Why the *hell* would I do that?

Because. Fear. *Is*. Fun.



You can find Tim's work online at his [Amazon Author Page](#)
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THE SWITCH HOUSE

A SHORT NOVEL

**"...his best work yet.
Unmissable." - Matt Hayward,
Bram Stoker-nominated author
of WHAT DO MONSTERS FEAR?**

TIM MEYER

THE SWITCH HOUSE

by Tim Meyer

The house stands in the middle of the dirt road, the nexus of Everywhere. Overhead, the skies roll in a spreading blanket of tumbling fog. The sun hides somewhere beyond, however, the gray lid makes it impossible for significant light to appear. A shadowy shield buries this place, this vast emptiness of nonexistence.

The house stands on a property belonging to no one. The property consists of a front lawn, a backyard, a stockade fence stained the color of dead autumn leaves and a deluxe swing-set showing little wear. The windows remain intact, the marine-blue vinyl siding rests in perfect condition, the shutters expertly hung, darkly colored to accent the blue. The roof, no less than a year old, is free from mildew stains. Where the property ends lies a colorless wasteland, an endless lot of desolation filled with dirt and gravel, and if anyone was to dig beneath the empty plots, they might discover a skeleton or two.

Or twelve.

Or a thousand.

Impossible to tell how many souls have wandered this endless place. Come to live, leave to die.

The house is a tomb. Not her tomb. Not yet. But a tomb nonetheless.

She walks up the stoop and approaches the front door, the blood-red barrier between the cool atmosphere grazing her exposed arms and legs and the fireplace-heated interior, which will warm her from the inside out. She slips the key into the lock and pushes the door open.

Who gave me the key? she asks the dream's absent architect.

Access resides within you, child, an omnipotent voice replies, supplying her veins with ice. No matter how warm and cozy the inside of the house may be, she thinks she'll never shake that frigid feeling from her bones. The brisk sensation clings to her, infiltrates her pores and nests in her marrow.

She decides to keep her questions to herself from here on out, though, in this place, in this Everywhere, the rules are different and she doubts her mind will remain silent, even if that's her wish. And, of course, another presence lurks behind her, invisible and almighty. The phantom has followed her up the stoop, through the front door and into the living room.

It breathes in her ear.

She spins.

Nothing there but the open doorway and the barren wasteland yonder. She stares at the entryway as the exterior landscape warps and twists, the image swirling like toilet water. After the desolate, ashen world of perpetual ruin melts away, the view fades, embodies a starry black expanse. She realizes she's looking the elements of space and time in the face and her mind feels like a cheap piece of glass ready to break, ready to crumble, ready to cut and draw blood.

She blinks and discovers the door has shut itself, turning the black nothingness away, the prospect of eternal madness temporarily kept at bay.

She faces the living room. The house appears differently than its real-life counterpart. In real life, lilac walls hold up the ceiling and a wrought-iron table stands by the stairs, displaying a fresh bouquet of either roses or violet pansies. In real life, the floors are always swept and polished, so much so that guests marvel over their crisp reflections. In real life, the plush leather couch faces an eighty-inch television screen, mint as the day it was manufactured. Here, now, in the middle of the Everywhere, the house's interior décor lies in havoc. The couch is ripped and torn, tossed before a television screen appearing to have been smashed by a mallet, a mess of wires hanging from its open face like a mouthful of electric spaghetti noodles. The vase near the stairs holds dead black flowers, wilted and filling the air with stomach-churning fragrances reminding her of rancid meat. The floors have been scratched and muddied with bootprints. The walls are no longer lilac; in fact, they hold no color. And they're moving. Not moving in one direction or the other, not gliding, but writhing.

Crawling. Wriggling. Squirming.

It takes her a moment to realize the walls are alive, pulsing with maggots.

But it's not just the walls that are alive; the house itself is alive and she hears the drum of its heartbeat along with her own.

She watches herself walk. Toward the kitchen. She hears footsteps ahead of her and stops. She's waiting for something to happen, waiting for the omnipotent driver of this dream to steer her in new directions. That, or she's waiting for the architect to grant her access to her own bodily functions so she can run, run like hell, run like the devil's chasing her.

Because he is.

He's over her shoulder, whispering thoughts. Sharing intrusive images. Marking her. Prepping her permanent residence in the belly of Everywhere-land.

The devil.

Well, not the actual devil. But something like him, something that schemes with nefarious intentions, that lures, beckons her deeper into hell with a long, taloned finger.

Some unnamed thing.

The shuffling grows louder. She stays frozen, her feet stuck to the urethane-coated floor, feeling like a fly in a spider web.

And the spider is coming.

A small thing appears in the doorway separating the living room and the kitchen, a shadow belonging to a small boy; a tiny boy; a little baby boy. Older now than when she last saw him. He's covered in mud, dripping with shadows and some clear viscous slop that reminds her of embryonic fluid. Through the shade and the sludge coating his flesh, she sees the whites of his eyes, the stark brightness of his baby teeth. She can't tell but she thinks he's smiling. Such a good boy. A nice boy. A happy boy.

"Ma-me," the boy says, but as he speaks she notices differences, specifically the throaty gargle deepening his voice. No, not a boy. A thing. A predatory thing hiding beneath the flesh of an innocent child, an unseen monstrosity that growls instead of articulating, a thing that gnashes its teeth when silent. "Ma-me," the thing that is not a boy says once more.

Shivers curl around her spine. She chokes on the foul air, polluted by the boy-thing's earthly odor. The thing steps forward.

Closer.

And closer.

And...

The thing stands before her, inches from her face. He's floating, lying on an invisible magic carpet. They're eye to eye now, locked in an epic battle of who-blinks-first. She stares into the monster's snow-white eyes as they grow darker and darker until she finds herself gazing into another starry black nothingness; one harboring hatred and rage; one craving violence and the sweet taste of death.

She peers into the Everywhere, gets lost, and drifts away...

"Ma-me," it says with a growl and, this time, a painful bite.

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