The Sirens Call

Spring 2021 issue 53



A Dark Fiction & Horror eZine!

Short Stories, Flash Fiction, Poetry, and Artwork

> Featured Poet « Author: Lori R. Lopez

Featured Poetry
Collection:
'Odds and Ends'

Featured Book:
'The Dark Mister
Snark'

Featured Artist: Lori R, Lopez

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(1-800-273-8255), or text HOME to 741741 for the Crisis Text Line.

For those members of our SCP family who have lost loved ones, or suffered from the trauma of COVID-19, we wish to extend our heartfelt sympathy. There seems to be no rhyme or reason to what is taking place during these difficult times, but please know our hearts are with you and you are not alone.

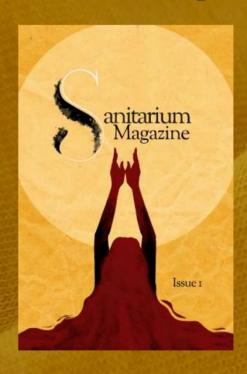
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The Man Downstairs | RJ Meldrum

"What a racket! What is he doing down there? I tell you Deirdre, the man downstairs is so noisy. He has visitors at all times of the day and night. It's unbearable. I'll have to phone the landlord again."

"Yes, Agatha," replied her listless companion. Yes, there was noise from the apartment below, but it was only footsteps and talking, nothing too bad. It wouldn't have bothered Deirdre.

Agatha had been in the apartment for about six months since the death of her husband Derek, a self-employed businessman. It wasn't until after his demise that it had been discovered he had spent his last few years defrauding the taxman. Agatha had lost the house, the Jaguar and the respect of her friends in Acacia Avenue. Deirdre was the only one who still kept in touch, more from an elevated sense of sympathy than any real friendship.

"Well, it's terrible. I've complained to the landlord, but he doesn't care. Such a horrible little man. When I think of my Derek, it breaks my heart."

Her voice trailed off into sobs. Deirdre didn't try to console her, her sympathy only stretched so far. Agatha continued to sniff, more for effect than from real emotion. Deirdre stood up.

"Well, Agatha, I must be going now. George will be home soon."

Agatha dried her tears. No one understood how she felt.

"Will you come round next week?"

"I'll have to see; it depends on the ladies at the golf club. They've arranged a coffee morning."

Agatha, forced out of the golf club when she couldn't pay her fees, sniffed in disapproval.

"Well, come round if you are free."

Deirdre left, after giving Agatha a cursory peck on the cheek. Agatha went to the window to watch her friend walk to her car. Deirdre had to push past a variety of obstacles including three dustbins, rubbish spilling from them, and two drunks who were sprawled on the front steps. Agatha turned away from the window and looked round the two rooms she now occupied. In her most cheerful moments she had to admit it was a dingy little hole. When she was 'down', as she put it, she called it far worse. It was all she could afford now she lived on welfare. Derek's death had left her with nothing. She sniffed again, trying not to think about the future. No rosy retirement for her anymore, with dinner parties, golf and endlessly busy days. A bleak future faced her, a future of damp apartments, poor food and no friends. A future of long, boring, idle days looking out the window of her first floor apartment, staring out at people who still had lives to live.

She turned back to the window noting Deirdre was gone. The street was empty once again, leaves blowing across the cracked tarmac. She sighed, it had once been such a prosperous area. Not anymore, most of the large houses on the avenue had been broken up into apartments and bedsits. Her own apartment was in a large Victorian house. It was owned by an absentee landlord who rented exclusively to welfare recipients and only visited the place to show people round or throw them out. Agatha had very little to do with him except to complain bitterly and frequently about the man downstairs.

The man downstairs had moved in about two months after she arrived. She had seen him from her window as he moved in, although she had thought nothing of it at the time. He was a small man, with a thin pointed face. Agatha hadn't liked the look of him and when she found out he had taken the apartment below her, she resolved to avoid him as much as possible. Since she rarely left her apartment, this wasn't hard to achieve.

In many ways the man downstairs was a good neighbor, there were no parties or loud music, but the constant footsteps and conversation from below was driving her slowly mad. At first it hadn't bothered her, but as the days and weeks passed the constant grumble of voices and the tap of shoes started to impinge on her consciousness, the endless noise becoming harder and harder to ignore. Now, she simply couldn't bear it anymore; every word, every click drove a painful spike further into her mind.

Agatha saw another stranger arriving and heard the door of the apartment downstairs being opened. The voices started up. Five minutes passed and then Agatha saw the stranger leave. He looked happy. What was going on down there? Was it drugs or something worse?

She decided, with sudden middle-class self-righteous clarity, to find out what was going on. If she could present evidence to the landlord regarding the cause of all the noise, then he would be forced to do something about the man downstairs. Hopefully, it would lead to a quick eviction. She was pleased. Finally, after all these months of grieving, in one split second, her true spiteful, intrusive Acacia Avenue nature was back. She stood at her window, waiting for the next person to visit the man downstairs. She didn't have to wait long.

She waited until the visitor, a man of about forty, had entered the apartment. She quickly walked across to her door, opened it and crept out onto the landing. Through the bannister, she could see the door of the apartment below. It was closed. Good.

She started down the stairs, careful not to stand on any of the squeaky boards. She didn't want to attract any attention to herself. She reached the ground floor and moved across to the door belonging to the apartment of the man downstairs, pretending to read the faded and scruffy list of house rules pinned up nearby. She could hear the conversation from within quite clearly.

"So, you know why you've come here?"

That had to be the man downstairs.

"Yes."

That had to be his visitor.

"Good, I will now ask the question you are here to answer. Once you answer and I have agreed, the deal will be done. There is no need for paper, our contract will be verbal. Understand?"

"Yes."

The voice of the man downstairs changed to an eerie whisper. Agatha could feel the hairs on the back of her neck rise.

"What do you want from me?"

"Wealth and power."

There was a pause.

"Granted. The deal is made."

Agatha guessed the conversation, and the visit, was over. She managed to move to the other side of the hallway before the visitor left the apartment. She pretended to be walking towards the stairs, but the man ignored her. His face was flushed and he looked neither looked right nor left as he made a quick exit from the house. Agatha was none the wiser about what was going on in the apartment downstairs, but she was now sure something untoward was occurring. Some instinct made her look up and she glanced towards the apartment belonging to the man downstairs. She realized with a start he was standing in the doorway looking at her. He spoke.

"You really shouldn't listen at other people's doors, Agatha."

She spluttered, but said nothing. Something told her there was no point lying.

"Come in."

It wasn't a request. The inside of the apartment looked very much like her own. It lacked the tasteful trinkets she had salvaged from Acacia Avenue but, apart from that, it was very similar. The man stood in the center of the lounge and smiled.

"You've been very interested in my affairs."

It was another statement.

"Well, yes."

She felt she might as well agree to something he already knew.

"I don't mind. I'm used to all this attention. Just tell me one thing. What do you want from me?"

"I want some peace and quiet."

He smiled and at last she saw the darkness in his eyes. He spoke.

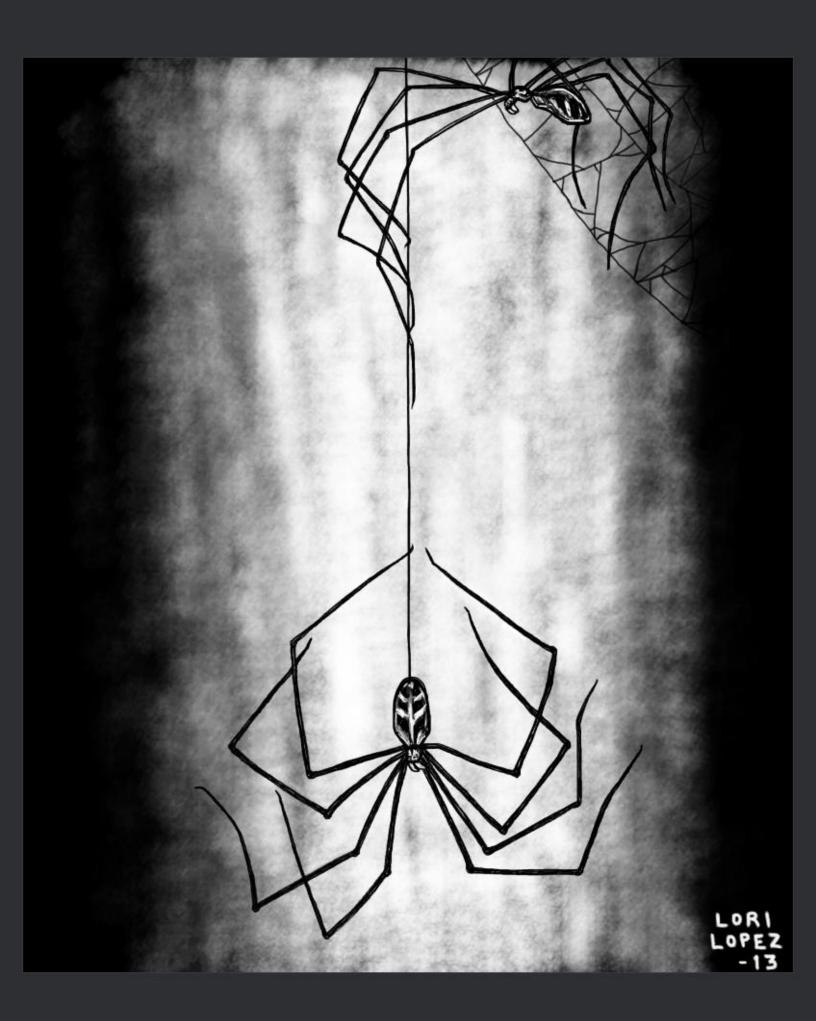
"Granted. The deal is made."

Then, much to her amazement and with a dawning realization of what she had just agreed to, the man from downstairs disappeared.

About the Author:

RJ Meldrum has been published by Culture Cult Press, Trembling with Fear, Black Hare Press, Smoking Pen Press, Tell Tale Press, and James Ward Kirk. He's had stories in Sirens Call Publications eZine, the Horror Zine and Drabblez Magazine. His novella *The Plaque* was published by Demain Press.

Facebook: richard.meldrum.79 **Twitter**: @RichardJMeldru1



Wendigo | H.B. Diaz

The old man lowered his gaze to the fire and poked at the simmering coals with the steel toe of his boot. He held a tin cup that clanged against a wedding ring whose match was buried in Lakeview cemetery. Constance waited for him to speak and clutched the sleeping bag around her shoulders, despite the gauzy heat that clung to the forest. Even the branches of the oak trees seemed to sag beneath the close weight of the night, and the ferns drooped like hunched trolls in the shadows beyond, the dim firelight mimicking movement. Constance shivered.

The old man inhaled deeply and coughed.

"What do we do with the bodies?" she asked, her voice sounding somehow metallic against this savage landscape. The old man lifted his eyes to a place over her shoulder, a place she could not look; she knew that inside the tent, the corpses of her teammates were stretched out atop one another, their faces stripped as much of skin as of identity. She knew the bodies instead by their clothing: John by the tattered remains of an old college sweatshirt, Rich by the jade pendant that hung around his neck, Sharon by her favorite pair of cargo pants, now shredded as if by the claws of a great wild animal.

But, no animal had done this.

The old man did not answer her question. His eyes, stained a hellish red by the dying fire, hovered over the tent and she thought she saw his tongue flick out between bloody lips. Surely she must have imagined this, as she'd imagined the events that had transpired earlier in the evening, once the sun had settled low and purple beneath the blanket of Lake Michigan.

Because what she thought she saw was impossible.

She had heard the screams from the forest. Lichen specimen forgotten, along with the tools required to collect it, she'd run back to camp afraid that a bear had broken into their food supply, but her instinct, the thing she'd so resolutely denounced as a scientist, told her to run away, not toward. She ignored it. Why had she ignored it?

In the growing darkness of the sunset, she thought she saw the old man *gnawing* on Johnny's face, her colleague's legs kicking helplessly, hands flailing and clawing at the shock of white hair on the old man's head. The firelight revealed Sharon and Rich, both twitching like cockroaches on their backs, wet moans escaping lipless mouths. In the days to come, she would not recall lifting her flashlight to shine the shaky beam on the old man's face, but it would reveal the same wild inhuman eye-shine that she remembered in the rabid coyote that scavenged her garbage cans for a picked chicken carcass. She would think of that coyote many times after this night.

"Professor?" she'd whispered, unconvinced that the creature looking up at her with blood and flesh dripping from his chin could be the mentor she'd admired for the better part of her career. Instead of replying, he dug his impossibly long fingernails into Johnny's eye socket, plucked the orb from his skull and popped it into his mouth like a chocolate truffle. Constance stumbled backward with a cry and this, strangely, woke the old man from the beastly trance that inspired his hunger. He fell onto his face beside the corpses of his victims and sighed, exhausted from his feast.

Rooted as much to her place as the ferns at her feet, but unable to bear the sight any longer, Constance dropped the flashlight. She remained there, torn between fleeing and looking for survivors. In the end, altruism suffocated her fear and she approached, picking through the bits of entrails and clumps of hair to reach the old man. Constance felt his sticky, wrinkled neck for a pulse, and he moaned beneath the pressure of her fingers before sitting up, his eyes as empty as the stuffed possum that he kept in his office.

"Is it gone?" he murmured.

"I—"

"Is it gone?" he repeated, louder. "Did you see it?"

There was such horror in his eyes that Constance began to question her own. Had she imagined it? Could a bear, like she'd originally thought, be capable of such violence? Was it a wolf that she'd seen in the dim light, or some other undiscovered species of beast? She helped the old man to his feet and offered him a towel to clean his face, but he refused it. They had sat by the fire together in silence, drinking coffee as on every other night, bound by tragedy.

She asked again what he thought they ought to do, though she didn't expect an answer. When his eyes met hers, she recognized the man he had been earlier in the day. His lips parted and the cup fell from his hands, and Constance could see the weight of memory descend upon him. Words moved over his tongue and behind his lips, but did not make it past the screen of blood that inexplicably bubbled up from his throat and then filled the sockets of his eyes like a chalice of communion wine. Before the milky blindness overtook his eyes, they conveyed a single, urgent word: run.

And so she had. She would wake up the next morning behind the wheel of the company pick-up truck, parked in

front of a diner 200 miles from the sight of their camp, and she would never regain the memory of how she had arrived there.

After Constance returned home, presumed the only surviving member of the biological research team, her friends could not force her either to venture beyond her house after dark, nor speak of the reason for her resolute fear. Even when the police and the press gathered like turkey buzzards around her lakeside rancher, she greeted them only with warnings.

You don't know what's out there.

It clung in willowy shadows to the corners of her house, creeping up like ivy and tickling the wind chimes on her porch. She saw it in the edges of her vision, and heard it in the wind that sprung up like a spirit out of the inky depths of the water. Constance knew in her heart that it would come to claim her. It was only a matter of time.

About the Author:

H.B. Diaz is an internationally published gothic horror writer who also manages accounts for Penguin Random House. She is the author of *Nocturne: A Collection of Dark Tales*, and her short stories have appeared in anthologies by Horror Tree, ID Press, Flame Tree Press, and others. She lives with her husband and son in a historic (and likely haunted) East Coast town.

Facebook: <u>H.B. Diaz</u>
Twitter: <u>@HollyBDiaz</u>

You Misunderstood | Graham J. Darling

Jon Carver of Barzoon, you misunderstood.

The True Love whom you met in dreams was the goddess of this planet: pluripotent relict of a vanished race, marooned here eons before you ever were (do not doubt her love; she was made for love). Your crash-landing awakened her to purpose. The honeyed tongue she thrust between your lips divided to sample your every cell; while she cradled your broken body, you and she populated an empty world.

Its seas were modelled on your tears, and its bogs on your bile. The waving jungles you hacked through came from your hair; the vitreous plains you traversed, from your fingernails; the sluggoths you battled, from your own lymphocytes; the steeds you rode, from your heart. The warriors you led to blood and glory were your sons, working out their destiny; the princesses you rescued, your daughters; the Transfederation you built by the seat of your pants, already your family (have you not wondered why they all speak your tongue?).

The caecal dungeons in bone citadels you regularly woke in and escaped from, were hospital wards, where your eyes or limbs sliced in ivory swordplay were switched out; here they all are, mounted and healed, looking and waving at you, in the Museum of the Man.

The Darkened Lord against whom you strove is yourself, enthroned. We surrendered Brain-Priests are your own. Here is your crown. Please be seated. She'll be with you in a minute.

About the Author:

Graham J. Darling of Vancouver Canada designs molecules such as the universe has never seen and demonstrates medieval science and technology to school kids and passers-by. His singular creations have escaped into *Sword & Mythos* (eds. Silvia Moreno-Garcia & Paula R. Stiles, Innsmouth Free Press), *Pulp Literature and Brain Games: Stories to Astonish* (ed. Juliana Rew, Third Flatiron Publishing)--lock your doors and windows!

Website: <u>Graham J. Darling</u>
Twitter: <u>@GrahamJDarling</u>

Hunting with Dad | R D Doan

From his tree stand, Charlie focuses his scope on a small Coke can resting on a rock along the trail roughly thirty yards away. After some fine tuning and scope adjustments, he takes a steady breath in; and as he exhales, he takes his shot. Birds take flight as the morning's serenity is interrupted by the sound of gunfire. The can does a neat little flip in the air, spraying the nearby ferns with its sticky, carbonated ichor. Satisfied, he shoulders his rifle and begins his descent to the forest floor below.

The air is cool and the leaves are at peak color change. With opening day just weeks away, Charlie is right on schedule in his preparations. He's happy with how his practice shots have been and the stand seems to be in a great location. From his perch twenty feet above the forest floor, he has a clear view of the trail below, the riverbed off to the east, and the hillside to the west. From the scouting reports his father provided, he should expect to see action either down the trail or along the riverbed. His father has assured him that the hunt would be successful on opening day. It's the best time to hunt. All the other hunters around should stir up some action along this part of the woods.

Charlie doesn't have to look far to find his Coke can. It's lying about three feet from the trail and rock. He smiles when he sees that the shot had gone through the center of the 'O' on the Coke can. He's always been a good shot, and his father is a great teacher. He puts the can in his small backpack (father always says, 'leave no trace') and heads up the trail to make his way back to the campsite. He and his father have set up a camp about four miles up the trail in a privately-owned portion of these woods. Charlie's hunting stand is just over the line in state-owned hunting land. He picks up his pace as he's expected back at the campsite by six, an hour or so before sunset, and the hike back is going to take a while.

When Charlie reaches the campsite, his father is stoking a fire.

"Heard ya take a shot. Did ya nail down some supper or were you working on accuracy?" his father asks.

"Just fine tuning my scope. Should be all set. The stand has a great view of the trail and riverbed. I'm as ready as I'll ever be." Charlie unloads his gear next to a tree trunk by the tent.

"Excellent. We'll finish setting up our trail cameras and head home in the morning. We can watch what goes by our stands from home and return for opening day."

Each afternoon, Charlie rushes home to see what they captured on the trail cameras. Each camera was set to record if movement was detected. The cameras would send a video of the recording to an app on his father's iPad. Usually, there wasn't much to see. Occasionally, he'd see a nosey raccoon, some squirrels, and once he thought he saw another hunter baiting down by the riverbank.

His father, and his grandfather before him, had hunted the woods of Michigan's Upper Peninsula for decades. They rarely hunted the same spot twice and always came home bragging about a prized kill. His father told Charlie it was a bit of a family tradition. From a young age, Charlie and his father would camp and take hikes in the woods. His father would teach him the ways of the woods. On their outings, he'd learn about wildlife, ecology, tracking, orienteering, wilderness survival; and when Charlie was old enough, his father taught him to shoot. Now, fully trained and of legal hunting age, Charlie was deemed ready to carry on the tradition.

Charlie's father wanted to be sure he was well prepared for opening day. Since 1970, there have only been two years where a hunter hasn't been killed on opening day in Michigan. Each year, a few hunters are shot accidentally, mistaken for a deer; and sometimes a hunter will get lost in the woods, never to be seen again. There are lots of hunters out on opening day, most wearing camo and very little hunter's orange and accidents tend to happen; especially with tired hunters who may be a bit trigger happy, eager to get their first kill. The years spent training, teaching and mentoring Charlie were meant to be sure he was ready and well prepared.

A few days before they went out to set up their stands and prepare for the hunt, Charlie learned of the finer details of his family's opening day tradition. He'd come home from school and found his father stoically drinking a glass of bourbon alone at the kitchen table. When he asked what was going on, his father threw back the rest of his drink and told him he needed to show him something. Charlie was led to a locked storm cellar in the wooded land behind their home. His father produced a key from his pocket, unlocked the door and led him down the dark, musty stairs. There was another locked door at the bottom of the stairs that his father unlocked with a different key, this time found on a chain he wore around his neck and under his shirt. His father paused before opening the door, his hand on the knob.

Without looking away from the door, he said to Charlie, "I trust you'll keep what you see here a secret. You're ready to step forward and be a real man in this family, aren't you? As men in this family, we are charged with thinning the herd."

They entered a dark room, and before turning on the light, his father warned him, "Try not to scream."

When the lights came on, Charlie saw a room like so many other 'Man Caves' with a stocked bar, comfy furniture, a big screen TV, and various guns mounted on the walls. Among the mounted guns, there were dozens of mounted heads as well, but not deer, elk or moose; there were dozens of human heads. It appeared to Charlie the family tradition was to hunt hunters on opening day.

Charlie spent the few days after feeling conflicted over wanting to appease his father but feeling nauseated with terror and dread over the thought of killing another person. He conceded to just go through the motions. He hoped he'd know what to do when the time came.

When opening day finally arrived, Charlie and his father trekked to their respective tree stands in the darkness of early morning. The moon was nearly full and casted shadows among the trees. Charlie's imagination ran wild with thoughts of himself being hunted. Surely the authorities had figured out his father's patterns by now and were staking them out, waiting for the right moment to strike. Or maybe there were others like his father who hunted other hunters as well. Would he be a head on someone else's Man Cave wall? He wanted nothing more than to get to his stand unnoticed, but the air was cold, making the leaves crunch under foot. The resulting sound seemed to be amplified by the stillness of the woods and surely would give away his location. When he approached his tree, he paused to listen. The woods were still without a sound to be heard. He made his way up to his perch and began his long, cold wait.

As the sun slowly crept up the horizon, Charlie's eyes began to adjust to the dim morning light. He could see now that the shapes that looked like crouching hunters or law men in the distance were actually tree stumps and brush. He could make out the path a bit more clearly as well. For hours, he strained to hear any evidence of men in the woods, but all he could hear was the sound of his teeth clattering and the beat of his own heart.

Time crept on slowly and uneventfully and his eye lids began to sag under the weight of fatigue and boredom. He began to slowly drift toward sleep when he was startled alert by the sound of a twig snapping below the tree stand. Very slowly, he peered down to see his father stealthily making his way up the trail. Where was he going? As far as he knew, his father's tree stand was nowhere near his own. He decided to stay quiet and resume his watch as his father disappeared around the base of the hillside. He saw small animals over the next several hours; squirrels, rabbits, and a turkey. He wasn't here for them; so, the watch continued.

As the morning marched on toward afternoon, Charlie's stomach began to rumble. He was getting ready to reach for a granola bar from his pocket when he heard the unmistakable metallic sound of a rifle bolt sliding into a chamber. He froze. Something big was along the trail about fifty yards out. He couldn't make out what it was through the trees. He quietly put the snack down and slowly brought up his rifle. Using the scope to gain a better look, he peered in the direction of the trail and could see a partial boot and vapored breath in the cold air. From what he could tell, there was a hunter crouching behind a tree by the trail, with a loaded rifle.

Charlie kept his aim and watched through his scope to see what the hunter would do. The hunter didn't move for what felt like an eternity. Charlie spent each agonizing moment battling with his own thoughts on morality and good versus evil while he watched and waited. Could he really go through with this? Could he take a life? Was family more important than doing what is right?

Finally, the hunter in his sights raised his own rifle and slowly took aim down toward the riverbank. This new positioning by the hunter moved him out from behind the tree and gave Charlie a better chance to take a clean shot. Taking aim at the man, Charlie resigned to his decision. He conceded to knowing his life would be forever changed with this single shot. With shaky determination, he slowed his breathing and blocked out the sounds of the woods. He heard his father's voice in his mind guiding him through this shot. 'Remember boy, aim just below the button on the left shirt pocket and you'll take out his heart.' He let out his breath to steady his shot and pulled the trigger.

The man on the trail fell back and crumpled to the ground at the impact of his shot. Like his grandfather and father before him, Charlie had killed his first hunter. He shouldered his rifle and climbed down the tree carefully. When he reached the hunter's body, he took one look at the pool of blood under the lifeless man and became lightheaded. He turned, gripped his knees and vomited. He had to get his shit together. He had one chance for this to go right, if that was at all possible. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and turned to the body. Crouching next to the lifeless man, Charlie leaned close to his ear and whispered, "I'm sorry dad, but someone had to stop you from killing again. Please forgive me." He then worked up some tears (if he was being honest with himself, manufacturing tears wasn't too difficult as he really did love the man; no matter how horrible he was as a human being) and screamed for help. The hunter down by the riverbank, whom his father had been aiming to kill, heard the cries for help and came running. What he found was an apparent hunting accident, where a young hunter mistakenly shot his father. Through sobs, Charlie told the hunter he

thought he was shooting a deer and he didn't know his father had been nearby.

For several months after the killing, Charlie had nightmares where he would be forced to relive the killing in the woods. Night after night, he'd wake up horrified and drenched in sweat. As horrible it was to kill his father, Charlie found it more horrifying to learn he enjoyed killing and wondered if he might not take a walk in the woods and do a little hunting next fall after all.

About the Author:

R D Doan enjoys writing dark fiction when not working his day job as a Physician Assistant. His recent work can be found in the anthologies Marisa's Recuring Nightmares & Nobody Goes Out Anymore. He's had stories appear in Sirens Call Publications eZine as well. He writes his stories in West Michigan where he lives with his lovely wife, two boys and dogs.

Instagram: @rddoan
Twitter: @rd3 pac

Memento Mori | Amanda Crum

Shake and flash, a rattle like bones in a coffin.

It's what I feel upon waking, and suddenly I yield a vision of men on a battlefield, gaping wounds unsewn and axes drawn. Wizards and giants walking together on a quest. I don't know where I am.

I know where I've been. I had fifty years on Earth before cigarettes took me down; sometimes I still hear the hiss of crackling paper, see the plume of exhalation, taste the phantom mentholatum. That's how much I miss it. I donated my body to science so med students could shake their heads as they pulled blackened organs from my cavity. A sort of penance, I suppose.

I spent thirty years hanging from a hook in a classroom, teaching anatomy to bored kids with acne and wispy mustaches. They counted my ribs, measured my tibia, flapped my mandible and made me talk like a ventriloquist's dummy. How exhausting, how utterly stationary. My only reprieve from the constant noise was a darkened lab full of chalk dust, a weekend to myself amongst the shadows. Even then I willed my skeletal hands to move, to lift my body from its suspension, but they never obeyed. I was a prisoner, in a sense.

I know what you're thinking: what a horrible way to spend eternity. How sad. Perhaps. But death brought a certain measure of satisfaction, you see? It came with knowledge, memories, the ability to see past my own bones to the stardust that formed them. I saw myself as I was in my mother's womb, forming a small curl of life in her darkness. Death was a bridge between my mind and body.

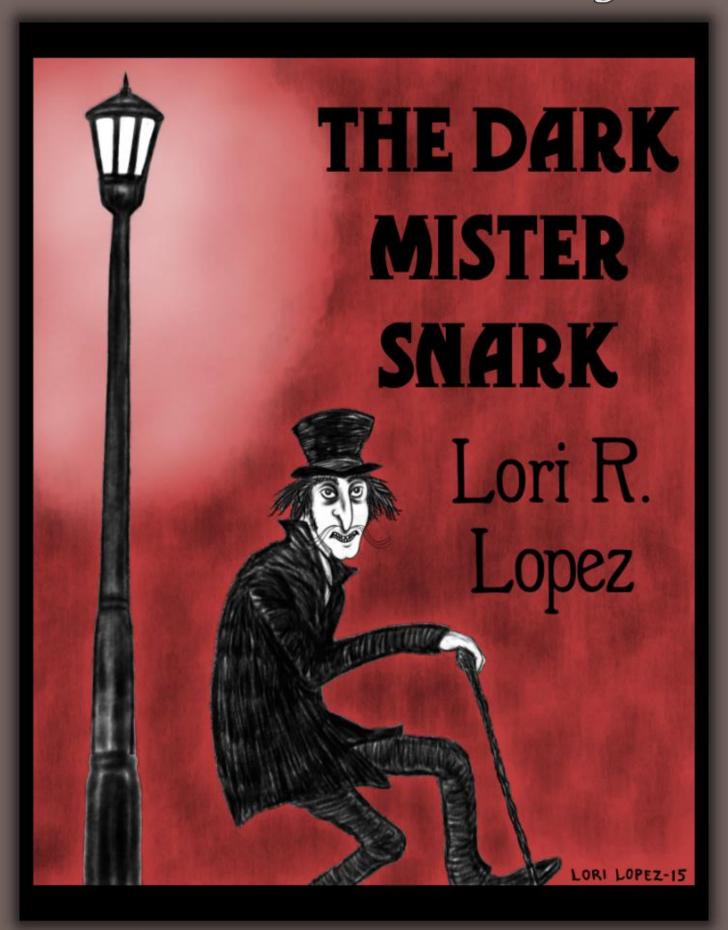
There's been a change; the classroom is gone. I remember heat, smell myself grinding into a fine powder. Someone has decided my skeleton can be useful in other ways.

It's not such a bad existence, really, being shaped into dice. When I roll across the table I can see the tree it was carved from for just the barest moment before the game takes over. *D&D*, someone says overhead, and I see the curved eye of a dragon looming over the hill. My bones tumble and shiver, over and over, as I lead the group through their uncertain journey and I think, *here it is, finally. A way for me to travel.*

About the Author:

Amanda Crum is a writer and artist whose work has been published in Barren Magazine, Eastern Iowa Review, The Hellebore, and more. She is the author of *Tall Grass*, a chapbook of horror poetry which made the shortlist for a Bram Stoker Award nomination and was nominated for an Indie Horror Book Award. Amanda currently lives in Kentucky with her husband and two children.

Beware! Mister Snark is lurking...



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

As Long as It Lasts | Miriam H. Harrison

I know it sounds corny, but I believe life has a purpose. Really, I do. I believe that I—all of us—have a reason for being here, a reason for living. I don't need to know what mine is. All I know is that one day it will come and it will go, and with it will go my need to live.

I test this every now and then, to see if I've outlived my use. The first time was with a pill bottle, but I've gotten more creative since. Five times I've tested this and five times I've survived.

Guess that means I'm still useful.

Hard to believe it as I make my way through the busy streets, just one of many ants in this hill. It's times like this my philosophy carries me through. Every moment could be my moment—the one that completes me, opens the door, sets me free. All around me is potential. It gives life dimension for as long as it lasts.

As I ride the bus back from yet another eight hours spent by the burger fryer, I can't help but wonder if today was my day. Maybe I did my part by holding the door for that girl, or by smiling at the gentleman on the corner, or by offering my seat to the grandmotherly woman on my morning bus. Every part counts, and maybe I've paid my dues.

I hear the moan of braking bus tires and get up at the all-too-familiar sight of my stop. I wave to the driver, but my mind is elsewhere, thinking of what the test should be. I try to change it up each time. After a while, it becomes an art of sorts, but that's the kind of detail I pride myself on.

Lost in these thoughts, I barely even notice her until I'm almost past the alley. It's the click that gets me. I stop in my tracks, expecting someone to come out asking for my wallet or my watch or something, but nothing happens. I glance down the alleyway and see her. It quickly becomes clear that it's not my money she's after.

I relax a bit, and see her look at me for the first time. She's young enough—early twenties, no doubt—and not bad-looking. Mind you, she would probably look even better if she wasn't holding a gun to her head.

"Guess you're gonna tell me to back off," she says after a long moment. I can see her grip tighten, and I almost laugh at the idea.

"Nah, go ahead." I step back, cross my arms. "I'm kind of curious, actually."

She snorts. "Morbid son of a bitch, aren't ya?"

"Guess you could say that. Not every day you get a street-side show. Seems like a strange place for it."

"Not for me. Thought I'd leave him with something to remember." She gestures up to a window in the decrepit apartment building beside us. "Maybe I can get his attention while he's still inside that bitch of his. Give her something to really scream about."

"That works."

I wait. I watch her. She watches me.

"You're really not going to stop me?" she asks at last.

"No point," I say with a shrug. "I've got a theory, of sorts. Call it fate if you like, but it all comes down to a fifty-fifty chance. Either it'll work or it won't. Either you've got a reason to live or you don't. Not my call."

"You really are sick, aren't you?"

"Maybe, but it keeps me going. Here, how many bullets do you have in there?"

She pauses. "One."

I stretch out a hand, slowly. "May I?"

I can see she wants to say no, but her curiosity is stronger. She gives me the gun. I unset it and spin the cylinder. Before she can say anything I cock it again, raise it to my head and pull the trigger.

Nothing.

I shrug. "See? Guess that means I keep going."

The girl is visibly shaken as I hand the gun back to her. She's lost some of her initial verve, but still cocks the gun and lifts it to her head. She bites her lip as she pulls the trigger.

Nothing

I give a small smile. "Guess you keep going, too."

The effort seems to have drained the last of her resolve. She almost drops the gun as she pushes it into my hands. "Thank you," she says. She's crying now.

I'm about to reply, but she's already gone. Running from the alley, the building, the gun. Running to something more. As I watch her go, I wonder what her purpose is. Why she keeps on living. Why any of us keep on living.

The weight of the gun returns me to the present. I look down at it with some surprise. I think of the girl, of all that was and wasn't.

I smile and lift the gun for one last test.

About the Author:

Miriam H. Harrison studies full time, works on the side, writes when she should be doing other things, and trains the dust bunnies to fend for themselves. Her poetry and short fiction have appeared in a number of publications, and any updates about her published works can be found on Facebook or her website.

Facebook: Miriam H. Harrison
Website: Miriam H. Harrison

Bramble | Sonora Taylor

Mimi loved her hair. It grew past her shoulders into long and flowing locks. Those locks, however, loved to tangle; and Mimi's mother hated having to brush them out.

"You have so many rat's nests in here, I expect a rodent to come crawling out any minute," her mother said as she brushed her hair in increased frustration. But Mimi ignored her mother's anger, instead focusing on the bramble of her hair as it grew outwards and upwards, floating and spilling in all directions over her shoulders.

One morning, Mimi's mother had had enough. She tugged the brush from another rat's nest and threw it on the bathroom floor. The thwack against the tiles rang in Mimi's ears as her mother opened up a drawer.

"Enough!" her mother said. She grabbed the tangles in Mimi's hair and cut them.

Mimi screamed as she saw her hair fall to the floor, a clump that resembled a wounded animal. "No!" she yelled as her mother continued to cut. "I like my hair!"

Her mother ignored her and kept cutting. She pinned Mimi down with palms that dug into her shoulders with increasing pain. Mimi twisted and turned like her beloved curls, which floated to the floor like falling tears. "No, no, NO!"

Mimi jerked so hard that the scissors slipped. The blade scratched a newly-shorn spot on her head, and Mimi felt a cool trickle of blood seep through the searing warmth of pain that emanated across her head.

"Serves you right," her mother spat as she slammed the scissors down on the sink. "Crying over all that ugly hair."

Mimi grabbed a tissue and held it to her head. She ran out of the bathroom, avoiding the mirror. She didn't want to see what she'd become. She ran into the backyard and fell to her knees between a copse of trees whose dead branches littered the ground. She began to cry. Her blood and tears fell on the branches.

Mimi heard a stirring beneath her. She looked down and saw tender leaves sprouting from the dead branches. Roots sprang forth and curled themselves around her legs and waist. She was about to run, when she felt the wound on her head grow cool. She touched the wound and felt soft leaves. Branches and twigs grew as well, until Mimi felt her hand pushed away by the growing height and width of the bramble.

Mimi's mother came outside, her eyes down as she smoked a cigarette. "Come inside," she said as she looked up. She dropped her cigarette when she saw Mimi.

Mimi felt the power of the trees within her, and smiled as the branches around her lashed towards her mother. "Serves you right," she said as they ensnared her mother's ankles. "Cutting off all of my beautiful hair."

About the Author:

Sonora Taylor is the award-winning author of several novels and short story collections, including *Little Paranoias: Stories, Without Condition*, and *Seeing Things*. Her work has been published by Sirens Call Publications, Cemetery Gates Media, Tales to Terrify, and Camden Park Press. When she's not writing, she loves to cook. She lives in Arlington, Virginia, with her husband and rescue dog.

Midnight Meal | Lee Andrew Forman

The spray of red is fractal against the wall. Each drop lands with an audible slap, easily heard by perked ears. Claws drip with violence; teeth set barred, ready for a taste of what's inside. Howls of pain are muffled by a throat filling with blood and vomit. Arms and legs convulse as the voracious feast continues. The maw of this haired beast gorges itself within the ruined torso of its meal. As the body of its prey goes limp and the life is drawn from its ragged shell, the creature pauses, listens, and moves towards the next waking biped.

Hope | Lee Andrew Forman

The cold, hard metal of the chair is painful beneath my urine-soaked boxers. But I don't mind. The sharp table edge has indented my forearms over long, hot days and frigid nights. That doesn't matter either. My bones are cold, my stomach empty. My shirt is torn and smells of filth. All limbs are weak and these bones are frail. That's okay too. Because Hope kept me going. I always knew she'd come. The unending thud on my door tells me my time in the chamber has come. The purity of Hope's fire will set this sack of flesh free.

Eyes Open | Lee Andrew Forman

Eyelids open, light enters. The reflection within grey matter induces instinctual response. Adrenaline fuels a rapid heartbeat, short breaths, heated blood. The thing stares back with two ebon spheres, infinite darkness within their centers. The warmth of its breath against my cheek, its hard stare, its spindly hands held out as if in welcome; I consider the invitation. Despite its alien presence, it feels benign. As flesh touches flesh my own outer shell withers. Hair falls from my scalp, fingernails slide off, teeth—a pile spat onto the floor. I am unsure where death goes, but I'll soon find out.

About the Author:

Lee Andrew Forman is a writer, editor, and publisher from the Hudson Valley region in New York. His fascination with the macabre began in childhood, watching old movies and reading everything he could get his hands on. His love of horror spans three generations, starting with his grandfather who was a fan of the classic Hollywood Monsters.

Blog: <u>Lee Andrew Forman</u>
Instagram: @leeandrewforman

Up | Joe Moses Leggett

I have a blackout blind that covers my living room skylight. It's always drawn before the sun has set. The night before I bought it, I noticed above me, faintly illuminated by the room's light, a stranger's face smiling at me through the glass.

I have a blackout blind that should be covering my skylight. I fell asleep on the sofa before dusk. I know without opening my eyes it is nighttime. I know there is nothing covering the window directly above me.

I know I just heard tapping against the glass...

About the Author:

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

Instagram: @joemosesleggett



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Lights Out | Edward Ahern

"You're going to do what?"

"Strap you down with what amounts to a lie detector wired onto you, then completely blacken the room. Completely."

"But why, Professor Givens, I already told you I'm afraid of the dark."

"Jack, unfortunately we get a lot of students who'll say anything to make eighty dollars a session. Before we can proceed to the experiment we need to verify that you do have nyctophobia."

"Hah?"

"Nyctophobia. Fear of the dark. Named for the Greek goddess Nyx who—oh never mind, the qualifying test takes five minutes, once you're rigged up."

"Do I get paid for the qualifier?"

"Twenty dollars."

Jack edged further back in his chair. "What about a nightlight, or maybe instrument lights?"

Givens let out a dry chuckle. "You know, there are almost as many night lights in this country as there are people. Not counting all the constantly burning yard, garage and walkway lights. As a species, we really do fear the dark. No, Jack, no light at all for five minutes. But you can stop any time you want.

"But only twenty dollars?"

"For this trial. But during the real experiment you'll be well paid for a half hour in the dark."

Jack exhaled. He really needed the money. "Okay, let's do it."

Givens smiled. "That's the spirit. But it wouldn't be a university experiment without a questionnaire. So it's question time. Question one. When do you first remember being afraid of the dark?"

"I was always afraid. And my mother's mother, who used to babysit, was vicious about it. She used to recite an old poem to me, about the bogeyman.

"Do you sleep in the dark now, Jack?"

"Never. Two lights, so when the bulb goes on one I have another still lit."

The questioning went on for ten minutes. Givens eventually clicked off the recorder. "We can do the test now if you like."

"Uh. Okay."

Givens lead Jack into an adjoining room. The room was windowless, bare except for a reclining chair and an EKG machine on a wheeled dolly.

"Take off your shirt, Jack, and sit erect in the chair. Once I've set you up with pulse, respiration and skin monitors please just lie back and get comfortable."

"Doubt I'll be comfortable. I've already started to sweat."

Once Jack was rigged and ready, Givens handed him a wood cylinder with a wire coming out of one end and a depressible button on the other. "It's, pardon the expression, a dead man switch. Hold it down throughout the session. Once you release it, the test is aborted and the lights come on. But if you release it before we've completed our readings we'll have to send you home without pay and start on the next applicant."

Jack settled back in the chair and Givens left the room. A few seconds later the room speaker clicked on. "Okay, Jack, here we go."

The room went black. Jack began to softly whine, the same monotonal noise that he'd used as a small child to protect himself from the dark creatures. But he stopped, embarrassed that Givens was listening to him panic. And it was panic. His senses began to short circuit, and he could almost taste the electricity flowing through the monitor. The air around him eddied and flowed, as if things were swimming in it.

Jack squeezed his eyes shut and clinched his fists, his knuckles cracking. Thousand one, thousand two he began. Five minutes was a count to three hundred.

Something seemed to brush against his right trouser leg, and he almost dropped the panic button, but held on. Jack's armpits had gone squishy with rank sweat. "Thousand seventy, thousand seventy one." Jack was counting out loud now, not caring that Givens heard.

He began curling and uncurling his toes so tightly they hurt with each flex. Something was in the room. He sensed it, knew it. Something is not right. Something released when the blanket of light was pulled away. It was to his right, waiting. Thousand one sixty, thousand one sixty one, God help me through this. You are of the light, hold this at bay.

But there was no answer, and no light. *Thousand two ten, thousand two eleven*. Jack felt tiny touches on his arms and legs, as if mites were crawling up and disturbing his body hairs. He scratched at himself until he was sure he'd drawn blood.

As he moved his arms and legs he felt-resistance- as if something foul had nestled up against him. *Thousand two ninety eight, thousand two ninety nine, thousand three hundred*. "There! I've done it!"

He threw the panic button off the chair to his right, hoping to hit whatever it was. The lights snapped back on and Jack swiveled his eyes around the room. Nothing. He looked down and saw long, angry scratches on his arms and legs. Givens came into the room, a polite and probably insincere smile shaping his mouth.

"Well, your count was a little too fast, but we got our readings. Congratulations. We can proceed to the test." "I don't want to do it. Take this stuff off me, please."

Givens began popping off suction cups and removing the blood pressure cuff and respiration strap. "Jack, we can't do the experiment without you. If it's the money I can double your stipend. You've suffered with this all your life, don't you want to learn more about it?"

"I'm scared, Professor. There, I've said it."

Givens stared down at Jack for a few seconds. "You know, Jack, I can't think of much better protection that what you have here. Your vitals are closely monitored, and I'm in constant contact with you. That's got to be better than a ten dollar night light."

It was Jack's turn to stare, his expression conflicted. His car sat in the dorm parking lot, undrivable until it got two hundred fifty dollars worth of life support. "I'm going to need three hundred dollars. Firm."

Annoyance flickered across Given's face, then the unctuous smile reappeared. "Okay Jack, I'll make an exception. But we'll need to do the trial tomorrow. Would that be all right?"

The next day was Saturday, so no classes, and Jack wanted it to be over.

"Okay, sure."

"Come at eight thirty, there's some things I need to explain to you."

On the way back to his room Jack speed dialed Suzie. "Suz, I need company. And some of that warm care you provide. Couple beers at Stan's?"

"You sound shaky, Jack. Everything okay?"

"Not so much. But I'll tell you when I see you."

Stan's draft beer was cheap and almost flat, but it did the job. Halfway through the second beer he opened up. "So there it is, Suz. I'm afraid of the dark."

"Not a huge surprise. Your goddamn lights keep me awake. But, Jack, the bogeymen never really gets anyone. Even if they existed, it's like they're restrained from getting at us."

"Yeah, I guess."

Suzie continued. "It's only going to last a half an hour, and the butthead professor will be eavesdropping the whole time. You'll get freaky, but my guess is that you can do it. And it would be nice for you to have wheels again."

"Selfish bitch."

"And you love me for it."

"Stop by the dorm?"

"What an enticing proposition. But no, I've got a paper to finish. Call me in the morning before you get strapped in."

Jack stopped for service-truck Mexican on the way back to his room, exchanged trash talk with his roommate and went to bed. He surprised himself by sleeping well, but anxiety struck him as soon as the alarm clock went off.

Jack understood, logically, that his fear was irrational, but he feared beyond reason that he did not belong in a dark place. He dressed and left.

"Hello, Jack, bit late aren't you? No matter. Let me explain some things to you while I rig you up."

Givens lead him back into the room with the reclining chair, and showed him a large, many-dialed unit that fed wires to what looked like arc lights in corners of the room.

"What's that?" Jack asked.

"A light machine. Sit back down, Jack. There you go. We're evaluating a hypothesis. We initially ran tests with subjects who had no fear of the dark, but the results were disappointing."

"Disappointing?"

Givens applied straps and suction cups as he continued. "It's complicated, but let me try and explain in non-scientific terms. Darkness is usually defined as the absence of light, but light is weird stuff. We can also produce darkness

by overlapping light waves that cancel each other out- we can produce darkness with light, and that what we're going to do today."

Givens adjusted a metal fiber skull cap onto Jack's head.

"What's that for?"

"To give us a better idea of what you're seeing or not seeing. We can't just rely on your descriptions. Anyway, the overlapping light waves will produce a completely dark area. And that area can move faster than light."

"Nothing can move faster than light."

"Almost nothing, Jack. The overlapping waves create an effect something like the cutting action of a pair of scissors. The action itself is twice as fast as the movement of an individual blade. With me so far?"

"I guess.'

"So that's where you come in, Jack. Our instruments tell us a lot, but not the apparent effects of this overlapped darkness. You're hyper-sensitive to the dark, and we need your subjective feedback. There, I think you're rigged and ready."

Givens stepped back from the chair, and gave Jack his billboard smile. "I'm going to elevate the chair back and lock it in position so your field of vision is limited to the dark area we're going to generate. I'm also going to strap down your torso and head so you can't move them away from that field"

"But the room will already be dark, isn't that enough?"

"Not nearly. We'll first remove all light, really just to eliminate any distractions for you. Then we'll generate the field and let you sense what you can. If anything."

"But I get the panic button?"

"Oh, absolutely. Uh, Jack, you did relieve yourself before you came in?"

"Yes."

"Excellent." Givens tied Jack down and tried but failed to move Jack's body and head. "Very good. We'll start shortly. Here's the dead man switch. I'd wish you luck, but I'm sure you'll do well."

Givens turned a little too quickly and left the room. Jack had begun to sweat even while Givens was talking, and felt droplets trickling down his forehead. The lights cut off, and darkness dropped on Jack like a heavy duvet. *Thousand one, thousand two,* he began, wondering how he could focus on observing while he was counting.

Servo motors in the large machine behind him came to life, and a high pitched whining drowned out Jack's counting. Harsh, glaring cones of light formed above and behind him, then gradually overlapped and mutually dimmed until darkness was again complete.

And more. The blackness directly in front of him seemed more substantial, more deeply inky. Jack squeezed his eyes shut, then realized that Givens could probably tell when his eyes were closed, and cautiously reopened them.

The high pitched whine of the machinery syncopated with another noise, a rasping that seemed to come from the ebony ichor in front of him.

'Thousand thirty eight, thousand forty" he mumbled.

Odors began drifting past him, the rank, fetid smells of plants and animals long dead in a bog. The grating from in front of him condensed into almost syllables, almost words. The darker area appeared to heave.

Jack began screaming. "Thousand hundred ten! Thousand hundred eleven! My God, I can't do this!" His bowels opened and he soiled himself as he kept screaming.

He flipped his thumb off the dead man's switch, but the room stayed dark, the whines and screeches howling. Jack grabbed the wooden handle in his left hand and pounded the switch with the palm of his right, but only cowered in blackness.

A vague, velvety form began slithering toward Jack, as if swimming against the current of the projected black light. Jack lost his ability to scream and sat open mouthed, half-gargling sounds from the back of his throat."Agh, agh."

The amorphous black touched Jack's shoes, then crabbed under his pant legs and upward over his genitals and torso. Jack fell silent, his expression catatonic. His body strained twice against the bands holding him and then sagged.

Givens reentered two minutes later, his lips pressed together, his nose wrinkled at the smells. His words were nearly non-stop.

"You gave us a little bit of a scare, Jack, your readings were frantic, but you seem to have stabilized nicely, I'm sorry about the dead man switch, but we needed to test your reactions in a panic situation, please don't be mad at us, Jack, say something please."

"I'm. Acclimating."

"Thatta boy, Jack, take your time, we'll get you cleaned up, wow, what a display you put on, are you sure you feel okay? Your brain wave patterns changed radically. Would you like some water? Are you still afraid of the dark?"

"Jack. This name is Jack?"

"Yes of course. We, ah, don't have a change of clothes, but I can provide a hospital gown until we make arrangements."

"I am free."

Givens frowned. "Free? So you no longer fear the dark?"

Jack's face was expressionless. "Free to live and feed in your darkness."

Givens had released Jack's restraints, and Jack swung down from the chair and stepped over until he was almost touching Givens. The smells of feces and something else-rot maybe- were acrid.

Jack sniffed as if taking in Given's scent.

"Givens. You will conduct this test with others who fear the dark?"

"With your success, absolutely. There are several already scheduled."

"So the barrier will be removed many times."

"Your lost fear of the dark has enabled this, Jack, you should be proud."

"I no longer fear the dark." Jack smiled with his lips but not his eyes. "But you should."

About the Author:

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

Facebook: <u>Ed Ahern</u>
Twitter: @bottomstripper

Once in a Blood Moon | John H. Dromey

Shortly after sunrise, Helen drove her badly-injured husband to the hospital.

An exposed cheek bone peeked out from one of the deep, evenly-spaced vertical cuts scoring the man's cranium from forehead to chin.

"Prescribe him some painkillers," Helen told the attending physician. "He'll mend on his own."

"I have to report this incident to the police."

"That won't be necessary. The wounds were self-inflicted."

"How?"

"An accident. Edmond always watches an around-the-clock movie channel while caged up during a lycanthropic transformation. In his altered state, he had trouble locating his mouth."

"So?"

"One of the noir films was a nail-biter."

About the Author:

John H. Dromey was born in northeast Missouri. He likes to read—mysteries in particular—and write in a variety of genres. His short fiction has appeared in Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Flame Tree Fiction Newsletter, Hybrid Fiction, Mystery Weekly Magazine, Thriller Magazine, several previous issues of The Sirens Call Publications eZine, and elsewhere.

Echoes | Debapriya Ambuly

It has been four weeks since I lost my daughter in the accident and one hour since I have been diagnosed with schizophrenia. I am sitting in the clinic, waiting for the specialist to arrive. A nauseating stench of medicines and chemical disinfectants fills the air. "Everything will be fine," my husband assures. "You don't believe me. You don't believe in her," I sigh. The psychiatric arrives with my charts in his hand. He flips through them. A serious crease appears in between his eyebrows.

"I am giving you these pills for a month. Here, have these now and your next dose will be at night," he passes a tray with two pills in a bottle cap and a glass of water. "It will make you feel good," he reassures. I swallow them. He asks the nurse to take me outside while he turns to my husband, once again flipping through my reports with a disturbing crease in between the eyebrows.

As usual, like every other night, my daughter is here now. Days are increasingly becoming intolerable for me. I desperately keep waiting for the sun to set so that I can be with her for the entire night. She looks sick today. Her lips are pallid, skin ashen, dark circles cover her sad little eyes and her body seems too weak. She starts to cough. The door opens. My husband enters with a tray. "Here honey, it's time," he says.

"No, Mom! Don't take them. They are making me sick. Can't you see that? They are trying to kill me. Don't take them," my daughter begs.

"These are not for you, sweetie—not for you. They are for the headaches. They will make me feel better," I lie.

"She is not real. Take them, they are good for you and everybody around, please," says my husband. I can see her horrified eyes.

"No, Dad, no—Mom, please," she pleads in vain. I swallow them. A putrid miasma of rotting flesh pervades the air as I see the skin and flesh slowly disintegrating in front of my eyes, revealing the white bones of her body.

The rays of the morning sun are pouring in through the window. A foul odour lingers in the air. My husband is already ready for work. "Breakfast is on the table. Your mom will be here soon," he says as he kisses my forehead. He waves goodbye and goes out. My parents stay next door, or rather, we stay next door to my parents. The doctor says it is good for me if I stay close to them. So, we have moved to the house next to them.

The day goes by. In the evening, my husband arrives. I keep waiting for her. She does not show up today. Still, I wait. My husband enters the room with the tray in his hand. "Here honey, it's time," he says. "No, not again," I retaliate. I slam the door behind me, rush down the stairs and walk out in the dark.

I reach the cliff side where it all happened. I stare into its deep darkness. What should I hold on to? What should I let go? I remember my wedding day, our anniversaries, my husband's smiling face. I remember my graduation day, my birthday parties, my parents' smiling faces. I remember the funeral day, my daughter's dead face, closed eyes, purple lips, pale skin. Only God knows how dreadfully I fancied a movement, even the slightest, in those cold frozen muscles.

"Here girl, Mommy is here now. I will never leave you alone, never again. Come, baby. Come. It's dark. It's our time now," I cry out to the darkling night, to its silent sounds and waiting echoes. "Nothing has changed. Don't be afraid. Here girl, Mommy is here now." I feel the gentle touch of a cold little hand. I kneel down and hold her tightly against my chest. My chest aches. What a soothing relief that pain is! We sit on the dewy grass and settle for the night.

The night passes by like a blissful sweet dream and once again it's time to wake up, it's time for breaking dawn. "I have to go now, baby." I tell her. "I will be back tonight." I kiss her cheeks. They don't feel that cold anymore. I stand up.

She clasps my wrist with both hands. "Don't go," she pleads.

"Baby, I have to go. I will be back tonight, right here," I say. But she won't let go of that grip. What an inhuman strength those little hands have!

"You don't have to go, Mom, not anymore," she says, her dead eyes staring right into mine, and for the first time, I feel scared.

"I will be back tonight," I say and walk away.

As I approach the house, I see a police van leave the yard. The door is open. I go inside. My husband and parents are sitting on the couch, visibly distressed. "You are back," my mother exclaims. My husband and my father stare at me, blankly.

"I am tired," I say and avoiding eye contacts and everything else, I walk towards my bedroom. I hear indistinct chattering, cries, voices behind me. I pay no heed. I need some sleep.

I feel very sick today. My body feels more exhausted with every passing hour. My lips are pallid. Dark circles cover my tired eyes. I stare at myself in the mirror. My ashen face stares back at me. I look so much like my daughter now. She looks so much like me. I smile.

My mother is already here. "Slept well?" she asks and prepares me a plate. She smiles. I smile back at her.

"I am sorry. I had to do this. I need to be with her. She is there. You believe me, right? It's all so confusing, Mom. Who stays? Who goes? Goes where? You do believe me, right? I know you do. You do see—," my father enters with a tray in his hand. The familiar medicines—the familiar insanity—the hallucinations—the treatments—why don't they understand? I get up and walk out in the dark.

She is already here today. I wonder for how long we can meet up like this. It can't be forever. They say the dead passes on, away from the living. When? Why is she still here then? For how long? What will happen when it's time? I look at her dead face. It's all fine. As of now, it's all fine, beautiful. We settle on the grass, and one more blissful night passes by.

It's dawn, another long wait till dusk. I reach my house. I knock on the door. Nobody answers. I knock again. Nobody answers. What happened? Where is my husband? Can't he hear me? I knock again and then, again. No one opens the door. I rush to my parent's house and knock. My mother opens the door. She greets me with a smile. "You look so sick," she says in a grim voice. I say nothing. We go upstairs to her bedroom. She sits on the bed. My father enters, holding the familiar tray in his hand. "Here honey, it's time," he says.

"No, Mom! Don't take them. They are making me sick. Can't you see that? They are trying to kill me. Don't take them," I beg.

"These are not for you, sweetie—not for you. They are for the headaches. They will make me feel better," she lies.

"She is not real. Take them, they are good for you and everybody around, please," says my father. I am horrified.

"No, Dad, no—Mom, please," I plead in vain. She swallows them. A familiar effluvium of rotting flesh pervades the air as I see the skin and flesh slowly disintegrating in front of my eyes, revealing the white bones of my body!

About the Author:

Debapriya Ambuly is from India and is a teacher by profession. She loves to write and create stories, especially about the deep, dark, macabre aspect of the world and existence. Her other passion is storytelling and she runs an audio story channel on YouTube called Nocturnal Audio Horror Station. Debapriya has previously published with Sirens Call Publications. Her short story *Fireflies* appeared in the February 2019 issue of The Sirens Call Publications Ezine.

Facebook: <u>Debapriya Ambuly</u> Instagram: <u>@debapriyaambuly</u>



The Old Man | Rivka Jacobs

I noticed the thing as soon as I followed Harry into his den. Nothing else about Harry and Bailey's three-story townhouse stood out as especially stylish or unusual. A lot of their furniture was either inherited or second-hand. They never had more than a few houseplants in small glazed pots in the kitchen.

But the thing growing from a large plank of wood on the wall, across from the sliding glass doors to give it light, it took my breath away. It looked like a green rack of antlers with tiers of cascading lobed ribbons and a brownish crown--and it was huge.

"He's a staghorn fern," Harry told me. "Belonged to Dad. When he died a few months ago, we got the recliner--the one he sat in getting drunk, watching TV until he fell asleep. And the dining room suite. And this..." He pointed up.

"So, you mount it like a buck's head?" I asked.

Harry made a sound in his chest as if he wanted to laugh but couldn't get it out. "He's an epiphyte; you have to hang him like that. They grow high on trees in the wild. They live on organic debris; those round upper fronds are like a catcher's mitt, raking in the dead leaves."

I remarked that he sounded like he'd done some research.

Bailey flitted by and handed us our beers. It was Thursday night, the game was on in a few minutes, so she excused herself. "Guys, I have to turn in, I get up early for work." She raised her eyes quickly, glancing at the fern as it hovered to the left of the 52-inch television. Her complexion blanched, her teeth clenched. Then she was all smiles again. "Honey, clean up before you come to bed, okay?"

He waved a hand and was about to confirm, "Okay," but Bailey had already hurried out of the room. We could hear her footsteps on the stairs. He lifted his can and sipped. He shook his head. "She doesn't like the old man."

"The old man?" I settled on the sofa that faced the TV, my eyes drawn to the pre-game graphics and patter from the sports desk. I swigged some beer and caught Harry in my peripheral vision, stepping closer and closer to that enormous fern. I turned my head briefly, then again, this time watching as my friend stopped directly under the monster of a plant. "Harry? What's up?" He didn't answer and seemed frozen, so I said, "Doesn't it remind you too much of your father? You had a shitty childhood—he was a real asshole—why did you keep his damn fern?"

Harry abruptly shrugged without turning. "Dunno. He's a living thing; I couldn't toss him out. Real hard to please him, though. You gotta do stuff just right."

I was in the act of rotating my head to the front, trying to catch the start of the game, when a rustling movement snagged my attention and I swung my gaze back to Harry, peered intently at the fern above him. "Did that thing just move?" I asked. "I thought I saw it move. Is it a fucking Venus Fly Trap?"

Harry shook his head. "No, but you have to be careful what you say. Don't say bad things about Dad."

"Oh, yeah, sure..." I began, then stared as Harry lifted his beer can straight up in the air. "What the hell are you doing?" And I swear to God that plant, those green lobes and fingers, began stretching, gliding, weaving. "Harry, that plant is moving!" I said stupidly. I slid to the edge of my seat, set my Bud Light on the floor, my fists on the cushion getting ready to propel myself up. "It moved all by itself. There's no breeze in here...."

"He wants you to be quiet, so he can hear the game," Harry said as several of the fronds snaked their way downward, into the opening at the top of the can.

I could hear a slurping sound. "Harry, it's drinking your beer," I said. "It's drinking your fucking beer."

Harry looked pale and stiff. "It's okay, Neal. You know, these ferns are real picky. You have to have just the right humidity, amount of water. We found out he also likes to watch football and loves Bourbon and Budweiser. He can really shoot those fronds after you too, if you disrespect my father...." His arm lowered--in his fist the red and white can was a crumpled lump. "But we're okay now." He kind of shuffled over to the couch and lowered himself slowly beside me. "Don't have many visitors these days. Glad you could do game night like we used to. Just ... don't leave until it's over, okay? He doesn't like it when someone leaves at half-time."

About the Author:

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

Facebook: Rivka Jacobs
Twitter: @Rivka Jacob



Death of the Apostrophe | Pamela K. Kinney

"You need to have more conjunction between sentences before this story is right," said the first sentence. John slammed his fist down on the desk. "Shut up! This is my story."

"Yeah, like you can write." The word count giggled.

"Wasn't your last novel a flop?" asked a comma.

I heard his agent say that if he doesn't do a bestseller this time the agency's through with him," whispered an adverb to a pronoun.

The writer tried to calm down, but instead a headache formed behind his eyes. "Look, guys, let's write the story my way this time, and the next one's yours. How about that?"

"Shit," growled the last word. "I'm at the end of this miserable mess and to tell you the truth, there won't be a next novel--it's that bad."

"Yeah, like a penny awful," agreed the title. "Even I'm pathetic. Blood of the Vampire."

"Sounds like something a five-year old thought up," piped up an exclamation point in a bored voice.

For an exclamation point to be bored was the last straw for John. He bolted from his office and grabbed a hammer from the utility room. He carried it back to the office and ignoring the screams, he brought it down hard, smashing a hole in the screen. Sparks and crackling sounds filled the air as the laptop died. For insurance, the power cord was yanked from the machine and wall at the same time and tossed aside.

"That should shut you up," said John with a snarl.

The printer whirred to life and began printing up pages of the novel, shooting it out like cannonballs. He slammed the hammer down on the printer. Down and down, again and again, until nothing but pieces remained.

John thumped down in his chair and dropped the hammer. It hit the carpet with a soft thud. His hands cupping the back of his head, he leaned back and laughed as he surveyed the damage.

"Guess I need to get a new laptop and printer, but God, it's peaceful. No damn words jabbering at me." He savored the quiet until he heard something.

Oh, no, it can't be...

The headache pounded as something appeared on the screen. It was a page from his novel, some of the words missing from the hole in the middle. John jumped up and picked up the machine with his hands.

"I destroyed you. There's no way you can come back on—not with a hole in you."

"Well, it looks like you don't know everything. Just like you don't know how to write a good story either, dingle berry!" snorted a period. "I am so ashamed to be a part of this manuscript."

"What kind of software did my wife pick up for me?" John threw the laptop. It slammed into the wall and leaving a large crack in the drywall, slid down to the floor. He grabbed the hammer and went to work pulverizing it. "I'll stop you. Do you hear me?"

Instead of screams and pleas, voices mocked him. "Hey, don't blame us. Blame that bitch wife of yours. She's the one who bought the software with your credit card, along with that butt-ugly lamp for the living room. The lamp you hate."

Gritting his teeth, John banged harder with the hammer. They were right. He hated that lamp. Maybe he would use the hammer on that next.

The yelling finally stopped. John clutched the hammer with a death grip as he straightened and turned his breathing harsh. Sweat beaded his face. One drop dripped from his double chin.

"What is going on—"

It was his wife. Lily stood there, her mean little eyes, which he always thought of as the color of shit, darted from the wreckage to him. Her mouth opened and closed like a fish. John saw something stuck between her tobacco-stained teeth, most likely from the dinner she had just came back from with the 'girls'.

Girls, his ass. A bunch of old hags, who gossiped like the nasty hens they were.

"Hello, sweetheart," he said, walking over to her and giving her a peck on her cheek. Makeup she used to cover her doughy complexion plastered his lips. He resisted the urge to wipe it off. "Did you have a great time?"

Lily's shifted her eyes to him. They held a suspicious gleam.

"Forget my night out. I can see that you were busy while I was gone."

John shrugged. "Oh, you mean all this?" He jerked a thumb at the damage. "I had to."

"Had to . . . what?"

"Destroy them, or they would have gone on and on."

"Who was going on and on?" Lily backed away.

"The novel. It was trying to tell me how to write the storyline."

"Uh huh. I see. . . " She inched toward the door.

John frowned. No, she obviously didn't see. Lily looked at him like he gone crazy or something.

"Honest, they were talking to me. I think it has to do with that new writing program you bought."

"John, your novel can't speak. Software doesn't cause the computer to make your story communicate with you, like people do."

He grabbed her arm, his fingers digging into her skin as he waved the hammer with the other.

"I swear to you, they did. It's that goddamned software. Thinking that since I'm such an awful writer that some stupid CD for the computer will make me better." He drew her closer. "Well, I'm not such a bad author and you're nothing but some old bitch with menopause who thinks she's better than me."

"I don't think I'm better than you, John. I...I love you." Lily's voice grew shrill with hysteria as she struggled to tug her arm out of his grasp.

As if suddenly he had stepped outside of his body, John watched her frantic attempts to free herself with a detached air. He saw the hammer rise up and descend down upon her head, cracking it open like an egg.

With the same detached air John saw the hammer with Lily's blood and bits of brain fall to the carpet. He saw himself looking down at her body, which lay on the carpet like a broken doll, her limbs all askew. Blood seeped into the carpet, turning the golden color to a rich, red one. He found that he preferred the red color.

"Boy, you couldn't even kill her right."

John turned and saw that the laptop had come to life again. On it, the words were jeering at him.

"Can't write a novel and he can't kill his wife properly," remarked one apostrophe. "The man's an idiot!"

"Nonononono!" screamed John, as he picked up the bloody hammer and battered at what remained of the processor "Stay dead this time."

He kept at it until the couple from next door on hearing the ruckus came over and found him. The wife shrieked as she almost stepped in his murdered wife's blood. Frightened, they ran back home and called the police.

The police found John still hammering away at the laptop pieces strewn across the carpet, yelling, "You're dead, you hear me, dead." over and over. Their guns trained on him, the police managed to get him to lay down the hammer and allow them to handcuff him. The manuscript cheered as the policemen led him to their cruiser outside.

Deemed insane at his court trial for the murder of his wife John was sentenced to a mental institution.

Percy, one of the male nurses at the McCutcheon Mental Institution, gave his co-worker, Sherry, a strange look. "What's John doing, Sherry?"

"Well, Dr. Thomas said that after months of therapy he seems to be doing better. That I could go ahead and let him write if that is what he wanted to do. I gave him paper and a pen."

"Do you know what he's writing? He did write some bestsellers once upon a time."

"I'm not sure, but I think he said he's calling it, *Death of the Apostrophe*. Or something titled like that." Both nurses crossed over to the other side of the room. "What harm can writing on paper do?"

"Hey, John, you think you're going to kill us with this new novel?" asked the title with a laugh.

"Yeah, he might," said an apostrophe. "It's such a stinker that it'll kill us to be the words for this trash."

They laughed, but John ignored them as he continued writing. Besides, he knew where the nurses kept the scissors in this place.

About the Author:

Pamela K. Kinney gave up long ago trying not to listen to the voices in her head and gave into the madness of writing horror, fantasy, science fiction, poetry, and nonfiction books on the paranormal ever since. She is a member of Horror Writers Association and Virginia Writers Club. Pamela has acted on stage and film and investigates the paranormal with Paranormal World Seekers.

Website: Pamela K. Kinney
Twitter: @PamelaKKinney

I'm Glad You're Here | Katie Ess

When the worst happens, that's when you find out who your true friends are. When tragedy struck me, I discovered that I had none.

My friends couldn't handle my grief, didn't like my reaction to it, so they pulled away over the years, one by one. Eventually I was left alone, rattling around my tiny apartment watching reruns of *Friends* until I could recite the episodes by heart. Or else just sitting on my couch listening to the sounds of life going on through the walls—people laughing and talking with their friends, saying goodnight to their dates (or inviting them in), getting ready for bed. It felt like my life had ended the night my parents' life ended, and I didn't know how to start it back up again.

That's why I said yes when my brother asked me to move in with him after he was released from prison. He'd been given a life sentence, but I advocated for his release, on the grounds of good behavior. My coworkers told me I was crazy to do it, but I was so lonely I didn't care. People die from loneliness all the time. No matter my brother's crime, moving in with him felt less risky somehow.

He was all I had left.

"You want to move back into the house?" I hoped I kept the shock out of my voice when he told me what he wanted during one of the visitations at the jail.

"It's the only connection I still have to Mom and Dad," he said. For a minute, I didn't see the orange jumpsuit or the prison tattoo on his forearm. All I saw were the sad eyes of my little brother at age six, when he'd broken my favorite toy and didn't know how to fix it. "I know it's weird, but I want to go back there. I'm so sorry for what I did, and I need to feel close to them again. Like maybe there's a chance they will forgive me."

"There have to be conditions," I told him after several minutes' pause. "I can't go back there with it looking the same. I'll never be able to separate the present from the past that way. It's going to take a lot of work. We'll need to do some...renovation...for me to be able to live in it."

"Of course, of course!" he agreed immediately. "Thanks, Sis. Thanks so much! I knew I could count on you! I'm so glad you're here."

"Me too." I rested my head on the glass between us, thinking about how hard this would be. But I could make it work. I had to make it work.

My brother, Tim, had schizophrenia. He developed symptoms at age 22, very suddenly. He's not the sweet kind of schizophrenic character you see in Hollywood— the kind that talks to himself and acts a little odd, but solves genius-level puzzles to make up for his eccentricity. He's the kind of schizophrenic who thinks he hears demons telling him to murder his parents with an ice pick. Growing up, he was my hero, my role model, and my best friend. The crime scene photos, drawings in blood on the carpet, the mangled bodies of my parents, should have changed that. At least, that's what my friends told me. They all thought it was premeditated, analyzed every little interaction they'd had with him to find guilt. But I knew better. Schizophrenia is a disease, and he was sick. The more my friends accused him, the more I stood up for him. It's why I pursued a career in neuroscience, working every day to find a cure for schizophrenia. It's why I advocated for his release, once he was on the proper medications, and why they listened when I did advocate for him. It's also why I sit alone at night, friendless, as the world goes on outside my door.

Even though I lived in an apartment, we still owned the house. I hadn't been there since the murders—I hired a crew to clean it up, after. I'd moved out, hoping it would sell, but it's not easy to sell a house that was the site of a gory double homicide. It's still on the market, ten years later, but no one ever comes to see it. So I went out to visit—I needed to see if I could really be okay living there.

From the curb, it still looked like the same house on the same secluded lot. But as I got closer, I could see the shingles sagged a little, and the paint on the door was peeling from lack of care. All the trees had grown bigger and older, the leaves muffling the sound around the house. Weeds choked out the grass, giving the yard a snarly feel underfoot, I imagined they might wrap around my ankle if I stood still long enough. The brick of the porch looked solid, but as I stepped up, it crumbled under my feet as though trying to push me away. Everything together gave it the feel of something almost sinister, like the evil from the past was still in residence somehow.

It had been so long since I'd used my key that I didn't think it would work in the lock at first. But my fumbling fingers finally got the doorknob to turn. The atmosphere inside was stale. Dust hung in the air, reflected

in the sunlight filtering through the windows like a million small bugs floating in stasis. The carpet was clean, the walls repainted, but all I could see were the images from crime scene photos—blood on the walls, the carpet, the ceiling, like some kind of horrible room in a haunted house. And the silence pressed on me. Juxtaposed with the sounds I imagined my parents making in their final moments, I started to feel claustrophobic. Like I was trapped with something else in the house, begging to be let out. After a minute, I had to race out of the house to breathe clean air again.

"You have to do this" I told myself as I knelt, gasping, on the porch. "For Tim." And after a couple more deep breaths, I went back in. This time, I refused to let the images play out in my mind. I pretended like this was a new house, one with no history for me, one that I might buy if the price was right. I walked through all the rooms. Opened the windows. Aired things out. Ignored my foreboding and harnessed the power of denial.

A few weeks later, after I moved the last of my things into the house and turned in my apartment key, I picked Tim up from jail. "How does it feel to be a free man?" I asked.

"Good," he said. "Really good. In fact I appreciate you picking me up, Sis. I'm glad you're here."

"You're my brother. Where else would I be?" I smiled at him. He returned the smile, but with a hint of quiet calculation in his eyes that felt insincere. I knew that the powerful medications he was on could blunt his responses, or make them seem less genuine. After the look between us had lingered a few seconds too long, he turned and stared out the passenger side window. We were silent on the rest of the drive, each lost in our own thoughts.

When Tim and I arrived, I could feel his excitement. "I'm here," he whispered under his breath. But while he seemed to be happy and energized by our return to the house, I could feel myself starting to panic. It was like I could hear my parents begging me to leave this place—to run and never come back. I was sure it was all in my head—old, troubling memories that needed to be replaced with new, happy ones. So I engaged Tim in the renovation plans right away. We would change the whole living room—open up a wall, repaint, pull out the carpet and put in wood floors, maybe add some new light fixtures. By the time we got done, it WOULD be a new house, and the panicky feeling would go away. Tim was surprisingly excited about doing the actual work on the project. He had never been handy before...well, before. But circumstances had changed him, in many ways. By the end of our first day at home, we had drawn up some plans.

And such became the rhythm of our days. I would go to work and come home to find him ordering materials, measuring doorways, or locating the studs behind the walls. The table would be strewn with drawings, or books about how to drywall, or pull up carpet, or knock out a wall safely. His drawings all looked architectural, with triangles and arches, symbols and dimensions.

"How do you know how to do all this?" I asked.

"Books," he said distractedly. And "don't touch them!" when I went to take a closer look.

At night, I'd lie awake and listen to him talk to himself as he got ready for bed, just like I used to listen to the people around me in my old apartment. Only now, I wasn't alone, listening to people on the outside. It was my brother, and we were together.

"First, we should pull up the carpet, see what's under there. Oh, I hope there's something good under there."

"Maybe the light fixture needs to come down. It could be in the wiring. We should check the wiring."

"The wall. Of course, it has to be the wall. Don't worry—we'll get to everything. I'll find you, and it will all be okay."

"Tim," I said one day, "who do you talk to at night when you're going to bed?"

"You heard that, did you?" his eyes hardened for a minute, but then he grinned sheepishly. "I still talk to myself sometimes. Old habits. I promise I'm still on my meds. I just like to pretend like someone else is with me at night, so I don't get lonely."

I knew about lonely. I knew only too well. I nodded and changed the subject. "What about that wall? When do we get to knock it down?"

"How about now?" he said. "I think everything is ready!"

"Let's do it then," I said, ready to make some progress. My sense of foreboding had been growing, and I just wanted to make a change, any change. Something to cleanse the house, let out whatever it was that felt so suffocating. Tim gave me a list of tools we'd need. As I gathered them up, Tim transferred his plans to the wall in

preparation for the project. Triangles and symbols, arches and diagrams were drawn everywhere. I traced one. I could swear I felt it pulse under my finger. I pulled back sharply, shaking my hand as though I'd been shocked.

Tim smiled. "Static electricity. We need a humidifier."

I nodded half-heartedly as he turned back to his plans.

After a few minutes, Tim handed me a sledgehammer. He looked as excited as I felt—we needed to get started on something before we both exploded.

"You do the honors, Sis." I swung it once, twice, three times, until it broke through the drywall.

Something black and sticky poured out of the opening. It slithered to the floor with a thunk, then coalesced gradually into a solid form. Each part was blurry, as if not quite solid, but there was definitely a head, thorax, abdomen—all the parts I remembered from years of biology classes, combined in an impossible way. The insect-like creature raised up on its newly-formed legs. There were so many legs, almost an impossible number, and they ended in sharp points like the tips of an ice pick. Each little foot clicked on the floor as it inched toward me. Over the clicking, I heard a buzzing sound like a thousand flies, louder and louder as the creature grew bigger and bigger. Blank white eyes with no pupils stared in my direction, and a slash for a mouth opened to reveal black teeth that dripped and oozed as it grinned. Panicking, I whirled to the door to run. It slammed in front of me before I could scramble out.

"Tim!" I shouted. "Come on! We have to go!" But no matter how I yanked on the doorknob it refused to open. Whirling around, I saw the slithering, clattering creature continue to advance. It had come so close that Tim and I were trapped in the entryway now. There was nowhere to run.

"I've been looking for you," Tim whispered to the creature. "I missed you." He walked up to it, ran his hand gently along its side. His hand appeared to become one with the creature, and it buzzed in response to his caress.

I pressed myself into the door, trying to back away even though I knew it was in vain. I could feel the beast's exhalation warm on my neck as it closed in. Its breath was foul, like blood in a slaughterhouse. The tip of its leg, icy cold and metallic, brushed my hair back from my face. I shuddered as it grazed my cheek, devouring my scent. Cringing and trembling, I flashed back to the crime scene photos I'd seen before.

I knew exactly what was about to happen to me.

Tears sprung unbidden as I looked frantically, in vain, for any way to escape my fate.

"Tim," I pleaded quietly. He met me with the same look I'd seen in the car—a smile on the lips, but cold calculation behind the eyes. He nodded, and with that gesture of permission, the creature stretched out its spear like leg, then thrust the tip into my flesh.

The pain was immediate and excruciating. Lightning ran down to my fingers and up to my head. The buzzing of flies amplified as the crackle hit my brain, until I thought my eardrums would burst. I screamed, and another leg pierced my other shoulder, pinning me to the wall. Its long black tongue licked my neck, and I felt its dripping teeth slowly tear away a strip of flesh. The world blurred as pain consumed me. I closed my eyes so I didn't have to watch it eating my skin with those terrible, dripping black teeth. But sound and anticipation turned out to be so much worse than sight, and my eyes flew back open again.

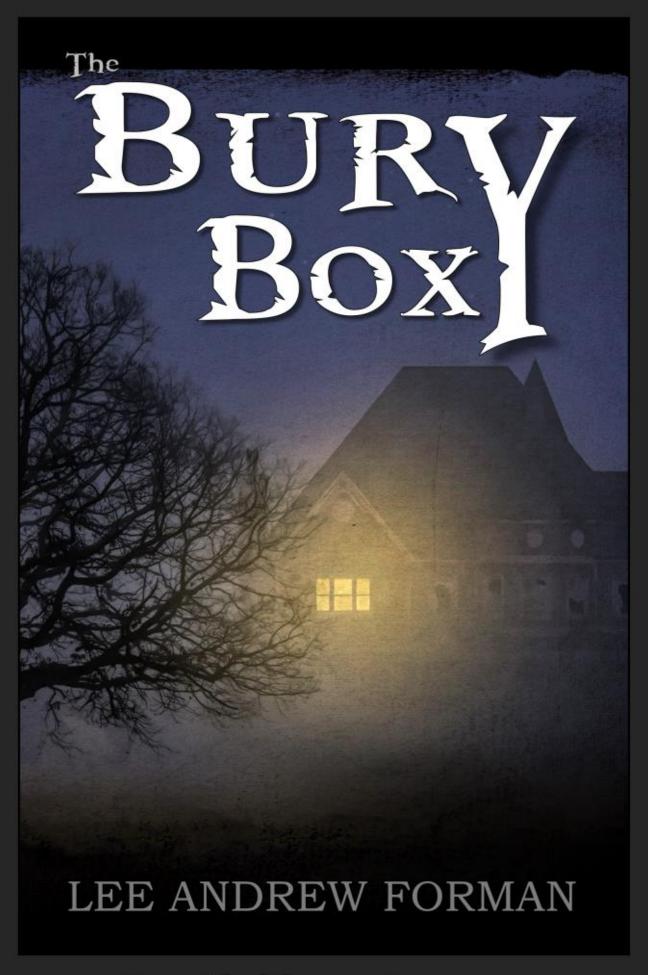
My brother touched my shoulder, wiped off some of the blood, and drew a symbol on the wall next to me. As the creature leaned in to take another strip of my skin, Tim approached my other ear. Together they advanced closer, closer, until over the buzzing in my head, I heard him whisper.

"I really appreciate you Sis. I'm so glad you're here."

About the Author:

Katie Ess lives in Colorado with her husband, two sons, a bulldog puppy, and two ferrets. When she's not writing, you can generally find her cleaning up a mess. Aside from someday becoming a world famous author, her most important life's goal is to teach the six of them to clean up their own messes.

Facebook: <u>Katie Ess</u>
Twitter: <u>@KatieEss3</u>



Available on Amazon

Under the Snow | *Radar DeBoard*

Christopher shivered as he walked along the sidewalk. He took a quick second to look up at the sky to see if it was still snowing. The small snowflake that landed in his eye gave him his answer. Christopher stopped for a moment to rub his eye and get the tingle sensation out of it. He sighed then continued to trudge forward to his house. There was still a good seven or eight blocks he had to walk before making it back home.

Christopher noticed a fenced off field up ahead on his right. He walked over towards it and realized that he might have just found a shortcut. On the opposite side of the field he spotted the Christenson's place, which was only a few streets down from his. That proved that the field was a more direct route to get home. He stood there trying to decide if he should continue walking his normal way to get back, or take the shortcut through fenced off land. A small gust of freezing wind that blew by made his mind up for him. There was no way he was going to spend an extra ten or fifteen minutes walking home in this weather.

Christopher carefully placed his gloved hands on the top of the barbed wire fence. Taking the utmost care, he hoisted himself up and over. He landed with a thud into the snow which gave out under his feet. Christopher waved his arms wildly as he tried to keep his balance. After a few seconds he was able to regain his footing and relaxed. He looked down to see that the snow came up to just below his knees, so it was well over a foot high.

Christopher took in a deep breath and started to push forward across the field. He had to lift his feet up as high as he could when he walked so he met less resistance then simply dragging his legs through the snow. The practice of high stepping turned out to be exhausting as he found himself stopping after a few minutes to catch his breath. Christopher checked the sky again to find snowflakes still falling. He looked back to see how far he had made it and groaned upon learning he had only crossed a quarter of the field.

Knowing he had to keep going, Christopher reluctantly started walking again. The only sounds to be heard were his heavy breathing and the snow moving around him as he walked. As he went to take another step he could have sworn he heard something behind him. Christopher turned and scanned the part of field he had already crossed over. The only thing visible besides the white snow were the tracks he had made getting to where he was. He shrugged his shoulders and started to move when the noise of snow moving sounded again from behind him.

Christopher whipped his head around and called out, "Hello?"

Silence greeted him, but he still felt like something had been behind him.

"Is there anyone out here?" he shouted.

Christopher's breath rose up in front of his face while he waited to see if something was going to move. After standing still for what seemed like an eternity, he finally turned back around. An uneasy feeling trickled down the back of Christopher and he suddenly wanted to get out of the field as quickly as possible. He started his high stepping method again and pushed forward. The world was completely silent around him until he reached the middle of the field. A strange screeching noise froze Christopher dead in his tracks. Fear overtook him and he was far too scared to find out what the noise was. With every fiber of his being, Christopher hoped that he had just heard a weird sounding crow. As he started to take another step the screeching noise sounded again. This time it seemed like there was malintent in the sound and Christopher was not sticking around to find out if that was true.

Christopher took off as fast as he could go, his feet awkwardly hitting the top layer of the snow as he desperately tried to run through it. He looked over his shoulder constantly to see if anything was coming after him. The adrenaline pushed him forward, but he could tell that he would be tired in a matter of minutes. Another screech filled the air and Christopher had to check behind his back again, which is when he saw it. Something, he didn't know what, was moving through the snow. It seemed to be tunneling just beneath the surface because he was able to see it pushing up the snow as it moved along.

Christopher gasped for air as he pushed himself forward. His legs burned from having to put forth extra effort because of the snow weighing him down. The cold air hurt his lungs when he tried to take in deep breaths, and he found his energy quickly leaving him. He checked behind him to see the snow trail was closing in fast. The thing moving under the snow was now less than forty feet behind. Christopher looked ahead and saw the barbed wire fence roughly a hundred feet in front of him.

Upon seeing his salvation so close, Christopher found a new well of energy. The burning sensation in his legs lessened and he scrambled forward through the snow. He took in little breaths of air as he pushed his way across the field. Another screech let him know that the thing was growing closer. Christopher looked behind his

shoulder to see the snow pushing up a mere twenty feet behind him. He turned around to see he was within spitting distance of the fence. Christopher put everything he had into a few more strides to reach the small embankment that the fence was on top of.

A sense of relief rushed over Christopher as he scrambled up the small hill and started to climb up the barbwire. A sudden tugging on his leg almost caused him to fall backwards into the snow. He looked down at his feet to see three slimy tentacles wrapped around his right leg. Christopher grunted and struggled with all his might to lift himself up the fence. The tentacles proved to be too strong for him and he soon found his grip failing him. Christopher screamed out for help as he fingers slipped off the fence. He desperately clawed at the snow for something solid to grab onto as he was pulled backwards. Christopher let out one final scream before he was pulled beneath the snow. There was a quick rustling of movement at the spot of snow that Christopher had been dragged under, but that soon ceased. A quietness settled over the field as the snow continued to fall, slowly covering the tracks that Christopher had made.

Children of the Woods | Radar DeBoard

"I think I heard something," Valeria whispered in a panic.

"I'm sure it was just a racoon or something," Mordecai said waving it off as he continued to move forward through the trees.

Valeria walked behind him for a few seconds before she heard the sound of a twig snapping somewhere off to their left. She whispered, "I really think something is here."

"We're in the woods," Mordecai said with a hint of annoyance in his voice, "There are animals everywhere. Of course there is something here."

Valeria grabbed hold of Mordecai's arm to get him to stop walking. "What about those kids?" she asked.

"What?" Mordecai laughed, "You mean the urban tale about the kids who haunt these woods." He paused to remember the legend, "Eight kids thought to possess evil inside them were chased into the woods to die, but they never did. They've lived among the trees for over one hundred years, killing and eating anyone who dares to enter the woods. At least, that's how the story goes, right?"

He suddenly lept towards Valeria while making a growling noise. Valeria jumped in shock while letting out a terrified scream. Mordecai busted out laughing as Valeria glared at him.

"That's not funny you dick," she growled.

"Oh come on," he chuckled, "It's funny." Mordecai shook his head, "Plus, everyone knows that story about the kids is fake."

"Is it?" a quiet voice asked.

Valeria and Mordecai looked to see a small girl who couldn't have been older than ten standing in front of them. Her hair was done up in pigtails and she wore a pink dress that was immaculate.

"What?" Mordecai said in confusion and bewilderment.

"The story," the girl smiled, "You said it wasn't true, but it is."

Mordecai shook his head as he chuckled. "Look kid," he said while taking a step towards her, "There's no such thing as evil, demon kids hiding out in the woods." He knelt down and smiled, "You have nothing to worry about."

"I know I don't," the girl replied, "It's you two that should be worried."

"Why is that?" Mordecai asked in a condescending tone.

"She already told you," a young voice came from behind Valeria.

They turned to see a small boy in a pristine school uniform staring at them.

The boy shook his head, "The story is true, yet you don't believe us. Perhaps it's because we look like children."

"That's fine," the girl added, "It doesn't matter if you believe or don't, you'll still taste the same."

Mordecai slowly stood up and took a step backwards, "This isn't funny anymore."

"Well it's not supposed to be," the boy replied, "This isn't joke."

"Oh god Mordecai," Valeria pointed off to their left, "Look!"

There were several children walking out from behind the trees and they were slowly approaching them. Valeria couldn't help but notice the sinister grins they all wore. She looked to her right and noticed that several more children were coming at them from that way. It was at that moment Valeria realized they were surrounded on all sides.

Mordecai let out a strained laugh to cover his growing fear. "You're just a bunch of kids," he snorted, "I could kick you to the side of the path if I wanted to, but I won't." He pointed at the girl, "So step aside and let us through."

"You would kick a little girl?" she asked with a smirk.

"I would if she doesn't get out of my way," Mordecai growled in frustration mixed with apprehension. He noticed the rest of the kids were closing in on them and he didn't like it one bit.

"I don't think I will move," the girl replied confidently.

"Suit yourself," Mordecai yelled as he geared up to kick her.

He let his left leg fly towards her at full force. The girl easily caught his leg with her left hand. She smiled at him as he tried to wrestle it away from her, but he wasn't able to. The girl's smile turned to a scowl of anger and she tugged on Mordecai's leg. The appendage was ripped from the rest of Mordecai and he screamed out in agony. Valeria cried out in terror as she watched Mordecai fall to the ground with blood spurting from the wound.

The girl held up the leg and shouted, "Brothers and sisters, we have fresh meat!"

In an instant, the children descended on Valeria and Mordecai. The two screamed for help as the tiny hands of the children tore and ripped their flesh apart. In a matter of minutes there was nothing left of the two hikers, and the children snuck off into the woods to await their next meal.

The Clacking Dentures | Radar DeBoard

Ethel refused to remove her dentures despite the constant pleading from her husband, Don. The fake teeth always clacked together while Ethel slept, keeping Don up for most of the night. He lay awake from the noise of the dentures and the terrible smell that emanated from Ethel's open mouth thanks to the false teeth.

So when Don finally suffocated Ethel, he naturally assumed he would be able to get a good night's sleep. Yet, when he laid down for bed, Don heard the distinct clacking of fake teeth coming from down the hallway, slowly moving closer towards the bedroom.

Annoying Screams | *Radar DeBoard*

Jonathan sipped his beer while he relished the quiet that covered his farmhouse which was located miles away from the nearest town.

Suddenly, the muffled screams of horrified wailing broke through from the floor below. Jonathan growled in annoyance as he pulled himself off the couch and made his way over to the basement door. Throwing the door open revealed a weeping woman who had been shackled to the wall.

"Shut up!" Jonathan hollered, "Or I'll do to you what I did to your sister!" He slammed the door and grumbled, "Damn contractor told me those floorboards were noise canceling."

About the Author:

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

Facebook: Writer Radar DeBoard
Goodreads: Radar DeBoard



The Scent of Pine and Wildflowers | Naching T. Kassa

The moon gleamed outside Margo's window as she placed the silhouette against the glass. Cut from black construction paper, it cast a tree-shaped shadow over her bedroom.

"What's that, Margo?"

Margo turned. Her father stood in the doorway.

"Something we made in school."

"Are those your friends?" He pointed to the girlish shapes around the tree.

"Yes."

"And is that Mr. Crinkles?"

Margo nodded. A tear trailed down her cheek. "He liked climbing trees."

"It looks good. Especially with the moonlight behind it."

"Oh, it's not for decoration. Emily Wallace said it would keep the monster away."

Margo covered her mouth with both hands and glanced at her father. The man shook his head and smiled.

"Sit on the bed, Margo. We need to talk."

Margo climbed up on her bed and sat with her hands in her lap. Her father switched the light on, and the tree silhouette vanished.

"I know you're upset about your friends, sweetheart. It's a hard thing to lose people so young."

"He took them, Daddy," Margo said. She brushed another tear away. "And he killed Mr. Crinkles."

"I know. But he isn't going to get you."

"Sarah's doors were locked, and he took her anyway."

"He won't get you."

"What about Lisa? He took her from her grandma's house. Emily Wallace said he hid in her closet. She said Lisa didn't put up the picture, so he came and got her.

"Emily is making things up."

"But-"

Father held up a hand. "Margo, no monster will come in this house and take you. He won't dare."

"Because of the picture?"

"No. Because I'm the scariest thing in this house. Nothing will mess with me." He pulled back the covers. "Time for bed."

Margo slipped beneath the blankets. Her father tucked her in and kissed her forehead.

"Daddy?"

"Yes?"

"If I'm scared, and I call you, will you come?"

"I'll be here faster than you can blink."

The silver moon crawled across the velvet sky and the paper tree's shadow shifted with it. Margo yawned. She shut her eyes and slipped into twilight. Dreams bloomed in her mind.

Margo ran with wolves along a mountain ridge. They jogged beside her, their eyes reflecting the silver moon, tongues lolling.

Seconds later, they reached the shore of a lake. Margo joined them at the water's edge. She leaned down and lapped up the sweet, clear water.

Something rustled in the brush.

The wolves rose, ears pricked. Something padded out of the trees. The man-like beast grinned at them. It's cat-like eyes glowed. Blood dripped from the talons of its right hand.

Margo screamed.

She pushed herself up and stared, panting into her bedroom. The scent of pine and wildflowers lingered.

The moon had moved on and only a sliver of silver light remained. Margo's gaze swept the room, halting when she encountered a shadow. One which hadn't been there before.

"Are you awake, Margo?" the shadow asked. It lunged toward her.

Margo shrieked.

Clawed hands covered her mouth and green, feline eyes glared into her own.

"I didn't know which room was yours," the monster said. "I'm glad you listened to my daughter."

"Daddy!" Margo cried.

The beast laughed, low and hoarse.

"Margo!" Her father called from beyond the door.

"Daddy, help me!"

The creature snatched her up from the bed and covered her mouth with one hand, muffling her cries.

Something crashed against the door as they headed for the window. The door jamb splintered.

Margo's eyes grew wide.

The thing which entered her bedroom bore no resemblance to her father. Black fur covered its human form and the strange snout which emerged from its face. The eyes glowed with animal shine. It howled and rushed forward.

The monster hissed and dropped Margo to the floor. It lashed out with a clawed hand.

The man-wolf ducked the blow and went for the throat. Strong teeth latched on. Together they fell through the window. Glass shattered, sparkling in the moonlight.

The world fell quiet.

Margo rose to her feet. She approached the broken window and peered down onto the lawn below. A man lay upon the grass. Margo's breath caught in her throat. She hurried out of the room, down the stairs, and out the door.

The man still lay on the lawn. A shard of glass protruded from his eye.

"Margo?"

She turned. Her father stood near the front steps. He wore no shirt, only pants.

"Daddy!" She rushed into his arms.

"I told you he wouldn't get you."

She clutched at him. His hair smelled of pine.

And wildflowers.

About the Author:

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

Blog: Naching T. Kassa
Twitter: @nachingkassa

Tyler's Spring | Radar DeBoard

The distinct smell of budding plant life always let Tyler know that spring was officially beginning. It was, by far, his favorite time of the year. When color came back to the world. More importantly, the rising temperature would melt away the snow, revealing the shallow graves that Tyler had dug for his victims.

Eventually, the police would discover what he had done and set out on a manhunt. Meanwhile, Tyler would be long gone, on to the next state by the time any evidence was put together from the decayed corpses. Spring always brought Tyler new beginnings, and new bodies.

About the Author:

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

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Baby Debbie's Death Rattle | Hillary Lyon

She was a squealy, red-faced little thing who looked nothing like either parent, but they tried to love her anyway. 'Tried' being the important word here as she was a most difficult baby: wouldn't eat, spit her milk at her mother's face, bit her father when he held her, screamed all night, pooped in the bathtub, grabbed anyone's hair at every chance and, with surprising strength, pulled out tiny handfuls.

Bedtime in their household was an ordeal. A warm bath, rocking, lullabies, bedtime stories, a bottle of warm milk—nothing worked. It was only after Dad lost his patience and threw something—usually a book of fairy tales—at the wall and Mother teared up, that Baby Debbie coo'd and relaxed and drifted off to sleep. Every night, this was their routine. Dad wondered why they didn't just skip all the happy family stuff and go directly to the violent eruption of frustration. He looked down at this daughter as she slept in her crib. It was true: she looked angelic, like everyone says a baby does when it sleeps. A blissfully dreaming cherub. A sweet little lambikin. His heart melted. He turned towards his wife to see if she shared his reaction to their sleeping child, but she had already left the room.

Baby Debbie is just going through a phase, the parents reassured each other. We'll be patient; she'll outgrow this behavior and be wonderful, and we'll all laugh about it in the long run. Maybe she suffers from colic, maybe an allergic reaction to something in the home, maybe her nervous system is not fully developed and she struggles with sensory overload, maybe—the pediatrician said no to all these theories. Despite her lack of appetite and sleep, he said, she is not only completely healthy, but thriving. The pediatrician also said they had to find a new doctor for her, after she clawed at his eyes, and he developed tinnitus from her shrieks.

She learned to crawl earlier than most babies; her parents discovered this when, early one summer morning, they saw her crawl out the doggie door into the backyard. They hadn't had a dog in years, but decided when the kid was older they'd get another one. In a panic, Mom raced out the door looking for Baby Debbie—and there she was, sitting under the old pecan tree, crooning to something small she cradled in her hands, something. . .disgusting: a desiccated toad she'd found somewhere in the grass. Mother slapped it out of Debbie's chubby hands, picked the child up, and marched back inside as Debbie wailed her disapproval.

"I'll jerry-rig some sort of barrier to the doggie door when I get home from work," Dad reassured with a confidence he didn't actually feel. He secretly worried, if she can crawl now, neither of them were safe as they slept in their bed.

From her high-chair, Baby Debbie giggled and mouthed her rattle like it was a delicious candied apple. This, her favorite toy, was round like an apple, but then most cartoon depictions of skulls are—which is what the rattle was: a plastic grinning skull on a plastic bone stick, filled with dried seeds or plastic pebbles or—whatever hoodoo beads the manufacturer put in there. Very funny, Mother thought as she watched her daughter lick the rattle-skull. Your Godmother Julietta has a very peculiar sense of humor.

Dad put off creating a barrier to the doggie door when he got home. Said he had to think about how to make it, and with this huge load at work—well, he'd do it for sure this weekend. Mom took a deep drink from her wine glass, and shook her head imperceptibly. Maybe she'd fix it herself, maybe she could use duct tape and a piece of cardboard leftover from—

Baby Debbie smashed her sippy cup down on her tray, knocking her cartoon character themed plate off onto the floor, along with her mother's train of thought. Mashed potatoes splattered the linoleum and the legs of the kitchen table. Baby Debbie giggled with glee and kicked her plump legs as Mother got on her hands and knees to wipe up the mess. Baby Debbie grabbed her rattle and threw it at her mother's head. It bounced off and rolled away on the floor, but not before raising a sore knot that would linger for days. Dad poured himself another glass of wine.

"You'll raise a spoiled brat," Mrs. Vincent declared, nose titled up in the air, "If you don't set some boundaries." She took a sip of her tepid coffee. "For instance, set her in her crib at night, turn off the light, and do not go to her when she cries. And no night-lights, either, unless you want to foster an emotionally weak, superstitious child!" The old woman fluffed her hair-sprayed, white hair. "Also, for goodness' sake, don't pick her up every time she whines, either. You have to force the child to learn independence!" The old woman shoulders straightened in acknowledgment of her own infallibility.

Mother had invited her neighbor and landlord, Mrs. Vincent, over for a morning coffee and chat; actually, as the old woman had raised three kids, Mother hoped Mrs. Vincent could give her advice on getting Baby Debbie to sleep. Among other things.

"I don't think I can do all that," Mother laughed uncomfortably. How cruel this advice sounded, Mother thought to herself. No wonder Mrs. Vincent's adult sons rarely visited. "More coffee?"

Mrs. Vincent placed her veiny hand over her cup, and shook her head no. Baby Debbie grabbed the top rail of her playpen, shrieked, and tossed her rattle over the netting. Mother excused herself and scooped up the rattle, before lifting Debbie out of her pen. She sat back down at the kitchen table, gently bouncing baby Debbie on her knees. The child pointed her skull-rattle at Mrs. Vincent, and hissed.

"And for Heaven's sake, get rid of that obscene rattle! A child's toy must have some educational merit, some intellectually-stimulating worth, and that thing is just . . ." Mrs. Vincent looked as if she had something nasty in her mouth, and had no place to spit. "Well, I have business to attend to, so I shall be going." As Mrs. Vincent rose from the kitchen table, she reached over to pat Baby Debbie on the top of her head, then thought better of it when the child made eye contact. "Good luck with your daughter," she sniffed. Mrs. Vincent saw herself out.

Swish, thump. Dad opened one eye and listed. Was that the doggie door? Did he dream that sound? He rolled over and looked at his wife. She was sleeping soundly, or pretending to. He rose up on one elbow and cocked an ear.

Silence. He must've imagined it.

Under the light of a full moon on a clear night, the old trees in the backyard swayed ever so gently in the warm breeze, causing the dappled shadows below to shiver and dance. Through these undulating shadows, a small figure in pink pajamas navigated her way across the lawn, quick as a weasel. The little creature made no sound, save for the soft rattle of her favorite toy, clutched in her tiny fist. She found the loose slat in the wooden fence abutting Mrs. Vincent's back yard, and pushed through.

As the clock on Mrs. Vincent's fireplace mantle struck midnight, the creature wiggled through the doggie door into her kitchen. Like her renters next door, Mrs. Vincent had a dog long ago, and once that dog ran off, she never got around to sealing up the pet door.

The little thing scuttled across the kitchen, then moved down the hallway toward Mrs. Vincent's bedroom. The rattlesnake's tail trembled with anticipation, and its warning noise grew louder the closer it came. Of course it was a rattlesnake, Mrs. Vincent decided in her dream; just like the one she'd stumbled across as a girl in the wash behind her house. Luckily, she'd heard the warning rattle, and was spry enough to jump away before it could strike. In the intervening years, that rattlesnake occasionally came to visit, always intruding into her dreams, always bringing bad luck. Tonight, the snake slithered up the old woman's bed and straddled her chest like a nightmare. It shook its tail furiously, a harbinger of certain death—so close to Mrs. Vincent's ear that she, half asleep, pleaded for it to stop. In reply, it giggled and put one chubby little hand over Mrs. Vincent's mouth. She opened her eyes in time to see Debbie clenching the death's head rattle between her tiny teeth. With unnatural strength, the child bit the rattle's handle in half. Now clutching the sharp, jagged stick, Debbie slit the old woman's throat. Gleefully.

About the Author:

With an MA in English Literature from SMU, Hillary Lyon founded and for 20 years served as senior editor for the independent poetry publisher, Subsynchronous Press. Her speculative, horror, and sci-fi stories have appeared in numerous print and online publications. She's also an illustrator for horror/sci-fi, and pulp fiction sites. And she loves to hand-paint furniture and accessories.

Website: Hillary Lyon





You'll Never Walk Alone | Alex Woolf

Every morning, Jim would walk to the well on Lonely Hill to fetch water. For many years, Maeve, who lived in the neighbouring cottage, would accompany him on these walks, until the cancer took her. He missed her company. She hadn't exactly been a talker, but he liked the way her mind worked, and their conversations had always left him feeling refreshed and ready to face the day.

One morning, as Jim was setting out on his daily walk, bucket in hand, he heard someone call out. It was Hank, Maeve's nephew, and the new owner of her cottage. "We can't have you doing this walk alone every morning, Jimmy boy," said Hank. "Let me join you." So Jim waited for Hank to fetch his bucket and then the two of them set off together.

Unlike his aunt, Hank was a talker. With Maeve, Jim had had to draw the conversation out, like water from a well, and it always tasted sweet and refreshing. Hank was more like a babbling brook. He never stopped. And the water of his conversation leached from a toxic soil, for Hank was a gossip. Unlike Jim, Hank was the owner of a telephone, and he had a friend in the village who would pass on all the latest rumours.

That was how Jim came to hear about Mrs. Warrener, who allegedly used black magic to cure her arthritis; and Mr. Rooney, the schoolteacher, who was apparently having an affair with one of his students; and young Tommy Townsend, who had, they said, lost all his inheritance on the horses.

Jim didn't care to know about any of this. He had always gotten along fine with the folk in the village on his occasional visits there, and he didn't wish to clutter his mind with the details of their lives, sordid or otherwise. Moreover, he hated the way the handle of Hank's pail squeaked as he walked beside him—Maeve had always kept the hinges of her bucket well oiled. He hated even more the way Hank liked to put a hand on his shoulder on the final leg of their journey home. "Wait up a moment, Jimmy Boy," he'd pant, exhausted. Then the hand would grip his shoulder, and he'd have to support both Hank and his own water-filled bucket on those long final yards.

Eventually, Jim had had enough. He thanked Hank for his company but said he'd rather fetch his water on his own in future. Hank's reaction surprised him: he simply refused. "We have to do this together, Jimmy boy. It's not healthy for either of us to spend so much time without company. Rest assured my friend, so long as I am alive and fit, you'll never do this walk alone."

And so the walks continued, and Jim suffered Hank's scandalous tittle-tattle and his squeaky bucket and his "Jimmy boys", and the hand on the shoulder that always left a greasy sweat stain on his shirt.

Then disaster struck. After a long spell without rain, the well on Lonely Hill dried up, and they were forced to use the one in the village. As a consequence, the walks became twice as long, and doubly painful for Jim. Although calm and peaceable by temperament, Jim had his limits, and he feared he had reached them. I'm going to snap one of these days, he thought to himself. I don't know when, or what I'll do, but it's going to happen soon.

It happened on a Thursday.

It had become their habit each day, as they trudged over Lonely Hill on their way to the village, to stop at the old well and toss a stone into it and listen out for a splash. When none came, Hank would make some crude remark, like "It's as dry as Mrs. Warrener's snatch," and then he'd laugh until it seemed he might burst.

On this particular Thursday, as Hank was leaning over the well about to drop in his stone, Jim ran up behind him and pushed him in. He watched his body plummet, and heard a scream echo up the shaft, followed by the sound of something heavy slapping into wet mud. There was a pause, and then the screaming continued, only fainter and weaker.

Jim continued on his way and fetched his water from the village. No one he saw there asked him where Hank was. On his return journey over Lonely Hill, he stopped to listen at the well. He couldn't hear any more screams, but he thought he could hear whimpers. The following morning, when he passed the well, it was silent. Jim breathed a heavy sigh.

While he was filling up his bucket in the village that day, Chad strolled over. Chad was Hank's friend, and the source of all his gossip. "Hey there, Jim," said Chad, seating himself on the well's circular stone wall and fanning himself with his hat, for the day was already warm. "You haven't seen Hank around, have you? He's not answering his phone."

Jim, who had been expecting this, responded without hesitation: "Hank's gone. Packed his bags yesterday and left for the city. I think the quiet finally got to him." Chad nodded and continued to fan himself. "Is that so? Funny, he never called to say goodbye." Jim said nothing, just continued filling his bucket. "Ah well," said Chad after a while, "I guess that's that then." Then he got to his feet and wandered away.

From this point on, Jim felt a new lease of life as he set out each morning to fetch his water. Not since Maeve had been alive did he experience such a deep pleasure at the prospect of these daily excursions. Hank was finally gone, and Jim could now walk alone, with nothing for company but his own thoughts.

One morning, about a month after the events just described, Jim was crossing Lonely Hill when he heard a squeaking sound by his elbow. He spun around, but saw no one there, only the old dry well. The wind, thought Jim, must have twisted the handle and made that sound. He resumed his journey. A few minutes later, he heard the squeak again. It sounded, though he was unwilling to admit it, as if someone was walking beside him with a badly oiled bucket. Jim looked around to see what might have caused the noise, but saw nothing except fields and a few trees. He blamed it on the wind, the birds and the crickets, though he knew in his heart that none of those things ever made such a sound.

On his return journey, passing by the old well, Jim heard the squeak again. This time he didn't turn to discover the cause, but quickened his pace towards home. As he hurried along the path, the wind blew in his ears, whispering words that sounded to him somewhat like *never* and *walk* and *alone*. Fear drained the moisture from his mouth. He pictured Hank dropping a stone into the well and turning to him and saying "Dry as your throat, Jimmy boy!" and then laughing until it seemed he might burst.

Jim began to run, which was hard with the heavy bucket banging against his leg. "Let me get home," he cried. "Just let me get home!" But before he could reach his cottage, he heard a dreadful panting by his neck, and a wheezing voice: "Wait up a moment, Jimmy boy." Then something pressed down hard on his shoulder. It felt like a hand.

About the Author:

Alex Woolf is a professional author of fiction and non-fiction. He has recently won Fiction Express awards for two of his stories and was shortlisted for the RED Book Award for his horror novel *Soul Shadows*. Alex loves the Rogers and Hammerstein classic 'You'll Never Walk Alone', but finds the title a bit creepy. Hence this story.

Website: Alex Woolf
Twitter: @RealAlexWoolf

Unfunny | DJ Tyrer

Nobody likes clowns, no matter how hard the circus posters try to make them seem funny. A band of psychopaths performing to a soundtrack of forced laughter.

Those who sit with stony faces through the evening's entertainment find they have a special show waiting for them after they get home.

Tied to their seats, gagged, they couldn't laugh if they wanted to. But, laughter isn't the aim, rather muffled screams of horror and pain.

The performance concludes with each audience member receiving a wide, bloody smile of their own. The clowns are laughing when they leave in their tiny car.

About the Author:

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

Facebook: DJ Tyrer
Twitter: @DJTyrer



Regrets Legacy | Gregory L. Steighner

"I'm not staying in this fascist state!" Sarah yelled as her step-father chased her up the stairs.

She slammed the door as his thunderous footsteps reached the top of the landing. The door vibrated from his verbal and physical assault, "You can stay in there all night. Forget about seeing your friends."

The several clicks of the lock reassured Sarah that Paul trapped her once again in her room. Sarah never understood why her mom remarried this jerk. Somehow, she'd reunite with Dad. Grabbing her backpack, she'd stuffed it with everything she would need to make her way to San Francisco.

It seemed that Paul hated everything about her. The way she wore her long brown hair, the assortment of tie-dyed pleasant blouses and bell-bottoms, and especially her friends living on the fringe. What truly drove him insane was her relationship with her Dad. Despite being separated by thousands of miles, they remained close via social media. Things worsened last year on her so-called sweet sixteen when Paul discovered that her father created a sizeable trust fund in her name.

Paul wanted more than the child support check.

She flipped open her wallet filled with almost four hundred dollars saved in secret. It was more than enough to buy a bus ticket to San Francisco, but she needed to go a different path. The moment they discovered she fled, every cell phone in the region would receive her amber alert. Sarah planned it carefully.

The great escape occurred just after one in the morning when Sarah climbed down the massive oak tree beside her window. Paul kept threatening to cut it down, but fortunately, his cheapness and laziness worked in her favor. She dropped to the ground, crouching low for a moment to ensure that no one saw her. The full moon drifted above the orange haze of street lights adding its light. She jumped the first hurdle, reaching the second undetected and on time with the next.

Walking the six blocks felt like trudging through the darkest jungle, surrounded by predators lurking, and ready to drag Sarah back. The empty public park had what she needed, an open yet disgusting restroom. She endured the foul smells as she rummaged through the backpack for the plastic bags, hair dye, and scissors. Carefully she spread first white one over the sink, then picking up the scissors she leaned forward and started cutting.

Her newly ragged blonde hair was still wet when her ride arrived. Sarah checked the time on her watch. Three o'clock, a black van pulled into the parking lot to stop in front of her. The driver's window slid down, revealing a rustic looking man smoking a cigarette.

With a harsh once over with his dark eyes, he spoke gruffly, "Get in."

Sarah darted around the front, getting into the vehicle's side door. She sat in the seat, securing the black trash bag under her feet. "The name is Kyla."

"Whatever." He said, driving with his eyes focused ahead.

After a short trip, they arrived at an old abandoned warehouse, pulling into one of the garages. Barely a moment after parking, the driver got out, waving Sarah to follow. With her backpack and the garbage bag, she followed him into the building towards voices.

Sarah felt she should be afraid as a young girl alone in a dark building at night, but knowing that she was on the right path eased some of those feelings. Whatever happens, she will get through to her father.

They rounded a corner, entering the furnace room. The furnace with all the connecting pipes and gadgets looked like a twisted bloated dragon. The driver joined with the other men, some sitting on chairs and sofas while the rest stood around leering at her.

Out of a side room, an old supervisor's office, came John who fixed her up. Dressed in a tight high collar shirt with pleated pants entirely in black. He called the look, Beatnik, whatever that was. "You made the commitment."

"Can we do this? I don't have time...."

He gave a slight nod forward, like a teacher scolding his students. Pointing to the office, "Get in there and take off all your clothes."

She hesitated; although Sarah understood that doing certain things might be required. Before she could protest, he asked, "Your hair trimmings are in the bag?"

"Yes." Sarah nodded.

"Good, put your clothes in there. Go now."

Sarah dashed into the office. It reeked of rotten wood; a single overhead light over the desk revealed a desk with clothing presented neatly folded piles on it. One pile was different; it was a complete outfit with a note reading, 'PUT ON NOW!'

She did everything as instructed. The outfit encompassed a red jersey for the New York College of Albany and a black skirt. Stuffing everything into the black bag with the white one holding her hair, Sarah took a moment before rejoining John and his friends.

"The bag." He ordered with the flick of his fingers. She handed it off which John gave to one of the guys, "Toss this in the furnace."

After the guy left, John reached into his pocket and removed a shiny black smartphone. "This is untraceable unless you log in someplace as you."

She understood the police could track her call and where she logged into public servers. "So, who will I be?"

"Come on." He guided her to another room. A cleaned white room with a desk with a camera mounted on it. Directly in front was a chair with a white background. John pointed at that one for her to sit as he went behind the desk. "Okay, give me a snarky smile."

As Sarah did eke out a smile as the camera flashed several times. After a few minutes, the printer produced two plastic cards, a driver's license, and a college id for Kyla Anderson. Finished he snatched up the backpack and walked her through the halls back to the loading area. A black and white RV waited with a craggy old man sitting on the stoop of the side door. John gave her the backpack, "This is Howard. He will get you to San Francisco."

"Thank you." She said.

"You're lucky I have a soft spot for people like you." John said, adding, "Hope this works out to your advantage."

She glanced over at the man, looking like the wild grandfather that no one in the family wants to be around. He groaned standing up, "You can get some sleep on the bed. If you read a book, put it back. Do that, we won't have a problem."

"Yes sir," Sarah answered climbing in behind him.

She settled in, lying on the surprisingly comfortable mini-bed. The RV lunged forward, causing one of the books to fall off a shelf and onto the floor. The lack of a cover title intrigued her. She picked it up off the floor, her fingers feeling the rough leather cover with a slight creaking as it opened to the first page.

There was one sentence in old type, reading, 'Let it be known, once touched by the Weird, forever be bound by it.'

Sarah flipped to the next page. "Cool."

"I don't believe it," Sarah whispered.

"What?" Howard asked, adjusting his sunglasses.

Sarah didn't realize she spoke aloud. "In the past eight days, I've seen cities, forests, rivers, deserts, and mountains."

"Well, I doubt you have been far from home."

She didn't understand Howard, but she did trust him. He never moved against her, did anything pervy, or even raised his voice at her. Twice he went out of his way to take her someplace that interested her. Yesterday they visited the Navajo nation, setting him back one day.

"Yes, but it's more than that. I can't explain it. Things are just different."

"Did you read the red book with the gold lettering?" He asked.

"Yes." Many of his books didn't have titles, but subject lines. That peculiar volume explored the mind's nature. She quoted. "When the awakening mind of the adept is in a state of contradiction between wonder and confusion as the splendors of reality open up, impressing both horror and delight on it, only thru time and experience can it gasp the truth. So, you think I'm waking up to another reality?"

"Maybe it's simply that you are having fun."

Sarah smiled, but it was an uncertain one. Although she did enjoy this road trip, the reason she fled still anchored from home. When she reached Dad this would change.

"Why didn't you go to the authorities?" The bluntness of his words stung.

Sarah squeezed tight, "I thought... John promised not to tell."

He gave a stern smile, "Never assume anything, especially among criminals. Besides, I know more than you think. So, I've answered your questions for the last eight days, you owe me this one."

Did he turn on her? Was it something else? Could he actually care about her? Maybe it didn't matter, she owed him. "Paul is the son of a distinguished judge and a prominent professor slash activist. His family had the right connections, knew the right people, and they enjoyed unpleasant things. Mom knew about it, but she relished moving in those circles. I had to get out."

Howard glanced at her for a second, "There is a truck stop ahead with surprisingly good food. We'll grab a bite there."

Sarah looked out at the passing Arizona landscape. A few miles ago they were in the desert flats, now they were in forested mountains. "I want to text Dad. Tell him everything is okay."

"The police will be able to ping that."

"I thought this phone had a VPN?" Sarah said holding the phone up.

"Yes. But it still has to go through a local cell tower or router. They will know your location within a hundred miles. Every law enforcement officer in the state will be looking for you and I'm pretty sure they will guess where you are going."

It sounded right, even it wasn't why risk it? Stay low until she was in San Francisco to contact Dad.

A half of an hour later, they pulled into a truck stop which was an understatement. Sarah at first thought it was a mall, but there were gas stations, service garages, and hotels built into the main building.

"We'll get cleaned up, get dinner," Howard said getting out of the driver's seat. "Oh, we should use the laundromat?"

After putting a change of clothes in her backpack, Howard carried a bag of week-old clothing into the trucker's mall.

Sarah enjoyed a long hot shower. The RV shower allowed only two minutes of cold running water. Doing a wash would be such an improvement. As she waited for the dryer to finish, Sarah took advantage of the WI-FI to go online. Searching for her name and town, she wondered what had occurred.

The headline shocked her. With trembling fingers and shortness of breath, she touched it. "Oh, god."

Howard returned with dinner, but asked, "Sarah?"

Sobbing she hugged him, "They killed my father."

"It's my fault."

The fire's orange glow pushed back the darkness, illuminating Howard's face, "You aren't responsible for the actions of others."

"If I didn't run away, Dad wouldn't have confronted Paul. The gunfight never would have happened, Paul and Mom would be alive, and the police wouldn't have shot Dad. Every action has a consequence, a reaction that reverberates to each point of creation."

"You read that book?" There was a certain amount of pride in his voice.

Sarah grimly nodded, "They were interesting. I wish they were true. Do you believe in what's in them?"

He leaned towards the fire "Go into the RV go to the closet, onen the third drawer, and remove the cand

He leaned towards the fire. "Go into the RV, go to the closet, open the third drawer, and remove the candles and the red jar."

Unsure what he was up to, Sarah did as instructed. She found the items and brought them to Howard. He said, "Take six steps from the fire, stop, then turn to your right to slowly pour the salt from the container out in a circle. Then when you get to the place you started, place the black candle on the ground, then clockwise place the red, green, white, blue and yellow candles."

As she performed the task, Sarah wondered what he was doing. She did know from the books that this was a magical circle. When finished she rejoined him at the fire.

"Take this to light the black candle." He pulled a flaming twig out to hand her. "The choice is yours."

Curious, Sarah returned to the black candle. It was her choice to light it or not, to go in one direction or another, to follow Howard or leave him. She pressed the flame against the wick. It burst into flame like a sparker, igniting the salt and the other candles. She ran back to Howard.

"I feel weird." Sarah dropped to her knees. She saw the world break apart, fracture into openness. The curtain lifted and she peered into the beyond.

"Fall and fly, Sarah. Savor the experience of the first time passing beyond the threshold." Howard's voice latched on her.

"I'm falling."

"I'll catch you."

She didn't know how, but he kept this word. Sarah felt safe.

The cold desert brought Sarah out of sleep. She sat up, reliving the thousand dreams and nightmares she experienced. Fragments of images, thoughts, and feelings just waiting for her return. Sarah watched the sunrise, she perceived it in another way.

"How do you feel Sarah?" Howard offered her water.

She quenched the dryness in her throat, "Why me?"

"Why not? You're smart, young, and without a place to go. I'm much older than you think. I need a student to pass on what I know. An apprentice of this time of science and technology. It's yours if you want it."

Sarah stood up, thinking about all that happened to her. Her dad was gone. There was no close family. Her friends would move on. She touched the beyond, becoming part of it, and that can't change. "Do I have to call you Master?"

"No, I don't like such formalities. Go in the RV, we'll leave soon."

"Where are we going?" She asked.

"To show what is, to learn what is out there, and once we are done, return to my home to complete your learning."

Sarah smiled, "Yes sir."

Howard found the process distasteful, but harshly necessary. The years searching for the right one brought Sarah to his attention. The subtle direction of fate to bring her here pained him. Sarah's suffering would harden her for the work ahead. Maybe one day before he dies, he would explain this to Sarah. Hopefully, she would forgive him before she had to kill him.

About the Author:

Gregory L. Steighner is a passionate writer and photographer drawing inspiration from the world and people of Western PA for stories. He resides with his wife Nikki, mother-in-law, and three energetic cats.

Facebook: <u>Gregory L. Steighner</u> Instagram: @dino1954godzilla2020

Moon Rise | Maggie D Brace

With first moon rise, smaller creatures surfaced, struggling to fill their gullets in the cool, burgeoning darkness. With only an hour before the true hunters lumbered out at second moon rise, timing was essential.

Stumbling from stupefying dreams, Jonas emerged from his makeshift shelter erected from the debris of his craft. He hunted the horizon for edible game.

A fuzzy creature resembling a rabbit lopped toward him hesitantly, with large, dewy brown eyes. Jonas hefted the metal strut and brought it down fast. The gaping maw of the Thunderlep was faster still. Razor sharp canines incised him throat to torso.

About the Author:

Maggie D Brace, a life-long denizen of Maryland, teacher, gardener, basketball player and author attended St. Mary's College, where she met her soulmate, and Loyola University, Maryland. She has written '*Tis Himself: The Tale of Finn MacCool* and *Grammy's Glasses*, and has multiple short works and poems in various anthologies. She remains a humble scrivener and avid reader.

Facebook: Maggie D Brace
Twitter: @MaggieDBrace

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Afraid of the Dark | Patrick J. Wynn

Katy was scared but she knew not to cry out. If she cried out for Mommy and Daddy the monster would know just where she was, her best friend Tommy Tompkins told her so at recess. After Daddy had read their nightly bedtime story, he'd kissed her goodnight and flipped off the light and turned to go across the hall to the bedroom he shared with Mommy.

"DADDY, NIGHTLIGHT" Katy spit out quickly before her daddy could clear the door.

"Sorry honey" Daddy smiled and bent to flip on the princess nightlight.

"HALL LIGHT?" Katy asked hopefully.

"Not tonight baby" Daddy shrugged. "You'll be fine, and we are right across the hall" He smiled and turned for his bedroom.

Daddy flipped off the hall light and when he closed his bedroom door darkness fell like a deep shroud except for the small glow from the princess stuck in the wall socket. Katy slid down and pulled the covers up under her eyes. With the blanket pulled up her small green eyes swiveled back and forth as she tried to gaze into the deep shadows around her room. The small princess nightlight only gave enough light to illuminate the dresser. The corners of her room were dark and shifting, her closet door just a rectangular shape across from her bed. As Katy shifted her eyes toward her toy box under the window the small princess light flickered and went out. A small yelp escaped her lips, but she bit it back as the room went black. She knew if she made a sound the monsters would know where to get her. Pulling the covers up over her head she decided to hide until daylight came, but the sound of the closet door sliding open made her peek out. A dark shape slowly slid from out of the now open closet door, it stopped and stood completely still in the darkness. Katy knew it was there because it was darker than the surrounding shadows. After what seemed an eternity Katy watched as the shape began to move again. It slouched down and slowly moved toward Katy's bed. The monster's claws clacked on the hardwood floor of Katy's bedroom as it approached the bed and as it moved up next to the bed Katy could see its deep red eyes as it leaned over her. The monster's breath washed over her in hot waves, and she gagged with the rotten smell. Katy stayed perfectly still as the monster reached out and let its long finger fall on the blanket. A small sob escaped Katy's lips as the blanket began to slip down. She tried her best to hold tight, but the blanket ripped from her grip and as it cleared her eyes, she found herself staring into the face of horror. It leaned down breathing in short quick breaths that smelled of death. The eyes glowed deep red and were set over a small pointy nose. The nose flared out over a mouth set with long yellow teeth that smiled down and dripped drool onto Katy's chest. Katy opened her mouth to scream but the monster quickly covered her mouth with his hand and put a finger up to his lips and made a shushing sound, he then leaned down further until his nose touched Katy's.

"Don't make a sound." The monster whispered.

The monster pulled the covers further down and sat next to Katy, the bed sagged under the monster's weight as it lay down next to her.

"Can I sleep here? I am afraid of the dark. And remember don't make a sound. If you make a sound they'll know where you are. Tommy Tompkins was right, and they got him." The monster whined as he pulled the covers up just so his deep-red eyes peeked out.

About the Author:

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



Camp Blood | Danny Nicholas

"That is not dead which can eternal lie, and with strange aeons even death may die." -H.P. Lovecraft

Abby was going to have her first kiss in a summer camp restroom. She'd rather it happen on a Brahma beach. But, beggars couldn't be choosers.

Actually, it was worse than any ordinary **john**, since, this restroom happened to be haunted by a vengeful spirit. What quickened Abby's pulse wasn't the likelihood of seeing a ghost. It was the boy she invited. Abby never had a boyfriend before. She was terrified of losing Randy. Which made her do silly things, like: inviting your boyfriend to make out with you next to a toilet.

Abby gave the lavatory an appraising glance. Sparse overhanging lightbulbs funneled tiny pools of glow every five feet or so. Abby couldn't see in the corners. It was a fair bet that was where the ghost would appear.

"Her face is mummified," Marcy told Abby last night, when the girls in **Owl** cabin decided to trade spooky stories. "Skin dry and papery thin, lips eaten away, and nose completely gone."

"She wears a bloody jersey," Rose took over. "Torn gym shorts with her name embroidered on the hem: Emily Harvey."

"What happened to her?" Abby asked the girls. The moonlight fanning from the window made her cabin-mates appear to be ghosts themselves.

"Suicide," Rose said. "She was in love with someone who didn't love her back."

"With who?" Abby asked. "This is an all-girls camp."

The back of the cabin giggled. Abby blushed. She was embarrassed for not considering the obvious and felt naïve for going with conventional ideals.

"So, she committed suicide in the restroom?" Abby asked Marcy.

"Her lover wrote her a letter saying to meet her there at midnight. When no one showed up, Emily was heartbroken."

"I'm not sure how you could kill yourself in there? Did she hang herself?"

The girls giggled again.

"She drowned herself," Marcy said.

"How? Where did she find the water?"

"Inside the toilet." Marcy's smirked. "Emily dunked her face in, took a lungful of toilet water, and kept drinking." "Liars! All of you!" Abby said. "You can't kill yourself that way."

"If you're that committed, you could!" Rose shouted.

"When they fished her head out of the toilet the following morning, she was all pruney." Marcy deepened her voice. "All the blood from her body drained into the plumbing and mixed into the camp's septic system. For months after Emily's death, whenever anyone flushed a toilet around camp, the water refilling the bowl would come back bloody."

"That's why Camp Wekeelya is known as Camp Blood," Rose said.

Rubbish, Abby thought, settling inside a toilet stall. Spook story nonsense. Abby knew of another Summer Camp nicknamed Camp Blood in New Jersey. Camp Bloods were as common as Macdonald's.

Dammit, where was he?

She text messaged Randy yesterday, yet never received any response. *Did he lose interest in me already*? Abby worried. What would be her options then? That creepy fat kid who lived across the street from her house? Abby shivered. *A future with that boy, I'd rather drown myself in the toilet*.

No, she had faith. Randy was at Camp Kadath, seven miles away. On bike, he'd be here in an hour. Abby wondered if her creepy neighbor was at the Fat Camp closer by, and she shivered again.

Abby intended to turn trash-talk into an opportunity. Marcy dared her to spend next midnight in the accursed restroom. Abby thought she could profit from it by twisting it into a romantic evening. Sitting alone inside a stinky toilet stall, it seemed Abby's expectations were dashed.

Outside, floorboards creaked. Someone was coming in.

Abby closed the stall door, hid inside. She was going to scary the be-jesus out of Randy.

She saw a shadow of feet at the door. More shadows snuck in, six pairs of feet in total.

Abby reached for the door. It wouldn't burgle.

The laugher encircled the stall.

Abby didn't know what spilled over her. When she peeked at her hands, she saw the red. *They drenched me in blood*! Abby thought.

The chanting began: BLOOD! BLOOD! BLOOD!

Abby heard the laughing voices of Marcy and the entire crew of *Owl* Cabin.

BLOOD! BLOOD! BLOOD!

They fled. The only sound was the dripping of water.

Abby pushed open the door, stumbled to a faucet, and saw the bloody mess she was in the mirror.

She realized it wasn't blood, only acrylic paint. Still, Abby didn't feel any less queasy. She washed the red out of her eyes.

The gurgling sound startled her. Bloodshot water lingered above the drain before being shallowed. A single string of hair lay at the bottom of the faucet.

It wasn't Abby's blonde hair. This hair was red.

Abby tweezed at the strand, reeling it in. The hair rooted itself deep in mouth of the drain.

"Those are some rotten girls," said the drain.

Abby leapt away as if the faucet sprouted flames. Fire, at least Abby could handle. Disembody voices on the other hand, there were no extinguishers for that.

"Hello?" Abby called out, creeping back to look into the drainpipe.

"You wanna play a mean trick back on them?" the voice asked.

"Yes."

"Even that boyfriend of yours?"

"All of them."

"Groovy," said the drain.

Licks of hair scrambled out of the plumbing like unfurling spider-legs. Emily Harvey rose, and she was uglier than the storied said she'd be. The corpse presented her hand at Abby as if to be kissed.

"Unfortunately, I don't have much of a body to do anything with. But with your offering, we can make this happen. It's going to taste gross at first Abby, but you must drink," Emily said. "Then, we'll make them pay, the girls first, then Randy, and then maybe that fat boy and your rotten parents, too?"

Her lips touched the green, skeletal hand. Abby drank, filling her lungs, drowning herself in vengeance. When her thirst was quenched, Abby wasn't all herself anymore.

She walked back into **Owl** cabin, the girls still laughing at her. When she only answered to the name **Emily**, the laughing stopped, and Abby was the only one giggling.

When the sun rose on Camp Wekeelya and the toilets began to flush, the water came back bloody.

About the Author:

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

Facebook: <u>Danny Nicholas</u>
Twitter: <u>@DannyNicholas</u> j





The Last Train | Yvonne Lang

Snow was falling heavily. A thick, relentless flurry was suffocating everything in its path. Brian groaned; the weather forecast had said with confidence snow would begin to fall at around 8-9pm. Yet here it was, blanketing everything the eye could see just after 5pm. How could they get it wrong so regularly? Too full of their own importance and posh education to possess any competence. Brian grumbled as he dug around in his coat pockets for his gloves. The world was full of know it alls who had no justification for such self-belief. It would be a better place if the lot of them were shipped off and left the honest grafters like him to get on with it.

Brian smiled at this thought. He wasn't even sure he'd describe himself as an honest grafter. Still, he'd always made his own way in life and was about to finally be able to retire in his 50's, a rich man. He'd earned it. Not necessarily legally, certainly not morally. Yet he'd busted his balls and the settlement from the company was on its way to his bank account, with a considerable number of zeros on it. Nice guys finish last. Amazing what a combination of spying, blackmailing, fraudulent suits and a little light embezzlement could achieve. He'd be able to move to a nicer area, not be surrounded by scum and no longer have to sleep with a baseball bat. He was a success story. Later on in life than he would have liked, but he'd done it.

The smile was wiped off his face as he saw the board listing all the departing trains click over to 'cancelled' for every train. Nothing in this country worked! A few minutes of snow and everything ground to a stop. No one would get in trouble for it either. His last day at work and the journey home was going to take forever.

Brian stamped his feet to try and stave off the cold that was forming a vise for his toes. He wouldn't have to wear these fancy shoes ever again at least. Maybe if he went to a funeral. Then again, Brian couldn't think of a single person he liked enough to bother to go to their funeral, so maybe he should just bin them when he got home. Maybe he'd get rid of most of his belongings and start again in a new country with expensive things. Somewhere hot where people worked hard because the thick and lazy were left to starve.

He'd think through his options later, right now he had to figure out a way to get home and not catch pneumonia. Brian went to join an insanely long queue for coffee. It would be extortionately priced he knew. Even if he was about to be rich, he didn't like to be ripped off. Still, Network Rail may have got their arse in gear by the time he purchased his coffee and figured out how to transport people. He also wanted to get rid of the still lingering, awful taste of his earlier coffee. It had been diabolical. One of the secretaries had made it during his meeting with the top men. She had served him specially and he was convinced she had spit in it. He'd had run ins with her before, and she'd held a grudge even after her stupid allegations against him were dismissed. No wonder she was only a secretary. No man, no kids and not even the excuse of sacrificing it for a career. She was obviously bitter with her pathetic life. Brian was glad he would never have to lay eyes on her resentful face again.

Brian took the warm cup of coffee in its paper cup, waved away the spiel of extras the harassed staff member recited and bit back some choice words about the price of the damn drink. As he was fiddling with the lid, some idiot bumped into him

"Hey!" Brian angrily shouted after the man jogging away from him.

The guy didn't turn round, simply offering a middle finger over his shoulder as a response. Who ran on snow? Brian hoped there was some ice on one of the platforms.

"Where's he bloody running to when everything's at a standstill anyway?" Brian grumbled.

"One line's still running. Got an old diesel leaving from platform six and heading towards Godlington."

Brian jolted at the unexpected voice. He turned to see the owner of the gravelly voice and was confronted by a very tall man with wide shoulders draped in a black trench coat. He had a wide brimmed hat in a matching colour pulled down so low his eyes were concealed by shadow – an abyss of darkness surrounded by glorious, glittering white. A large, hooked nose protruded and he absolutely stank of smoke. He must be a chain smoker judging by the odour that emanated from him. Sure enough, Brian could see the red glow of a lit cigarette that wobbled slightly as the man spoke.

"Did you say a train is leaving?" Brian checked with the shadowy figure.

"Yeah, 5:35 to Godlington is still running from platform six."

It would take him quite close to home. Walking distance on a fine day. Hopefully taxis would still be running. It was a lot better than being stuck here.

"I wonder if there's any room left on it?" Brian checked his watch and looked around to gather his bearings and find platform six.

"There'll be plenty of space for you Brian," the gravelly voice man assured him, "The incompetents in charge of this place haven't announced it!" He laughed, amused by such idiocy.

Brian took off at a brisk pace, careful not to jostle his coffee as he followed the path the swearing man had taken moments before. He jumped on board mere seconds before the doors hissed shut. It was only as he was sitting on a battered seat with faded fabric that he realised the stranger had used his name.

He didn't have much time to ponder it though as the train let out an almighty shriek of protest and juddered out of the station. The train sounded old. It looked old. It smelled old. It reeked of old, stale cigarettes and Brian couldn't even remember how long ago smoking had been banned on public transport. Why wheel out the ancient old relic when there were plenty of more modern, and presumably safer, trains sat idly at the station? Maybe they didn't make them like they used to. The train seemed to be waking up and remembering what was required of it, it was now clattering along at a frantic speed with all of the carriages swaying rhythmically.

The train was so old it had no computerized display announcing the next stop. Brian cupped his hand round his eyes to peer outside. All he could see was pitch black and blurred white. He could make out no landmarks let alone station names. Maybe he'd stick his head out in half an hour or so when the train stopped to try and get his bearings. He drank some more of his overpriced sludge like coffee. It wasn't shifting the awful taste of the coffee he had endured at the office.

At least it was warm on the train. Almost too warm, it was a shock to the system after the frigid air he had been stood in at the train station. Brian took off his coat and looked carefully at the stained seat next to him, deciding the marks were old and unlikely to rub off on his coat before daring to lay it down. He loosened his tie and took out his phone to pass the time — no signal, no network access. His phone may as well be switched off. He tucked it back into his pocket and looked round the dingey carriage.

Everything looked grimy and Brian had an urge to get home and have a bath in disinfectant. Chairs were scuffed, stained and torn. Illegible graffiti was daubed across the walls. The straps for holding luggage in place were broken, appeared to be slashed in fact. It was starting to get uncomfortably warm and the dirt speckled windows would not shift at all despite Brian's attempts. It was like they were sealed shut; the filth must have evolved to form some kind of glue. Brian sat down, with no fresh air to show for his efforts and feeling clammy from the exertion. He finished the last of his coffee. He looked round for a bin but couldn't see one. He stood up to look further and gave himself a few moments to adjust to the swaying of the train.

There was no one else in his carriage but through the doors Brian could see a scattering of men. As someone who dabbled in the odd illegal jaunt and who had grown up in an area so rough it made sandpaper seem like baby moisturizer, Brian had honed an ability to be able to read people. He was getting very bad vibes from everyone he could see. All men bar one woman—who was sat zoned out, possibly under the influence of drugs, rocking back and forth and muttering something Brian had no hope of hearing from so far away. One of the men appeared to have blood splattered on his shirt. He seemed more angry than afraid though as he was in a confrontation with a man who appeared to have tattooed every available inch of his skin with gory images depicting violence and hate. Sensing a very obvious outbreak of trouble Brian backed away. He would move a carriage further back and put some distance between himself and the trouble-makers. He grabbed his coat and yanked hard on the metal handle to move to the next carriage. The door slammed shut behind him and Brian found he was no longer alone in a carriage.

There was a man – blatantly rich from his posh suit and watch worth more than Brian's car, leaning forward onto his knees, crying. How pathetic. What news could be bad enough to justify such a weak public display? Brian had no intention of finding out. The man caused his own misery and he could solve it himself or call the Samaritans as far as Brian was concerned.

He went to side-step the man and move himself another carriage away from the thugs. Even if they moved, they would not pass up the opportunity to torment and/or mug this rich, snivelling mess. He was at least useful to Brian in that way. As he tried to pass, the man looked up, wet cheeks, red-rimmed eyes and an absolutely desperate look on his face.

"I felt bad for the theft. Surely the rope should prove my guilt, act as an apology enough? The ultimate sacrifice?" Brian had no intention of engaging with the man, but now the crying man's head was raised he could see he had a huge bruise round his entire neck— like a purple choker with a red raw border. He stepped back, disgusted and a bit disturbed. It was like day release from a prison had all been emptied onto this battered old train. It was cracking on at a fair pace though, he just had to hope they reached his stop before something kicked off and he got sucked into the chaos. He continued edging past the crying man who was staring at him expectantly. Brian wanted to run, but felt easing past slowly may be for the best. He didn't want to startle the man, who was so blatantly teetering on the edge. He didn't want to stare at a man who could snap any second, but he was struggling to pry his eyes away from the neck wound that looked like a nasty rope burn.

The man paid no attention to Brian's uncomfortable stare and simply looked back. Realizing Brian wasn't going to answer his question he proceeded with another one,

"So, how did you die?"

The man was completely deranged, or was it a poorly worded threat?

"Brian here is still playing catch up," a deep voice dead-panned behind him.

Brian jolted with surprise and dropped his coffee cup. It hit the stained floor, rolling a few inches before coming to stop against a wonky chair leg and oozed its last few dirty brown dregs.

Brian spun round to see a man in a guard's uniform was stood unnervingly close to him. He had the same overly smoky odour as the dark stranger who had directed him to this train. Brian was beginning to wish he had braved the cold and remained stranded with the other commuters. It was getting warmer on the train, like someone was cranking the

temperature up on an oven. Or was it just the thick, tense atmosphere was making the nearly empty carriage feel claustrophobic?

"How do you know my name?" Brian demanded, trying to glare at the ticket inspector.

He had never been a victim of bullying before, had always stood up for himself. He wasn't going to let a jumped-up jobsworth who stamped tickets for a living intimidate him. He couldn't make direct eye contact though. The bill of the cap was oversized and cast a shadow in the dim overhead lighting. The man was smiling though, a wide smile with thin lips that could barely contain his dazzlingly white, pointy teeth. The mouth was grinning away in a sinister fashion, dominating a too small face that tapered down to a pointed chin so sharp it could cut glass. Instead of answering Brian's question the man simply chuckled, an unnatural sound in carriages transporting people filled with such rage and pain. The guard tilted his head up to look at Brian, meeting his eyes with yellow tinged ones. Brian felt uncomfortable and couldn't fight the instinct to avert his gaze and look down. He lowered his eyes and saw the guard did not have feet, instead he had black, shiny, pointy hooves.

Brian gasped and started retreating, putting some distance between himself and whatever it was in the guard's uniform. Before he could formulate a plan the thing in front of him spoke, calmy, almost bemused. "Brian here still hasn't even realized that the coffee he drank earlier was poisoned. He doesn't even know he's dead, let alone realize that he is on his way to his final destination."

Brian was consumed with absolute terror as he turned to run away and jump off the train if need be. The broken bones would be worth it. Then he saw something outside other than the fuzzy white on black. The train was hurtling down into the very centre of a towering red inferno of clamouring flames that were waiting to welcome the train and its passengers.

Wish for Water | Yvonne Lang

The drought had dragged on for months. No grass was left, let alone any plants. I picked my way amongst the bodies of dead and dried-up birds and animals when I went to queue up for our government allocated daily water allowance. Rivers were trickles, or just parched land. It was as if Hell had come to Earth. People smelled a bit with all the sweating and the lack of bathing water. We had to save it to drink and to wash our hands for hygiene. Baths were a luxury we could not afford. I begged Gran for us to use her special book, we had all sorts of rhymes and methods for all manner of things. I was sure there was a rain incantation in there. She refused though. Last time we had helped the town out they had gleefully accepted the result, and then turned on us for our black magic and mysterious ways. Despite helping them they had turned violent on us, and now it was just Gran and I as Mum didn't make it through their wrath. I was desperate though. I missed water. Surely times had moved on and they would be grateful for the help? Gran would not be swayed. She was happy to suffer if it meant she could also watch those who took her daughter from her suffer.

One day I decided to take matters into my own hands. I dug out the book whilst Gran was asleep and rifled through until I found a spell for water. It seemed simple enough, merely reciting some words, scattering some herbs. I had never been taught how to use the book, but I knew I was on my own so I snuck down to the cellar and began to read aloud, confident I could figure it out and be the saviour of the town. The words did not make any sense to me but I took my time and pronounced them slowly and carefully. Nothing happened initially. All felt very still, I was sick with anticipation. Then I heard a steady dripping. Soon it became a gushing. The water was filling up the cellar. Outside was still bone dry and my house was getting flooded. I had done something wrong. I began to panic, wondering if I would be in more trouble if I tried to fix it myself or called for Gran. I retreated up the steps and watched open-mouthed as the cellar continued to form a lagoon. There was a dark spot in the centre. A swirling dark patch that suggested a current. I leaned forward to see what was happening. I had no time to react as a bony, withered hand shot out from the magic water and grabbed me. I struggled and floundered, but it was useless to resist as I was dragged down to the watery depths by whatever I had summoned.

About the Author:

Yvonne Lang is a librarian who works in children's publishing. Her work has featured in a range of publications, from Sugar Magazine to Your Cat Magazine, as well ranking highly in competitions throughout the UK. Her horror stories have been published in the *Short Sharp Shock Series* by Demain Publishing and are available on Amazon. She resides in Yorkshire, England with her partner and cat.

Website: Yvonne Lang

The Sorry Hitchhiker | Yvonne Lang

The fog had descended without warning. I could barely see a foot in front of me and was crawling along in my car. I was desperate to get away from this desolate place, but could not safely see the road. I was forced to inch along. Peering over the steering wheel and straining my eyes for a glimpse of precious tarmac. I think I was out of the woods now and around the moorland area. I also believed from the time on the clock that darkness had arrived – but all of this was supposition. I could see no landscapes, had no indication of the natural light – it was just swirling gray mist with parts of it clumped together like thick clouds you felt sure must be solid until the car breached them like a ship through waves. I didn't want to be here so late, there were terrible rumours of this place. I did not want to be out here alone and with poor visibility. Some young folk trekked here for the spectacular views, some came specifically to see if the tales of a haunting were true. If I had not had to attend a nearby house for an essential work visit, I could not be dragged here under normal circumstances.

Then a woman stepped out in front of me. Or maybe she was there all along but the fog only revealed her at the last second. I hit the brakes and came to an abrupt stop, thankfully almost immediately due to the snail's pace I had been travelling at. I rolled my window down and thin fingers of fog snaked their way into my vehicle. Odourless and opaque, they still managed to convey a sense of menace. Maybe it was my imagination.

"Are you OK?" I asked.

She looked pale, dressed in casual walking clothes instead of sturdy hiking gear. She had come out unprepared and the weather had taken her by surprise. She shook her head, her teeth chattering too much to speak.

"Would you like a lift into town?" I asked.

I would never normally collect a hitchhiker, but the young girl was about half of my weight, if that, and obviously posed no threat. I would have to be heartless to leave her out here at the mercy of the elements. She nodded, gratefully, tears of relief welling in her eyes. I waved her round and leaned over to unlock the passenger door. She climbed in thankfully and wrapped her arms around herself, trying to retain some warmth. I turned up the car's heaters and the sound of warm air blasting was all that could be heard momentarily.

"Are you OK?" I repeated.

"I'm sorry for the inconvenience," she replied, barely audible over the car heaters.

"Not to worry, glad I was here to help or you could have been trapped out here all night. Were you alone?" I asked, suddenly worried there was another person out there, lost in the fog.

"I won't make any mess, my boots are clean. I really am sorry."

It seemed a bizarre response. Maybe she had been in an abusive relationship and was nervous around men, always worried she was about to be blamed for something. I glanced over. Her feet didn't seem to be touching my car matt. She didn't have her feet in the air, but just seemed to be clenching ever so slightly so that her feet hovered a tiny bit above the mat.

"Don't worry about it. Mats' clean. Relax. It's slow progress with the fog, but maybe it will clear soon. Anyway, hopefully won't be long."

"It will clear soon. Sorry." She looked away.

This girl was weird. Maybe she had been without food, water and heat for a few hours and was losing her grip on reality. "How do you know it will clear soon and why are you sorry?" I asked.

"The fog is so he can hunt. It will be gone soon. I am so sorry. If I lure another three souls, he says he will let me go. I really want to go home."

Ice ran through my veins. This girl sounded dangerously deluded. Fog still swirled all around us and I could see nothing but her and a backdrop of shifting mist, as if it were alive. Then I saw another colour. I looked in my rear-view mirror and saw a huge hooded figure all in black taking up my backseat. He had whipped out his scythe before I had finished my scream.

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The Hatty Batty Eccentric

Hello, I am Sorry Snoppet, Understory to the Undersecretary of the Lefthand Assistant to Miz Lopez, as in Lori R. Lopez (the R stands for Reclusive). Miz Lopez is far too shy to write such an illuminating Feature about herself and has politely asked me to climb into her humongous Clown Shoes for the purpose of delivering an unofficial statement. Therefore I resign because I have already been tasked with juggling her Parlor Tricks, Redundancy Searches and Random Research, not to mention dusting a vast collection of Collectibles along with constant polishing of Spectacles (the dust and smudges never seem to end). I shall now take my leave . . .

Stamp, stamp, stamp.

Okay. Well. I guess I have to introduce myself.

That was all sheer nonsense, of course. Except the part about the R. Actually, I have an Alter Ego named Violet Dupree — a Famous Reclusive Hat Model who appears in a video on YouTube, at our Fairy Fly Entertainment Channel. We plan to do more with her. We have a lot of plans, my sons and I. Once we find the time to get to them all, it will be astounding! Seriously. I am only serious about two things, Horror and making plans.

Just kidding. Some of my Horror is actually quite amusing. (Some of it's dark, like the very best Chocolate.)

Anyway, you might say I tend to be a bit eccentric. Not always, just when the Moon is half-full or half-empty. When it's full I am perfectly ordinary. Exceptionally bland. Not at all quirky, bizarre, madcap. Scarcely offbeat. And when there is no Moon whatsoever, I vanish. If you call me, I won't answer. But that's usually the case because I don't carry or own a Smart Phone. I know it sounds incredible these days. How can I do anything without a phone? I assure you, I am not a complete Cavewoman. I have progressed to relying on a computer and am lost without electricity. Yet I will survive without the Internet for periods of time.

I take that back. I rely on the Internet to watch movies. And shows. And Cat Videos. Occasionally other types of videos. When I'm not busy trying to catch up. Wait, I am often trying to catch up. Maybe those Cat Videos are part of the problem. This *is* illuminating.

I hope we have learned something from my mistakes.

Moving on, what else can I divulge without giving too much away? I'm a painfully private person, you see. A Triple-P. Which is sort of like Triple-A with a different letter. On second thought, it isn't anything like Triple-A. It's like an Ostrich who is there but isn't there because her head is submerged in the sand. I guess.

Or perhaps not.

Whatever it is, this is me being me. Strange and peculiar.

I wasn't born this way. I think it was caused by a terribly unfortunate Industrial Accident. Possibly from a Lightning Strike. Or being spun too fast in a Tornado. Whether unnatural or natural, something happened and here I am, the awkward ruffled bird you see before you.

What do I do, exactly? I'm glad you asked. Poetry and Prose. Ballads including Protest Songs. Odd tales. Weird ramblings. I write many things, from short to long. And I draw — primarily art for my books.

I enjoy acting but not on a stage. That's too frightful. I taught myself guitar to write songs. I was a Drummer in Junior and Senior High School for five years. I don't drive or fly planes or jump out of planes or skip to the loo. I just walk . . . progressing from Baby Steps to Toddles to Penguin Waddles to impulsive Mad Dashes and Wild Leaps. I don't really like to run, but riding a bike is fun.



I'm very into Hats. And Horror, though not too gory. I may blend it with other genres in my work. I am also an Alice Fan. I belong to the Lewis Carroll Society Of North America (LCSNA). The Horror Writers Association (HWA). And the Science Fiction Fantasy Poetry Association (SFPA).

My sons and I are Vegans and Animal Activists. I became a Vegetarian at fifteen years of age. I care deeply about the rights of children too.

Speaking of my sons, they're pretty amazing, gifted and compassionate. Noél taught himself Computer Programming as a teen and competed at the International Science And Engineering Fair. He composes music and is our creative company's Tech Expert, Audio Engineer, and Nutrition Adviser. He's also an excellent artist. They both danced on stage as a Duo and in Mexican Ballet Folkloric Groups when they were small. Rafael is a talented published poet. He also writes Fantasy Tales and has developed an entire detailed world for an array of book projects. He taught himself Computer Graphics and Animation through Blender. His first animated character was the base for the creature in our *Chupacabras Jig* on YouTube. Noél composed the organ music. The lyrics are from one of my Novels. It's the first song the three of us put out into the world.

Since then, we formed a Folk Band called The Fairyflies to record original songs I wrote in the Eighties, Nineties and beyond, plus songs by Noél.

The books I've published vary: Poetry and Story Collections, Novels and Novellas, Children's Books. I like to create interesting characters in my writing and art. Mister Snark is one of my favorites. I have a sequel underway. And a Ghost Collection that's been in progress for several years, *Spooktacular Tales*. A handful of these tales need to be finished. There are Illustrations to wrap up for the Story Collection, Volume Three of a Poetry Series, and a Ghost Novella named *Leery Lane* (published in 2016). This is the year, fingers crossed. (I've said that before.)

There have been delays with these and other projects. Pausing to design Second Editions of existing Print Books (there are still a number to do). Revamping E-books. Redesigning our Website, Fairy Fly Entertainment. Adding Merchandise to Zazzle. Finally taking time for Music — daily Band Practice, recording — after years of waiting.

I'm generally in good spirits, but recurrent spells of Anxiety and Insomnia can slow me down.

I think 2020 threw a lot of us into a depressed state. To cope during the Pandemic, I have focused on Poetry. I'm building a new collection of verse, the fourth volume in my *Poetic Reflections* Series, which is based on a humorous column of the same name.

My writing style can be as varied as my drawing style. From absurd to poetic to gothic to classic to speculative; for a broad range of ages. My artwork over the past dozen years has become exclusively Digital. We don't have space at present. Perhaps one day I can return to painting.

I typically compile an abundant list of goals at the start of each year. It's a struggle to decide which to get done and which to leave on hold. The list can fluctuate based on mood and whim. I used to be more disciplined, less distracted. I don't believe I've experienced Writer's Block, but I do get into slumps where I'm unable to concentrate on or find time for Illustrations and Prose that require more attention, demand more hours in the day. I find it challenging to keep up with everything. Deadlines may stress me out. I'm an Introvert, which makes Social Media both a blessing and a curse. It's easier to stay in touch, and I have met such wonderful friends online. How else could a "hermit" know people around the world? I wish I were better at it.

I will conclude this exposition with a personal quote from a file of nonfiction notes: "I think about the poem I need to finish . . . about other creative projects

rattling through my brain like locomotives on separate tracks. And reflect to myself that filling my head with stories can prevent it from filling up with dark memories."

I hope you enjoy the poems and art and books so generously being showcased! Thanks to all for the interest in my work!

that filling my head with stories can

Website: Fairy Fly Entertainment
YouTube: Fairy Fly Entertainment
Zazzle Store: Fairy Fly Entertainment



Featured Poetry Collection | Odds and Ends by Lori R. Lopez

odds and ends

Let's face it, I'm odd And I love a good ending Not necessarily a happy one You never know with mine What you might get (Insert wink) I like to shake things up Like a waterglobe They say the sky is the limit Unless you live in a dome The type you can agitate And stir up a tempest Of sparkles or snowflakes So if you happen to find yourself Peering out at the world Through a wall of liquid A dandy warped perspective Wearing fishbowl lenses As opposed to rose-colored glasses Don't expect to go far Without bumping your nose And everyone looks wrinkled Whether young or old Inside or out I didn't mean turned inside out I guess that's fine too Such a life would require a wetsuit The latest fashion in diving apparel Not to mention an aquatic nature (Oops, I just did; I keep doing that Along with having Déjà Vu But back to the poem) You'd need a clam-destined soul A type of underwater spirit The predisposition of a fish It's like living in a bubble Or a shell at the bottom of the sea It could even be similar To being pickled like a dill Preserved in a jar on a shelf A bottle of jam in the cupboard Floating in formaldehyde soup A nice chemical bath or broth Yes, that's more like it One of those or the other I suppose in such a world Umbrellas would be obsolete Remaining folded, an accessory How I'd miss their mushroom shapes On a delightfully overcast day And the patter of raindrops No, I simply couldn't bear it! Yet I contemplate such things When I have nothing else to do Which is almost never, it seems Or is it most of the time? I can never keep that straight Nonetheless, I like to dream up ways Of filling bottles Collecting a motionless glass zoo Containing thises or thats An assortment of sundries and peculiars There's an ointment available But I keep them in jars The odds and the ends Oh no, I don't trap living things That wouldn't be nice Dead things keep better And don't need to be fed.

The Maw

It hungers Unfed for the tides and moons Of an eternity A long time to wait Behind a door and a lock Its breath stale and dusty Appetite so intense The fever rages like flames Without fuel, only the rabid desire To feed, to devour Licking teeth dry as hell-baked bone Such a force must eventually Consume itself Or burst like a volcano Spewing need and desire It chooses the latter And the door bulges The seal cracks As if something immense Surges upward, straining To escape on the other side Unsatiated, unnourished Seething with want Craving what exists out of reach The warm juicy flesh In a ripe garden Of bountiful fruits, a grim harvest How it wearies of this vault This hollow dungeon Where it has been kept, a prisoner

Cramped in dark confines Entombed by long-dead priests A demonic impulse, throbbing Like a heart that gorges On the blood of the innocent Its beastly maw grumbles Rapaciously brazen Growing, ever increasing its strength To an overwhelming Insanely famished urge Step back, fools! Read the warnings engraved At the mouth of its chamber As it listens within The shadowy contours Of an abysmal cellar Buried by the sands of Time And the hands of the desperate Marked, branded Yet devoid of monument A nameless aching dread To be feared rather than released Heed the inscriptions Maintain a distance Pray the door will hold The symbols endure Plead for your souls And the lives of your offspring Should the door creak wide On ancient hinges, or blow off — Your children will be next . . . After you.

Mirror Image

The beast was born a mere splinter Fractured off a shattered looking-glass. It grew from shard to handmirror, Reflecting the zits and hairs and warts On the aspects of viewers who held it To inspect themselves for flaws And discovered many more defects Than were noticed the day before — Becoming hideous in their own eyes.

The creature enlarged to the size of A dresser mirror, displaying the vanity Of its preening owner, presenting a jaded Image increasingly distorted and grotesque; Sprouting humps and spots in the worst of Places, fashioning a monster that only the Woman could behold, but that she would Physically turn into, transformed by

An attitude of self-hate and loathing.

Then the mirror moved on to its next Shape, a tall narrow full-length model Attached to a closet door, where a female Would stand in profile and squint at the Magnified and overly exaggerated fun-house "Dementions" of her fanny, which seemed Bigger and bigger with every outfit tested; At last ballooning to a blimpish eyesore Of a posterior, jutting from a slender frame.

Chortling darkly, the sinister glass gremlin Shifted to coat the sides of a dance studio, Where slim ballerinas pranced and twirled Or posed with feet in the air, always noting the Reflections, examining their style to check for Lines and flow, the perfect extremes of grace And poise, the purest form; that delicate Swan-like distinction between beautiful and Ugly, judged by a harsh set of standards.

The goblin showed them atrocities, a garish Spectacle in which dainty pirouettes were spun So fast the dancers twirled to mere stick figures Honed down as if by a mechanical grinder. And leaps landed on the feet of frogs, throats Baggy and croaking, eyes bulbously flitting, While tongues unreeled to snatch a passing fly. A dipping bow would tip to a handstand, Then a series of goofy acrobatic cartwheels . . .

Followed by rolls and tucks and tumbles,
Rendering the ballet troupe into a goggle
Of strident blatting honkers that flocked
With the dignity of geese to caper clownishly
And then contort, stretched until their limbs
Were spaghetti, their heads huge in comparison,
Bodies rotund like pears, out of all proportion!
A puddle of silvery spite, the creep would infect
A building's exterior and mock the world going by.

The menace bounced their insecurities back
In their faces, exemplifying the deepest horrors
And most critical versions of themselves imagined,
Warping their scrutiny to manifest the visions they
Most reviled. And thus the abomination remained
Along a well-traveled street visited by countless
Numbers of the human population, planting seeds,
Cultivating monsters. But the broken mirror's bad luck
Wore off in seven years; cracking, the goblin split apart.

Crime Scene Footage

There are some jobs that a Germaphobe should really never do . . . Sewage Worker. Trash Collector. Window Washer. Repossession. Hospital Staff. Dry-Cleaning. Of course, a Crime-Scene Cleaner-Upper. So naturally, one of these would have to be my profession!

I am not the sort who does a thing that is actually my choice. It is usually the other way, by accident or compulsion. I wade in, donning hip-boots and a gas-mask for good measure. Rubber gloves, a plastic jumpsuit; carting plenty of strong emulsion.

A ten-foot pole, a garden hose, trash bags and deodorizers. Antiseptics, disinfectants, antibacterial soaps and sprays. You can never be too prepared for something you abhor. Like Vegas, at a crime scene, everything that happens stays.

It can't be expected to be pleasant; for me it is especially nasty To step into a germ-filled lair slick with ripened body fluids, In an atmosphere crawling with plague and the rich stench of decay, As if I were the Janitor for the gory altar of pagan Druids.

Removing tape, forensic dust, spilled coffee and donut crumbs; Powder burns, a ruined rug, the shards of a struggle interrupted; Picked-over remains not collected, bagged and tagged for evidence; Vacuuming the scraps of a life miserably corrupted.

You probably seldom think about behind-the-crime-scene heroes When glimpsing lurid headlines of the latest sensational mention. Folks like me can go unnoticed about our daily tasks and torments, Mopping up messes while the creepy killers claim all of the attention.

Thankless nameless individuals who tend to blend into the woodwork; Poor souls like me who slog away at a job they shouldn't undertake; We keep the tide of filth at bay so nobody else need bother, Yet for me it is more than mere career, it is something I can't forsake.

I must scrub the walls ten times or more, the floors thirteen at least, Then use a blacklight to inspect for stains otherwise unseen, Since the thought of leaving a trace of grime or crud will cause a shudder, And a job well done is the best reward, once the place is squeaky clean.

I can heave a sigh of vast relief to know I accomplished something — That there is less disgustingness at large for one brief and shining minute . . . That's what makes me smile as I face the horrors of the next atrocity And hum merrily as I make the world a little better for being in it.

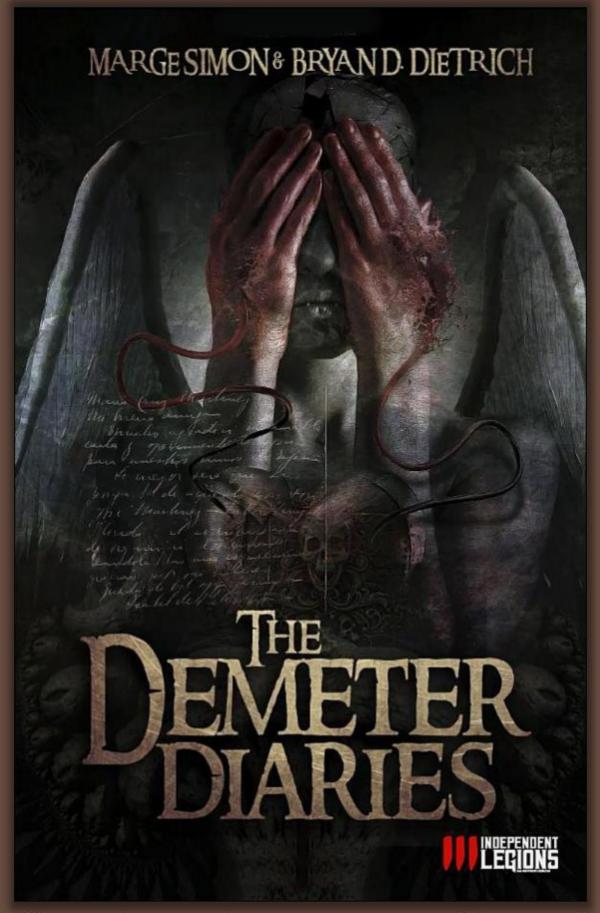
Death's Viper

A wicked train curves through the hills Ominous death-rattle reverberating Slithering across the distance Hauling the thick sinuous coils And convoluted length of a snake As I fidget with a case of nerves Akin to an epileptic seizure Of the blood, rattling the depth of me Clattering as loud and furious As the train hurtles iron rails Jarring, assaulting the tracks I await the serpent's hissing advent The chilling rasp of scales Pacing, I pick fingernails to rags Shredded and uneven Slivers raining, a compulsion Yet standing here in all of my Neurotic apprehension, conviction Steeling my heart and spine That it has to be done I have to meet this train When choice is removed There is nothing but action And consequence. The train is Close enough to feel its vibration Anticipate the harsh shudder and Scrape of brakes in a friction of sparks As it slides into the Station, skating Undulating, haloed by steam Cloaked by a moody ophidian aura No mystery aboard these cars Their purpose is clear, the outcome certain Dense and shocking Rolling in waves that soak me With the cold sweat of terror While the friction and release of pressure Heralds its bleak arrival The seats and windows bear impressions Of decay, a putrescent stench Passengers locked within the throes of Fate's rigors, gnarled by wither I have dreaded such a moment Known it was coming for me Yet there is never sufficient time To prepare, to accept Time is an inadequate measure A shoddy substitute for existence Marking and keeping score Ticking, always ticking off Each instant squandered, whether In achievement or simple pleasure

Frittered or fraught with regret Struggling to decipher the meaning And knowing makes it all the more Intolerable, insufferable, inconsiderate This train is the latest method A civilized envoy less gruesome However imposing, reptilian Death is at the controls Blowing the whistle when your time is up Sending a hooded Reaper to conduct you In a precise efficient manner To peel you out of your reverie and ooze Stripping away the flesh to reveal A thin and sleek core, hollow yet durable I have gripped this one-way ticket For several moons, a lifetime of last seconds Of striving to cram in one more Just one more glance or breath or chance It could never be enough And it would be so much easier to let go Without the hope that it was a mistake A clerical error, some big misunderstanding Or that I could somehow change my destiny I once loved trains and yearned to ride them Off into the Sunset, on a grand adventure . . . That was before I beheld this beast Rearing, parting jaws to engulf me Tongue darting, fangs like quills Scrawling death sentences You cannot shake your fist in its face However outraged or indignant Snakes have little mercy, no compassion I brace for its bite, wincing There is a line ahead of me Too soon it will be my turn Obedient yet complaining Writhing, kicking and screaming Just as I was born Only this time absorbed, swallowed Drawn into its belly rather than expelled A fat intestine that stretches rippling Between Past and Future Constricting my Present in a stranglehold One at a time the doomed are snatched And I am next, this is it -I am paralyzed, hypnotized Unable to resist the fatal strike Of Death's viper.



An exciting new take on a love story of the ages



Vlad's passionate journey to meet his true love

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Poetry

Prowler | Miracle Austin

Tick Tock...
Tick Tock...

It slithers around trees and in between leaves.

Spiraling up and down rooftops, it hovers above in its twisted invisibility.

After lavender sunsets, it dances while summoning black rains to wash away the hidden, gurgling screams.

Where any heartbeat races, it watches until the time is right.

Anticipation to strike is its favorite pastime while waiting to capture its prey.

Most don't think it's real.

So, if you're up for a little scare dare, then follow these simple directions.

Prepare a candlelit room and leave one window open.

Don't forget to hit the record button on your cell phone.

Then, repeat this out loud:

One

Two

Three...

I see you staring... Show me!

You'll feel a lingering chill climb up your thighs then towards your shivering spine.

A wet, musty odor will saturate the air and extinguish all the candle flames.

Once you feel something scratching at the back of your throat, close your eyes tight.

Your mouth will open automatically, and it will reach deep down to snatch your heart, while sucking out your shattered soul before your lifeless body collapses into a pile of ashes.

It'll fly away into the onyx lights, devouring the gifts you surrendered.

I used to be a nonbeliever just like you, until I found my best friend's phone buried under his powdery remains and viewed the video.

Be careful, it may just find you... next.

Tick Tock...

Tick Tock...

About the Author:

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

Instagram: <u>@MiracleAustin7</u>
Twitter: <u>@MiracleAustin7</u>

From Ash | E.F. Schraeder

Before, I was ash, jumpstarted in reverse.

I walked backwards in time to end up here.

Wind and bone. Sunlight stinging.

A pile of crushed stone, something to blow away.

An inky shadow and a bright star—

a million light years from now my echo imprints the sky.

Recall what you thought you knew about the world, about me. You didn't.

Saint of Suicide | E.F. Schraeder

First His whispers come like quiet sneaking fingers telling the heart how to ache, spotting the gaps. Words echo like a familiar touch, a quiet breeze.

Next spite sinks to the marrow, deep as winter cold, it clenches into inaction,. never asks why. Waits until every dream unravels.

Then He sends such grim wishes! Steals hope and sips courage until exacting consent to that final, fatal invitation.

Even those who never believe in the dark hood, those death-fears, the stupid fantasy—seek answers and release. Some relief.

Please, He'll sing. Close those tired eyes. Listen to My sweet lullaby.

Remembering Jane Doe | E.F. Schraeder

Ever since the disappeared girl reappeared, sunflowers bloom in the roadside ditch—

tall as a man, a six foot yellow bouquet marks the spot where they found her,

what was left. But on some bland unmarked road with leaning trees and crooked sidewalks

hides her shadow-heart: the real last place she walked or skipped or pedaled her noodle legs on a bike.

Not sugar-spice, she's pourable as a packet of warnings sprinkled like seeds.

For all the bad girls and runaways, all those swept into a meadow of the lost.

This hope chest of yellow possibilities, this shrine to prescience and purity, blossoms,

a hollow pretense of dangerous strangers. The place where all things breakable and lost spill

A highway of memories littered with crosses and sad-eyed teddybears, each one a tear

dropped for the stolen and misremembered.

About the Author:

E. F. Schraeder is the author of the novella *Liar: Memoir of a Haunting* (forthcoming, Omnium Gatherum, 2021) and the story collection *Ghastly Tales of Gaiety and Greed* (Omnium Gatherum, 2020). A semi-finalist in Headmistress Press' 2019 Charlotte Mew Chapbook Contest, Schraeder is also the author of two poetry chapbooks. Schraeder's poems and stories have appeared in a number of journals and anthologies.

Abysmal Bride | Mary Parker

I've waited centuries for you

Unfolded the tiniest morsels of magic,

Clung to dreams that I could conjure you -

Bewitched and bewildered, toiling against never-ending temptations

Restlessly waiting for the touch of your hand

And now you have appeared

Glossy scarlet and bright as the sun

I wallow at your feet, prostrate

Your throne a cage of bones, a ribcage your crown

Your kingdom is my eternity –

I waited to give my lifetime to you

My turbulent heart, your aching bones

Crash together in coursing calamity

My fingertips brush your skin and you shiver

You taste death on my kiss

And you give in

I will devastate you

But still you wrap your arms around me

And wipe the stinking sweat from my brow -

You patch my wounds, collect my sloughing skin

And blanket me in clandestine filth

Lay with me and accept your fate

The funk of fatality is our perfume

The last kiss we shared, stolen passion

From beneath a burial shroud

Dance with me in the moonlight

As tears stain my face, lips bloodied from your biting kiss -

I am bewitched and bewildered

By your nefarious beauty and the fever of it all

Darling, transform me into your abysmal bride

You know my black heart pulses in your hands

You know I tremble

With each blood-soaked kiss and clawing glance

My skin burns from your touch

Shattered glass is my sustenance

But I would never go back

Darling, dance with me in the moonlight

As blood floods the streets

Inhale the ashes of existence

As we march toward eternity

About the Author:

Mary Parker is a horror author and poet. Her work has appeared in numerous anthologies and magazines. Her first novel is nearing publication. Mary is a former ambassador for and proud supporter of Women in Horror Month. She likes true crime and werewolves more than anyone probably should.

Twitter: @MParkerHorror

Darkside | Colleen Anderson

You can almost touch the moons here at the edge of the world It is the border that cannot be crossed

There are many edges and my brittle logic wears so thin that it will crack

Try to live here
where cold raw peaks
chew at continual night
No thing has learned
to breathe the near vacuum
that looms above the ridge

The air is crisp as shattering stars when only moons brush together in greeting and farewell

I witness then the fliers of the void They flare determination then vanish to the abyss

Here at the edge we cannot go back and learn to accept death as the jagged teeth at our backs

I have tried to leave In one direction lies my past shrouded in the chill moondust of failed explorations

In the other the barrier of frozen stone to a molten future and the undying furnace of this hungry planet

So I burrow, delve into what was left by a race as secretive as this bleak edge I bury my present and squirm under glittering silt

Addiction | Colleen Anderson

I am the first taste to the lips—a kiss a death—but not true death any but the sudden killing of the senses one by one I am the slow insidious poison a drug to draw you in

A puckering of the lips a taste or two adds only a tremble after one too many lingering touches you can't pull away

I can pull the needle of my presence from your veins pulsing need Just one teardrop left of blood and old bedstains

Without my measured dosage you gasp alone suck the air of my passing withdrawal surrounds your heart and squeezes

I am a narcotic flowing pain or pleasure If you take too much too little I will be the end of you

Calliope's Song | Colleen Anderson

Hair sings a nebula to the moon of her face. Fibril hands serenade saddened, charred metal. From her ears float the Transcom wires-severed from a life of words. Black-iced blood in darker notes spirals from blued skin. Squeezed in frozen grasp she arcs an ellipse. Calliope sings her death song, silent harmony to space.

Angels Call | Colleen Anderson

A Strange Attraction | Colleen Anderson

He's a General.

Rules Star systems they say

Scowls storms above
3-inch inset fangs.
Bracelets orbit elbows,
Rings enforce his brows,
Paprika hair floats to his waist-Adds a promise of bloodshed
Rather than civility.

Two rows from me, a cadet faints

From the arrow of his gaze.

A sheep-like rustle brushes the ranks--Crystalline fears of his command.

Noticed, he closes the distance

Between us like a battle-cruiser

Swallowing its enemy.

No falter in stance, his eyes

Probe my soul.

You're not frightened, he says.

No, just repulsed.

Indignity burns his eyes red.

A collective gasp vacuums the air

From the room.

He asks, why do you cater death? I answer, why do you court ugliness?

Repulsed, we become lovers.

When angels call I cower in my bed I hear their whirring wings and pinions slash my flesh

They sing celestial power nonwords quake the air My ears offer blood for what Heaven lets me hear

The scent of angels in the air blots out earthly pleasures then burns away desires I cannot smell decay

Not meant for heavenly visions of angels on my bed they gift my eyes with ruby tears I will see eternity forever

Divine-tipped claws connect, tear my mortal soul My skin is flayed to threads I am unmade, gone from Earth

When the angels call people whisper of the blessed I am told they are a vision a kiss of godhood in our midst

All I know All I was nevermore the same I cannot live I cannot die I am changed I am changed

About the Author:

Colleen Anderson lives on BC's rainy wet coast and much prefers it over snow. She has a BFA in writing and has been nominated for the Aurora, Rhysling and Dwarf Stars Awards in poetry. Some of her work can be found in Polu Texni, Starline, and Heroic Fantasy Quarterly. These poems were previously published in Chizine, Daughters of Dangerous Dames, OnSpec, Amazing, and Talebones respectively. Colleen is especially fond of mermaids.

Blog: Colleen Anderson Instagram: @celdae

Bressler Manor | Scott McGregor

Welcome to Bressler Manor, a place so meek, but just below the steps, the floor boards creak, and hidden within the walls, the ancient ones speak.

Concealed behind the doors, ghosts of forgotten past, seeking to answer our calls, phantoms so abominably vast.

Apparitions of endless blight, wraiths watching if we last, specters of powerful fright, demons of vengeful cast.

Roaming throughout the depths of night, the deceased wait and learn, soon to set free their might, eager to wreak havoc upon their return.

An endless purge it's said they roam, but as they rise again, they whisper, welcome home.

About the Author:

Scott McGregor is a Canadian author based in Calgary, whose fiction has appeared in Hellbound Books, Oddity Prodigy Productions, DBND Publishing, Eerie River Publishing, and many others. He recently completed his honors project, which explored Marxism in Orwell's 1984, Gibson's Neuromancer, and the HBO series Westworld, as well and the future of historical materialism.

Website: Scott McGregor Writes
Twitter: @ScottMSay

Red Rage Rising | Maggie D Brace

I seethe, I scream, I silently gag upon the red rage rising. Commencing in the soles of my feet, it courses through me.

Weakened knees

Girded loins

Pulsing heart

Eyes ablaze

Sinew and muscle take over as soul and brain recede.

Unbidden, this all consuming mad dance gyrates to the fore.

Flesh tear

Hair yank

Nail slash

Tooth slice

Wrath slowly ebbs from me, leaving space for thought to return.

Disconsolate, I stand astride the bloodied corpse.

Remorseful pain

Penitent mien

Tinged in contrite

Repentance sworn

Until next time.

About the Author:

Maggie D Brace, a life-long denizen of Maryland, teacher, gardener, basketball player and author attended St. Mary's College, where she met her soulmate, and Loyola University, Maryland. She has written 'Tis Himself: The Tale of Finn MacCool and Grammy's Glasses, and has multiple short works and poems in various anthologies. She remains a humble scrivener and avid reader.

Facebook: Maggie D Brace
Twitter: @MaggieDBrace



will of the vampire | Linda M. Crate

all he wanted was every single ruby of her carmine blood on his tongue,

and he got what he wanted;

she put up some resistance but in the end his will was stronger than hers—

running only made it worse for her in the end,

she was too tired to live;

and thus he showed her the mercy that came with death but not without a bit of pain because the vampire derived pleasure from her screams.

the moon carmine | Linda M. Crate

as the blood on his claws, and of his twitching victim not yet dead; it wouldn't be long now the man wasn't long for lifebut the werewolf held no remorse, only a rage and a hunger he couldn't diminish; try as he may he heard the human whimper more pathetic than the wailing of a werewolf pup, and he had no mercy: death would claim him soon and he would feel nothing but this numb dread that he had to continue on with these claws and fangs for as long as he dared to exist the weight of being a monster, having no choice sometimes weighed on his soul; but now he had no regret only rage.

just like that | Linda M. Crate

she ran, but it wasn't quick enough to escape the beast;

her tears did not appeal to the humanity that had faded eons ago

and she couldn't outrun death-

still, she tried, because she wanted life and he honestly admired that she didn't crumple and fall before him like a flower bowing before winter;

but that didn't mean he wouldn't give in to his darker nature—

what kind of predator would?

her terror was like music to his soul, he loved the erratic rhythm of her frantic heart;

twining his hand in her hair he pulled her close: "let me end your suffering"

& just like that, the vampire won.

wrong place, right time | Linda M. Crate

she felt a dark aura, but when she searched the darkness nothing was there;

but she knew her intuition wasn't wrong something was up—

looking all around her she didn't pay attention to where she was walking, and found herself tripping over a tree root when a handsome stranger caught her;

looking into his eyes she knew that he was the one she felt—

"please, don't."

"you were at the wrong place at the right time, i'm afraid," came his cold reply;

she watched in both horror and fascination as his eyes went from brown to red

it was the last thing she saw before she died.

the scariest beasts of me | Linda M. Crate

you called me succubus, but you were a dread being without name; preying on vulnerability for your strength you thought that you could kill me i rose from the ashes of your chaos, promising that i will destroy you darkness because i have never let nightmares live; you wanted me to be a monster but i am more than my yearning i am fangs and ferocity wrath and rage burning brighter than a thousand suns i'll char those useless wings right off your back, so more can know of your lies; make that mask slip straight off your face and introduce you to the scariest beasts of me because i hunger for you to know the pain you gave mei'll be merciful and give you to your bride death.

About the Author:

Linda M. Crate's works have been published in numerous magazines and anthologies both online and in print. She is a three time best of the net nominee. When Linda isn't writing she likes to enjoy nature walks, photography, reading, dancing, and music. Her favorite musical genres are industrial, indie, rock, and goth. She's always been a misfit, but she prides herself on always being herself.

Facebook: <u>Linda M. Crate</u>
Twitter: <u>@thysilverdoe</u>

Teeth | Brian Rosenberger

Her necklace of teeth, some yellowed, some gold, some with cavities, Some teeth so blindingly white you'd think they once belonged to God. She's never without the necklace. In the shower, in the bedroom, when we fuck. I admit it's a turn on, those teeth moving like bugs about her neck, her chest. I've tasted them. Not much flavor. Bitter at best. Call them trophies, call them souvenirs.

They belonged to past lovers.
I'm her current flame, always reminded of past infernos,
Always reminded of the future, my future.
Sometimes, the necklace tastes like ash.
But maybe that's my imagination doing the tasting.
I see a dentist regularly, brush three times a day,
Floss more days than not, and use mouthwash religiously.
I know what waits. My teeth, jewelry for God
Or at least Goddess.

Hoodie | Brian Rosenberger

The Reaper moves through the convenience store aisles, Carefully. Cautiously. He is one intent shopper, Past the chips and cookies and the condoms, Past the aspirin, energy drinks, and the rotisserie hot dogs. His destination, somewhere between the beer and milk. He pulls the drawstrings. The black hood tightens. All business now, Death's business, His Business. "Pardon me..., Sir..."

Red lights strobe the store windows.

Heart attack in the dairy aisle.

An electrician. 39 years old. Survived by a wife and four kids.

His family had a history of heart disease.

Thank the Gods he had life insurance.

Because the paramedics arrived too late.

In the parking lot, black hood loosened, A lottery ticket is scratched by a finger of bone. Death never loses.

Two Mountains | Brian Rosenberger

The Frost Giant crouches, touches
The silver scales of the dragon.
Colder than normal.
His pet, his companion, his friend.
Lifeless.
Wings that eclipsed the Moon
Never to fly again.
The Giant weeps icicles.
The Mountain walks,
A glacier seeking vengeance.

By His Healing Hand | Brian Rosenberger

Cursed by the Devil, crippled in the womb,

At least, Jacob survived; his twin Daniel resided in Heaven,

Modern science and the small town quacks of no help.

Jacob sat on the monkey bars at recess, perched like a gargoyle.

No freeze tag or kick ball or hopscotch for him.

The locals still whispered, 'Poor boy" and "Such a burden."

Outside of town, the tent already set up, illuminated by burning candles.

The sign said, 'Faith Healer.'

It's a small town. The crowd standing room only,

There to witness miracles between the singing, sermons, and tears.

The Preacher, sweat stained his white shirt

Like he'd been caught by a Summer thunderstorm.

He'd been preaching close to two hours,

Even a small town can overflow with sin.

Jacob was next in line of healing.

The Preacher kicked Jacob's crutch,

Steadied him at the shoulder, an iron grip. Cold Iron.

"Do you believe, boy?"

Jacob had doubts. He'd done nothing to deserve this -

the insults, the ridicule, the humiliation, all because he couldn't walk straight.

He's cursed God in the dark of night. Cursed his parents. Cursed himself.

His parents in tears. Pa never cried, not even when Gramps passed

Nor when he had to shoot their coon dog, Blue. Rabies.

Jacob, in tears, despite his doubts.

"Yes., Please, Preacher yes."

The Preacher, his palm to Jacob's forehead,

His hand opened, revealing jagged, grey teeth, a yellow tongue.

Jacob's sweat, sweet as sin, sweet as honey.

The Preacher's eyes. Only Shadows. Only Darkness. Twin whirlpools of Sin.

This miracle was real as was the debt. Jacob's parents carried him away.

In the morning, Jacob would race with the sunrise. His parents and himself in tears.

He'll never outrun the debt. No one ever has.

Years from now, this night, Jacob will think his brother Daniel was the lucky one.

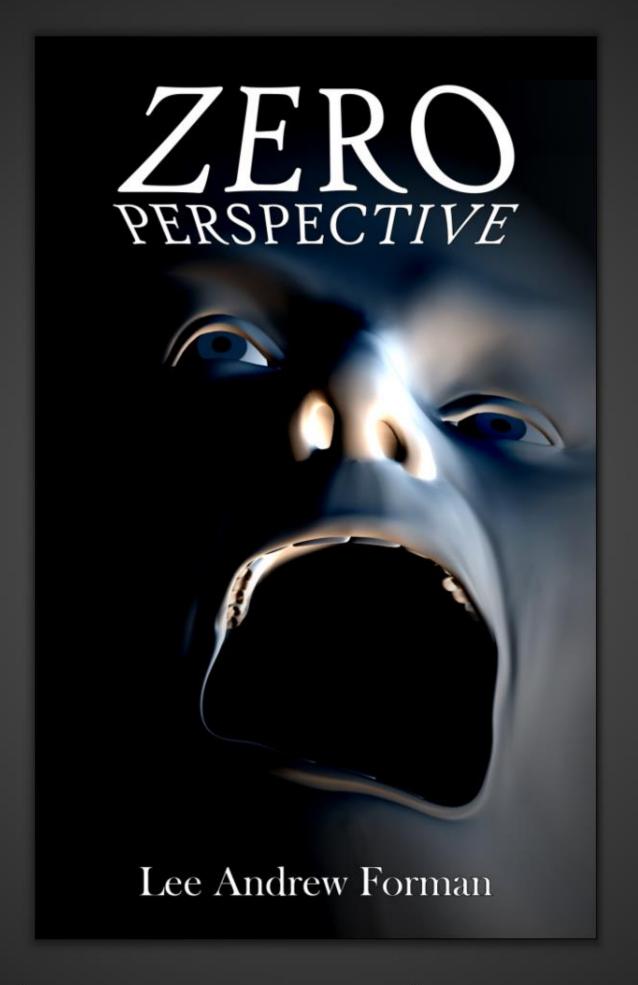
The Preacher smiled, his face, his hands.

About the Author:

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

Facebook: <u>Brain Who Suffers</u> Instagram: @brianwhosuffers





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One size too big | Angelo J. Letizia

And he is everywhere

He has worn my clothes

Before the sun rose

Before me

In the pantry, in the kitchen and bathroom

There is a sewer pipe I could have loved you | Angelo J. Letizia Μ Park the car i In the core of the world Burn my nightmares e To inaudible scraps Smoldering in your stomach Spit on them below Sizzling things I have your rib the skin You my finger Like oil in the mouth Place them in garbage pails Keep them safe Can you t a s t e the monoxide? Start a new heart between us Can you hear it? Pumping sulfur Like the screams and chainsaws Into a blackhole but we would be whole The car accidents A whole heart In every corner of the Beating in blackness bedroom Swallowed by a dead star The horn of the truck that drives Light years away through a From television and microwaves and magazines splne And condoms Liquor would be extinct any day of the week Perfume would be lost I must expel this fear In ancient bedrooms Like vomit Next to expensive clothes I am afraid that there are Scattered on unwalked floors Ashes in my shirt Fuck the chores Blood in my shoes And flat tires and middle eastern wars I am afraid of the man Fuck the refridgerator Who keeps showing me these Throw a pillow, a picture of you and me In that blackhole images All crushed to a distant spot Churning in shadows On old movie reels that refuse to break And dayless nights Away from the intact world I hate him

18 Year Poem | Angelo J. Letizia

The computer screen is warm but it does not bleed
I can see the carpets on it
The carpet skin is cleaned
Yet still
It is disturbed by unholy doctors
Tending to it daily
Depressing the tongue
Further into the lonely place
Of the ventricle
and the lung
Its dwindling population
Of solar idiots
Drowning in something it cannot name

The sticky tables
At the bar
A coffin for four
Each a doctor
Statistician, murderer
Kissing and killing
The counted ways
Of ordering a beer
And seeming normal

How to Build a Monster | Angelo J. Letizia

Days are the bones of weeks Weeks are sinews of years And years the flesh of memory

Like some stalking Frankenstein

The debris and fragments
Are littered on the linoleum floor
A tapestry of forgotten dust
And broken plastic
In an office building
Where important meetings are held

The monsters live there too

Whose mouth is this?
Unclean teeth
Reused to chew
Frankenstein repurposed
Can you taste a memory?
Swallow a thought?
Vomit on that boring floor
And disrupt the dust

We create our monsters when we sleep

About the Author:

Angelo J. Letizia's work has been featured in a number of literary outlets including Bewildering Stories, AHF Speculative Magazine, Bowery Gothic, Tales from the Moonlit Path, The Atlantean, New American Legends, Red Planet and Transcendent Visions. His first book of poetry, *The Starry Devil* will be published by Silver Bow Press in 2021. He lives in Northern Maryland with his wife and three children.

Twitter: Academic Comics @ajosephletizia

The wardrobe | Mathias Jansson

I was lying in my bed drowsy with heavy eyes when suddenly a light in my wardrobe I saw how strange I thought and looked at the bright light when the light went out

I was lying in my bed sleepy and tired of a hard days work when suddenly a light in my wardrobe I saw irritated I starred at the light when the light went out I was lying in my bed feeling the sleep approach when suddenly a light in my wardrobe I saw frustrated I got up opened the wardrobe door and starred stupid at the empty wardrobe

How strange I thought what could have activated the motion detector in my wardrobe could it be a spider or a draft in the night that turned the light on in my wardrobe?

I closed the door
I turned back to my bed
when I heard a familiar click
it was the light
that was turned on
in my wardrobe

Angry I turned around and threw up the door and by God what a horrifying sight I saw in my wardrobe it was a perversion of breed between a spider, an octopus and a crocodile staring at me in my wardrobe

By God I tell you I will never again sleep in a bedroom with a wardrobe.

About the Author:

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

Author Website: Mathias Jansson
Amazon Author Page: Mathias Jansson



Back from the Dead | Ivanka Fear

I witness the lower life forms coming back from the dead repeatedly and I wonder do they pretend to be dead?

these lowlifes hugging the ground those rednecks reaching for the sky are they supplicating? are they praying?

the prickly beauties worshipping the sun the spineless old men revering water how do they possess the power? how do they rise again from the cold ground?

those masses regenerated out of the rocks those hosts eternally cloned are they hibernating? hiding covertly under our noses? are they resting up? for what? clandestinely planning a takeover?

these sleepers cells retreating into the ground when temperatures dip these cowardly creatures shutting down in the night do they fear the cold? are they afraid of the dark?

perennial aliens lying dormant resurrection miracles revived by holy water sun gods reborn each cycle do they feel pain like you and I? do they have a heart and soul?

organisms springing back to life evolutionary geniuses conquering death immortal pods

drinking from the holy grail

why are they playing dead? are they? why don't they share their secrets? why do they come back to life so easily?

why can't you and I? why? are we the lower forms of life?

Half Breed | Ivanka Fear

Cat lady, catwoman... blinking, winking, eyes lined with kohl, glittering in the lamplight, windows to her soul. Masked illusionist...

She-cat, female feline...
purrfectly content,
lithe body stretched out, baking in the sunlight,
temple of her spirit.
Sun goddess...

Kitty, Kat... brushing, grooming, soft, silky hair, glistening in the daylight, veil of her quintessence. Queen of the jungle...

Your familiar, bewitching you. A transformer, the shifter.

Cougar, wildcat...
on the hunt,
sharp claws painted red, kneading in the darkness,
tools of her trade.
Sheath shedder...

Jaguar creature, were-cat, on the prowl, toned legs, ready to pounce in the witching hour, instruments of her pursuit.
Stealthy stalker...

Skinwalker, shapeshifter... on the sly, vampire fangs bared, feeding in the dead of night, devices of her covenant.

Deadly predator...

The sacred Egyptian Bastet, cat headed woman, protector and devourer.
The Cat Mother.

Beware the Shifters Among Us | Ivanka Fear

Across that thin line between dreams and awakening, they'll come for you.

On your pillow, curled up next to your face, (blink and you'll miss it) their feline form presents itself while you lie oblivious.

Within the glass or upon the pool of water, they'll expose themselves. In the mirror that reflects their true nature, (remember, looks can be deceiving) their cat's eyes glaring back at you while you deny what you see.

During a full moon midnight's walk, they'll split in two.
Behind themselves they'll stroll, (suppressing a howl) their tails trailing their shadows while you fail to look twice.

On All Hallow's Eve, they'll take the prize. At the costume contest for most strange, (people wouldn't believe the half of it) their humanoid feline selves showing while you pretend you never knew.

The Intersection | Ivanka Fear

Every night I sleep the sleep of the dead slipping away into unconsciousness immune to the reality of what's real.

I wonder do the dead dream the dreams of the life that slipped away from their consciousness subject to the fantasy of what they believe is real?

Every night I wake in the land of the dead crossing paths with those who have passed subconsciously creating my fantastical new reality.

I wonder if the dead like the living leave their shells to cross over the line that separates us consciously forming new laws of reality?

Every night as the blinds come down bodies lie in beds in graves in the dark as minds wander in their surreal reality.

And I wonder which reality is real is illusion as I wake from my sleep as you wake from the dead as our consciousness collides at the intersection.

Ridding Myself of my Unrelenting Stalker | Ivanka Fear

I tried pushing him off a cliff that last time we overlooked the ocean, but he stepped out of the way just in time and I nearly toppled over the edge myself.

So I walked with him too close to the river's edge hoping to nudge him and send him down the falls but I was caught off balance and nearly plunged right in. It overwhelms me every time. All the time.

I thought about putting him on a boat and setting out into the deepest part of the lake at night.

I considered putting him on a plane and opening the door to send him flying at 3000 feet.

But I know what would happen.

So I allow it to be a part of who I am now.

My stalker and I are inseparable.

She even follows me in my sleep
integrating herself into the dreamscape of my nightmares.

If I could have three wishes I wish
she would decompose, disintegrate, dissipate
and leave me in peace instead of pieces.

I've wondered whether I could better rid myself of it if I could put an actual name or a face to him/her. But that would probably be more frightening than the absence of substance. I've even tried to get her weight off my chest and his shadow off my back by talking about it, by writing it. Now he permeates my every story, now she butts into every conversation. I'm hoping that in time he'll just give up and skulk off somewhere far away from me. I'd like to unload him on someone else but I really wouldn't wish her on anyone. Besides, you've probably got your hands full with your own unrelenting stalker and certainly don't need to be afflicted with mine.

About the Author:

Ivanka Fear is a former teacher now pursuing her passion for writing. Her poems and short stories appear in Spadina Literary Review, Montreal Writes, Adelaide Literary, October Hill, Scarlet Leaf Review, Sirens Call Publications, The Literary Hatchet, Wellington Street Review, Aphelion, Muddy River Poetry Review, and elsewhere. She has completed her fifth suspense novel and is looking for an agent. Ivanka resides in midwestern Ontario, Canada, with her family and cats.



Wet Locks | DJ Tyrer

She waits in the pool, dripping Skin the colour of pond scum Hair like the trailing weed Lurking below the still waters

A beguiling smile A beautiful face

She beckons you in on a hot summer's day

Invites you to swim with her Grips you, drags you down Choking, choking, choking

Till the waters still And you grow still, too.

The Wreck | DJ Tyrer

Deep below stormy sea spray
The wreck lies in perpetual night

Half-buried in mud

Encrusted, rusted, broken, busted

Yet figures move through drowned corridors

Silver sheen of souls

Unable to move on from their watery grave

Reliving the opulence of the voyage

In the freezing oceanic void

Waiting for the day

When new voyagers will come

Join them in the night

Cyäegha's Call | DJ Tyrer

An unspeakable evil

Recalled only in misremembered legends

And misbegotten lore

Dark bedtime tales told to children

Cruelly stinging eager souls

Implanting thoughts of a single eye

Ever watching, ever watching

Yet hidden out of sight

A tugging evil

Hidden beneath the earth

Forever calling the damned home

To enter its vile embrace

Son of the Dark Mother | DJ Tyrer

Twisted Inhuman Alien offspring Pinnacle of perfection

A son

Yet as much a daughter

A prince

Favoured offspring
Son of the Dark Mother

A Fecund Ewe

Mother of a Multitude Black Goat of the Woodland

Unholy Mother of All

Whose worship he conducts

A myriad of sinful acts

Alien orgies Inhuman Twisted

Arise | DJ Tyrer

The moon rises fat and full

An ivory night-sun

Beneath its pale silvery light

The dead rise

Their graves offering them up

Like an unholy sacrifice To the hidden dawn

From their homes from home

They shamble

Shamble from the graveyard

Into the town

Through streets they knew so well

So long ago Seeking relevance Following an urge To relive memories

Only to find their loved ones

Long dead

Shamble along beside them

About the Author:

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

Facebook: DJ Tyrer
Twitter: @DJTyrer



The ghost in the room | Lori R. Lopez

The ghost in the room is watching. Spying. Is it madness? It must be madness. No, he's there. I know he's there. He's real. I feel him watching me from behind. Staring like a cat awaiting dinner. I can't turn, can't bear to confront him. I sense his presence, the keen eyes, a never-faltering gaze. I see his blurred specter in my dreams. Am I awake? I doubt he ever blinks, or looks away. I am his world, the focus of a phantom's rapt appraisal. For some unconscionable reason, the center of his universe, that unwavering unwanted attention. Why won't he stop? It's maddening! Nobody deserves this . . . To be haunted by a relentless figure, chilling the back of my neck! Boring into my spine with twin icicles of intense scrutiny, fixation, concentration avid unfailing interest. Why won't he just leave??? Die, return to the grave! How can I be rid of the revenant's brooding glower? His wan reproach? Why must he disturb me as if obsessed? Torment me in this chamber? This box where I cannot escape him or the walls, these four uncompromising walls that confine me.

conspiracy of cats | Lori R. Lopez

Night belongs to the howlers The ones that roam. Singularities of sleekness Fur and delicate features, mood-indicators In tow, orbs bright as pale lunar eyeballs Against an oblivious ink-drenched cosmos Padding with the self-assurance Of a jungle feline, until a noise Betrays its fear — razor-edged Ready to split the scene Right down the center and race On feral cat feet Ducking to alleys like strays Then strutting like champions Tails proud. Punctuation Marks Held high. Still skittish; temporarily Conquering an aloof demeanor A scared-rabbit image. Prowling in Affectionate gangs. Rubbing, winding, Hissing; getting in each other's way Yet it is every cat for his or her Best interest, despite the purr-meows And their smug conspiracy of Nine lives. They are individually gods With the solitude of a wolf Who runs in a pack But is content to go it alone Fleet of paw and claw, wily of Whisker and will, light as Ballerinas They dart . . . possessing abundant confidence Agility, clandestine phantom grace as they Steal a look behind, peering over a shoulder Past a hoisted Lightning Rod The night has been theirs for millennia We just didn't realize, didn't acknowledge Their supreme aptitude and ownership Svelte agents of shadow and dusk Melting through the streets Silent of stride, on stealthy cat steps Infiltrating homes and hearts, lounging near While humans gaze up at starry skies and Wait for the invasion to begin. If only We all knew; if only more could see That it's already here!

Being Shadowed | Lori R. Lopez

If you never look back, you might not realize you're being followed. Stalked by a sinister nothing. Shadowed by a shady character, unobtrusively obscure . . . hiding, gliding, striding right behind you. Sticking to your heels like Embalmer's Glue — quite the opposite of Elmer's. Dark and dry rather than white and moist. Flat instead of thick or goopy.

Perhaps you'd sense that something is off, the atmosphere amiss. It can begin as an uncomfortable sensation, like a tickle in your toes that will drive you mad unless it's scratched. But you mustn't give in to temptation, for such would cause the beast coiled at your wake to contort and embellish, expand, burgeon with a great understated muckraked abandon. Inglorious.

The savage orneriness that bursts out when emotions explode into an oily manic gloomfest. The worst of dreads and frightful poses. Deliberately bland, exquisitely overt, a bleak and ominous inkstain. The burst black pearl of gothic substance, raking poetic. Stark and morbid, slashing, looming, deliverer of doom, imperiling your nape.

This shallow creature reared, spiderish — poised to pounce, yet stealthy and restrained as a rug lying stretched and narrow from the backs of your feet until it rises spine against the wall, firmly rooted and crepuscular, a mountainous contour of menace, the silhouette of a monstrous behemoth, miming, mumming, moaning . . . lingering to paw with curved dagger-claws unsheathed.

Thrust like a jagged horrendous Bowsprit toward the dance of wave and froth that ebbs, fading conciliatory in the background as Night deepens while lights dim. Shocks spark and mutate. Electricity grows wan, the Moon Anemic. You may even be overshadowed. This is not to imply or say there will never be a moment when you merge complete — wholly absorbed. Swallowed up!

The starkness of bated breath | Lori R. Lopez

My ears scream for quiet.

My eyes boast of sleepless indignation, the burn of a candle's both ends.

Lying awake, fighting the cold, battling fatigue, nocturnal elements, the Twilight's furtive sneakers — grappling with the exhaustion of a mind that won't be silent.

How hard it is to outrun your demons, real or imagined, physical or figment. (Fooled ya, we're emotional!)

Quaking, unable to breathe, holding it tightly. Or chase the spirits away that daunt and haunt you in the deep end of Night, absent the huffiness to scream.

Fraught breaths clamor for attention, for a sympathetic listen, gasping fishlike with the hoarse pleas of an aggrieved throat. Covers overhead, paper stuffed in ears, begging for mercy from a heartless universe of Trolls and Highwaymen. Spurned, ignored, ghosted . . .

A parade of apparitions flit by, so many you could never count them all, bearing the faces of Regret, the visages of victims — everyone you failed in some regard, and the multitude we read about, hear about; a bodycount too long to remember. Or forget.

I float within myself on the bed of mental nails that will not let me rest, embraced by a tumult of fog, inane duress clouding my skull. Seeking a drop of gentle peace in the darkness of the mind, when its shade is pulled down, its curtain closed on the day's final act.

Maybe it isn't too late. Maybe there is a chance to save it. Losing hope is the greatest defeat. There is truly a night with no Tomorrow, of crepuscular dusk without end. Like a ship without sails, left to drift alone on an empty sea . . . no land in sight and no salvation.

Only a vast relentless gulf of oily morale

and flagging courage. On and on toward a blank Horizon in the starkness of bated breath. Is this like death? Is this the Future or the Past? One day I will float far enough, sleep hard enough to reach the other side and heave myself ashore.

Deliberatus Mordica | Lori R. Lopez

Straining against bonds, reclined on a slab
An altar, it seems, for a fateful rite
While a squirming fat creature captured in pincers
Inspires revulsion at the very sight
"Deliberatus Mordica!" bids a Priestess
Drugged voices echo the fervent cry
Memory awakens — I have been chosen!
This honor bestowed, to live or die
An act of valor to survive or fall
Embracing the Leech-Snake, I risk it all.

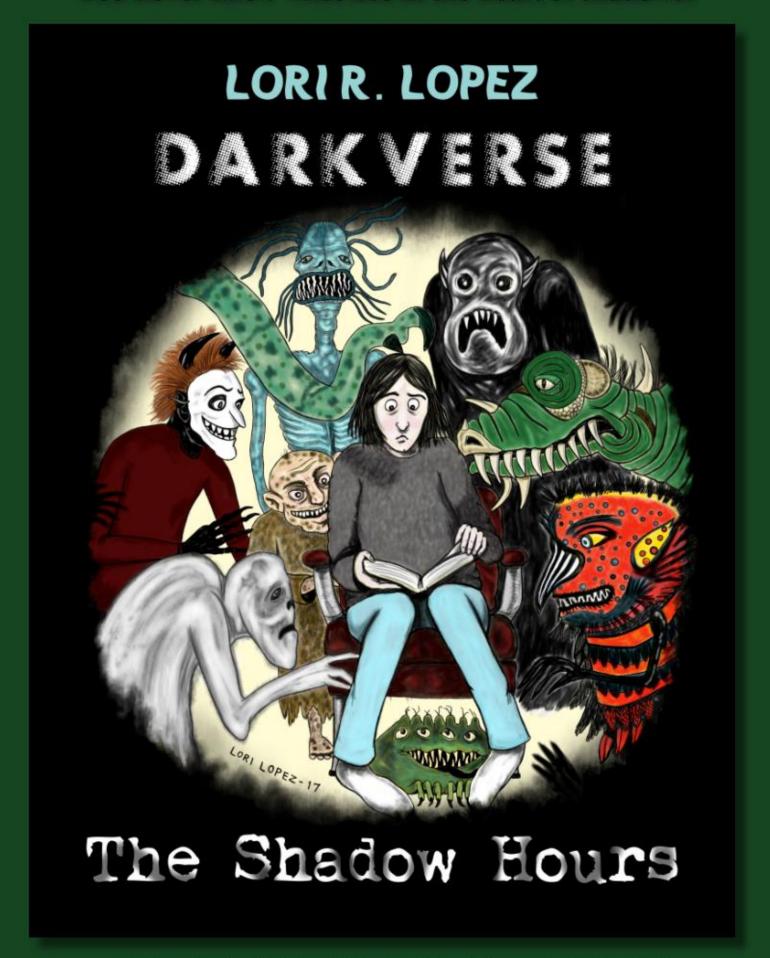
About the Author:

Lori R. Lopez is an offbeat author-illustrator, poet, songwriter, and wearer of hats, as well as an animal-and-monster-lover. Verse has appeared in The Sirens Call Publications eZine, The Horror Zine, H.W.A. Poetry Showcases, Weirdbook, Spectral Realms, Space & Time Magazine, Oddball Magazine, Bewildering Stories, Illumen, Altered Reality Magazine, California Screamin' (the Foreword Poem) and more. Books include *The Dark Mister Snark*, *Odds And Ends*, *Leery Lane*, and *Darkverse: The Shadow Hours*. Lori has been nominated for the Elgin and Rhysling Awards.

Facebook: Lori R. Lopez
Twitter: @LoriRLopez



You never know what lies in the heart of shadows!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

The Ineffable Horrors of the Eldritch | Corina Del Barro

'Where you go, I go too.' That'd been Noelle's promise.

If she'd known that such a promise would have her following a sleepwalking Jodie through Riverdale Road, she'd have thought twice about it.

"Jodie? Where'd you go?"

A shallow breeze was her answer, drowning out her pleas the further she ventured. Goosebumps traveled up her neck and down her arms like intangible fingers. Noelle's whisper was cut short by somber footsteps a few paces away, followed by incoherent babbling.

"Jodie!"

Noelle caught up to her friend, frantic hazel eyes searching him for signs of cuts or bruising.

He kept walking.

"Where do you want to go? I'll lead you there," Noelle said, taking his hand in her own.

His palm was ragged to the touch and prodding with her thumb, she discovered open wounds still wet with blood.

"We're going on an adventure; don't we always love those?" His neck craned to look at her, and the smile was nothing short of delirious. It was too wide, spittle and blood spots smeared on his dry lips.

"Yes, we do. Let's go then shall we?" Noelle said, feigning a smile. She turned Jodie around, gentle hands pushing her friend back down the road to get him home, back to their sleepover, back to the safety of warm blankets and melted chocolate chip cookies by the firelight.

"Our fun is this way."

Jodie slipped his hand out of her grip with a force that caught her off guard. He turned her back around, pushing her down the road with his hands still clenched on her jacket-clad shoulders, broken nails digging into her numb skin.

Noelle tripped over her own feet coming to a halt at the sight before them.

Where there should have been more of the endless Colorado asphalt sandwiched between dead grass plains and wilted weeds, was a mossy brick building, smoke emerging from the stones and sand-colored pillars.

"Where the hell did this come from? Did we make a wrong turn?" Noelle looked to Jodie for answers, but what answers could he give her that wouldn't sound made up from the unconscious brain?

"A special treat, we'll never experience anything like this again," Jodie replied. He waved at the strange vestibule like a magician basking in the glory of a successful trick.

"Are you still asleep?" It was a stupid question if she'd ever heard one, but the longer they interacted, the more suspicious she was that Jodie was playing a joke on her.

He didn't reply.

The doors of the crypt opened like beckoning hands, making the shudders return to her skin, with a violent premonition that warned of danger. She planted her feet, pushing against Jodie's shoves, but the boy abandoned her in a huff and ran towards the doors, disappearing within the cavernous twilight beyond.

"Dammit, Jodie!"

Noelle ran after him, and the doors shut behind her with a rattle that echoed into the silence inside the chambers. Darkness slithered in ghostly tendrils of smoke around her sore feet, and past her into two adjacent hallways bathed in a maroon glow. Noelle closed her eyes, took a deep breath to calm the quivering of her heart, and fished out her phone to use as a flashlight.

Laughter reverberated down the left chamber.

She ran down that hallway, reminding herself of that promise she'd made long ago on a drunk night. He'd kept his end of the bargain when she ran from home; she intended to pay it forward.

'If I can't live the life I want, then why stay? Why live?' she'd said to him that night.

"I couldn't agree more."

The glooming light skittered across the walls that should've been brick but instead felt like the coarseness of paper mâché beneath her hesitant touch. Hieroglyphics were carved, snaking up to the roof where white dots twinkled like imitation stars.

With aching groans the walls began to close in.

Perspiration trickling down her spine, Noelle screamed. She ran to the end of the hallway with barely enough time to escape and saw a glimpse of Jodie running past her on the moon-shaped mirrors lining every inch of the wall. His reflection bounced left to right from each one. Her fingers caught his shirt collar the moment colorful dots swam across

her eyes, blurring her vision. When they dissipated, Noelle was outside kneeling on the asphalt, a stream of thick blood escaping her nose.

A lump lodged itself in her throat as she stared at long-limbed spindly creatures surrounding Jodie's body at the entrance of the mausoleum. The color was drained from him, a scream fixed on his unseeing expression. Waves of infrasound were emitted from the creatures, but it was far above the acute understanding of mortal comprehension. Sickly yellow fangs tore through skin and climbed *into* Jodie's chest cavity.

Noelle threw up, knees buckling at the sight. The putrid metallic scent invading her senses.

On trembling limbs, Noelle forced herself to cross the distance, to grab hold of his arm and pull him from this mess as if there were anything left of him to grab on to. Her fingers merely brushed the length of his sleeve when bright light and those strange colorful dots attacked her sight once more.

"Noelle? I'm sorry," he said with a smile, eyes alit with an otherworldly glow, "I was sleepwalking again, and you must've fallen out there."

Noelle rubbed her lids with her palms, blinking as she awoke to the familiar sight of Jodie's living room. She focused on his face, terror returning with a tight grip on her nerves as the memories came flooding back.

Jodie hoisted her onto her feet, coaxing her to get some rest.

Nearing four in the morning, Noelle rose from bed, tears stained across her face. She'd feigned sleep while she thought of a plan.

"I promised."

Her sobs ruptured the calm she'd clung to as she lit Jodie's body — the creature inside — aflame.

About the Author:

Corina Del Barro is a creative writing student at Full Sail University, set to graduate with a bachelor's degree in 2023. In 2018 her short story *Butterfly Toy* received second place in the Scholastic's Writing Awards. Corina currently lives in Florida, hoping to move somewhere that has all four seasons. You can follow her over-caffeinated journey on Instagram and Twitter.

Instagram: @corinadelbwrites
Twitter: @corinadlbwrites

A Taste of Spring | B. T. Petro

Baba Yaga noticed the days getting longer and shoots of wildflowers poking through the snowpack like children's fingers grabbing for candy. "Spring be coming soon, Baiyun, with young'uns, herding their goats to the high pastures," she cooed to the ebony ball of fur curled on the hearth.

She wrestled four jars from the back of her larder.

"Sweetmeats and fresh breads will bring the strays to our cottage."

Next, she pulled vials of Passionflower and nightshade tinctures, arranging them like draughts pieces.

"Plenty to help the darlings sleep, eh Baiyun? It will be good to taste young flesh once again."

About the Author:

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



Fear Maudlin Street | DJ Tyrer

"Stay away from Maudlin Street," said Don.

Robbie laughed. "Seriously? What are you, my mother?"

"I am being serious, actually. It's a bad place."

"It's just a row of derelict houses." Robbie swiped a cane at a stand of nettles and looked across the waste ground to the backyards of the houses. Beyond the rooftops rose the chimney of an abandoned factory. "The worst thing you'll find in there is a rat or a druggie."

"You're telling me you haven't heard the story?"

Robbie whacked the nettles again. "What story?"

"About why nobody lives there anymore."

"No, but it's obvious, ain't it?"

"Sorry?"

"Come on," Robbie gestured about the town, "this place is dead. Most folk are out of work, can't pay their rent... same story all over."

Don shook his head. "That's not it."

"Well, what is it? Ghosts?"

"Something like that..."

Sighing, Robbie tossed the cane aside. "Well, you clearly want to tell me, so, go on..."

"Seven people died there, in four different houses. *In one night*. They said it was a gas leak, but my dad was an ambulance driver and he saw the bodies when they carried them out, said they died of fear."

"That's it? That's your 'scary' story?" Robbie snorted. "Probably was just a gas leak and, even if not, who cares?"

"No, that's not all. People said they saw... things."

"Things? Really? You're no good at this! Would you like me to tell you a ghost story – properly?"

"Listen. They saw these sorts of shadowy figures like a tall man in a top hat and a little girl in a veil."

"So, ghosts... Boring ghosts."

"But, you don't -"

Robbie cut him off. "I don't know if you're serious or just trying to wind me up, but I'm going to prove there's nothing scary about Maudlin Street. Even if there *are* ghosts, they sound terribly dull and not a bit frightening. A man in a top hat? Whatever next, a man wearing boots?"

He began to stride towards the houses.

Don followed after him.

"You don't understand."

"No, you don't understand: I'm not some silly kid."

Shaking his head, Don halted. "It's your funeral..."

"Yeah, and the pallbearers will be wearing top hats!"

Robbie jogged towards the houses, paused to turn and bow, then scrabbled over the wall into the backyard, vanishing from sight.

Don swore. "You idiot..."

He went a little closer, but continued to keep his distance, the tales his father had told, the rumours he'd heard, stronger than his fears for his friend.

Robbie's laughter echoed out of the empty houses to him. If there were any ghosts inside, they clearly were amusing ones. His friend was a regular Mr. Jolly, always had been.

Maybe Robbie was right and he was being stupid? Maybe the deaths really had been due to a gas leak and everything else was just hearsay and attempts to get a rise out of folks?

What was it his dad had always said when he asked if the stories were true? 'I leave the truth of it for others to surmise.'

Maybe he'd surmised wrong? Maybe it wasn't true?

There was no need to be scared of Maudlin Street. None at all.

It was quiet, now.

Don felt a little uneasy. Of course, there was no reason to, Robbie was right, but...

A sudden scream made him jump.

It was just his friend playing a trick on him, trying to scare him – wasn't it?

Silence fell, again.

Dammit, but he was shaking.

What if Robbie were hurt? He couldn't just leave him...

"Damn you..." he muttered and went over to the yard wall, pulled himself up, looked at the backs of the houses.

"Robbie, you there? Robbie?"

No answer. No sound. Nothing.

Not even a bird on the rooftops.

That made him shiver. There were crows all over town, on the waste ground, but not one here, not a sparrow or anything.

No food, that was it. Without anybody putting rubbish out or dropping litter, there was nothing to attract them, that was all.

Nothing weird about it.

Don pulled himself over the wall and dropped down into the yard.

"Robbie, where are you? This isn't funny?"

He went into the house, his footsteps echoing through the mostly-empty rooms. There was the occasional piece of furniture, as if whoever had lived there had taken what they could when they fled and never returned. Or, maybe they'd been too poor to afford much; it was impossible to tell.

There was no sign of Robbie.

Don swore. The house might be empty, but that only made it worse, like the calm before the storm, as if the silence and stillness concealed something that were about to break free.

It didn't. The house remained silent.

"Robbie, where are you?"

If he was just playing some sick joke, Don was going to kill him...

Don went into the next house. There was still no sign of his friend.

He went into the third one.

There was the creak of a floorboard overhead, the sound of footsteps.

"Robbie?"

There was no answer.

Was it his friend?

He shivered. He couldn't do it. He couldn't bring himself to go up the stairs and check.

There was the creak of a stair.

Don ran. He burst out into the yard and scrambled over the wall onto the waste ground. He didn't pause until he got home.

He tried Robbie's mobile, but it went straight to voicemail.

There was still no answer the next morning, no word from his friend.

He called the police.

"Another stupid dare?" asked the officer who came to see him.

"Sort of. Robbie dared himself, sort of. I told him not to go. I thought he was playing a prank on me, but I couldn't find him and he hasn't been in touch, so... I'm worried."

Man, it sounded so lame.

The police officer gave a sniff. "Well, I suppose I could take a look. You'd better come as well."

Don couldn't really say 'no', no matter how his stomach churned at the thought of going back.

The houses were still empty and quiet and made him feel uneasy, so he hung back and let the officer take the lead in searching.

The officer shook his head at him as they finished checking the final house.

"No sign of him. Still, I'll report him as missing and he's sure to turn up sooner or later."

Then, he added: "Strange, though. There was a top hat just sitting in the middle of that last bedroom."

Don shivered as the officer said, "I wonder why anyone living in a place like this would've needed a top hat? Oh, well, I'd best be off. Can you walk home?"

Don nodded. In fact, he'd run. Somehow, he doubted the top hat had anything to do with the living and he knew, in his heart, that his friend had been taken from him.

He'd been right to fear Maudlin Street.

He just wished Robbie'd had the sense to listen.

One last glance back told him the street was still silent and dead. He shivered and began to run.

About the Author:

DJ Tyrer studied history at the University of Wales at Aberystwyth, edits Atlantean Publishing, and has been published in various anthologies and magazines, such as *Chilling Horror Short Stories* (Flame Tree), *What Dwells Below* (Sirens Call

Publications), and issues of The Horrorzine, and Tigershark, as well as having a novella available in paperback and on the Kindle, *The Yellow House* (Dunhams Manor).

Facebook: DJ Tyrer
Twitter: @DJTyrer

Odd Samaritan | David J. Gibbs

"Who would've done something like this?" Helen's voice was higher pitched than normal. She was upset. Norm couldn't blame her. He couldn't even look at the thing on the porch. Something about it was unnatural, unsettling. Was this some kind of gag from one of his idiot friends? Who was he kidding? This was no practical joke.

"I don't know." He really didn't, his bathrobe not keeping the chill away, the front door still wide open, the winter chill on full display.

"Do you think we should call the police?" He knew it wasn't a question. Helen just wanted him to agree, hand bunching her robe at her throat. She looked terrified. She looked how he felt, his heart a thudding brick of ice.

"I'm not sure it's a crime."

"You have to be kidding. Why wouldn't it be? Norm, this can't be legal. How could that be legal?" Her voice was even higher now and louder. It sounded like she was on the verge of tears. That would be a disaster. He didn't want the kids to wake up and come downstairs and see this, this thing. How would they explain it? It would be worse than when Jacob caught them putting presents around the tree, his eyes accusing, his tears a little too real.

Damn Santa Claus.

"What would the charge be?" He could feel the chilled breeze teasing the few scraps of hair he had left across the top of his head. His voice was sharper than it needed to be but he was at a loss. Anger made his hands tremble. This was bad. Real bad.

Helen's hands were framing her face, drawing her sleep crazed hair back, jaw set. "I. Don't. Know." Her voice wasn't as high pitched as it was a few moments ago. Instead, it was filled with barbed wire and broken glass.

"Look, we need to get rid of this before one of the kids comes downstairs and sees it." His hands were on his hips, his robe falling open. He didn't care. She'd seen everything he had and didn't have, not that she had even bothered to take a look recently. Actually, he hadn't looked at Helen either. Who has the time?

Her head nodding a little too rapidly, like a bobble head. It would've look comical at any other time. He didn't want to agree with her, but she was right. They needed to get rid of it. And get rid of it now. "Good, idea."

One hand went to her mouth, while the other made odd gestures toward the porch. She finally found her voice. "What are you going to do with it?"

Good question.

His head still thudded, thick with sleep and way too much beer. He was paying for it big time. The knock on the door was insanely early, the clock not even displaying 8:00. Who the hell was knocking on his door this early? It was Sunday morning for crying out loud. Better not be the little Johnson kid or he'd kill him. There was something about the kid he didn't like. He couldn't put his finger on it but there was definitely something off about him. Wayne knew every neighborhood had a kid like him in it. For him, while growing up, it had been a kid named Stanley. It didn't matter what the kid did, Stanley was always the odd one. Dressed weird. Talked weird. Even smelled weird. Never included in birthday parties or sleepovers or pickup games of baseball, he was destined to be labeled, you guessed it, weird.

Wayne tried nudging Jodi awake, but she was dead to the world. Thanks, Ambien. Sighing, he stepped down on an evil Lego. It was a conspiracy. Every damn time it hit the sweet spot along the arch of his foot. Biting his tongue, he grabbed his shoes and slipped them on as he made his way into the hall. Heading to the stairs, he narrowly missed stubbing his toe on the foot of the bed.

He reached for the doorknob, preparing to open it and yell at the Johnson kid but stopped short. What was his first name? It didn't matter. He saw the alarm winking at him to the left of the door. How could he have forgotten it? Wayne punched in the code before he opened the door, realizing he'd probably have awakened the whole house if he'd have opened the door with it armed.

The door opened but he wasn't greeted by the Johnson boy, his anger dissipating quickly. Instead, he simply stared at what someone left on the front porch before he threw up in the umbrella stand just inside the door, his head thudding even harder.

"What are you talking about?" Stella dreaded conversations with her ex-husband, especially the kind like this one where he sounded like a raving lunatic. She caught her reflection in the storefront window and admired her figure, looking like she'd been poured into her dress. Pursing her lips, she drew her designer sunglasses down her nose to wink at her reflection before walking down to the next store.

Damn, I look good.

"Someone just left it here on the front porch. I mean, who would do something like this? It doesn't make any sense. I don't get it." Greg sounded drugged. She wouldn't be surprised. He'd taken the divorce hard. Poor baby.

"Look, Greg, I'm not sure what you want me to say here. Why don't you just call the cops?" Silence.

She took the phone from her ear, looking at the screen to make sure the call was still connected. Seeing it was, she moaned. "Come on, Greg, I've got a busy day here. I can't really deal with your weirdness today."

"I'm not asking you to deal with anything. I just wanted you to know in case Casey or Troy said anything when they came home."

Now he sounded hurt or pissed. She never could tell. He was always so dramatic. "Okay. Thanks. I'll talk to you later."

Greg muttered something under his breath before saying, "Bye."

Asshole.

It was art.

Fine art.

Smiling, he took in his latest creation. It was always impressive when it all came together. He loved taking in his creations. He only used the finest forms and the highest-grade thread to minimize the pulling, the stitching remaining perfectly straight. Though he was no surgeon, one would certainly be proud of his work. He was meticulous to a fault.

Painstaking measures were taken with shampoos and conditioners as well, to make sure the coats were as clean as possible given their condition when he found them. A soft contented laugh escaped as he nodded his head. What had started as a whim had fast become an obsession. A healthy one. Much better than collecting baseball cards or comics or silly butterflies.

He was an artist, creating something beautiful.

Something lasting.

Something impactful.

The tags made it easy to know where to deliver his finished pieces. He'd had to invest in a chip reader for the ones without collars. It was but a small price to pay to give back to the families who had lost their pets to careless drivers, leaving the carcasses along the side of the road like forgotten bags of garbage.

Such a disgusting waste.

He loved leaving his gifts on the porches in the early morning hours. An unexpected present left by an unsuspecting stranger. He loved using his talents to help the families with their grief.

He was making the world a better place with each gift he left.

Smiling, he loaded the small stuffed terrier he'd found run over along the highway just yesterday. Sliding it into the back seat of his car, the glass eyes looked so lifelike, catching the early morning light.

About the Author:

Never losing touch with the wonder and terror of childhood, David J. Gibbs always enjoys writing stories which excite, delight, and most of all, surprise his readers. An accomplished musician, he plays Cincinnati area gigs on weekends with his band. He also enjoys hiking and camping across the country.

Blog: <u>David J. Gibbs</u>

Twitter: <u>@David J Gibbs</u>



Inner Critic | Nicole Henning

He's complaining again. It's like he never stops. Constantly he gripes and moans about everything I do, say, wear, or think. Tonight, was going to be so perfect. I got my hair done and wore my special dress but all he could do is whine. I made our favorite meal and set the table with his mother's china. But he just kept knocking me down and telling me how much of a failure I am. I can't think of anything else to do. I already killed him, chopped off his head and hands and fed the rest of him to the pigs out back. I buried his head and hands under the floorboards, but he just won't shut up!

Love Sucks | Nicole Henning

They always run when they find out the truth, he chases her through the woods, getting closer by the second until she can feel his breath on the back of her neck. His mouth opens and his incisors extend, ready to plunge into her tender flesh when he is pulled back forcefully. He's thrown to the ground, knocking the wind out of him. Strong hands grip the sides of his head and beat it against a large rock repeatedly until he loses consciousness. When he wakes, he is swinging upside down from a tree, blood trickling from his head. He flexes his bound hands behind his back and a husky laugh sounds in front of him. He looks up in shock and sees his last victim standing next to tonight's mistake. Vanessa smiles and laughs again before passionately kissing the woman he had failed to catch. After giving the other woman a playful pat on her backside Vanessa walked to where he hung angrily and positioned a large bucket under him. She caressed his throbbing forehead gently before taking out a sharp knife and began to saw at his throat until his head fell to the ground. Once his corpse was bled dry Vanessa and her lover left the woods with his blood before the sun came up. By the time its rays made his body ash Vanessa was tucked in bed, in her windowless room. Her lover at her side. Both with crimson on their lips.

A Calm and Quiet Mind | Nicole Henning

All the halls and rooms are dripping with red. Wet lines streak the floors and handprints smear along the various pathways around the mental ward. She had changed their medications without anyone noticing, causing mass hysteria and panic. The nurses and guards unprepared for the damage true insanity can cause. The carnage was beautiful to her, the patients had called her Simple Anne before. Simply silent, simply stupid, simply subservient...they didn't know who she had hiding inside her. Even the other orderlies had referred to her by these hurtful names. She had shown everyone who she really was. As she walked through the halls and listened to the screams of the tortured and the insane, she felt truly at peace. The screams inside her head silenced by the screams in the world around her.

House Call | Nicole Henning

When he opened the door Dr. Crane didn't know what to do. His patient's parents had called in a panicked haze. They begged him to come and see their teenage daughter. They were afraid the new antidepressant he had injected their daughter with had made her worse. A priest had just left their home and their daughter had gotten violent. They feared she would hurt them or herself if he didn't come and help them now. As he roamed the blood-soaked carpeting he followed as it trailed to what he assumed was the girl's room. On the way he found the girl's mother sprawled on the dining room floor with a cleaver sticking out of her back, and her husband laying in the hallway with a fireplace poker jutting from the top of his head. He followed the sound of laughter and found their daughter, Holly, sitting on her floor smiling vacantly. Frowning he knelt in front of her and growled, "I told you to never let them bring in a priest. Now I have to find you a new host." Holly began to convulse and fell backwards. After the shaking stopped her head exploded and a small worm like creature slithered out of the crater that used to be her face and up Dr. Cranes body to his hand. Rolling his eyes, he put it in his pocket, "Damn demons", and left the house without being seen.

About the Author:

Nicole Henning is a book-a-holic who lives in a big-little town in Wisconsin. She surrounds herself with all things scary and bizarre and enjoys creating unique art. When she isn't writing she enjoys playing video games and spends a lot of time snuggling with her dog Allie aka Princess Prissy Pants. Reading, writing and horror are her biggest passions in life.

Reading to No One | Kelly-Ann Porter

The night was cold and wet; a few people hurried home huddled in their rain coats or under umbrellas. A warm glow came from the upstairs window of the Millstein home drawing you in. If you could float up and through the glass, and the colourful drawn curtains, you would find yourself in a cosy bedroom. You would see a ceiling full of colourful stars, fairies that danced on the walls, shelves filled with soft toys, dolls and books, along with childish doodles. A child's dressing table stood on one side of the room next to a chest of dress-up costumes, a large dolls house and a princess tent. A warm gleam came from the rainbow stars and the flower shaped lamp that sat on the bedside table next to the pretty white bed filled with pillows and teddies and decorated with a princess canopy and bedspread. Snuggled in the bed, propped up on pillows, a little girl lay holding onto a pink elephant cuddly, she listened intently to her mum who sat at her bedside in a rocking chair reading from a book under the lamp light.

"Off with her head cried the queen of hearts..." Mum glanced over the top of the book to see her daughter's reaction. The child was wide eyed with wonder, her mother smiled; she was so thankful that everything was back to normal, only a few months ago she wouldn't be able to read to Daisy like this.

Daisy was an only child, sweet tempered and highly imaginative, she had always had a big imagination. The teachers in her school praised her, even from the time she was in nursery. She was as full of curiosity as Alice from her favourite book, always full of questions, and wanting to try everything. An artistic child with an eagerness to learn, that was how Miss Bridget had described her, she wanted to go on adventures like Alice in Wonderland. Daisy was bright and mischievous, she made friends easily who would often fight over her, which amused the girl. She was always teacher's pet, until a year ago when she turned six and then, with the arrival of Samuel, everything had changed. At fist Daisy's mother had thought Samuel was a new kid in her daughter's class. All her little girl would talk about was him; she would tell her mother how funny, or naughty he was. Mum had put it down to a childish crush. It was later she found out the truth, when she had discovered her daughter reading to someone in her bedroom. She had thought she was reading to her teddies, but when she asked Daisy about it, the child said she was reading to Samuel. Samuel, it seemed, was an imaginary friend.

It had all seemed so innocent at the time, lots of children had imaginary friends at her age, especially if they were an only child, it was nothing to worry about, she would grow out of it. Yes it was all fine until Daisy started to act up in school. It started with her being disruptive, then moved on to her breaking things, being rude to the other children and her teachers, and even becoming angry and lashing out at her classmates. The teachers and headmistress were very concerned, Daisy was a good girl, they couldn't understand what would make her change so dramatically in such a short time. When her mother confronted her, Daisy told her it was all Samuel's fault. Her mum wasn't ready to dismiss it so lightly.

"You can't blame your bad behaviour on your imaginary friend." Her mum told her angrily. "You have to stop being a naughty girl."

"But it's Samuel, Mummy." Daisy sobbed. "He tells me to do things, bad things, says that they all whisper about me in school and say mean things."

"No one is saying mean things about you, they're your friends." Her mother soothed her. "You have to stop listening to Samuel."

"But he's mean to me, he says he'll hurt you and daddy if I don't do what he tells me." The little girl was afraid; her eyes darted about as if checking to see if her so called friend was around.

"Samuel can't hurt us honey, you just have to stop talking to him, if he turns up ignore him or tell me or daddy OK?" Mother embraced her daughter reassuringly. "There's no need to worry."

After that little talk everything seemed to go back to normal, but the calm didn't last long. Miss Bridget said Daisy seemed distracted in class, she would shhhhh chairs and put her fingers in her ears when no one was talking. The teacher had even seen her talking to thin air and reprimanding it for trying to get her into trouble. She boycotted the other children and was always alone now, and had stopped taking part in activities she used to love and excel at. Even at home she was distant. It seemed her imaginary friend was still around. Then one day her dad walked in on her tearing up her Alice in Wonderland book, when he challenged her over the reason she told him that Samuel had said it was a stupid book, and she spent too much time with Mummy reading it, and ignoring him.

They took her to see a child psychiatrist in the hope it would help but it just made things worse. Daisy started to injury herself, she would wake up full of cuts, bruises and even bite marks, when asked why she had done this to herself she would tell them that it wasn't her but Samuel that had caused the injuries, seems he wasn't pleased that they were trying to get rid of him. Her parents were at a loss for what to do, their sweet child was suffering from her own imagination and they didn't know how to help. Daisy had continued to talk to thin air, she took little interest in anything, got angry a lot, was mean and cruel to everyone around her including her mum and dad. At school the other children kept a safe distance from her, fearful of her violent outbursts. Even her best friend Emily wouldn't come over to play, too scared of Samuel. Sometimes Daisy would cry and apologize over and over. They put her on medication and everything seemed fine, then her father had an accident at work and ended up in hospital. Daisy seemed convinced that it was her fault, even when her dad told her he was fine and it

wasn't anything to do with her, she was not convinced. She stopped taking her pills, when her parents found out she told them that Samuel had hurt daddy because she was taking tablets to get rid of him and he was angry. Once again her parents tried to persuade her that Samuel couldn't hurt them or her and she had to stop talking to him, but Daisy remained distraught. After that, little mishaps seemed to plague the family. Everything from items and objects being misplaced or disappearing altogether, to incidents leading to injuries. Soon it wasn't just Daisy that woke up scared. At first mum and dad thought it was Daisy causing the various 'accidents' but soon even they began to question it. Mum tried to do some research on the internet but the power blew. She became increasingly concerned for her child's sanity as well as her own. Her husband had dismissed the whole thing as coincidence, they had taken their little girl back to the psychiatrist and she had been put on stronger meds, all was calm once more.

Mum sat silent watching her little princess sleep peacefully for once. On hearing the hinges creek behind her she looked around to see her husband standing in the bedroom door way.

"What are you doing in here?" He asked her.

"Just finishing Alice in Wonderland, you know it's her favourite." She smiled up at him, he looked back at her blankly, his shoulders were slumped, his face gaunt.

"You have to stop doing this." He ran a hand through his hair slowly. "It's been four months now. You have to let her go." He reached out and placed a gentle hand on his wife's arm, she visibly flinched as reality hit her like a wave, bringing with it the memories she would rather forget.

She was walking back from the school with Daisy, holding her hand. The child was more subdued lately but at least she had stopped hurting herself. The doctors said she could come off the meds when she was stronger and more in control of her emotions. Glancing down at the child she noticed that Daisy seemed preoccupied as if she was watching someone or something else, her mother called to her to get her attention. When asked what she was looking at, Daisy wouldn't answer but her mother could guess. They had carried on walking until Daisy let out a yelp of pain, when mum stopped to see what was wrong she saw that a large welt had appeared on the child's arm. Now mum got angry. She turned towards were she thought Samuel was likely to be and shouted.

"Leave my child and my family alone! I don't care if you're real or not, get out of my babies head!"

There was silence for a moment and then suddenly, without warning, Daisy's hand was wrenched from her own. She tried to hold on but it was pulled by such force she couldn't maintain her grip. Looking up she meet her daughter's eyes, the horror, fear and foreboding in them made her panic. She made a desperate grab for the child but fell short. Her little girl was being pulled away from her. Daisy struggled frantically to free herself from her unseen assailant but to no avail. She pleaded for her mummy's help, her hands reaching out. Her mother didn't hesitate; she followed her daughter, unaware of the truck, not hearing the blast of its horn. Suddenly, strong hands were on her shoulders holding her back, she tried to get free but they held her tight as the terrible scene unfolded before her eyes. The truck careened into Daisy sending her flying into the air. 'Dead on impact' they told her later, but Daisy's mother had seen the terror on her child's face. Screaming, Mum moved forward but the onlookers continued to hold her back for fear of what she might do, she was forced to watch. Through her tears she swore she saw a boy on the other side of the road laughing cruelly before he disappeared. A figment of her imagination, or something she had conjured up in her grief her husband had told her, but she wasn't convinced. Later when the condolences had flooded in there was an anonymous message saying, she should have done what I told her, it was signed S. Again dad had put it down to the cruelty of people, but his wife could not imagine someone being so vicious and cruel.

Daisy's mother began to sob uncontrollably, her body rocking with the force, her husband came and put his arms around her and held her until she calmed down.

"Come on, let's get you to bed. Tomorrow we'll get you some help," he spoke softly and his wife nodded into his tear stained chest. Slowly she rose to her shaking legs, supported by her husband. She looked back at the empty bed where her precious child was sleeping only moments before, and realised that it was now herself that was reading to no one.

When they left the room the flower lamp suddenly glowed brightly and then winked out, a childish voice said, "You can't get rid of me that easily," and all the stars dimmed leaving the room in darkness.

About the Author:

Kelly-Ann Porter hails from Liverpool, England, where she enjoys nothing more than spending time with her Pomeranian Syaoran (little wolf). She is an accomplished crafter and maker, creating costumes, jewellery and props. Her active imagination manifests itself in the many short stories she has written.

Service | Lady DarkMyst

She stood on the balcony, her grey eyes fixed on the horizon, pouring herself into the endlessness of it as the sun slipped beneath the edge. The shadows began to lengthen, pulling her back to the reality of what's behind her. She snorted in contemplation at the thought of his promises. Oh, how he trembled as he pleaded to keep the shabby tendrils of his life from ebbing away. She cast a glance over her shoulder, thinking there might be some remodeling in order. This one was messier than the previous had been. As she sauntered across the room, her disdain for this unworthy creature not disguised in the slightest as she stepped through the remains of what used to be her lover. He seemed surprised by the reception he was met with when he returned to her chamber, as if his betrayal would go undetected and his deceit would shield him from judgment; her judgment. How little he knew about her, even after all the decades of service. She ran a crimson fingertip over her lips, savoring his taste once more. She didn't foresee this one being the one to expose her...well, try to anyway.

She had remained out of the consciousness of humanity for thousands of years, letting their collective memory of the old ways and the creatures they once feared dim as she rested in solitude, far from their reach. That was, until the small scouting party found her cave and disturbed her slumber...and her hunger. As she drank each one, she tasted their memories, saw glimpses of how the world had moved on, seemingly ignorant of anything outside their mediocre knowledge of the natural world. It was that awakening that led her to their cities to watch and learn how the creatures, that had at one time offered her sacrifices, now mindlessly ran around, repeating the same meaningless routines with no apparent purpose. She had been alone for so long that it would be difficult for her to interact without a liaison, so she went in search of one.

Over the years, she was joined by many. Some of them were merely food, some of them distractions from the strange world she found herself in. Occasionally, she grew fond of one and kept them until their life naturally ended. She didn't feel love like mortals do. Instead, she regarded them more like pets. They brought her satisfaction and aided her in the appearance of a 'normal' life. That was until him. He appeared on the fringe of her perception and she didn't regard him as anything more than a potential meal. She maintained the illusion of normalcy until the day he was finally beneath her, vulnerable and under her spell. That first drop of his blood that spilled into her waiting mouth...oh how memories hit her like a storm with a thunderous roar. She gasped as she was thrown through the maelstrom of his most intimate moments to the most mundane. She saw the scope of his life in that instant and knew she would keep him, whether it was until his final breath or eternity. She snapped back into the present... Eternity. Ha!

Knowing the situation needed addressing quickly, before the smell became noticeable, she reached for her phone and dialed the building custodian. He has always been loyal and tactful in his dealings with her 'indiscretions' and in return she rewards him with the scraps of her leftover meals. Sometimes having a scavenger for a pet has its benefits. He arrived within minutes of her call and knocked three times before letting himself in. As she lounged on the settee, she motioned for him to approach.

"I came as soon as I could, Mistress."

"Yes, you are the reliable, if not greedy, imp needed right now. Clean this mess up."

"Yes, Mistress, right away," he quipped eagerly. She smirked and looked back out towards the skyline through the open drapes at the city as it came to life for the night. It'd been over 30 years since she'd been on her own to hunt and the thought filled her with both delight and dread. Facing mortals alone often proved difficult as her desire to drink them on sight was hard to restrain. That's where 'he' came in. He bridged the social gap with his charming smile and captivating green eyes.

When they went out together, he would be the magnet that drew even the most reserved of prey. She preferred to stay in the shadows and watch him easily break through the pretense of noncommittal interest. At 6'2" with a perfect build, he was handsome, gregarious, and desirable. Even the most arrogant prude would find themselves laughing at his quips and staring into his emerald eyes as if to try to gauge if he were indeed mortal. Male or female didn't matter, he appealed to all of them. Of course, he had the advantage of a few drops of her blood in his system and it was like a pheromone to humans, and even to some animals, that was irresistible. Once he had convinced them of his honor or seduced them with whispers of carnal pleasure, he would invariably lead them to wherever she waited, allowing her the scent of a potential meal. If she looked away, he took that as a dismissal and would quickly find a way to disentangle himself from the rejected offering. On the other hand, if she raised her glass and sipped slowly, he knew to continue with his ministrations until the desired target agreed to leave with him.

Usually, they would make their way to the waiting limousine only to get in and discover her there, waiting, smiling, a vision of ethereal beauty. Sometimes, they would protest the presence of another unexpected companion, but

would always succumb to her mesmerizing gaze. She easily brought them under control with a stroke on the cheek and a few whispered commands.

"Come, don't be shy." Her voice like a cool sheet of satin flowed over their senses, delicate and seductive. Once the car started moving and the doors locked, the atmosphere changed. He on one side, held fast to the arm of their captive, she on the other as she stared into their eyes while her fingers moved over the soft pulse at the nape of their neck. Once the hunger took over, she was a creature of instinct. Fangs and claws flashed and blood flowed. Screams turned to gurgles until there was only silence and the smell of fresh blood filled the air. He always made sure she was fully sated before notifying the driver to go to the garage to have the car serviced.

Her thoughts were broken by a raspy voice, "Mistress, I'm finished." She hadn't realized how much time had passed and that the mess gone and the short, stocky, blood-covered servant with greasy hair and taped glasses stood before her, eyes down and hands behind his back, waiting to be dismissed.

"Yes, very good, slave. Enjoy it. He was a rare vintage."

"Thank you, Mistress. It is my honor to serve you, as always." With that, she waved her hand at him to be gone so she could be alone with her thoughts. Once he was out of sight, she stood and let her silk robes fall free. She moved silently to the balcony to stare out into the night, and wondered how she hadn't sensed his betrayal. Even after all these centuries, she still didn't understand the human condition, and perhaps, that will be her downfall. She snorts and thinks she'll devour them all before that happens!

About the Author:

Lady DarkMyst prefers to wander the gloomy halls of the Shadow Keep, unseen by mortals and unknown to all but the few who have dared to drink from the well of Hidden Shadows and Dark Desires.

A Superior Predator | Joshua E. Borgmann

I'd waited a very long time to find her. We'd met once many years ago, and I had my fun, taking everything from her and leaving her with a bit of myself. My only regret was that I was interrupted and left her before I'd finished my task. I wasn't one to make mistakes, so I'd long dreamed of finishing my work.

It was so very long, but I found her. I'd come to find dating sites, escort review boards, and ad sites were a wonderful place to search for prey. The web brought me all I needed, and I seldom needed to actually hunt anymore. I'd pick a woman, study her ads, her social media, and often her websites. They usually told me enough to know if she'd be missed. When I was sure a few emails would get me a date, and then I need only show up and reap my rewards.

Two months ago, I was searching through escort ads, dismissing the fakes and the potential law enforcement, and noting those I wished to investigate more deeply. When her picture came up. I recognized her immediately even across all the years for no one had ever escaped me and nothing ever slips my mind. I read her ad. She was calling herself Lucretia Bloodborne and using some kind of gothic dominatrix persona. I had to admit it was a fitting brand all things considered. I read her ad memorizing her rates and rules. Following her Linktree, I found her Twitter, Instagram, and OnlyFans sites. I followed all of them. It would have been easy for me to make my move then, but I waited. I followed her Twitter closely and replied occasionally but not enough to be dismissed as a reply guy. I tracked her, noted every city she visited. Read every post and reply, memorized the followers and clients she seemed most interested in.

Before her next tour of my city, I responded to her ad with a polite email requesting a date during her upcoming visit. As expected, she asked for basic screening information, but I had several ironclad identities with legitimate identification and could pass any background check she put me through. Three emails and our date was set.

I arrived at her room on time. When she opened the door, she didn't seem to recognize me. She smiled at me and hugged me before I put my donation on the desk. I took up her offer to freshen up in the bathroom. As I stripped, I assured myself that she was no threat. I was after all a superior predator. I licked my fangs and opened the door.

I noticed she wasn't naked just as her right hand thrust the stake into my heart.

"Did you think I'd forgotten, monster?" I fell, and she pressed her stilettoed foot into my groin.

"You're my first kill," she whispered with seduction, venom, and sweetness. "You should have learned: a superior predator knows how to take just enough."

Mother Visits | Joshua E. Borgmann

I was sleeping on the couch when she appeared.

The room was dark and I'd fallen asleep in the middle of another Bigfoot documentary. I'd probably have slept poorly for a few hours as was my custom if I hadn't been awoken by the sound of coughing.

The television had gone into power-saving mode, but it gave off just enough light to illuminate her form standing beside one of my bookcases. I thought that it must be a dream because I recognized that ridiculous beehive hairdo and those awful horned rimmed glasses immediately. My so-called mother had worn both for as long as I could remember; however, her ashes were safely stored in an unopened box in a cupboard in the laundry-room where they'd been since I finally recovered them from the junk in the back of my car six months earlier. As far as I was concerned, she was happily cosigned to oblivion, so she couldn't be standing in my house watching me try to sleep.

"What the fuck do you want," I croaked out of my dry throat.

She just stared at me for a minute before she said, "You never even came to see me, you dirty little shit."

I laughed and didn't even bother trying to get up.

"Not one God-Damned time while I was rotting in that place," she continued.

"Fuck off," I said. "I didn't even know where you were until the funeral home called."

"That's a fucking lie," she bellowed and pointed her bony finger at me.

'Nah, you signed power of attorney over to Mrs. Johnson, and she cut me out. I called the last place I knew you were at, but they told me that they couldn't say anything to me because you didn't have a son."

She laughed and billowed, "Well, I do not have a son. I have an adopted son. Maybe I should have left you with my drug addled niece or with your loser father. I bet you wouldn't have it so good then."

It was my turn to laugh. "No, you just left me with your elderly mother. All you did was show up and yell for no reason. I remember one time you said you wished you had a bomb so you could blow us all to Hell," I yelled as I started to push myself up to a sitting position.

She started to move toward me still pointing her finger. The look on her face was the same hateful visage I remembered from life, so I decided to push the issue a bit and said, "I bet you've finally made it to Hell now. Care to share a weather report?"

She stopped in her tracks and proceeded to start coughing.

"You're not welcome here," I said as I turned on another Bigfoot documentary.

She stood there staring at me for another twenty minutes until she faded away.

The next morning, I finally flushed her ashes down the toilet. It was better than she deserved.

About the Author:

Joshua E. Borgmann toils away his days as an English instructor at a small community college and dreams of being able to escape into a world of fantasy and terror where there are no student papers to grade. He resides in a nameless small town surrounded by terrible cornfields. He is currently being held captive by felines who have taken over his home.

Cocooned | Greg Fewer

Pleased with her first trip to the local market, Helen put away her purchases before sitting down to take a bite of a new exotic fruit called a 'cocoon berry'. It was delicious, so Helen gobbled up two more!

However, within minutes, she had an acute stomach cramp and became dizzy. When she tried to stand, she fell to the floor and lost consciousness.

Days later, personnel in hazmat suits entered her house and found her body cocooned in a fungal matt.

One of them exclaimed: "That makes 46 victims! Whoever bio-engineered those berries has a lot to answer for!

About the Author:

Greg Fewer has had a lifelong interest in speculative literature and tabletop role-playing games. Publishing one story in 2007, he returned to writing stories and poems more frequently about three years ago. His work has appeared in (among other places): Cough Syrup, Lovecraftiana, Page & Spine, Polar Borealis, Scifaikuest, Star*Line, and Sirens Call Publications. This story originally appeared in Dirty Girls Magazine #2 (2019).



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Valerie | K.A. Johnson

Ralph slid into his chair and logged into The Sea, the dating website he'd been using for the last few years. His heart fluttered when he saw the green circle next to her name. Valerie was online. His friends had been laughing at him. There was no way someone as pretty as Valerie could be interested in someone as nerdy as he, they had said. The joke was on them though; she'd been talking with him for about a month now. Ralph clicked on her name, which opened the messaging box.

"Hi honey," he typed.

A blinking dot appeared next to her name, telling Ralph that Valerie was typing a response.

"Hi, sweetie. Are you interested in meeting in real life tonight?"

Ralph's heart skipped a beat. He knew the day would come that he and Valerie would meet for real, but he still wasn't quite mentally prepared.

"Sure."

"Meet me at The Well?"

"Okay."

"I've got to get ready, sweetie. See you at nine?"

"Sounds really good."

"See you soon, sweetie."

"Okay."

The dot next to Valerie's name turned red, indicating to Ralph that she had logged out of The Sea.

Later that evening, Ralph made his way to The Well, a basement bar in the Bronx. The stairs down to The Well were narrow and went under the set of steps that went up to the businesses on the first floor. Ralph opened the heavy door and entered. The bar was dark and dingy. The lighting was such that he couldn't even tell if the bar had been cleaned in years and the customers at the bar looked like they might be permanent fixtures of the establishment.

Ralph wondered why Valerie wanted to meet him at such a seedy place. He couldn't fathom what the appeal was for her. *Maybe she lives nearby*, Ralph thought. He saw her at a booth in the corner that the light barely illuminated. Ralph walked over.

"Valerie?"

"Yes."

Ralph slid into the bench on the opposite side of the table from her.

Ralph was glad to see his friends were wrong. Valerie hadn't been catfishing him. She was as beautiful in real life as she was in her photos on The Sea.

"I'm Ralph."

"I suspected that, sweetie. How are you?"

"I'm good. How are you?"

"Not bad. I've had a long day, but seeing you is brightening it up. What do you want? I'll go get it from the bar."

"Just a beer, I'm not much of a drinker."

"Any beer?"

"Pick one out for me. I don't know much about the brands."

"I guess you really aren't much of a drinker."

Valerie got up and went to the run-down bar counter. She had a short talk with the muscular, tattooed, mustachioed man behind the counter, who produced two large clear glass mugs with an amber liquid inside. Valerie turned around with a mug in each hand. Returning to the booth, she placed one in front of Ralph before placing the other where she was sitting and slid back onto the bench.

"Nugget Nectar."

"What?"

"The name of the beer, silly."

"Oh."

Ralph did feel silly. He felt like he was already blowing it with Valerie. Ralph drank some of his beer.

"You must be thirsty."

Ralph realized he had drunk more of the beer than he had intended. He smiled.

"Yep."

"Tell me more about yourself. It must be nice working from home."

Valerie had been like this throughout their internet relationship. She asked Ralph far more questions than he asked her, and she was often aloof with answers about herself when she did provide them. That was part of the reason Ralph's friends had thought she was catfishing him. Ralph never really pressed her for information because he didn't want to come across as being too forward.

"Well, it is nice not having to commute across the city."

"I can imagine. Do you miss seeing other people at work?"

"Not really. I've never been much of a people person."

Ralph started feeling odd. He didn't feel well and thought, I shouldn't have grabbed the hot dog from the street vendor on the way here. His head felt swimmy, and he tried to hold his composure in front of Valerie. I must make it to the bathroom, Ralph thought, Valerie can't see me like this.

Ralph felt dizzy and groggy as he opened his eyes. The last thing he remembered was talking with Valerie at the bar. His vision was blurry at first, and slowly his surroundings came into focus.

The first thing that Ralph became aware of was that he was naked on a table face up. He felt the hardness of it on his back. He tried to move and realized he couldn't turn over. His arms were out to his sides and were held down somehow.

"What the fuck?" Ralph asked to no one.

He found his legs, which were spread apart, also were restrained. Ralph didn't think he had enough to drink at the bar to blackout. His memory of the bar was very hazy, and he found himself wondering, 'What did I get myself into? I hope I didn't embarrass myself in front of Valerie'.

He looked up and saw rusty utility pipes running below a grungy cement-looking ceiling. He turned his head to the side and saw a dirty brick wall with more utility pipes running along it. A single bare lightbulb, dangling from the ceiling, lit the room.

"Hey!" Ralph shouted. "Can anyone hear me?"

"You're awake," came a female voice from behind the top of Ralph's head. Ralph tried to tilt his head up to see the woman, but he couldn't manage it from his current predicament.

"Help me, please," Ralph said. "I appear to have somehow gotten myself stuck."

Ralph heard footsteps walk over to his right side. He turned his head and saw Valerie.

"Oh, thank God it is you," Ralph said. "Can you help me get up?"

"Silly, you didn't get yourself stuck," Valerie said. "I tied you down, and I'm certainly not going to untie you after all the work it took to get you down here."

"I don't know what kind of weird game this is, but I think I'd rather go home."

"It isn't a game, and I'm sorry to say you aren't going to be going home now."

Valerie planted a kiss on Ralph's forehead and giggled.

"Okay, fun is fun, but this really isn't fun anymore, so why don't you untie me now."

"Oh Ralph, none of this is about fun. It's about education."

"Education?"

"Yes, my education."

"I don't understand. I thought we had a date."

"No, not at all, silly. I selected you to help with my education."

"Your education in what?"

"I'm in med school. You know the old joke, what do you call a person who graduates last in her class in medical school?"

"No."

"A doctor, silly. Well, you see, with my grades, I'm not going to graduate. I'll end up being booted out long before my fourth year. I need extra practice in order to do better."

"So, how do I fit in?"

"You're my practice."

"I don't know anything about being a doctor."

"No, silly, I'm going to practice using you."

"Don't they give you bodies or something to practice on?"

"Not unlimited cadavers, I'm what they call a slow learner."

"So, you don't become a doctor."

"No, you don't understand; that isn't an option. My parents have been grooming me my whole life to be a doctor. My father is a renowned heart surgeon, my grandfather was a doctor at Bellevue. My great-grandfather was a medical research doctor at Willowbrook, and his father was a highly regarded experimental psychiatrist at the New York City Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell's Island. Well, at least until they shut it down. I can't not be a doctor. My family would disown me."

"Can't your father help you get practice cadavers?"

"Oh no, he can't know how poorly I'm doing. That would be as bad as failing out. No, I have to do this on my own, and that's where you come in."

"I don't understand."

"My girlfriend was telling me about how she tried one of those online dating sites, and how she had all these losers, who didn't even know her, begging for dates. Then the idea came to me. If I went on dating sites and picked losers, like you, who no one would ever miss, I could get the bodies I need to practice on."

"I'm not a loser," Ralph said indignantly.

"Really? Who is even going to notice you are gone over the next week? The next two weeks? The next month? "Someone would."

"Sure, sweetie, you can think that."

Valerie winked at Ralph.

"Where am I?"

"In an old cold war fallout shelter I found in the basement of my apartment building. I don't think anyone knows it's down here. I noticed a corridor behind some old stacked mattresses and checked it out. It went to a big thick green wooden door with a yellow and black fallout shelter sign next to it. I had to look up what it was."

"Won't someone in the apartment building hear me scream?"

"No one has heard anyone scream yet."

"Can't you just let me go and get someone else?"

"Why would I go through all that work? I have you here. And the exam is soon. No, it has to be you. And we really have to get to work. I have other courses to study for as well."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you and I are going to work on appendectomies."

"Appendectomies?"

"Yes, I'm going to remove your appendix."

"Can I live without my appendix?"

"Sure, why else would we have to learn how to take them out, silly."

"That's good."

"Not really. I said you could live, not that you will live. I can't have people running around telling crazy stories about a crappy medical student cutting into them in an old fallout shelter. Someone might actually believe you, and, well, that would cause a lot of issues I don't want to deal with. I'm already overwhelmed with all I have on my plate now."

"I wouldn't tell anyone."

"You won't believe this, but that's what they all say. Now, on to your appendectomy."

Valerie reached over to a wooden table against the wall and picked up a thick hardcover book. She flipped through the pages until she got to one, and then she held up the book so that Ralph could see the pages. He saw all these diagrams of a human body.

"This is the operation we are about to perform."

"You'll knock me out first, right?"

"No, the Rohypnol I used in your drink is expensive and obviously isn't covered by school supply grant money. All that comes out of my pocket, and I can't afford to work much, not with all the extra studying I have to do."

Valerie returned to the small table and opened a black bag. From inside, Ralph saw her pull out a surgical knife.

"Please don't do this. This joke has gone on long enough. It isn't funny. I want to go home now."

Ralph started crying.

"Sorry, sweetie, this isn't a joke, and you aren't going home."

Ralph felt Valerie feel along the right side of his abdomen with her finger tickling him.

"The body should come with cut lines on it. This would all be so much easier if it did."

Ralph felt a sharp prick in his abdomen, causing him to scream out, followed by an odd sensation on the skin. The weird sensation made his body twitch."

"Fuck, don't do that. Dr. Harding would never pass this cut line now."

The sensation had changed to a burning feel on his skin, and Ralph felt a warm fluid running down his side.

"Shit, it isn't supposed to bleed this much. I did something wrong, again! Goddamnit!"

Ralph suddenly started to feel queasy, his vision began to swim, and everything went black.

About the Author:

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

Blog: <u>K.A. Johnson</u> **Twitter:** @kenjohnsontnh

The Warlock's Gift | Joshua E. Borgmann

Never dump a warlock two days before your birthday. His spell brought my death and cursed me to awake each year on my birthday. I first awoke to the agony of embalming fluid burning into my flesh. I could hear my friends and family speaking of me in the distance. My funeral! Dead eyes cannot cry, and soon the voices faded. I was forever alone. I awoke again smelling my own putrefaction and feeling maggots eating the rancid soup that was my body. More is gone each year, but I shall suffer until I am dust. Happy Birthday to me.

Briar Rose: The True Story | Joshua E. Borgmann

Millicent was enraged. This foolish king dared seat her at the back of the hall when even after she had bedded him and given him a child that he secretly adored, she'd still given him the potion that made the barren queen conceive. Staring at her plate, she muttered a curse under her breath and smiled while everyone ate. As the rest of the guests politely fell dead, she stepped into the baby's room and claimed her for herself.

She left behind a rose bush, which veiled the castle in deadly thorns, and took both her daughters far far away.

About the Author:

Joshua E. Borgmann toils away his days as an English instructor at a small community college and dreams of being able to escape into a world of fantasy and terror where there are no student papers to grade. He resides in a nameless small town surrounded by terrible cornfields. He is currently being held captive by felines who have taken over his home.





The Mummy Game | Selah Janel

Chatter and laughter from the children upstairs drifted down to the finished basement where the neighborhood adults were having their own party.

"This was such a good plan, Tess. I haven't had this much fun in years!" Elle Jefferson laughed as she raced to wind bandages around the figure in the center of the commotion. It wasn't making things easy, wiggling and trying to jump through their ranks. Luckily, it was a little harder to break through a circle of adults on a mission than it was a herd of eight-year-olds.

"Right? Why should the kids have all the fun? Besides, I haven't played this game in years. It seemed appropriate," Tess replied, dunking a roll in water before moving to wrap the ankles before he could bust loose again. It had taken them a couple goes to really get going, but, well, Tess's son Alex played baseball and had conveniently left his bat on the basement rec room sofa. Besides, the last time any of them had played the mummy game they'd used toilet paper.

"Remind me to thank Kent for getting us the plaster tape," Sarah Anderson from four doors down commented as she smoothed out the rough edges along the chest. Along the periphery of the room other parents watched. The older neighbors or siblings were good enough to keep the kids busy with a much more friendly party upstairs. No reason for them to get scared by anything other than Halloween appropriate material, after all. No reason for them to know how the world could be just yet. Better to keep them occupied while the neighborhood dealt with the problem. "It's a shame he couldn't be here."

"These sort of parties aren't for everyone, Elle admitted. Her voice went hard as she looked at the wiggling figure. "I'm glad I came, though."

"Have to admit, I'm having more fun than I thought," David Anderson agreed. Elle was sure he was. It was his daughter that had nearly been taken out of their yard by their Halloween centerpiece a few days ago. There had been rumors of a creeper in the nearby suburbs for a while, but until David just happened to be raking leaves while his daughter was coming home from school and caught him in the act they'd all half written it off as urban legend, something that they heard about but that couldn't happen in Englewood, especially not in their neighborhood. Now, they'd deal with it as a neighborhood.

"I'll admit this is probably a bit extreme, but we can't take the chance of you running away," Elle sighed at the figure. She didn't much care for the feel of the wet plaster on her hands, but it was a small price to pay. "After what you did, you can see why we don't want to take chances. We take care of our own here. It could've been any one of our kids you went after! It could've been..." She pursed her lips and cleared her throat from the awful words. She'd sent Cindy out to play that same day and they lived right next door to the Andersons. Cindy and Diane were best friends. She'd been so distracted getting things ready for Cindy's school party, she wouldn't have even noticed. I'm a bad parent, but this can make up for it, she thought.

It was hard to look into the man's terrified eyes. They'd left the gag on because there was no need for conversation, and the kids didn't need to think there was anything super scary going on if he screamed. "It could've been my little girl. Or someone else's little boy. We can't let you do that to anyone else." Sure, he said he was just asking for directions, but that's the oldest trick in the book, isn't it? You know how awful things are these days. She stretched out the tape and the man flinched away, shaking his head. He'd sworn up and down that he hadn't meant anything, that he really had been lost, that Diane looked like she was chasing a cat out into the street. If it wasn't for all the plaster and the black eye he'd been given when he'd tried to escape up the stairs earlier, he'd look like a forty-something she'd pass by in any aisle of a grocery store. That thought alone, that anyone could harm her little girl, worried her. The thought that maybe they'd jumped the gun worried her even more. Is this what monsters really look like? What if we have it wrong? Do monsters look like us?

The plaster tape dripped on the carpeted floor and her hands shook. The small mob paused and stared at her, and for just a moment she wondered what would happen if she voiced her concern. Would that dark, gleeful meanness in all their eyes be directed at her? Would it be easier to just deal with her, too? She shuddered.

David put a hand on her wrist and gently took the tape away. "He's guilty as hell, Elle. I saw him grabbing her up. If I hadn't beaten the crap out of him then...you saw how he fought us earlier. He's guilty, Elle. He has to be." That quiet fear was there in David's eyes, too, but the anger, the desperate need to make things okay, to have a target to punish, to protect his child was much stronger. "He won't hurt anyone again," he added, louder, and worked the tape over the guy's gagged mouth.

"Damn right." Jennifer Dawson helped him wrap the tape around the head, and went right over his nose. He shook so hard it was like he vibrated and tears leaked out of his eyes. Strange, muffled, animalistic screams forced out of him. Jennifer and David quickly did a layer, erasing his eyes, his forehead, all the human features that could have changed their minds, until the head was a blank canvas. They did another to make him that much more unrecognizable. The noises grew less and the body swayed.

"Everything alright down there?" Mrs. Grant from the end of the cul de sac called down. "The children thought they heard something.

The parents stared at each other, stared at the figure that was obviously trying to flail as it fell on the floor, trembling.

"Perfectly fine," Elle heard herself say, and somehow she smiled, though it felt like her face was more of a mask than any of the ones the trick or treaters had worn. "Tell them we're just watching a scary movie and making some decorations."

Mrs. Grant had a clear sight line to the blank screen of the television, but she nodded and flashed a pleasant smile. "Of course, dear, how festive."

When she closed the door they stared at each other. "So," Elle ventured, always the one to have to fill the silence, "Whose porch are we going to put him on?"

About the Author:

Selah Janel has written many e-books, including *Mooner, The Ruins of St. Louis, The Inheritance, and Candles*. Her work has appeared in The Grotesquerie, Curious Incidents: More Improbable Tales, and The Big Bad volumes 1 & 2. An unrepentant theater geek, she's worked for over twenty years in theater and entertainment building and designing costumes in regional theater, holiday events, amusement parks, and haunted events.

Website: <u>Selah Janel</u>
Twitter: <u>@SelahJanel</u>

Black Wings | Nina D'Arcangela

The first appears, then another. Soon the creatures are gathering; forming an indecipherable mass as each blends into the next. The assembly grows as evening deepens. They believe the shadow of late dusk masks their movement, but their eyes give them away – wet, shining, filled with hatred and unshed rage. One breaks from the pack, just one. It thinks itself brave as it postures for the others; foolish is a far more apt term. We stand at the ready, waiting for the melee to begin. As the first rock is hurled, the murder descends.

About the Author:

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

Author Blog: <u>Sotet Angyal</u> Intagram: @DarcNina



The Secret Through the Fog | Angie Velarde

"Where are we going, Maria?" Arturo asked. The deep mist cloaked them both in moisture as they stumbled in the fog. The leaves crunched and cracked beneath their feet. As they passed each tree in the haze, Maria reached out and pressed her hands onto the rough bark of their trunks as if counting, remembering. She paused briefly, and traced her hand along a knot in the base of a tree.

"Not much further, now," she replied.

The damp air collected in Arturo's beard in droplets and sheets, and he shook his head as if to will it free. It showered the ground below, collecting in pools on the faces of browned leaves.

"If you would only tell me where we were going, I might be able to assist," Arturo replied. "My ancestors have roamed these woods for many generations. Even in this dense cloud, I am sure I could find my way."

"Dear Arturo," Maria said gently, "If you persist in asking questions, I will have no choice but to turn around, and embark this journey another day."

"Well, perhaps we should," Arturo replied. "I do not understand why you had to head out here today, of all days. This fog will surely steer you wrong. And this dew has soaked me to my bones."

Maria chuckled, "Yes, of course it needs to be today. It will be months before I will be able to try this again."

Arturo looked up at Maria, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"You will understand soon enough," Maria continued, noticing Arturo's puzzled gaze.

The twilight faded to darkness, and the fog lifted, bathing the pair in moonlight.

"How lucky that it is a full moon," Arturo said. "Otherwise, I doubt we would be able to see the noses in front of our faces."

Maria ignored him, and kept her eyes fixed on the path ahead.

"Maria," Arturo said, "We have walked a long way, now. I am afraid these hips are not what they used to be." Arturo lowered his snout to the ground and shook out his back hooves. The white of his horns glowed in the moonlight.

"Just up this hill, Arturo, and we will be there," Maria replied.

Arturo hesitated, for a moment before following Maria up the hill to an open patch of grass.

"Yes, this will do nicely," Maria said, laying out in the grass, her face basking in the moon's bright glow.

Arturo collapsed beside her.

"I don't like this, Maria," Arturo said. "I don't like this at all. Can we go home now?"

"Hush now, Arturo," said Maria softly. "Just rest your eyes. See how I am resting, here?"

Arturo sighed and closed his eyes, listening to the sounds of the night in the woods below. Maria stood on her feet, and pulled a small glass vial out of the pocket of her dress, which was filled with crimson sand. She tipped it forward, watching it spill to the ground, and drew a bright red circle around Arturo. She breathed deeply and muttered a few quiet words under her breath.

Arturo cracked open his eyes, and upon seeing the red lines in the grass, began bleating. He bleated frightfully louder and louder, until all of the creatures of the night had silenced themselves to listen to the goat's cries. Maria ignored his cries, and continued to circle him, chanting softly.

"Maria!" the goat screamed. "No!"

Maria pulled a knife from a sheath at her side, and approached Arturo. He tried to scramble away, but found himself bound and confined where he stood. Maria grabbed his great horns, and slit his throat, splattering her pale dress and the mossy ground with blood as red as the sand. The goat's cries faded as he collapsed into a heap on the ground.

Maria reached down to his neck, and gathered a sanguineous puddle in her hands. She smeared the blood across her forehead and cheeks and shouted her prayers to the ground. The hill rumbled deeply in the dark, and a great mound grew in the dirt—higher and higher it grew, until it stood taller than a man.

Two great hands broke through the mound, and the earth crumbled away, leaving a figure, tall and imposing, and as sinister as a nightmare. He stepped forward, smelling of brimstone and all manner of evil things, and the dirt that cloaked him floated away on the wind.

"At last, my love," Maria said. "We are together."

Maria and the figure walked towards one another slowly and embraced, sinking under the hill, and into the ground below.

About the Author:

Angie Velarde is a Latina fiction writer from Sacramento who enjoys dabbling in horror, personal essays, and magical realism. When she is not writing, she spends her days as a film enthusiast, traveler, and amateur musician.

Beauty's Pale Note | Melissa R. Mendelson

Meridine stood on the stage, glowing under the spotlight. She posed with one hand lingering against her hip. Her face tilted, showing off its beauty. Her body was strong and tight in a two-piece bathing suit, and she turned slightly, looking over the crowd. A blast of cold air almost knocked her back, but she stood her ground, staring daggers at the one that dared throw her off her game. Her blue eyes narrowed, meeting a creature that stole across the back. She pressed her red lips together, silently praying for its eviction, but the creature was given a chair instead.

Meridine closed her eyes and opened them. She held her winning smile in place. The judges smiled back, nodding their approval. She was dismissed, and the next contestant was called. She gracefully left the stage but not without slipping her foot out, tripping the young girl wearing a one-piece bathing suit. She nearly flopped, but to Meridine's dismay, she caught herself with perfect balance. Meridine cursed the creature in the back of the room for the bad luck. If she could throw it outside into the cold, she would, but she did not want to look like the bad guy. She was winning, and the creature would not ruin that.

"What is that thing doing in here? Why was it even allowed in here?" Meridine sat down in the changing room and stared at herself in the mirror. She grabbed her brush and brushed out her long, blonde curls. "Someone should call the police and have it removed."

"Jesus, Meridine. It's freezing outside, and they're probably looking for somewhere that's warm," and the girl powdered her nose.

"You missed a zit," Meridine replied as she ran her fingers across her flawless skin. She ignored the dirty look from the girl. She grabbed her red lipstick and ran it over her lips. "Last round," she said to herself.

"Excuse me, ladies." Meridine's mother stepped into the changing room. "I need the room," she announced.

"This is not a private room," another girl said as she twirled her cheerleader baton.

"Get out!" Meridine's mother glared at the other girls in the room. She didn't blink as they hurried past her. "Ten minutes. I promise," she yelled over her shoulder, and she slammed the door shut behind her. "Barbie dolls," she snapped. "But my baby girl is the real thing." She moved over to Meridine and massaged her shoulders. "Why are you so tense? You're winning this pageant, and then we can leave this shithole and move on to the next round."

"Then, what?"

"Then, what? We head straight for the top." Meridine's mother's fingers bit into her skin. "Loosen up. We're at the last round, and then we go home. I'll get you a milkshake."

"I don't want a milkshake," but Meridine's stomach growled. "Did you see that creature that snuck in while I was on stage? I think it looked at me," and bile rose up into her throat.

"Yes, Meridine, I saw it. I could not not smell it, and I demanded that the owner to have it removed. But he refused, saying some kind of bullshit about feeling sorry for it. They just want to be warm. Well, they can be warm inside a garbage can, but we're leaving soon. So, focus on the last round, the talent round. Are you ready?" Her hands froze over Meridine's shoulders.

Meridine looked away. She glanced up at the mirror, meeting her mother's hard stare. She forced a smile, her winning smile, but her mother was not buying it. "How about I tell jokes? I'm good at that."

"Meridine, I had you practicing for months on the clarinet," her mother said.

"I feel like a child playing it, and I'm not a child."

"And I didn't throw my money away for nothing. You're playing the clarinet. That's it, and if you're terrible at it, we'll find a new talent for you at the next pageant."

"I'm going to look retarded out there."

Meridine's mother struck her across the face. "No, you are not going to look stupid out there, so remember DO, RE, MI, FA, SO..."

"LA," Meridine sang.

"Don't sing. I heard dogs bark. Are you ready?"

"Yes, but why do I have to go last?"

"Because they are saving the best for last." Meridine's mother gave her a cold kiss on the cheek. She stepped away from Meridine. "Practice. Don't sit here and bite your nails. And don't wear the pink dress. It makes you look fat." Meridine's mother walked toward the door. "I'm proud of you," and she opened the door.

"I love you," Meridine said.

"Sure," Meridine's mother replied. She always said that. She never said, I love you. "Put the white dress on. It's form fitting, and the judges will focus on that." Her mother left the room, and the other girls walked back in.

Meridine waited for the other girls to finish changing into their outfits. They powdered their faces and colored their lips. They tossed their hair, and one winked at herself in the mirror. She was such a loser, and she was in last place. Once the girls left to line up by the stage, ready to show off their talents, Meridine slipped into the white dress. It was snug and form-fitting, but it would do. She almost bit her nails on the left hand, but she stopped herself. It was almost over, and suddenly, there was a knock on the door.

"Hello?"

"Hello." It was one of the women helping out with the pageant. "I have something for you."

"You do? Is it from one of the judges?" If it was, maybe Meridine could skip the last round. She really did not want to play the clarinet, and she watched the woman hand her a rose. The rose was black. "Is this some kind of joke?" "I'm sorry. You don't like roses?"

"It's black," Meridine snarled. She watched the woman look at the rose, confused, almost as if she were seeing something else. "Where did it come from?"

"A man, who came in before when you were on stage."

"That creature! How disgusting," and Meridine grabbed the rose. She crushed it under her white heel.

"He's just a man," the woman said.

"Get out. Get out," Meridine screamed at her. "Now!" Meridine watched the woman hurry out of the room. "If he was such a man, he wouldn't look so grotesque." She composed herself, kicking the remains of the rose away from her foot. "Last round. Forget that creature. How dare he... It doesn't matter. You got this, and you are going to win," and she picked up her clarinet.

Meridine stepped out of the room. She tossed her hair and held her head high. She flashed her winning smile at the other girls, who lingered around, waiting to see what she would do. They were nervous, and yes, she would win this pageant. They could all try again next year. She stepped onto the stage, and her smile almost vanished when she spotted the creature bent over in its chair. But it would not steal this victory from her. She closed her eyes, took a breath and began to play, Ode to Joy.

As she played the song, Meridine opened her eyes. The creature stood right by the stage. He did look like a man, but something was wrong with his face. The flesh did not sit right over the bone. His eyes were sunken in. His lips were yellow, and where there were supposed to be teeth was nothing but a gaping hole with a rancid odor. She nearly gagged and tried to stop playing, but she couldn't. She watched in horror as the creature blew her a kiss and walked away. She looked around for her mother, finding her standing in the crowd. Her mother wasn't moving. She just stood there, and as Meridine continued to play, she heard some kind of sound. A crack like someone popping their shoulder, and her mother's left leg buckled. But she remained standing. Her lips pressed together, and Meridine could see tears running down her face. She could not stop playing.

Meridine was close to finishing the song, and with every note, she heard another crack. She tried to stop herself, pull herself away from the clarinet, but she couldn't. She was forced to play the song, and she reached the final note. Her mother's face shattered like a broken mirror. Skin flew out into the air, raining down on those around her, but nobody noticed. Bone jutted outward, and a hollow scream slipped across the clarinet. Meridine's mother fell to the floor.

Meridine dropped the clarinet to the stage. The clarinet broke, and the crowd erupted into loud applause. People stood up from their seats and smiled at her as if they had never seen such a performance. Meridine tried to speak, but only a pale note slipped out. She could not see her mother on the floor. A tear ran down her face, painting her flawless skin black, and a crown was placed on top of her head, red roses in her arms.

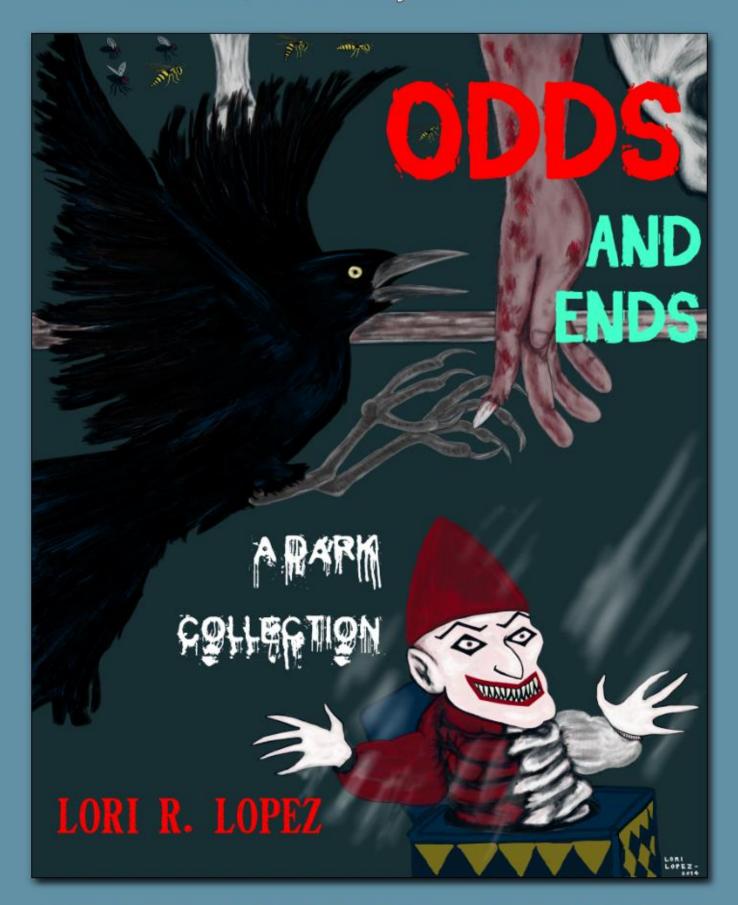
About the Author:

Melissa R. Mendelson is a Horror and Science-Fiction author. Her short stories have been published by Sirens Call Publications, Dark Helix Press and Transmundane Press. Her short stories have also been featured in several publications on the website, Medium. She is currently working on finishing her Horror novel, *Ghost in the Porcelain*.



Sometimes it is all about finding a glimmer of light in the shadows...

Sometimes, the candle's flame is blown out!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Beast of the Mountain | Patricia Flaherty Pagan

Expats adapt or die. After the North invaded, the pork ribs, chicken thighs, and nickel-sized shrimp disappeared from the market. I thought of the translator's horse. Plotting, I bit my lip. Tasted blood.

A widow, Jin had been called to translate at a banquet in Seoul three days before the missiles hit. She'd asked me to feed and water her horse while she was gone. I drove up into the breathing heart of the mountain three times. Something consumed the apple slices and rice I left on the floor of the stone shack, and the water level of the troth I filled decreased, but I never saw the animal emerge from the shadows.

On the seventh day of the war, I gave up on the embassy and drove back to Jangsan.

I stepped out of the car with my ax and skirted the barbed wire fence warning of active landmines from previous hostilities. Mockingbirds cursed in the trees.

As I rushed into the shack, the stench of feces assaulted me. Straining at the end of its chain, a red-eyed mammal with a matted coat of brown hair over its protruding ribs growled. I gasped as I realized it had once been human. Jin was no widow. It lunged for me, but the chain jerked its neck back. In its eyes, I saw the same terror whispering in my brain. Hunger.

Later, the sweet heat of kimchi masked my sin. I added chunks of the beast to my mushroom stew and served it to my children. Expats adapt or die.

Young Souls Are Mine | Patricia Flaherty Pagan

With the advent of Mr. Lancaster's lauded folding Watch Camera in 1894, the lads and ladies' brightness became easy to seize onto two and one half-inch plates. Enraptured by watching Marvelous Nex Mortalitas, our magician, guileless children sit open-mouthed for moments at a time. Ready to be captured in time.

A craftsman knows his palette. Not for me, the garish red of the clown's lips. Nor the muddied tulle skirts swept aside as the cavaliere Bianca jumps and poses with her Dapple Grey mare in the tent. Her beauty will one day wither. Purity is light; belief is color.

No one sees me withdraw Lancaster's beauty from my waistcoat pocket, open the gold lever silently, and rotate the button as the rabbit springs from Mortalitas' top hat. I quiver with hope. In the turn of a screw, and pull of a lever, young souls are mine.

My developing tent blends in amongst the performers' traveling abodes. The soft whisper of innocence escaping is lullaby to my ears. Twice yearly we visit the hamlet of the jeweler Dagger, who is more than happy to accommodate my predilection for certain photo pendants.

Once sewn into the soft dresses of my marionettes, nursery joy lives forever. Nine strings cannot contain delight. Each night, I bend into the marionettist's low bow. Amused families applaud. And in the next village, a fresh soul awaits.

About the Author:

Patricia Flaherty Pagan, MFA is a talkative introvert who lives on a pretty island in South Korea. She is the author of Trail Ways Pilgrims: Stories and Enduring Spirit, as well as the writer of award-winning literary, crime, horror and fantasy short stories.

Twitter: @PFwriteright



Life | Alan Porter-Barnes

I'd come to screaming within my own mind, but there was no sound as I jerked back into life. Lying here strapped to the bed I began to wonder just when this all started. I was aware of the two other beds on either side of mine in the small, white, clinical room. My movement restricted, I turned my head to my right, straining to get a better view, almost recoiling when the realisation of what lay there hit me. A corpse, *my* corpse. A small bullet hole in the center of his/my forehead. The bed to my left, surrounded by electronic gadgetry, a constant low hum and the slow beep, beep of monitors, supported a comatose replica of me, an array of wires, tubes and electrodes, monitoring vital signs, and no doubt sustaining him. For a while I was transfixed by the rhythmic undulation of his chest.

Trying desperately to hold on to my sanity, to calm myself, to think this whole thing through, I began to remember. The last thought, the last image I could recall was that of Stanman as he took the automatic pistol from the desk, and pointing it at my head, pulled the trigger.

"Ah, Richard, I see you're back with us." His soft, almost monotone voice making my flesh creep. My eyes involuntarily drawn to the location of his voice. Stanman was sitting at the foot of the bed. Legs crossed, back against the chair, one hand casually, loosely, across his lap, the other crossing it, a long slim cigarette partially smoked between his fingers, pale blue smoke spiralling up into the still air. He looked at me through the frameless rectangular spectacles perched on the bridge of his nose. Without thought he discarded the cigarette on the floor and extinguished it by grinding it beneath the sole of his highly polished embossed Spanish leather shoes. His face was expressionless as he began to speak. My mind however was still full of that memory, the gun, the excruciating pain as the bullet hammered through my skull, tearing through my brain, extinguishing my life, my conscious thought, before shattering through the back of my head. "Richard, Dr Bryce, we are on the verge of a great adventure."

To him this all seemed so matter of fact. He was not only the governments overseer for the research facility where I conducted my work but also for several other research units, one of which, he had informed me, had been working on human cloning, the results of which were all too apparent to me now. He had quite literally blown my brains out when I'd refused to cooperate with his outlandish requests, only to replace me with one of my own clones. The clone now residing in the bed to the left of me, there merely to prove his words.

At the university I'd worked on research projects on quantum mechanics. My work on chaos theory had led me to be brought in to work on the Large Hadron Collider and then I'd been offered the post at the facility. My own department, my own staff, no financial restrictions everything I needed to continue my work on subatomic particles, to follow my dream of molecular depositioning. The early experiments had gone well. Our first trial had been to send the particles of an ordinary drinking glass from the particle generator to the receiver. We had gone from strength to strength, transporting inanimate objects over ever greater distances. However, when we began to use live subjects we encountered problems. Our first live trial was with a house plant that had withered and died when it re materialized. This had been over the distance of a quarter of a mile within the facility grounds. Over the twenty-five foot of the lab however a similar plant survived. We progressed using a pair of cloned lab rats dissecting them upon their return, the autopsy of both animals, the traveller and the control animal, leading us to believe that the traveller aged.

It was at that point that Stanman appeared. I'd never encountered him before, never been aware of his existence. Never really having given much thought to who was in overall control of our work. If I had, I would have imagined some faceless committee of bureaucrats. Stanman however was the stuff of nightmares. He demanded I speed up the research, use a human. We were in a race against both our enemies and our allies. The use of a molecular transporter could greatly alter the balance of power in the world. Transporting food and aid to disaster zones instantly and to precisely where they are needed, as well as the commercial advantage of normal everyday transportation of goods around the world. Of course if people could be transported the stranglehold of the oil producing nations would be at an end. His argument was that we needed to be the first to perfect this system, any nation that had the means to transport instantaneously would be in a position to call the shots as it were. If our enemies were to get there first we could be held to ransom. Then he delivered the final argument. Imagine if a terrorist or unstable nation were to develop such a device, they could transport a bomb directly into the seat of government, or any other location. If we had it of course we could use it to maintain peace, we could transport an entire army to wherever in the world it was needed. He told me he had access to military personnel who would volunteer as human guinea pigs for the experiment to speed up the process. They could actually report any problems. I of course refused. I would not be a party to placing any man in danger. No we had to follow procedure, ensure it was as safe as possible before asking for volunteers. But he insisted. Taking me into his confidence he told me of the secret human cloning experiments. How certain members of the security forces had been successfully cloned, how it didn't really matter what the outcome was, how we could keep

cloning a volunteer until we got it right. The whole thing seemed absurd. This was a world only visualised in fiction. The more he pushed the more I resisted. Eventually, inevitably, the threats started. He would prefer I continue my work, but assured me there would be others who would gladly take my place. For all my work on the project, it was not my property, either intellectually or otherwise. My cooperation was however, as far as he was concerned, a foregone conclusion, all that was required of me was to reconcile myself to it. He could, he assured me, arrange my death if need be. How would that affect my wife and family? On the other hand he could see to it that our lives would be free of care and worry. Then when none of that worked he told me how I'd, without my knowledge or consent, already been cloned. He could kill me, put my wife and children through all that pain and suffering, and still have me here to do his bidding, held hostage against my family's well being. I still declined. It was then he walked to his desk, slid open the draw and took out the shiny, pristine hand gun, pointing it at the center of my forehead.

Laying here in the company of my other comatose clone, and the 'original' me, having had the time to digest the implications, to employ my logical thought, I knew now I had no choice. He'd proved his point, this could go on forever. "Life" he assured me "may not be cheap, but it is certainly within budget."

I felt like me, thought like me, in fact I am me. All my memories, all my knowledge, everything that makes me me, I am. The one difference is this new me has no appendix scar. I could see his argument made sense. See he was more than capable of carrying-out any threat he made. I was resigned to carry out my work in the manner he demanded, and in doing so accept his thirty-pieces-of-silver. With that resignation came the excitement, the anticipation, the freedom to accelerate my work without fear. And, no doubt, the Nobel prize. This would, as he promised, as I was now convinced, be the start of the greatest adventure, not only for me, but for the whole of human kind.

About the Author:

Alan Porter-Barnes always starts his day with a cup of coffee whilst sitting in the garden taking-in the sights and sounds of nature. He's an accomplished story teller and show man. He has appeared at the English National Wildflower Center and has been a regular at the Liverpool Storytellers Society. He also hosts an annual writer's event during Liverpool 'Light Night'.

Dog Walker | Donna Cuttress

Paula shouted for Buster then waited. Buster had scattered as soon as she had untagged his leash. The dog had bounded through the hedgerow about ten minutes before without a backward glance. She fiddled with the worn leather of the leash, listening for any sound of him. Buster had strained against his collar, breathing heavily, tongue lolling from its open jaws, demanding to be released. He wanted freedom. Eventually Paula had given in and unhitched him.

"Go run!" she had shouted as Buster took off. The sound of his panting had begun to get on her nerves. She needed a break from the dog then immediately felt guilty about it. She watched him run ahead on the country pathway, then leap over a gate that led into an almost hidden field. Paula walked slowly, enjoying the quiet and the afternoon sunlight. She thought about work, telephoning her mother, and what to have for dinner, letting her mind wander in the peace. As she reached the gate, she looked over expecting to see Buster rolling on his back getting filthy, but he was not there. The field's crop had been burned down to stubble, leaving only desolation surrounded by hedgerow. A lone tree, huge and bare, stood far over on the other side.

"Buster? Where are you boy?"

She could hear nothing. The silence was immense.

Paula tried to open the gate but it was padlocked. She began to climb it and stopped as she swung her legs over. She sat on the top of the gate and shouted for Buster, searching the bleak land for any signs of him. Paula had never had a dog go missing before; she had never *owned* a dog before.

"Please Buster! Come on boy!"

As she jumped she felt a sudden echoing pulse in her ears. She felt as though she had passed through something, but she didn't understand what. She reassured herself, as she waited for the dizziness to subside.

I'm being stupid! It's just the cold.

She forced herself to take a walk and made sure she kept to the gap between the churned earth of the field and the hedgerow. Clouds passed in front of the sun, darkening the sky. Paula stopped, aware there was someone in the field. She felt eyes on her. Someone or something was waiting. There was a darting movement on the other side of the field. A quick blinking darkness that darted from the hedgerow. She froze, suddenly terrified of whatever it was. Paula knew it was not Buster, but a different kind of creature.

She thought about shouting, then stopped herself, trying to reason with her fear.

There is nothing there. It's just a shadow. That's all

The sun reappeared casting slats of light across the field, blinding her for a few seconds. A flock of crows lifted as one from the furrows of soil. The overwhelming cackling and screeching scared her. She squatted down to make herself small, covering her ears with shaking hands, as they swooped low. They felt ferocious.

Where did they come from? They weren't there before!

Her heart was jumping in her chest as she straightened up. Her voice faltered, choking with fear. She swallowed it down, then tried again,

"Buster! Where are you? Get here now!"

Paula began to search the hedgerow just in case he was caught on some brambles or hidden barbed wire. A sickening tightness in her belly made her nauseous as she approached the tree. Inside her mouth became cold, but she kept walking, slowing her steps with caution. She kept repeating to herself,

I have to find Buster. I have to find Buster.

The tree was huge. It's thick, bare branches reached out in every direction. Paula felt it was waiting for her. If she got too close, the branches would wrap around her and squeeze until she became embedded within it.

"Your being stupid girl!" she shouted, then clutched her stomach as pain sliced through her torso, stealing her breath. She unzipped her jacket and checked herself. There was no blood on her, no injuries or lacerations. She was fine, and yet she felt ... wounded. Paula tightened her grip on the dog leash as she forced herself to walk on.

I'll go near the tree, and that's it! Then I'll head back to the car. Buster might follow my scent. That's it, then. I'll walk back to the car.

Paula took a few steps, then stopped. She could hear a dog bark.

Buster!

The barking became loud, aggressive growls.

"Buster! Where are you boy?"

She followed the sound. The growls became yelps, long whines breaking her heart as she began to run. He was scared! He was being hurt!

"I'll fucking kill you if you hurt him!"

She was running now, shouting his name, screaming for him in the silence of the bare field, every step taking her nearer to the tree. She thought she saw the shadow creature again, passing beneath the branches, then disappearing.

Paula stopped under the bough of the tree, heaving to catch her breath. The whining had stopped. She could not see Buster anywhere. A sudden gust of wind passed through the branches, causing them to sway. They rattled like bones. She felt them surround her. There were no nesting bundles of twigs holding eggs or buds about to produce leaves. The ground beneath was rock hard and cracked. Roots had pushed their way to surface. It looked dead.

"I know you're there ... I saw you! Where's my dog?"

Slowly, Paula began to walk around the thick, cracked trunk. She checked behind her every couple of steps, gripping the leash ready to swipe at anything that might attack. There was no one. The wind gathered strength, the branches bobbed and swayed. She closed her eyes and whispered,

"Buster, where are you? Just come back to me and we can go. Get out of this place."

She opened her eyes. Buster was sitting where she had just been. He was upright, but his ears were flattened back against his head. He didn't see her; he stared beyond her at the tree. Paula let out a small gasp, covering her mouth in surprise and relief.

How did he get there?

She approached him, lowering her voice,

"Buster! Come on, please boy."

She ducked slightly as she leaned toward him.

"Buster!" she hissed, "Come on!"

She edged her way toward him and began to attach the leash to his collar, but she stopped and followed his gaze instead. There was something in the hedgerow beyond the tree. A hand poking from the sleeve of a red jacket, a pair of

legs, a boot on one foot, the other a few yards away. Paula was sure she hadn't seen this when she had walked around the tree, she *knew* she hadn't. The jacket was familiar to her, and those boots ...

She stood and walked over to the body laying flat on its back.

They're dead! Someone is dead!

Paula stared at the woman's face, not believing what she was looking at. She tried to stop herself from screaming, but couldn't.

It's me! It can't be! I'm ... I'm dead. I'm dead!

She felt dizzy, as the slicing pain returned in her gut. Her knees buckled. She could see only blackness as she felt herself slowly fall backwards into nothing.

Paula could hear the cawing of birds. They were near. They sounded like they were right beside her ears. Something lightly ran over her cheek, then slowed. She felt a burrowing sensation as her flesh moved against something that gnawed and chewed. There was a tugging on her neck, then a ripping sound, as her skin was pulled. The birds became angry, fighting with each other as they prodded and pecked.

Barking! Is that Buster? He's whining! There are voices somewhere.

Paula was sure she could hear something, a muted sound, it sounded like voices but she couldn't be sure, she had begun to forget what voices were.

"Over here!"

Someone's shouting. Someone's shouting for help.

"Over here officer! Fuck these birds!"

Something swooshed above her, the air momentarily changed, she felt wings and claws against her skin as the birds lifted. There were more voices, she tried hard to listen.

"It was the dog barking that she noticed. She heard it and followed it, then found her, well, I think it's a 'her', I can't tell for sure. They must have been here a while. The dog wouldn't leave her. It had to be dragged away. Can't we cover the body up?"

Paula felt something enshroud her but she still remained cold. She could still hear voices, but they were faint now, disappearing.

"How many is this? Three? And always by this tree. Seems like we've got a serial killer. Must be they're favourite place for dumping."

I wasn't dumped. It happened here. It came from the tree. The evil waits in the tree.

They couldn't hear her.

"Who found her?"

"The lady over there, by the gate with the dog."

"Is that the dog that wouldn't leave? Old faithful?"

"No. He's in the back of a van. We'll see if someone can take it."

Buster. His name is Buster.

"How did she know there was a body in the field?"

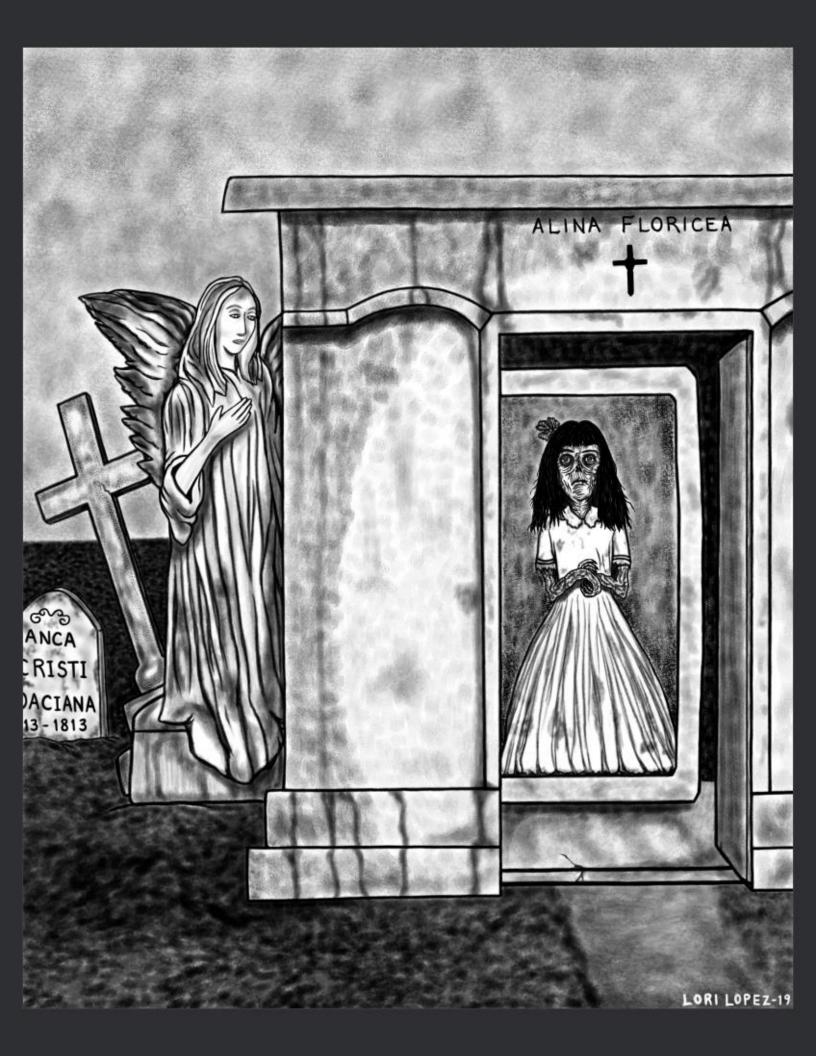
He looked down at his notebook, then at the woman by the gate.

"She saw the birds going crazy beneath the tree and heard the dog barking. She thought it was suspicious right away and climbed over the gate to investigate. They're always the first on the scene. It's always the dog walkers who find the bodies."

About the Author:

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

Blog: <u>Donna Cuttress</u>
Twitter: <u>@Hederah</u>



The Sparkling Floor | Susan Schwartz

Sitting on my stool watching the surgery, I started to seethe inside. I hated both Orthopedics and the team I was working with that day. The surgeon yelled at me constantly, and the resident was too good to speak to a mere nurse. Bored from just having to pass instruments, the scrub tech ignored me for the most part. After many attempts to fulfill their needs, I gave up, sat back down, and told them they could use what was already on the table.

The surgery proceeded with more drama because they couldn't get the right equipment in the right size. I tried to explain that this wasn't my fault, but the surgeons didn't want to hear it. They wanted what they wanted when they wanted it. I closed my eyes and wished them all dead.

Suddenly, I felt a bubbling down deep in the pit of my stomach. It reached a boil by the time I stood up and approached the sterile field. I leaned over the table and grabbed a scalpel. I employed it to stab the resident in the back as he had done me many times that day. I pulled it out and stabbed him several more times. There was blood squirting all over my face and scrubs, but I had never been happier. The surgeon looked across at me in horror and disbelief.

The resident crumpled to the floor already strangling on his own blood. It was music to my ears. I retrieved the scalpel and started toward the scrub person. While I approached, she and the surgeon tried to talk me out of my diabolical plan.

"Please, NO! You don't want to do this. You are not this person, something has gone seriously wrong," the scrub tech pleaded.

"Oh, yes, I do. At last, you speak to me for something other than supplies. I have had my fill of you fuckers today."

I still held the scalpel with the resident's blood drying on it. I plunged it into the tech's hand several times. The surgeon tried to sneak up behind me while I was busy with her. I grabbed a metal trocar and sent it straight between two ribs. His eyes went wide, and his mouth was left hanging open. I took pliers off the table and twisted his nose around. I took another metal rod and jammed it in his right eye. It made a psst sound as it deflated. Reeling in so much pleasure, my once sky blue scrubs were now a wet crimson color.

I looked around to think up some more mischief for the surgeon. I spied some Succhinycholine, a paralyzer used to keep patients still while they are being intubated. I drew up about 10cc and shot it in his ass. It took only a few moments for all the muscles in his body to relax, including his lungs. As he lost the ability to breathe, I sat there and grinned.

The anesthesia nurse walked back in the room and tried to make her way to the phone to call for help. I quickly threw an amputation knife at her abdomen. Missing, I picked up the mallet and aimed for her head. Hitting its mark, she dropped like a bag of potatoes. I retrieved the trocar that had flown past her and took the time to eviscerate her with it. Intestines, blood, and fecal matter fell to the floor.

I cannot explain what came over me, but I am glad it did. They had this coming for a long, long time. I squealed with delight over the mess all over the bed, walls, and my clothing.

The patient was still asleep on the table. I quickly decided to dispatch him as well. I turned the nitrogen up and the oxygen down. Then, I cut the IV tubing in half. An air bubble the size of Cleveland would enter his bloodstream in another minute.

I reveled in all the bloodshed and mayhem until I heard a knock at the door. I slowly drifted over, and the charge nurse asked how the case was progressing. I followed her stare into the room where the surgery continued, and the resident surgeon was closing the skin. The patient was doing fine, and he would be going to the Recovery Room within the hour. The floor sparkled.

About the Author:

Susan Schwartz RN, MSN, MSHA has been an avid writer for 15+ years writing freelance articles, editing manuscripts, and proofing medical competencies. Her alter ego is an Operating Room Nurse who creates tales from the interesting things she has seen. She is a member of the Horror Writers Association and the Virginia Writers Club.

Website: <u>Susan Schwartz Author</u> Facebook: <u>Susan Schwartz Author</u>

First Date | Patrick Winters

It was an incredible day.

We lay on the blanket, our bare feet tickling along the grass, for hours.

She would lay back as I leaned over her, staring into that gorgeous face while I fed her dainty grapes.

I told her things that I had never dared to tell anyone else. I even got to crying, and when I did, she told me everything was okay. And she made me believe it.

It was so perfect.

And as the sun finally set, I put her back in her casket, filled up the hole, and left with a lighter heart.

Kitsunetsuki | Patrick Winters

When Akio heard the shuffling of grass behind him, he assumed it was Ikuko, come to join him on their rendezvous in the field. But when he turned, he saw that it was a fox — leaping straight into his breast and claiming his limbs.

Once Ikuko arrived, the fox used Akio's hands to throttle her. Then it gave back the poor man's bones and left him there, wailing over his still lover.

The fox returned home to its mistress. "Is it done?" she asked it. The fox answered: Yes.

The kitsune-mochi nodded, certain that her husband would never stray again.

The Poppet | Patrick Winters

The crying girl came to her with a name and payment. She accepted both, and told the girl to dry her tears.

"Adam Cartwright." She whispered it through the night, in between her words of enchantment, and set to crafting the doll. She'd made many of them before; twigs and twine worked best for matters of retribution.

Then, once the doll was finished, she crushed it in her hand, reducing it to broken bits.

That night, Adam Cartwright was run down by an automobile in the street. He died instantly, every one of his bones broken in the unfortunate accident.

Making Room | *Patrick Winters*

"What do you guys want for dinner?" Tina called out to her sons.

"I don't know," Brandon called back.

"I need to make room in the freezer. Pizzas or lasagna?"

"Whatever," Adam said.

"Fine. Lasagna it is."

She pulled out the Stouffer's and set it on the counter. Cooking for two teenagers who couldn't cook for themselves could sure be a pain, but at least they never got into the freezer. And that meant they'd never find out about her hobby.

She stuffed Mr. Gottlieb's wrapped head beside the ham, now that there was room, certain it would be safe.

Overcast | Patrick Winters

That one looks like a bunny, someone might say. Or a peace sign.

No, I could answer back. It's my old friend, John Dearing, getting sliced in two by a sheet of falling glass.

I've always seen death in the clouds, you understand? Not sure how, but I do. Premonitions of demise, warnings of fatal accidents—all fluffy and floating along.

I saw my parent's car wreck in a booming cumulonimbus. And I knew my wife would die of cancer, thanks to a wispy altostratus.

And that one there, passing by right now—what do you suppose it looks like...?

About the Author:

Patrick Winters is a graduate of Illinois College in Jacksonville, IL, where he earned a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing. He has been published in the likes of Sanitarium Magazine, Deadman's Tome, Trysts of Fate, and other such titles. A full list of his previous publications may be found at his author's site, if you are so inclined to know.

Author website: Patrick Winters



Leave a Message... | Alex Grey

"Yah dinner's ready."

"Down in a minute, just checking something, Ma."

"Checking what? If you spent less time on that computer and more time in the real world, Jeanie would never have left you!"

Let me set the record straight - I left Jeanie. She got boring, always at her spin classes, and running club and having skinny latte mornings with her girlfriends. She was a good-looking woman, I'll give her that, literally, her grooming cost me a fortune. I remember her simpering 'I want to look nice for you, babe. Maybe you'd like to look nice for me too?'

Whatever. She was an empty-headed, empty-wombed doll - useless. True, she walked out on me, went off with her gym instructor, what a cliché; but I'd left her in spirit years before that.

Press #1 for 'Your wife would never have left you if you'd pulled yourself together.'

Ma's been repeating the same old stuff since I moved back home a year ago. It's like living with one of those automated switchboards, you know, press one for a list of your failures; press two for tired homilies. You get the picture.

"Here I am Ma, what's for dinner?"

"It's Tuesday, it's pot roast, it's always pot roast on Tuesdays."

Press #2 for the never-changing menu

Every day of her adult life cooking for my papa, always the same tired schedule – pot roast, meatloaf, chicken wings – always the same, never even a shake of spice different to her own mama's recipes. Just the way my Pa liked it; except he's been dead these ten years. Sometimes I think she hasn't noticed he's dead, like she didn't pay him much attention when he was alive.

"Why? Why is it always pot roast? We could change it up a bit."

"You think I'm made of money?"

Press #3 for 'I'm not made of money!'

Truly she's not, but I've got cash, computing pays, even after Jeanie's taken her cut. I could stand us a pizza now and then.

"It's not about money, Ma. It's about having some fucking imagination, broadening your horizons."

"Don't use that foul language under my roof."

Press #4 for 'No bad language under my roof!'

"I'm not a fucking child, Ma and I learned my cussing off Pa - you never said a word to him about it."

"I hoped to raise you to be a better man! Huh, guess that didn't work out so good. Anyhow, don't talk to me about broadening horizons, look at you, stuck in your bedroom on the computer all hours. Now, if you had a proper job."

Press #5 for 'Get yourself a proper job.'

I have a proper job – I'm a programmer. I got into writing code when Pa got crushed in a computer-controlled conveyor in the factory. But there's no money in industrial computing - gaming is where it's at. Which is why I can bear to spend so much time in my old bedroom, unchanged since I first left home thirty years ago. It's got the same sad single bed, tired furniture and faded Star Wars posters on the walls. It doesn't matter. I live in a virtual world via my VR headset. It's cutting-edge technology, but it's not something that Ma would recognise as work.

"I've got a proper job, Ma. Things have moved on; there aren't any factories in town no more."

"Your papa would turn in his grave if he saw how you spend your time."

Press #6 for daddy guilt trip.

She's wrong. Of course. My Pa wouldn't have cared - as long as I didn't cause trouble and there was enough money coming in. I remember him coming home, worn-out after his shift in the dog food plant, stinking of offal and hot metal. He thought automating the factory would make his life easier - in the end, it just made his life shorter. He was a dinosaur. I doubt if he even saw the robotic arm that swept him into the conveyor.

"Shut up, Ma, if his production line had better software, like the stuff I write, then he'd still be alive, and you'd be grateful."

"I would be grateful; he wasn't much of a talker, but he was better company than you! I get so lonely, may as well be here by myself for all the good you do me!"

Press #7 for whining self-pity.

She doesn't get it—what is the point of talking if all the conversation she can muster is put-downs?

It's gotten so bad I can trigger a stream of automated replies just by breathing. She probably doesn't mean anything by it. Pa always said her tongue wasn't linked to her brain. Not that there was much brain there to start with, Pa was the clever one.

I asked my Pa, once, how he could bear it.

"Son, sometimes it's easier."

That was all he said.

Every now and then I wonder why I came back here; why I stayed.

I get it. Sometimes it's easier.

"Stop playing with your dinner. Are you gonna eat that food or not? There's starving children in China that would be grateful for this food."

Press #8 for meaningless cliché.

"There are no starving children in China, Ma, they're the biggest growing economy in the world. You don't even know where China is on the map."

"Maybe, but I do know where my manners are, not like some people in this house!"

Press #9 for sarcastic last word.

I listened to her chattering on over dinner. Her sister had rung to tell her about my cousin's latest accomplishments - a promotion, a new baby, a new sofa - on and on and on it went...

I guess I'd been thinking about putting myself out of her misery for a while, which may be why the advert for *DIGITISE!* popped up on my dark web browser. On the mundane web, cookies scan your every keystroke for clues as to what to sell you – it can feel pretty uncanny. The dark web reads your mind.

When the body's weak but the soul's still rocking - DIGITISE!

I knew the company. In the so-called real world, DIGITISE! ran a memory storage facility for people with dementia - like a digital memory box. It was a popular service - saved a lot of trouble when your ancient relatives vanished into the care system along with their passwords and access codes.

On the dark web, DIGITISE! was offering to extract a digital version of your soul and place it in a new, inanimate vessel - any electronic device with a reliable power source would do. It was hush-hush. No regulatory authority in the world would approve the technology - they'd be arguing about the moral and ethical dimensions for years. In the meantime, DIGITISE! was using willing volunteers on the dark web to test and improve its systems. I reckon they ultimately wanted to sell some sort of immortality to folks rich enough to afford it; in the meantime, the beta version was cheap.

"Are you still awake? Switch that light off – who pays the electricity bills around here?"

Press #3 for "I'm not made of money!"

Actually, I paid the bills, but she's been parroting that particular bit of nonsense since I was a boy. I guess she's just stuck, like a record, or, like I said, an automated switchboard.

The website said the soul transfer would look like an embolism – one soul in the machine, one shell of a body functioning on basic. I wondered whether Ma knew 'Daisy, Daisy...' – man, she hated 2001: A Space Odyssey. She said the view of space made her dizzy. I loved it, it got me into math and physics in school, or, as Ma called it, 'That sci-fi rubbish!'

Press #5 for 'Get yourself a proper job.'

Well, I've got a proper job and I'm about to show her just how good I am.

I took my time – the dark web is pretty secure but converting my savings into bitcoin over a few months would leave less of a trail. I took a lot of care over the design of her soul catcher; I wanted it to be special, for Ma. After all, she would be in it forever.

"DIGITISE!" were professional and discreet. There was a bit of red tape, for plausible deniability, I guess. I had to pledge that I would look after Ma's body for a while – sudden deaths tended to raise suspicion. They warned me that encased souls needed appropriate mental stimulation - the suffering from sensory isolation could be crippling. I assured them that I would keep her soul happy. We had to do a work-around for consent, but we're talking about the dark web, there's always a work-around, for a price.

It was her birthday. I bought her a pretty card and some flowers, like any respectable son would do.

"What're you after? You should have treated Jeanie this good."

Press #1 for 'Your wife would never have left you if you'd pulled yourself together.'

"Well, Ma, I've had a big bonus in work so I thought I'd treat you; maybe I should start looking after you for a change."

"Well, that would be nice. I ain't known a moment's peace since your daddy died. I've been so lonely. A dutiful son would have given me grandchildren, but now I ain't got nothing to look forward to."

Press #7 for whining self-pity.

"There, there Ma, don't go on, it will be different from now on, I promise. Look, I've got a gift for you."

"What's that? A phone? I don't need a phone!"

"It's more than a phone, it does everything – runs the vacuum cleaner, changes your TV channels - everything. You never need to leave your armchair. Let me show you how it works."

I pushed the phone into her hands – it looked like any other smartphone, but this was the device that would hold her soul forever.

"Look, Ma, press this button here and say your name – that way it's programmed to your voice and no one can ever steal it."

"Like this?"

"Yeah, just like that. Now say your name..."

I tried not to be too eager. She didn't like to be rushed, but she needed to get it right. The DIGITISE! programme was a one-time code; saying her name counted as implied consent.

"My name is Sarah Brown."

It was a joy to watch.

Her eyes, always so alight with injured malice, became vacant. Her tongue fell silent and flopped over her sagging lips. Her mouth slowly drooped at the corners. Her shoulders fell and her body slumped into her chair. She suddenly seemed very frail, and I felt invincible.

I took the phone and pressed 'save' – there, the transfer was complete.

Her body was in a vegetative state. I had it shipped off to a cheap nursing home – they'd look after it well enough to fulfil the terms of the DIGITISE! contract, but I knew that it would soon die of neglect and infection.

Ma's soulphone is doing just fine. I keep it permanently connected to the mains power - wouldn't want to lose her by accident. After her body died, I used my inheritance to turn the old house into a tech cave worthy of Silicon Valley. Her soulphone has pride of place in my gaming room.

You see, I've learnt a lot about what the soulphone is capable of. DIGITISE! fulfilled my design brief perfectly - I must leave them a review sometime.

I can stream videos to the soulphone. Her wailing when I burned her furniture warmed me more than the bonfire ever could.

I've learned that souls remember the body's hunger so I'm careful to share videos of my meals. I like take-out food, curries, noodles, that sort of thing. Of course, she doesn't have a mouth or a stomach anymore so I'm careful to describe the flavour and texture of every morsel. I can hear her whimpering – full of a hunger which can never be satisfied.

I found a girl on one of the gaming sites. She's young, got two kids. It was easy enough to lift a few photos off her social media profiles. I photoshopped myself into the images before sending them to Ma. There I am, running around the yard with Katelyn and her cute little munchkins. Ma thinks she has a pretty new daughter-in-law and two lovely grandkids. I told her all about my life with Ethan (aged four) and Tyler (aged six).

It's pathetic, how she wails over these imaginary grandkids. Sometimes I keep the connection open just to hear her sobbing.

But nothing compares with those first moments when I dial in, her desperation palpable as she rushes to connect. "Marty, are you there? Why is it all dark? Marty, I'm scared, what's happening. MARTY?"

Press #1 for 'I don't give a fuck.'

About the Author:

After a lifetime of writing technical non-fiction, Alex Grey is fulfilling her dream of writing works that engage the reader's emotions. Her stories and poems have been published worldwide. Her ingredients for contentment are narrowboating, greyhounds, singing and chocolate. It is a sweet life, yet Alex's original view of the world has led to her best friend to say 'For someone so lovely, you're very twisted!

Blog: <u>Ideal Reader Blog</u>

Twitter: @Indigodreamers



FEAR Of the Dark











A Friend of a Friend Told Me





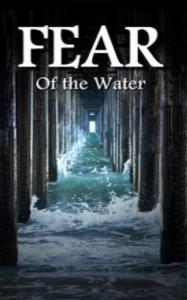
A Steampunk Anthology

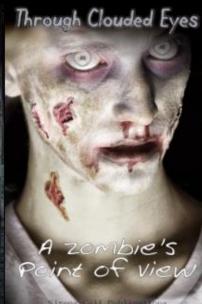
Mental Ward

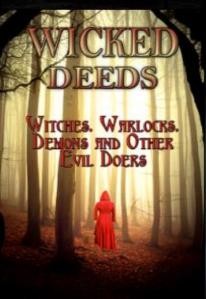


Slaughter House















PURVEYORS OF DARK FICTION



The Things You Let In | William Presley

"Swampy shithole," my new bride snarled, slamming the door to our trailer home. "Florida must be the only place on the planet that can make the industrial hellscape we came from seem livable. Even the drug addicts were better! At least up North, all they want is to curl up in a corner with their opiates. Down here, they get methed up and eat each other's faces."

"Ah, sunshine of my life. So happy you're home."

"Shut up, Coy!" She came over and slapped the pack of cigarettes out of my hand. "And I told you to quit smoking our money away! Until you decide to stop living off your dead wife's life insurance and get a job like a real man, things are gonna be tight around here. I swear, you're just as useless as your brother was... and twice as disposable. Don't know why I wasted four decades of my life on him, then decided to waste the rest of it on you!"

"Maybe you're waiting for me to blow my brains out like he did so you can disappear with what's left in the bank."

"No, I'm waiting for you to give me one more goddamn reason to shoot you in the head myself! Now help me get this place ready. The woman that called yesterday is supposed to be here for her reading in ten minutes." I watched her struggle to set a large, wooden sign out on the porch: *Nadine M. Bartlett – Light Trance Medium*.

"Oh no, I'm staying far away from this. You're opening doors that shouldn't be opened," I warned, my eyes fixed on the Ouija Board in her hands. "You don't know what you're letting in here."

My wife laughed as she lit the candles on the wrought iron bier we now used for a dining table. "I'll tell you exactly what I'm letting in – a seventy-five-dollar check for half an hour of work. The rest is bull. In all the years your brother and I ran that funeral home, I never saw a single ghost. You know why? You know where we go when we die? The ground. It's the *living* you gotta keep an eye on."

"Is that so, Madame Deenie? You ever try that séance act of yours in the funeral home?"

"I would've if I'd been smarter. I used to think morticians made money because everyone dies. Truth is, the money comes from no one wanting to be *reminded* of that. They'd rather hand off their dead to someone else than face the future." She began pulling the curtains shut. "Time's what keeps everyone going. You could be the sorriest sack of shit on the planet, but you still get up in the morning because there's always a chance to turn things around. Until there isn't. At some point, people just seem to realize that they're gonna to die miserable. That's when they call me. I convince 'em there's still something to look forward to."

"Does that make them desperate, crazy, or stupid?"

"Hell if I know, but today's client sounded like a real fruit cake on the phone. I hope sh-"

A faint knock cut Nadine short, and she hobbled over to answer the door. The woman who entered could have easily passed for a nun. The only skin not covered by her high-necked black dress was her face, which seemed unusually haggard when compared to her youthful blonde curls.

"Mrs. Klemm! Please, come in! You know me already, and this is my husband, Coy. He'll be transcribing for us today."

Before I even had time to protest, I was being led to the table by the back of my neck. A pen and notepad were already waiting for me at the far end. My wife then flicked off the lights and took a seat directly across from her latest prey, leaning into the candle flames so that they cast a rust-colored glow across her steely gray hair.

"There's an older male here with us now. His presence is strong – he must have been important in your life."

"Y- yes," Mrs. Klemm croaked, looking down at her left ring finger. She seemed to shield her teeth with her lips as she spoke.

"Your husband, I think."

"Yes!"

"His death was... unexpected. And you found him."

"C- car fire. In our garage. He was all burnt up." The woman began moving her hands up and down her arms, her sleeves sliding back to reveal thick, bloodstained bandages. "B- but... I couldn't tell anyone. They would take him away, and they can't take him, because I'm still fixing him! Like a quilt. He looks better now. That's... why I need to talk to him. I need to tell him he's almost done. I- it's almost time for him to come back."

I could see Nadine struggling not to roll her eyes. "Of course, dear. We're going to talk to him right now!" She reached over and drew Mrs. Klemm's hands to the planchette sitting between them. It came to life instantly, racing around the Ouija Board so fast that I could barely keep up with my pen.

"Together soon," I read. Goosebumps sprang up the second I saw the confused look on my wife's face. "Touch you. Feel you. Soon."

"Y-yes. Yes!" The woman's right hand disappeared under the table, but by the way her shoulder was bouncing, it was easy to imagine what she might be doing. "Soon! Just a few more days! A few more parts!" Her bloody, toothless gums were on full display as she smiled.

Nadine jumped to her feet, disgust etched into the lines around her mouth. "Lady, I don't know what game you're playing, but play it at home! Leave your check on the counter and get out!"

"No!" Mrs. Klemm screamed back, brandishing the handgun she'd been untangling from the folds of her dress. "He's almost back together! B—but I need more parts! I have nothing left to give him right now. Some things... I can never give him." She glanced over at me. "B- but you two... have plenty to give."

With strength unbefitting her frail frame, my wife grabbed a brass candleholder and whipped it at the would-be killer. Her wig flew to the ground, and I retched at the patchy red scalp hidden beneath. Still, I had no choice but to fight off my repulsion long enough to tackle this psychotic woman. She dropped the gun right at Nadine's feet, who shot her in the head without a second thought.

I just laid there for a second, hot blood dripping down my face and pooling around its donor. "Jesus Christ. Jesus fucking Christ." My trembling fingers gripped the kitchen counter while I tried desperately to regain my footing. But it was no use—my legs simply wouldn't hold me. I fell back onto the corpse and gulped for air. "I can't believe this shit! Thank god you killed her!"

"No, you killed her," Nadine retorted. "I don't know why—she wasn't hurting anyone. I don't even know why you had this gun. I would've probably been next, though. I had to defend myself." She reloaded the chamber with a sigh.

About the Author:

William Presley is a graduate student in human genetics who spends all of his free time outside of the lab desperately hocking his fiction at anyone who will have it. He is also an avid hoarder of Victorian furniture and country vinyl that few others would consider 'music.' He hopes that one day; someone besides his hedgehog might enjoy something he's written.

Facebook: William Presley

Wattpad: https://www.wattpad.com/user/wpresley

Glimmer | Nina D'Arcangela

It's dark at night, dark and lonely. Occasionally, I see others; catch a glimpse of their shimmer in the headlights that round the bend. I remember driving around the bend, reaching down to grab the map that slipped from my hand, the sound of the impact, the glass shattering as I was hurled through the windshield. At first, they were kind to me, helped me to understand, but then they seemed to drift away – lost to their own thoughts, their own inner worlds. I suppose that's what we're meant to do, lose ourselves.

I wonder if others see my glimmer...

About the Author:

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

Author Blog: <u>Sotet Angyal</u> Intagram: <u>@DarcNina</u>



Skin | Mike Lee

You couldn't tell just by looking, no. Looking wasn't enough.

But if you got close enough Laura thought, you could tell she used to be another person. A different woman entirely. In fact, she had been the size of three women stuck onto the frame of one.

She had molded herself with fried foods and whole weekend marathons sedate in front of the television.

The scales underneath Laura hadn't tipped politely with a wink and nudge 'pssssssttttt fat girl. I think you overdid it with the gravy AND coleslaw this week'.

No, the scales hadn't been kind, they had been damning, cruel and insidious.

The little red arrow teasing her as she first placed her left foot then right onto the scales. Laura held her breath and sucked in her stretched belly.

The little red hand on the scales swayed back and forth mockingly before delivering its punch line.

268lbs

But two surgeries and one tummy tuck later, she could stand in front of the mirror without weeping and successfully touch her toes.

Laura adjusted the body stocking around her waistline, the elegant netted fabric keeping some of her more unfortunate folds in check.

"Honey? Sugarplum?' Geoff called from the downstairs hallway.

Staring at her reflection she found herself missing the 'Old Laura'.

'The new Laura' was not a much happier person. Not the person she dreamed of becoming anyway at least.

The 'new me' never ate birthday cake, instead choosing to celebrate anniversary's with sugar free sorbet and lychee foam.

"It's just ice Geoff! It's just ice with orange juice," she'd snorted,

Her husband Geoffrey presenting the supposed treat with a single slim candle carefully nestled on top the frozen dessert.

"Laura?" He called again, his voice growing impatient. She could hear the growl of car engine waiting for them outside.

"Coming," she said, her irritation well disguised.

She zipped the back of her evening gown up, smiling at the satisfying sound of a smoothly unfettered zipper, pleasing after years of broken buttons and sweatpants.

She smoothed the creases in her dress, flattening the tell-tale traces of the bodystocking underneath.

"Are you ready?" Geoffrey hollered, his agitated footsteps echoing on the hardwood floor.

Let him stamp, she thought, buckling a large belt around her midriff. The generous leather and gold band covering the rest of her stomach and loose skin.

"Better safe than sorry," she muttered, tapping the girdle.

Twisting herself in the mirror a final time, Laura cavorted with her reflection. The new me? She asked the woman in the mirror. The reflection forcing a well-rehearsed smile.

"Laura, the taxi has been waiting for ten bloody-minutes!" Geoffrey bellowed.

The 'old her' never worried about fancy dinner parties, or being late to galas and charity events, the old her was simply never invited.

But once she had met her husband on the operating table, she found the company picnics and BBQs unavoidable and frequent. Geoffrey had always 'insisted', he liked to show off his 'work'

She looked back one more time at her reflection. Sometimes she hardly recognised herself.

Spraying a cloud of rose water, Laura strutted through the thin scented veil and waltzed into the waiting taxicab, Doctor Geoffrey's look of disapproval pleasing her somewhat as she fastened the seatbelt.

When they had arrived at the party Laura recognised all the familiar faces.

Not that she had met any of them people before. These *soirees* were always full of Geoffrey's potential clients and thankful patients.

He had left her to fend for herself in the circus of newly twisted skin while he mingled and schmoozed. She viewed the room, taking stock of familiar but never met before friends. Next to the fireplace stood Mr. Botox with his much younger and no less surgically altered companion. Her lips pursed, bulbous with an almost aquarium pout.

Laura snatched a glass of champagne from a speeding silver tray.

Sitting on the chesterfield in the corner was Madame tit-job, the plunging neckline of the woman's red dress showing off the *goods*. Laura giggled to herself as the lady winced and stroked her lower back, the breasts uncommon shape and size clearly uncomfortable for her fragile frame.

"No pain no gain, sweetie," she snorted into her glass before taking an acidic swig.

The revellers made small talk and attempted something close to mock-civility.

Laura commented on her husband's fine work as his colleagues recognised her from advertising on the company website.

She had begged Geoff to take the 'before' and 'after' pictures down from the clinic's homepage. They were the only humiliating relics left of the 'old her' and she sought to erase their existence entirely. But once again Doctor Geoffrey had 'insisted'.

Laura always found it strange that when she mentioned the surgeries people always felt the need to poke and prod, the intimacy of untouched tissue gone, replaced by a free-for-all of curiosity. Several of her husbands' employees rolled their hands across her and pinched her tucked skin, commenting on her evening gown and 'transformation'

Transformation? The word almost sounded spiritual.

Sometimes she felt her husband was a glorified butcher, his talent lying in the skinning and removing of less 'desirable meat' and the selling of more sought-after flesh.

Laura hadn't told him this of course, instead she had said 'I do' at the altar.

The 'old her' would have resented the fact she had married Geoffrey Winthorpe, with his oxford sensibilities and close group of well-connected friends. But his hands had sculpted and shaped the shell she found herself dwelling, and for that she was sometimes thankful and at other times remorseful.

She continued to nurse the champagne, sipping on the empty bubbles, her hand wrapped around a glass stem more brittle than bird bones.

The alcohol gurgled, popping in her hollow stomach, she eyed the buffet table and felt a twinge of pain.

The 'old her' would have gorged and enjoyed the spread of Spanish ham and colourful cobbled cheese's with thin limbed grissini. The sight drawing her closer to the well-stocked table. She reached for a morsel before correcting herself, silently scolding the forgetful hand.

Her stomach growled loudly in protest. The cherry tomatoes and cold cuts of meat too tempting. Few people turned as she hovered over the party food her belly continuing to tremor; the vibrations following her body all the way to floor.

"Everything okay, dear" Geoff asked, appearing behind her for his usual pit stop at parties, every fifteen minutes or so checking in on his own personal Frankenstein.

"Yes darling, fine thank you" she replied with little conviction, her hand stifling another shout from her insides.

"Are you sure?" Geoffrey looked at her midriff, concerned. She slapped his hands away as he motioned to cradle her stomach.

"Yes, I just need to eat something" she growled at him, a cauldron of champagne burning inside her.

"Well okay then" he stepped back, almost offended. He looked at her blankly

"I'll get you a top up, shall I?" Taking the glass from her hand, he stomped into the bar area alerting some of the guests.

Good! She thought go play doctor somewhere else. A pang pierced her centre, Laura doubled over the table before steadying herself next to the fresh crudité.

She reached for a wedge of runny brie, her fingers touching the yellowed rind.

She drew her hand away with a gasp, the rind felt just like skin!

Leaning closer to the cheese she could make out gooseflesh raised over its surface the pores wide, gasping for air Bile rose in her insides. Her stomach growled and commanded, the 'Old Laura' rising to the top.

Go on. Eat it! The voice said.

Laura recoiled at the sight of the cheeseboard, the once sumptuous display had become an abattoir of swollen bellybuttons and puckered nipples.

A couple regarded her from the corner of the room, their stretched faces giving an illusion of surprise or concern, she couldn't tell which.

"There you go my dear," Geoffrey returned in a better mood, passing her a freshly foaming drink and paper plate of hors d'oeuvres.

"A piece offering," he said, gifting her the plate.

She held the glass of fresh champagne in one hand and in the other a dish of still beating meat. Eyes widening, she whimpered, her stomach continued to churn.

Eat it! FEED!!!! The voice inside roared, her intestines turning into skipping ropes

"What's the matter?" Geoffrey asked picking a sticky red morsel from her plate and popping it into his mouth. The rubbery sinewy squeaking in-between open-mouthed chews. He swallowed triumphantly.

Laura gagged and quickly passed Geoffrey the plate back.

"I need to use the ladies' room," she rushed past.

Slamming the bathroom door behind her she twisted the latch.

She gazed around at the pristine marble floor and walls, the lavatory held all the sterility of a petri-dish.

She washed her face in the sink, the cool water sobering.

Glancing into the mirror, she saw..... standing idly.... her reflection, except the body was not hers not anymore.

You thought you could just cut me off eh? Little miss piggy.

The 'Old her' oinked.

"Go away you're not real, just an anxiety, a side effect...... yes! That's it!

I knew I shouldn't have mixed alcohol with those pills Geoff gave me" she huffed, the cool water drying quickly on her face.

Just get bored, don't we? All that pretending, all that posing.

"And what would you know about posing? Before I finally got rid of you, I could barely stand! My own flabby ankles nearly ground to powder!"

The reflection paused along with Laura, considering the accusation. Laura pulled a sweet-smelling balm out of her purse and applied it to her dry lips.

Her stomach growled again.

Jesus! Even that smells good! The 'Old her' said.

"It says non-toxic......" Laura waved the stick, wagging it in front of the mirror.

The 'Old her' clapped childlike, the same jubilation of a birthday cake being wheeled out at a party.

Without thinking Laura sunk her teeth through the waxy balm and savoured the synthetic flavour... cherry red.

Quick! What else have they got! The 'Old her' shot back not wanting to lose the newly gained momentum. Laura dug through the gilded draws, drinking peppermint mouthwash and slurping liquid soap.

When the draws were entirely empty, she found a wicker basket of bath drops, the small pustule's popping in her mouth like engorged grapes.

Hee-hee

The 'Old her' laughed with abandon; she could feel the weight of her reflection thumping against the marble floor, dancing merrily.

Laura stopped her feasting as the door handle attempted to twist, a short knock interrupting, followed by a familiar voice through the keyhole

"Honey, you okay in there? You've been awhile?" Geoffrey wrapped on the door.

He would not stop her banquet! She would not stop consuming!

She spied a man's straight razor next to the basin. Picking up the light tortoise handle she flicked her wrist exposing the fine Damascus blade.

Now we're talking turkey. The 'Old her' growled. A sinister grin spreading over her lathered face.

Gobble, Gobble.

For a fleeting second Laura could see herself through layers of fat and madness.

She looked at the razor, the blade winked back.

The manic smile in the mirror drooped, the jowls spilling over like hot wax. She held the straight razor up to the light and then her cheek.

Remember now, only a little piece...... just a taste, whet the appetite.

Geoffrey remembered the day he had met her; she had opened her eyes on the operating table and before he could remove his rubber gloves he had been smitten. Now standing outside the bathroom he could hear cackles followed by screams and the gnashing of teeth as they chewed.

He smashed himself against the door until he collapsed, his body battered and spent.

Lying outside the door bathed in sweat, he listened to the mad frenzy inside.

His nostrils flared as he smelled an all too familiar perfume of blood and body.

"Laura!" He shouted.

The hysteria echoing from inside the bathroom stopping abruptly. He heard the sound of something metallic hitting the marble floor before wet footsteps unlocked the latch and opened the door.

"What have you done?"

What was left of the 'New her' stood above him wrapped in a shredded body stocking, blood seeped in gouts between the fine silk mesh.

He held his hand over his mouth to stifle a scream.

In the corner of the bathroom lay a pile of flesh-folded into strange origami littered with teeth marks.

Laura smiled, her bottom lip no longer shrouding her teeth.

"Where is the finger food darling? I AM FAMISHED!"

About the Author:

Mike Lee is a UK based writer and lover of all things macabre. When not writing twisted tales for podcasts or magazines; he can be found watching his beloved Manchester United, or in a karaoke bar impersonating Tom Waits... badly.

Facebook: Mike Lee
Twitter: @MikeLee22046653

Eventual Self-image | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

I heard someone say, "The old man died at dawn."

This seemed wrong; his things were merely out-of-place—nearby?—farther away?

And the dawn was false—fluorescent, electronically hazy—interrupted by swirls of hospital-gowns, film-shrouded cubicles, machines beeping, instrument-trays rattling.

I needed to find him! Maybe there was still time.

The hospital-corridor divided, abruptly—colored-coded guides—This way: yellow's flickering limbo—That: green's semblance of hope.

Nothing made sense! Yet I knew it must.

Startled by something I turned around, and saw my wavering reflection—in a blue liquid-mirror of impossible depth—become a thousand, similar images, slipping into infinity.

Am I—There Yet? | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

It's the same dream, every night! I'm driving down this winding—then increasingly straight—country-road, wooded on both sides. Nothing is clearly seen.

It's as if the road is purposefully leading me somewhere—I may not wish to go.

Each time, I get a little farther down this road.

The straight part is level at first, but goes up a long hill, then descends suddenly, steeply toward...I don't know...maybe a bottomless lake, obscured in darkness until the last second?

Each time, I come closer to plunging into this 'abyss'—waking, just in time.

So, I'm wondering again tonight, Am I—

This Time I See You... | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

Things are scarcely different—the bed perhaps narrower—the frame higher—this new mattress, delicately cushioned, not well-suited to your demeanor.

Your hair-tint matches your dark suit—pressed stiffly, as you like it.

I complimented the lapel-boutonniere, the folded kerchief in your breast-pocket.

I said your name, at last softly—and something of your wishes—and mine, this time.

As usual, you said nothing—facing, disapprovingly, past my head.

Your stern countenance—though rouged—still projects resoluteness.

I could never do anything right, in your eyes—now professionally closed.

Why did I think—because you died—our relationship could change?

About the Author:

Will H. Blackwell, Jr. is a retired professor (botany) presently living in Alabama where he continues research on parasitic fungi in freshwater environments. He has stories published in Brilliant Flash Fiction, Disturbed Digest, Trembling with Fear, and 365 Tomorrows.



The Gladiators | Meg Smith

It was something that wasn't supposed to happen, but it happened.

"Teen Mom," the veterinarian, Dr. Brett, told us.

Our cat, Piper, started life as a kitten we found in a box behind the supermarket.

Just six months later, she was waddling around, having gotten out once.

Just once—when the kids were spraying each other with Silly String and I told them to take their battle outside.

It was too much for Piper to resist. The lure of something fine and invisible, on the air, that scent, that secret song. I could sympathize. I heard that same song, once.

I got some great kids, my true loves, long after the music faded.

I explained to them, as plainly and as softly as a parent can, that we cannot keep all Piper's kittens.

I began the phone tree, the email tree, the social media tree, every kind of tree I could.

I had instilled in my kids that pets are a responsibility, and we had to act responsibly, even when it hurt.

Kenny and Sandra, they're 10 and 12, and they understood—even if their tears revealed their hearts.

And, mine.

Finally, a friend of mine from work, Jessica, said: "There's the Grace Pichot Shelter for Cats." She volunteered there, occasionally.

Grace Pichot had given her entire life over to saving felines, and in this way, her name lived on.

"I'm going over there on Saturday," Jessica said. "Meet me at Goss Park on Saturday, and I'll bring them."

Goss Park, I thought. Ours is a coastal town. Goss Park is not, in the strictest sense, a beach—it's rocky and craggy, but it has an agreeable sandar for short walks.

Jessica and I got to be friends after working as housekeepers at Forest View Assisted Living, and then taking nursing classes together.

I could confide in her, in a way that I didn't always with other people.

We could find hilarity as only a parent can, or has to.

I remembered that when I last saw her at work, she closed the break room door behind her, and began waving her hands in the air. "They found a nest on the ground walking home from school. Baby. Birds. Why, Lord!" She looked up at the ceiling. "Dr. Brett can refer you to a wildlife clinic," I'd said. "At least it's not snakes," I could speak from experience.

But, looking back, I think that's what drew us closer.

A need for some border between our lives in our homes, and every place else.

We understood this instinctively.

Like this whole business of meeting at Goss Point. Yes, it made sense as a halfway place between my house, and the shelter, a few more miles north. But it was also a way not to meet at home.

Her home.

Well, Saturday came. Kenny and Sandra had gone to their Dad, after last cuddles and pats—and tears— for Piper's kittens.

Piper herself was at the vet's, after I'd put aside the money to make sure there were no more real-life 'Teen Mom' episodes.

I settled the kittens in the cat carrier—scuffed but sturdy, and lined with a towel.

They're not sad, I thought. They're kittens. Ready to go bounding into the adventure of adult cathood.

My son held the door open. My daughter helped to strap the carrier in with the seat belt on the passenger side.

Driving off, I took advantage of my solitude in the car, Piper's kittens occasionally mewing.

Tears began their course down my face.

It was a chilly, late-spring day, and a breeze was kicking up. This meant few people would be out walking at Goss Point, and I was kind of grateful.

I got the carrier out of the car, clumsily. Hey, I'm not an engineer. Still holding the carrier handle, I closed my car door, and could hear that it was not closed properly.

The hell, I thought. No one is going to steal that wreck, or my half-finished Diet Coke sitting in the drink holder in the front.

Or the ratty beach towels in the backseat, sitting there since last summer's outing to the other side of the lake.

My kids have imprinted on me—from task to task, doing the minimal cleaning and sorting, because time never seems abundant for finishing touches, or straightening up.

"Damn," I said aloud, softly. "Okay, guys, we're almost there," I said to the kittens, who I could feel thumping about inside the carrier, wrestling.

I looked around. She's late, probably cleaning up a chocolate pudding disaster. I smiled. Jessica understood the laws of chaos that come with kids.

She had two. Daughters, close to my kids' age, but more bickering, and more accusations of sweater-stealing, because they're both girls.

While waiting, I decided to walk down the concrete steps from the parking lot to the waterfront.

The water pushed against the craggy line of rocks, as if prodding them with irritation.

Clutching the carrier close to me, I stared out, to where the water met the sky, which was half-filled with surly-looking clouds.

It was not an ideal day, but something about the elemental scene comforted me.

I was startled, then, when, looking over my shoulder for Jessica, I saw a man. I realized—Jessica's husband. Rob.

Her mystery husband, I thought. She hardly ever mentioned him, but I had seen a photo of him, and her, and their girls, once, on her phone.

"Hey," I said.

He had longish, dark sideburns, sunglasses and a denim jacket—like a character out of a bleak drama from the 1970s.

That's exactly how he looked in the photo. Good-looking in a rugged sort of way.

He had a box with him, and there was a blanket in it.

"Jessica couldn't get away," he said.

"Um—chocolate pudding?" I ventured.

His smile was startling. He didn't look like someone who smiled a lot. "Cottage cheese, actually. Someone thought it would make excellent dog shampoo."

"Ah, kids," I said.

He set the box down on the cold, gray sand.

I said, "You can take the carrier. Jessica can always bring it back to me at work."

"No, that's all right," he said.

I felt a sharp stab of doubt within me. Stupid, I said, inwardly. He's going to bring the kittens to the shelter, and that's that.

I set down the carrier and realized I hadn't given much thought to taking out the kittens and transferring them—I'd had the kids to help corral them at home.

Something about doing that here, with this strange man, my friend's husband, seemed unplanned, unexpected, and uncomfortably and foolishly intimate.

When I opened the carrier, tipping it upward slightly, the kittens tumbled out—a grey one, a tiger one, a couple of mixed-color ones. I wanted to say, "No, I've changed my mind!"

He was tipping the box he brought, too. Something began tumbling out of the blanket in it.

I blinked. Small creatures, with damp-looking, blackfish feathers, red feet and bobbling, pink heads, righted themselves, their heads darting about, as if snapping at invisible flies.

"What?" I dropped to the sand and made a barrier around the kittens with my arms.

Rob took off his sunglasses, sliding them into his jacket pocket. His eyes were cold, deep, almost lifeless.

Absurdly, I had a flashing thought of my son's 'Scream' Halloween mask.

"Baby vultures," he said. "Kids brought them home one day."

I decided I would pluck the kittens off the sand, rush them back into the carrier, and scramble back to the car.

And call the cops to tell them someone had illegally set birds loose at the shore.

"I'm tired of them," he said. "So, we're going to have a fight."

The kittens were arching their backs, their tails sticking straight up, shaking. There was ferocity in their stance, for such small, fuzzy beings.

The baby vultures—if that's what they were—appeared dazed.

I reached to grab the first kitten I could. "The hell we are," I snarled.

Then, a chill surged through me, as if right off the water, from its depths.

"Everything's a fight," he said. "Me, one, Jessica zero."

My lower lip quavered. I could have run—bolted—not going to lie. For a moment, I staggered, feeling vulnerable, almost huddling on the hard sand, trying to shelter both the kittens and these hapless creatures.

He seemed irritated that as these seconds passed, the kittens were not interested in fighting—just looking fierce. The hatchlings were shrinking back.

He reached a hand down—and then drew it back with a cry.

Red-black blood drew a thick line down his palm.

He toppled back, and the hatchlings were rushing him.

One ugly, curled hand lashed out, and grabbed one.

"Let it go," I screeched, and my own hand struck at him—but stopped.

He was holding the creature close to its face, glaring at it with rage filling those cold eyes —and then, another cry.

His hand let the hatchling drop, and it sputtered about in the sand; the others hopped over to it, their short, tight wings batting erratically. They uttered sharp, short bursts of cries.

His hand with rivulets of blood clasped one eye. A new course of blood had started, along his face.

I heard distantly, then close and blaringly, a cry. I thought, great, here comes the pissed-off mother and father birds. Or whatever they are.

I gathered up the kittens, plucking them frantically from the sand.

The hatchlings were simply fluttering and chattering among themselves, forming a blurring knot.

Indelicately, I dropped the kittens back in the carrier; they fell on top of one another, squawking indignantly.

He's in shock, I thought, looking at Rob.

All that homicidal fury dashed by resistance from the scrappy, scrawny young ones that had a fight in them after all.

He fell back into the cold, damp, dirty sand; there were stray, discarded cigarette butts, and debris, forming a crooked aura about him.

I leapt up, grasping the carrier, awkwardly, almost falling.

The birds, I thought. I can't leave them here. He'll —

But they had slowed, seeming to recognize that they had won.

They were forming a ragged line, and scuttling toward the water.

They'll drown, I thought.

The air carried a desultory wail.

Seagulls.

Rob was still squalling, clutching his face, and now thrashing back and forth.

I kicked sand at him. "Shut the fuck up," I said. He seemed not to hear me.

I turned away.

The seagulls were forming a semi circle, gliding on the breeze—and then, with startling calls, they pulled away.

The hatchlings, pushing, screeching, made a leap, with their same, almost comical, chaotic disorder, and were airborne.

It was then that clarity returned to me. Walking further down the shore, holding the cat carrier close to me, I said, "You're going to be fine, and they're going to be fine."

A terrible grief gripped me. Jessica.

My mind quickly formed a plan. I am calling the police. And I am going to get Jessica's kids. I will make it happen. It will be, and them, and my kids. Their dog. My cats.

It lacked any rationality, but I had never felt so sure of anything.

My phone is dead, I realized, pulling it from my jacket pocket.

I picked up the carrier again, and before making my way back to my car, I looked back, over the sea.

Behind me, I heard a thrashing, raucous sound. The gulls. The coppery scent of blood, on the sea air.

I did not look back.

But I did take one last look at the ungainly brood, clipping along at a fair altitude.

They would never be graceful, and they would never be beautiful, but they would be free, I thought, as they formed a crooked 'V' formation, between the water and the sky.

About the Author:

Meg Smith is a writer, journalist, dancer, and events producer living in Lowell, Mass., with her husband, Derek Savoia, and their three cats. In addition to previously appearing in Sirens Call, her poetry and fiction have appeared in The Cafe Review, The Horror Zine, Poetry Bay, and more.

Facebook: Meg Smith Writer
Twitter: @MegSmith Writer



The Polite Thing | Chrissie Rohrman

I'm three miles from home when the wide, boxy back end of a stranded car appears in the beam of my headlights. A bearded man steps into the road and waves his arm, flagging me down. I tense up, knowing I shouldn't stop. It's nearly midnight, the road otherwise deserted. If this were a horror movie, I'd be a goner for sure, the moment I touched the brake pedal.

Still, I know that I should stop, because it's the polite thing to do. It's what Mother would want me to do.

I pull to the side of the road behind the beached sedan, gravel crunching beneath the tires of my truck. The man stays by the bumper of his car, puffing on a cigarette. My fingers tighten around the steering wheel before I unbuckle and slide from the bench. The night is dark and quiet, and the thick, warm air smells of impending rain. If this were a horror movie –

Almost on cue, a rumble of thunder sounds in the distance. I count five Mississippi's. The man takes another drag, and the tip of his cancer stick glows in the night. "Need some help?" I call, one hand wrapped around the frame of the door.

"Damn thing's a piece of shit," he complains around his cigarette, punctuating the statement with a punt to the back tire.

I nod, keeping my distance. The car's gray paint is faded in patches and the metal of the wheel wells resembles Swiss cheese. It's a wonder the clunker is still on the road.

Although, it isn't, and that's sort of the point.

If this were a horror movie, this stranded man with greasy hair and a dirty t-shirt would be a serial killer, the kind to lure a Good Samaritans to the side of the road under the pretense of car trouble only to slit their throat at a secondary location.

Mother always said I had an overactive imagination, but it was never quite clear whether she encouraged such wild-running thoughts or was concerned by them. She also told me that it's important to be polite, and kind, and that's why I had to stop for this scraggly man and his broken-down Buick Skylark. It's the kind thing to do, even though it's midnight and the road is otherwise deserted.

He takes the cigarette from his mouth and extends a grimy hand. "Charlie." It's the perfect name for a killer, I think, if this were a horror movie.

"Matthew." I don't shake his hand.

Charlie doesn't seem to take it personally. He shrugs and drops his cigarette to the pavement. "I really appreciate you stopping, Matt."

I wince and fiddle with the keys to my truck, staring at the thin ribbon of bluish smoke rising into the air. I give him an opportunity to do the polite thing and snuff out the cigarette. He doesn't. "I can give you a ride into town," I finally offer.

"Thanks, man." Charlie grins and hooks a thumb over his shoulder. "I just gotta get some things outta the trunk."

I nod and follow him around to the back of the Buick with wide steps, keeping some space between us. Charlie leans into the trunk, blocking my view of the interior with the bulk of his body. As he grabs a worn duffel bag, I catch a glimpse of a butcher's apron, streaked with rusty red and brown.

If this were a horror movie, I think, but push the thought down before it grows any traction.

"You like country music, Matt?" Charlie asks once we're on the road. Before I can respond, he leans over and snaps on the radio, turning the knob and tuning to a station outside of the presets.

A sharp twang of a guitar invades my ears, accompanied by soulful crooning.

"George Strait," Charlie says as he settles back on the bench seat and props an elbow on the door. "He's like an icon of mine."

I nod, though the nickname, and the music, grates on my nerves. I clench my jaw, and my knuckles whiten around the steering wheel.

The rain starts then, a few fat drops impacting the windshield. I turn on the wipers, and they squeak in protest as they drag across the glass. Within minutes, I can hardly see the road through the downpour. The inside of the truck feels cramped and hot, filled with tension and twenty-year-old country music. If this were a horror movie, it would be the part when Charlie grins too big as he says something like boy, it's really coming down, or hope we don't get stranded in this.

Instead, he lets out a low whistle. "I really appreciate this, Matt," he says, because this isn't a horror movie.

"Matthew," I finally correct through gritted teeth. A familiar angry heat is rising in my chest. I drop my left hand from the wheel, feel out the worn leather-wrapped hilt of the hunting knife in the pocket of the door.

I've tried to be kind, to be polite, for Mother. But I'm no Good Samaritan.

Chest heaving, teeth grinding, I twist the steering wheel. The truck veers harshly over the bump of the berm before I stomp on the brake pedal.

"Whoa, Matty!" Charlie's elbow slips from the door and he looks over me with a nervous chuckle.

Rain pounds against the windshield. A crack of lightning shows his wide, confused gaze, and then thunder growls overhead.

"Matthew," I say again. I raise the knife and bring it down to his neck as politely as I can. Mother would be proud.

About the Author:

Chrissie Rohrman is a training supervisor who lives in Indianapolis, Indiana with her husband and five fur babies. She enjoys white wine and writing competitions, and is probably calling for her dogs to come inside right now. She is currently drafting the first book of a YA fantasy trilogy.

Facebook: Chrissie Rohrman Writes Things
Twitter: @ChrissieRawrman

The Alchemist | Paul Gravanel

Hungering for eternal life, he embraced alchemy. Alone in his laboratory he pored over arcane tomes as crucibles glowed and alembics bubbled.

After decades of toil his spirit slipped from his body. Looking around, he saw his father.

He was filled with sorrow and said, "Have you come to gloat at my failure to find immortality?"

His father shook his head and answered, "You died, as all men must, but your failure is far worse. Not only did you not live forever but you locked yourself away and did not even live such a life as you might have had".

The Box | Paul Gravanel

In my study sits that which I fear beyond all else. An ancient box, cunningly fashioned from dark wood, its brass corners stained with verdigris, its lock the work of a master craftsman sworn to secrecy. It is warded on every side with occult symbols and carved with warnings never to open it lest unspeakable horror be unleashed. At night I listen to that which dwells within it raging with terrible and impotent fury at its confinement in the limbo between life and death. "Now, mortal fool," I whisper to it, "do you know what I endured these long centuries!"

Pitter-Patter | Paul Gravanel

We wake to hear something scampering around in the attic. Annoying little footsteps pitter-patter down to the far end where they change to sharp tip-taps on the coloured glass window above the stairs.

"Bloody squirrels!" I mutter in my half-sleep.

"Forget it," murmurs my wife, "we'll deal with it in the morning".

A moment later the pitter-patters end in a sharp rodent shriek. The moist crunching sounds that follow last for at least five minutes. We wait until the house is quiet once more.

"Alright," I say softly, "I'll deal with it in the morning, after he goes to sleep."

The Meeting | Paul Gravanel

In the walk-in wardrobe the AGM of the Union of Cupboard Dwellers, Underbed Lurkers and Allied Trades was in session. Speaker after speaker bemoaned the cruelty and fearlessness of modern children.

"We were once the hunters," wailed one delegate, "but now we are the hunted! What can we do?"

As he spoke, a door was quickly opened and closed at the back. Myriad sets of strange eyes followed the brightly coloured cylinder as it rolled to a stop before the podium. The sputtering white light of the fuse cast a hundred monstrous shadows onto the wall, all of them running.

About the Author:

Paul Gravanel lives in a quiet part of Hampshire, UK, with his wife and rescue cat. His favourite ghost stories are the kind which aren't true.

They Came in from the Woods | Maria Bertolone

The old mansion situated on the edge of Deadwoods, so called because of its reputation throughout the centuries for harbouring a witches coven lay still and quiet surrounded by the thickness of the sultry night air. Suddenly an almighty clap of thunder and a lightning bolt unleashed its fury illuminating the entire landscape for miles around. The youngest child of the Crawley family was awakened by the sudden onslaught, jumping out of bed she ran to the window and peered out into the darkness. There was nothing to see at first glance until another ear splitting clap and blinding neon flash lit up the back garden and beyond revealing four tall black humanoid shadows moving rapidly towards the house. One of them appeared to catch sight of her and abruptly stopped to look up, leaving the other three to continue onwards towards the back door. Her blood ran cold as it continued staring; there was no eyes nose or mouth, just a totally featureless black mass.

She crept out onto the landing silently closing the door so as not to wake her older brother and sister and tiptoed across to her parent's room. Lorna and Adrian lay blissfully unaware in their slumbers that anyone had entered.

"Wake up Mum," she whispered whilst shaking her mother's arm. Finally Lorna stirred.

"What are you doing up at this hour Emily?"

"I've just seen four dark shadows walking towards the house Mummy."

"You must have either been dreaming or your eyes were playing tricks on you because of the storm honey," Lorna said speaking in a soft soothing tone as she tried to calm the child down.

"No I did see them Mummy."

"Alright," Lorna answered.

"What's wrong?" Adrian enquired drowsily, still half asleep.

"It's Emily she says she's just seen what she describes as four blackish figures coming towards the house."

"It's probably a child's overactive imagination, you should know what kids are like by now, the noise outside must have spooked her," he answered yawning and just lying there.

"Well aren't you going to check it out then?" Lorna questioned.

"Alright! Alright! I'll go and investigate as usual; it's always me who gets picked to do these things. If it makes you all happy, I'll put your mind at rest that there is no one out there."

"Well, you are the man of the house," his wife retorted somewhat sarcastically.

He slowly crept downstairs as the storm began to gather pace outside, finally he reached the back door and flung it wide open. The onslaught of hailstone stung his face as he tried to shield himself whilst stepping outside.

"Who's there?"

There was no answer except for the crashing of thunder; neither did the intense flashes reveal anything out of the ordinary as his eyes searched every inch of the garden for any clues as to what Emily might have seen. Suddenly the door slammed shut behind him, he tried desperately to open it but it was too tightly jammed. Pounding on the door and bellowing for someone to come down and let him in, his voice could be heard in between the angry thunderclaps echoing eerily through the woods. Nobody came, it didn't matter how loud he shouted. *Maybe they can't hear me over the noise of the storm.*

With the hail and thunder at their full force and no shelter he bravely ran down the path eventually reaching the bottom of the garden. Crouching down on the muddy path he picked some tiny pebbles up and began hurling them at the window in desperation and shouting again only louder this time.

"LORNA where are you? COME ON! Let me in, the door's jammed and I can't open it. I'll catch my death if I stay out here much longer. There is NO ONE! At all here, NO BOGEYMEN!"

But there was still no answer; no one came to the window, no sign of life from within. The house was in total darkness apart from the intense lightening which illuminated it.

He stood shielding himself from the intense hail stones that were pelting him and wondered what his next move should be. He decided to go in search of more stones only bigger ones, the bigger the better, approaching the towering trees that separated the end of his back garden from the woods he again crouched. In the thick clump of overgrown grass he found just what he was looking for. Grabbing the large stone he sprang to his feet and ran as fast as he could towards the house taking aim at one of the downstairs windows, but it merely bounced off without even so much as

cracking the glass. He watched in utter disbelief as it hit the ground with a dull thud, how could that be possible a stone of that size thrown with such force should easily have shattered that window.

He picked it up and tried another window only for the same thing to happen.

Approaching the house and peering inside the window he could see nothing.

"Where are they?" He mumbled out loud in frustration. Not only was the window not even scratched, but there wasn't any impact mark left where the stone had come into contact with it, just like the first one.

"LORNA! MICHAEL! SARAH! EMILY WHER ARE YOU ALL? He shrieked, his frustration turning to panic and fear. At that moment the storm reached an unearthly level of intensity, he wasn't sure if it was the lightning and the heavy rain combined that was distorting his view or just his imagination playing tricks on him, but it seemed as though the house was slowly morphing into some sort of medieval castle, with turrets at every angle, gone were the larger modern windows these were now replaced by small renaissance windows with metal grills built into them. Directly in front of him where the garden used to be a large moat now lay in its place. The surrounding area no longer looked familiar, it was as though he had somehow been transported back into a time he neither belonged in or understood. He felt so disorientated and detached from reality, he wasn't sure of anything nothing seemed real any more, but there was one thing he was sure about, something strange was happening how could his entire family just disappear off the face of the earth and the house suddenly undergo a complete change of appearance to resemble a castle. It surely must have something to do with the witch's coven that the woods were once home to many centuries ago. He called out once more but to no avail.

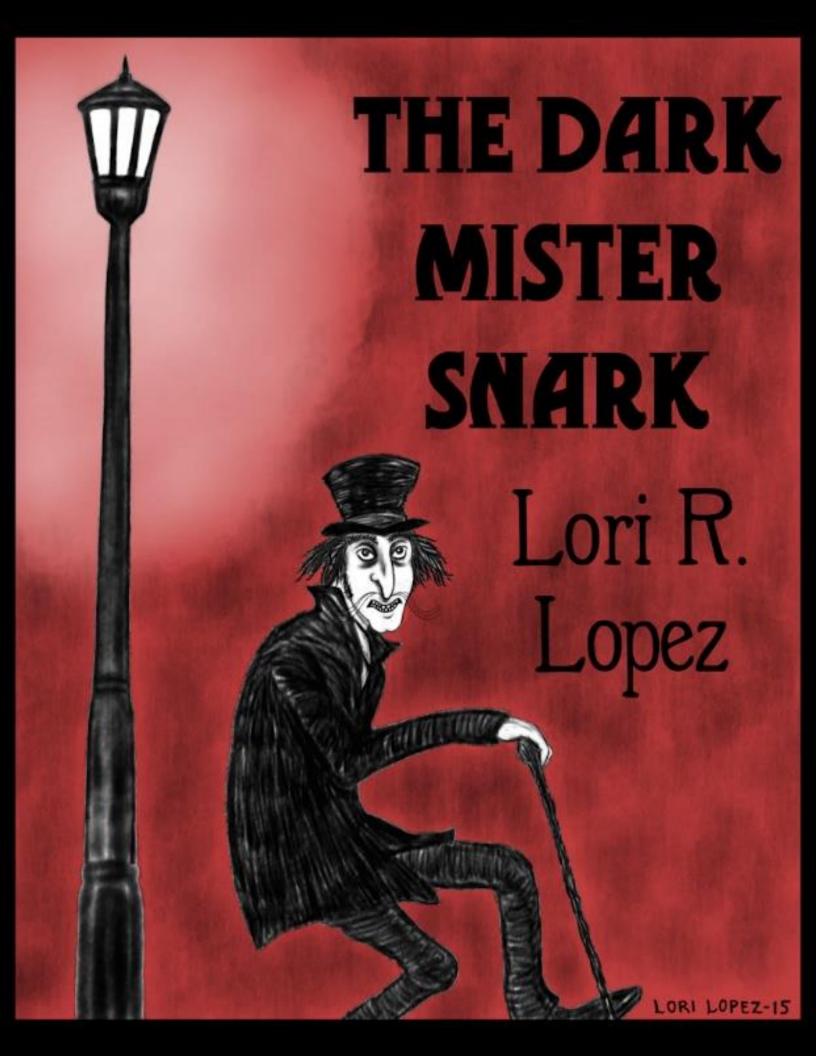
The sudden sound of slow, drawn out creaking broke into his train of thought, what the hell was that? Glancing in the direction that the sound was coming from he noticed the drawbridge had just mysteriously lowered itself down as if it were beckoning him across, quickening his pace he strode towards the bridge and began the journey. With every step he took the castle grew larger looming against the night sky, the nearer he got the more sinister and creepy its appearance became. Even though the night air was humid and electrically charged a cold tingling sensation ran throughout his body as though a sharp chilly gust of wind was blowing right into him. He stopped halfway trying desperately to pluck up the courage to continue in the face of the fear and foreboding he felt. Finally conquering his fears he eventually set foot on the other side of the moat, the familiar sound of the drawbridge could be heard echoing into the night as it folded back and withdrew leaving him directly in the grounds of the castle. Adrian slowly trudged the winding path towards it, with his heart pounding he listened carefully for any faint sound that would indicate a sign of life as he was desperate to know what had happened to his wife and children. Finally he stopped at what was now the front entrance with its two enormous wooden portcullises towering ominously in front of him, he again felt the same rush of cold air that he'd felt whilst crossing the bridge. The first one slowly began to slide upwards leaving a clear passage to the second portcullis.

It was pitch black except for the brilliant flashes of lightning which occasionally lit the whole of the inside, he shivered at the thought of entering. What if the gate suddenly comes down trapping me in this dark passageway? While he stood there contemplating what to do next a series of loud cackles could be heard mingling with the rumbling of thunder, it sounded as if they were coming from within the woods. Stepping backwards further away from the looming portcullis he suddenly felt the urge to look high up at what would have been their bedroom window, at that moment one of the many vivid lightning flashes lit up the entire wall and the window revealing something which filled him with horror and panic to the pit of his stomach. Peering down at him were four black faceless shadow figures silhouetted behind the metal grill.

About the Author:

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

Facebook: maria.bertolone.9/
Twitter: @bertolonemaria



The dunnish eccentric would prowl like a polecat in the depth of Nocturne, black-robed as a Bat . . . then rise at High Noon and shrink from the flare. Vampirishly pale and intense would he glare at a town ripe with sorrows that tasted too sweet, for the wretch did covet no pleasure or treat but the costumes worn on his favorite night — how gloomy and morose! He savored the fright of the monstrously clad: romping and stomping, howling and growling; the sound of teeth chomping gave Mister Snark chills, and he lived for the Eve that suited a drab mood to moan and grieve.

Like a clam did he slam his shell to emotions better unfelt, underexposed to the notions of healing or sharing. "Utter nonsense," griped he. Halloween was the time to set regrets free.

Only then could he surrender to banshee wails, sobbing and throbbing in the release of travails; harboring a secret blight, a desolation of spirit curdling in his sanctum where none could hear it. He let loose a decrepit ache, having watched the parade of horrors and screams, the haunting masquerade that soothed a mourner his fustian grave mark — the yearnful dirge of the dark Mister Snark.

Along distances of time, over the course of fears, many trials can be suffered with a flooding of tears. Mister Snark had not always been cloaked in despair, embracing the gray tumult of a life without care, for he once was adopted by a brackish din of birds. Sable and blue, the flock of few minced no words.

"Feed us!" they demanded on flying to the sill of an open window, then proceeded to grill with belligerent voices: "What's to eat?"

The dark Mister Snark offered, "Artichoke feet."

Like ravenous Grackles, they stuck out thin tongues. "You might as well serve us strawberry lungs!"

This brood rudely entered the dingiest abode, flapping in circles; cawing harshly, they'd goad a somber human to exit his comfortable chair . . . "Go and check your pantry!" abrasive Rooks did blare, then chased the man to a kitchen bare of bread.

"I have soup." He showed them bathed in dread — a compulsive sight; a larder laden with can upon can of tomato or split-pea, cream of mushroom or bran.

"We hate that!" blatted an impudent. "Got any corn?"

"I'm sorry." Hands spread, he met jaded scorn. The dark Mister Snark was a devout animal-hugger, even kind to a heckler with the gall of a mugger.

These arrogant thieves, bellicose and bossy, could clear his cabinets quicker than a winged posse. No sympathy had they for humans and their stews; grating and obnoxious, fed up with doleful news, they jibed like jackdaws and pecked his dome, reeling and squealing there was nobody home, till the dark Mister Snark requested slightly dour that his guests depart at the stroke of the hour.

"Your manners are rancid, your attitudes rank, and you've taken advantage of the local crank. I've been bitter and foul from the day I was born. You will have to forgive my absence of corn."

He informed them he never knew a reason to smile, abandoned on a road, raised by the stark Farmer Bile, who worked him as a slave an eternity of years. He grew up with the corn, unburdening to the ears, and could never eat the grains for they were brothers!

The Crows overlooked his metaphoric druthers, determining to linger in light of the sob story, since everyone was entitled to a little allegory.

The dark Mister Snark lost his taciturn scowl — "Glowering is for the birds, in particular the owl." His chums were introduced as Edgar, Allan, and Poe. The largest recited their own tragic tale of woe.

"Edgar and Allan are my sons," a forlorn mother wept. "Their father, a Raven, was captured and kept in a cage by a merciless tailor and his wife. Brave pleaded with the jailers to spare his small life, but the ogress desired his fine plumage stripped to adorn her best hat. He was stuffed in a crypt — an ignoblest tomb — plucked to shudder and bleed for the decorative urges of a human's greed."



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Authors and Poets

Edward Ahern Debapriya Ambuly Colleen Anderson Miracle Austin Maria Bertolone Will H. Blackwell, Jr. Joshua E. Borgmann Maggie D Brace Linda M. Crate Donna Cuttress Amanda Crum Nina D'Arcangela Lady DarkMyst Graham J. Darling H.B. Diaz. Radar DeBoard Corina Del Barro R D Doan John H. Dromey Katie Ess Ivanka Fear

Greg Fewer Patricia Flaherty Pagan Lee Andrew Forman David J. Gibbs Paul Gravanel Alex Grey Miriam H. Harrison Nicole Henning Selah Janel Rivka Jacobs Mathias Jansson K.A. Johnson Naching T. Kassa Pamela K. Kinney Yvonne Lang Mike Lee Joe Moses Leggett Angelo J. Letizia Hillary Lyon Scott McGregor

RJ Meldrum Melissa R. Mendelson Danny Nicholas Mary Parker B. T. Petro Kelly-Ann Porter Alan Porter-Barnes William Presley Chrissie Rohrman Brian Rosenberger Meg Smith E.F. Schraeder Susan Schwartz Gregory L. Steighner Sonora Taylor DJ Tyrer Angie Velarde Patrick Winters Alex Woolf Patrick J. Wynn

<u>Featured Artist</u>
Lori R. Lopez
Thirteen Original Works

Featured Poet
Lori R. Lopez
'Odds and Ends'

<u>Featured Author</u>

Lori R. Lopez

'The Dark Mister Snark'

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