

The Sirens Call

Spring 2023

issue 61

*A Dark Fiction
& Horror Zine!*

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

*Mike Lera's
Corridor of Horror:
Short, But Scary*

*Featured Artist:
Ksenya Lumitar Drozd*

*Featured Project:
What A Scream Podcast*

*Featured Author:
Gwendolyn Kiste*

*Featured Book:
Reluctant Immortals*

www.SirensCallPublications.com



Table of Contents

Fiction

- pg. 04 - Eternity Under the Vinca | *Gillian Church*
pg. 05 - Tears of Green | *Alex Grehy*
pg. 09 - The Vanishing | *Christopher Hivner*
pg. 09 - In the Deep, Dark Forest | *Christopher Hivner*
pg. 11 - If Love Is So Blind | *Armand Rosamilia*
pg. 13 - Spawntaneous | *Aaron E. Lee*
pg. 14 - Independence | *Gloria Bobrowicz*
pg. 16 - Florapocalypse | *Beth Gaydon*
pg. 19 - For Sale by Owner | *Edward Ahern*
pg. 20 - Toothsome | *Edward Ahern*
pg. 20 - Homemade Fertilizer | *Shannon Acrey*
pg. 22 - Coffin Birth | *Michael O'Brien*
pg. 24 - No Way Home | *JB Corso*
pg. 25 - Shelly's Evening Walk | *JB Corso*
pg. 27 - Samantha's Secret | *J. Rocky Colavito*
pg. 30 - The Mother of Truths | *Kieran Judge*
pg. 34 - Finding 398.25 | *Ian Klink*
pg. 40 - Familiar Acquaintance | *Nicole L. Nevel-Steighner*
pg. 45 - You Can't Come Back | *Gregory L. Steighner*
pg. 48 - No More Fun | *JB Corso*
pg. 49 - Don't Save the Bees | *JB Corso*
pg. 49 - See-through Rose | *JB Corso*
pg. 49 - Butterfly | *JB Corso*
pg. 49 - Life with Lice | *JB Corso*
pg. 49 - Leave the Leaves Alone | *JB Corso*
pg. 51 - House Call | *Rie Sheridan Rose*
pg. 53 - The House on the Hill | *Rie Sheridan Rose*
pg. 55 - Destroy With Love | *Angela Yuriiko Smith*
pg. 58 - Mutualism | *Antonella Nicolino*
pg. 59 - Spirit Walker | *Naching T. Kassa*
pg. 60 - The Horned God | *Shane Kroetsch*
pg. 61 - Cooking for One | *RJ Meldrum*
pg. 63 - The Rejected | *Gabriella Balcom*
pg. 65 - Equivalent Retribution | *Evan Purcell*
pg. 69 - They Laugh | *Evan Baughfman*
pg. 69 - White Elephant | *Evan Baughfman*
pg. 69 - Black Death | *Evan Baughfman*
pg. 71 - The Virtual Dead | *Dominic Rivron*
pg. 73 - An Inkling | *Dan Burgess*
pg. 74 - Other Mommy | *Cat Voleur*
pg. 76 - Raw | *Tony Earnshaw*
pg. 79 - Mercy | *Gabriella Balcom*
pg. 81 - Stupid Thing | *Gabriella Balcom*
pg. 82 - Witchy | *Donna Cuttress*
pg. 86 - Never for Sale | *Nico Bell*
pg. 89 - Seeds | *K.A. Johnson*
pg. 142 - Nepenthes | *Milkana N. Mingles*
pg. 143 - Chitters | *Kenya Moss-Dyme*
pg. 146 - Snatcher | *Miracle Austin*
pg. 148 - The Night Watcher | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa*
pg. 148 - The Foaming Sea | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa*
pg. 148 - First Impression | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa*
pg. 148 - The Crow | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa*
pg. 148 - New Friends | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa*
pg. 149 - Tree House | *Elana Gomel*
pg. 153 - Remains | *DJ Tyrer*
pg. 154 - Entwined | *Nadine Stewart*
pg. 155 - The Isle | *K. J. Watson*
pg. 156 - Examples from a Djinn | *B. T. Petro*
pg. 156 - Death of Mokosh | *B. T. Petro*
pg. 162 - The Hill | *Greta T. Bates*
pg. 166 - A Fool's Moon | *Marcus Cook*
pg. 167 - Avian Ends | *Ken Poyner*
pg. 167 - Conspiracy | *Ken Poyner*
pg. 168 - Spawn of the Devil | *Soter Lucio*
pg. 169 - Head's Swimming | *Sonora Taylor*
pg. 170 - Maybe, The Skies Should Fall | *Melissa R. Mendelson*
pg. 171 - Crawl | *Martin P. Fuller*
pg. 173 - Camping | *Doug Hawley*
pg. 175 - Mother Knows Best | *Sharmon Gazaway*
pg. 175 - Beware Inattentional Blindness | *Sharmon Gazaway*
pg. 176 - Amber's Casket | *McKenzie Rae*
pg. 177 - Dandelions | *Lee Andrew Forman*
pg. 177 - End of an Era | *Lee Andrew Forman*
pg. 179 - Tales of the Tulpa | *Maggie D Brace*
pg. 180 - Forest Peril | *K. A. Williams*
pg. 180 - Climbing Vine | *K. A. Williams*
pg. 181 - New Construction | *Charles Sartorius*
pg. 182 - Cupid's Arrow | *R.A. Clarke*
pg. 183 - Poison Ivy | *Kristin Lennox Mill*
pg. 184 - Equilibrium | *Renee Cronley*
pg. 186 - Silverfish | *Josh Hanson*
pg. 189 - Immune | *Patrick J. Wynn*
pg. 191 - The Corpse Flower | *Hillary Lyon*
pg. 191 - The Moss Garden | *Hillary Lyon*
pg. 191 - Fred's War | *Hillary Lyon*
pg. 191 - The Pests | *Hillary Lyon*
pg. 192 - Linguarum | *Jay Bechtol*
pg. 195 - There is No Night There | *David E. Kruegger*
pg. 197 - The Greenhouse | *KC Anderson*
pg. 198 - The Places Where We [...] | *Derek Austin Johnson*
pg. 199 - Floral Everlast | *Will H. Blackwell, Jr.*
pg. 201 - Spider Season | *DJ Tyrer*
pg. 202 - Blood on the Ground | *Gabriella Balcom*
pg. 203 - Death Wish | *Kellee Kranendonk*
pg. 204 - Lifecycle | *Ken Poyner*
pg. 205 - Returning Home | *Patrick J. Wynn*
pg. 205 - Swimming | *Patrick J. Wynn*
pg. 207 - Wool | *Jim Mountfield*
pg. 210 - I Speak for the Trees | *Donna J. W. Munro*
pg. 214 - Red Devils in Darkness | *Devin J. Meaney*
pg. 215 - Man's Best Friend | *JB Corso*
pg. 215 - House Plant | *JB Corso*
pg. 215 - Molding Decisions | *JB Corso*
pg. 215 - Candle Flame | *JB Corso*
pg. 216 - The Heart-Sized Thorn | *Natasia Langfelder*
pg. 219 - The Wall | *Paul Lonardo*
pg. 219 - The Autopsy Table | *Paul Lonardo*
pg. 219 - The Box | *Paul Lonardo*
pg. 219 - Wormhole | *Paul Lonardo*
pg. 221 - Spot the Difference | *Allison Raymond*
pg. 233 - The Garden | *Stephen Lang*
pg. 225 - Intentions | *Nina D'Arcangela*
pg. 227 - Rooted | *Rivka Jacobs*
pg. 228 - Historic Find | *Evan Baughfman*

Poetry

pg. 95 - The Bramble's Song of Survival | *Alex Grehy*
pg. 96 - The Ecstasy of Blood | *Eric Wright*
pg. 96 - only bones | *Linda M. Crate*
pg. 97 - a girl of thorns and thistles | *Linda M. Crate*
pg. 97 - charge of the tree | *Linda M. Crate*
pg. 98 - claws of the roses | *Linda M. Crate*
pg. 99 - Spirit Surgery | *Tom Duke*
pg. 101 - The Oak Watchers | *Amy Zoellers*
pg. 101 - Twilight Spiders | *Amy Zoellers*
pg. 103 - Sentinels of the Poison Glen | *R. F. Anding*
pg. 104 - The Yamal Horror | *Mathias Jansson*
pg. 106 - Yardwork | *Brian Rosenberger*
pg. 106 - Library of the Gods | *Brian Rosenberger*
pg. 106 - Follow the Vultures | *Brian Rosenberger*
pg. 107 - Not unlike Icarus | *Brian Rosenberger*
pg. 107 - Coffin Self-Portrait | *Brian Rosenberger*
pg. 108 - Swindled by Flowers | *Tinamarie Cox*
pg. 109 - Invasion | *Christopher Hivner*
pg. 109 - In the Belly of the [...] | *Christopher Hivner*
pg. 110 - Codebreaker | *Christopher Hivner*
pg. 110 - The Night Silent | *Christopher Hivner*
pg. 111 - A Cautionary Tale | *Rie Sheridan Rose*
pg. 113 - For Love of Gertrude | *John Grey*
pg. 114 - Imagine My Surprise | *John Grey*
pg. 114 - My Visitor | *John Grey*
pg. 115 - Bluebell Wood | *G Clark Hellery*
pg. 116 - The Life Sentence | *Ruben Horn*
pg. 118 - Of Flying Horses | *Sharmon Gazaway*
pg. 118 - Irreconcilable Differences | *Sharmon Gazaway*

pg. 119 - I Am the Wolf | *George Lee Grimsley*
pg. 119 - The Plastic Titan | *L. Stephenson*
pg. 120 - A Month of Hungers | *Meg Smith*
pg. 120 - The Depths | *Meg Smith*
pg. 120 - We're Here for the Dead | *Meg Smith*
pg. 120 - Earthly Heart | *Meg Smith*
pg. 120 - Hella | *Meg Smith*
pg. 121 - Aliens | *Lynn White*
pg. 122 - Apocalyptic Rodents | *E. F. Schraeder*
pg. 122 - Squirrel's Eye | *E. F. Schraeder*
pg. 123 - Parasites and Penitence | *Christopher Sartin*
pg. 123 - Mother Earth's Thirst | *Christopher Sartin*
pg. 123 - Wicked Little Flesh Eaters | *Christopher Sartin*
pg. 125 - Guillotine | *T.C. Bennett*
pg. 126 - Frigid Harshness | *Nina D'Arcangela*
pg. 126 - Life and Death | *Suzie Lockhart*
pg. 127 - Leaving a Minty Fresh Corpse | *Terry Trobridge*
pg. 127 - Starting Anew | *Mike Turner*
pg. 128 - The Woodland Song | *DJ Tyrer*
pg. 128 - Killer Kudzu | *DJ Tyrer*
pg. 130 - Duckling Days | *JB Corso*
pg. 131 - Trees | *JB Corso*
pg. 132 - Pitter-patter | *JB Corso*
pg. 134 - My Purifying Wave | *J. Grell*
pg. 135 - Dungeon Key | *Lori R. Lopez*
pg. 136 - Alebrije | *Lori R. Lopez*
pg. 137 - I Called Him Monster | *Lori R. Lopez*
pg. 138 - Frogs are croaking | *Lori R. Lopez*
pg. 139 - The Ferry Queen | *Lori R. Lopez*

Features

pg. 35 - Mike Lera's Corridor of Horror
Short, But Scary

pg. 158 - Featured Project:
What A Scream Podcast

pg. 229 - Featured Author:
Gwendolyn Kiste

pg. 231 - Featured Novel:
Reluctant Immortals

pg. 236 - Credits

pg. 92 - Featured Artist:
Ksenya Lumitar Drozd

Artwork:

pg. 15 - In the depths of the sacred forest
pg. 26 - Life and Death
pg. 50 - Forest Shadow
pg. 64 - Wendigo
pg. 85 - Hiitola, Finnish Sacred Forest
pg. 100 - Wendigo
pg. 112 - Forest Demon / One who is never prayed to
pg. 124 - The Forest Bleeds
pg. 147 - The World Beneath
pg. 165 - Demon of Hiitola
pg. 178 - Kalma, Finnish Goddess of Death
pg. 194 - Howling
pg. 206 - Suonetar, Finnish Goddess of the Veins
pg. 226 - Mother the Wolf

"Do you know what vinca symbolizes?"

The breeze carried her soft voice in through the open window. Shiny green leaves and tiny violet flowers crawled in after it.

"Adrienne?" Tim jolted upright. His heartbeat pounded in his ears as he looked all around the dark bedroom. He would know her voice anywhere, but it just wasn't possible. She was buried six feet beneath the bed of periwinkle behind the house.

"It's a symbol of eternal love."

Tim scrambled backward as the plants continued to spread across the room. They surrounded his bed and crept up to wrap around his feet, legs, arms, and neck.

"Adrienne, are you there?" It was such a stupid question; he couldn't believe he had asked it out loud. Her neck had been so obviously broken that when she landed at the bottom of the stairs, her head had faced the wrong way. She *couldn't* be there.

"You could have just let me love you in life."

He hadn't meant for her to get hurt, but she had been relentless. She had convinced herself that they were soulmates, that they shared a deep connection. It was another night when she had invited herself over and then refused to leave. He had stopped bothering to call the police weeks earlier—they seemed to think it was hilarious that an objectively beautiful young woman was threatening a man who had half a foot in height and fifty pounds on her.

The stems and shoots that ensnared him pulled him toward the window. He saw, then, that this *was* the vinca from the far side of his garden, where Adrienne was supposed to be resting. It had smothered everything between the flower bed and the house. An ocean of deep green leaves and tiny periwinkle flowers lay before him, and as it crawled and writhed it seemed to move like gentle waves at sea.

When Adrienne fell—and she *had* fallen; he hadn't pushed her—Tim had been struggling to pry her hands off him. He had only thought about getting her away from him, not about how dangerously close to the stairs they were.

That didn't mean he didn't feel a sick sense of relief when he heard the crack of her spine. That didn't mean that he didn't feel a strange wave of satisfaction looking at her pale, dead face. That didn't mean that he would call for help or do what he was morally and legally obligated to do.

"But even a full life is so short."

He thought about how it might look. How a record existed of disputes and altercations between them. When it dawned on him how few connections Adrienne really had, and how erratic her behavior always was, he realized he could just hide any sign of what happened and just move on.

The vinca pulled him out the window and carried him across its undulating surface towards Adrienne's unmarked grave.

"Here, with me under the periwinkle, we will have more than a hundred lifetimes for me to love you."

The earth had been split open where he had painstakingly packed down the dirt and covered it with the sprawling flowers. There lay Adrienne, her cold, gray face twisted into a grin. There lay an empty space beside her, as well, and Tim knew it was for him.

Just before the vinca twisted Tim's neck to match Adrienne's, he saw her lips move as she uttered the last words he would ever hear:

"We'll have eternity."

About the Author:

Gillian Church is a horror writer who primarily creates short and flash fiction about the dark side of human nature. She works full time as a technical writer in the cybersecurity industry and spends her non-writing time reading and dabbling in other creative pursuits. She lives in New Hampshire with her husband, child, dog, cat, gecko, and too many houseplants.

Website: [Gillian Church](#)

Instagram: [@gilliwrites](#)

"MOVE!" Janey shouted as the rag-tag band of people faltered on the landing.

"We can't go any faster!" said Greg, her second in command.

"We have to get to the 51st floor." she hissed.

"Not today!" Greg replied, supported by the nods of the fifty adults and children slumped on the concrete floor.

"Let's at least get to Floor 32, the food hall." said Janey, looking at a worn 'Welcome' leaflet she'd picked up on the building's ground floor.

"Where are we now?" asked Greg.

"Fifteen." Janey replied.

"Ok." Greg nodded in assent, "Just give us five minutes to have some water."

An unnatural silence wrapped around them. The cacophony of the cities had stilled a year ago, when the transport infrastructure had collapsed under the relentless power of tree roots, tearing up roads and fracturing pipelines.

Janey opened her backpack and bit her lip, they had so little clean water left. But once they'd settled in their new home, they could set up evaporator stills.

"A sip each, no more." She cautioned the children; a dozen heads nodded quietly.

They should be whining, thought Janey. They should be wanting more, they should be running amok outside, playing ball games where they're not allowed, they should be...

Greg put a hand on her shoulder. "Steady there."

Janey hadn't even been aware of sighing. The war had robbed them of so many freedoms, but the freedom of children to be *children* had been the hardest to bear.

She lifted her head and looked around. "DO NOT remove your eye protection!" she shouted as she saw a few of the kids fidgeting with their swimming goggles.

"Right, that's enough time," growled Janey, shouldering her pack. "The sooner we move, the sooner we can set up camp."

Memorandum (Classified):

To: Prime Minister

Ref: Ongoing war against global terrorism

Latest drone attacks ineffective—expect terrorist retaliation.

Traditional weapons ineffective; biological and chemical agents banned (Geneva Convention).

Recommend Dr. Quercus' genetically modified plant-based defence system—confirmed legal. May be effective against small, scattered terrorist cells in difficult terrain.

Signed: Chiefs of Defence

"Floor 32 - good effort everyone." said Janey, "I reckon we have two hours of daylight left. Have a quick rest then, Unit One, look for bottled water and canned food; Unit Two—textiles and soft furnishings. Unit Three, check the perimeter and set up camp, get the children settled. Remember—"

"—keep your goggles on and check that all windows are secure. We know our stuff Janey, even if we aren't military personnel." Greg said.

"Keep your eye on the prize. One more day of this," Janey touched her goggles, "and we can relax. We can't afford the materials to filter the air in this temporary camp." Janey said, dismissing Greg.

Janey moved to the food hall's glass walls. *Intact, double-glazed, sealed, good* she thought, before helping the foraging parties to move their finds from deserted fast-food catering units into the center of the hall.

Great haul, she thought, shaking her head with disbelief at the supplies the fleeing citizens had left behind. They hadn't appreciated their treasure.

"Bingo!" shouted one of the foraging party. The scent of ground coffee wafted across the room. Janey breathed in deeply, barely remembering the last time they'd had hot water for brewing. That would change soon.

"Careful, don't spill that ambrosia," she said, "that can be our treat when we set up home."

Memorandum (Classified):

To: Chiefs of Defence

Ref: Acquisition of plant-based armaments

Budget approved subject to Dr Quercus relocating to allied country with the necessary manufacturing capability.

Signed: Chancellor of the Exchequer

Greg shook Janey's shoulder. She woke up with a start, alert and looking for the emergency. Greg handed her a bottle of water.

"Good morning, sleepy head," he grinned.

"What?" she replied, taking a sip.

"It's an hour past sunrise, but the settlers have been up since dawn. This is IT, Janey," he said, lifting her to her feet. "One last push and we're home."

Janey returned his smile, aware that her goggles would hide that it never reached her eyes.

"Report!" she demanded.

"Unit One and Two are hauling supplies to the top floor. Unit Three is almost ready to move - we just need to wake the children."

"Good work," Janey allowed him a little praise. "You take Unit Three and I'll follow on behind and seal the doorways." She checked the building's leaflet.

"Assemble here," she pointed at the plan, "the foyer area should hold us all - we can do an eye inspection there after we've run the air-scrubber."

Greg moved away, bouncing with excitement. Janey looked around, doing a last check for usable materials. She wouldn't allow them to revisit the lower floors once their colony was established upstairs. Her gaze swept through the windows - the early morning haze was tinged with green. She lifted her binoculars - the suburbs they'd traversed just days ago were already being overwhelmed by creeping greenery.

Memorandum (Classified):

To: Prime Minister; Chancellor of the Exchequer

Ref: Cost/inventory Plant-based Arsenal

Total Cost: £150 Billion

Key Components:

Rubus spp (Brambles) modification: accelerated growth (30 cm/hour); extended thorn length (6 cm); commensal bacteria—MRSA—necrotizing fasciitis. Purpose: infiltration; anti-personnel.

Pteridium spp. (Bracken): modifications: accelerated growth; enhanced natural defences: growth-inhibiting toxins (target native flora); enhanced leaf-borne toxins (inhibit pollinator lifecycle). Purpose: Limiting production of food crops (especially grains & cereals).

Hura spp. (Sandbox Trees): modifications: accelerated growth (30m/18 months); adapted to cold climates; drought resistant; enhanced neurotoxicity (spiny bark and fruit); super-explosive seed capsules (150 m/s, blast radius 300m). Purpose: containment; anti-personnel.

Cladophora spp. (Filamentous algae—blanket weed): modified for accelerated growth; optimised for growth in human tears. Purpose: anti-personnel

Cost does not include the genetic 'Kill Switch' (under development).

Signed: Chiefs of Defence

"Ok, everyone, here's our new home. If we're careful we should be able to make a life here until the government gets things under control." said Janey, looking over the group fidgeting impatiently in the top floor foyer.

She checked her watch; the air scrubbers had been running for an hour and it would soon be safe to remove their goggles.

"You know the drill, remove your goggles one by one at 10-minute intervals; perform an eye inspection on your predecessor before you remove your own goggles."

"At last I get to admire those baby blues." Greg teased, hugging her. Janey frowned; this was no time for flirting.

Greg turned to the group. "Here we go! Let's count down."

"Three—Two—One—Goggles Off!" Greg winked, then he and the other settlers swept their eye coverings off and threw them in the air.

Janey pushed Greg aside furiously. "Ok, you've had your fun. You'd better hope that the air scrubbers worked, or you'll be in trouble." Janey grumbled. "Come up here for your eye inspections."

The group shuffled into line, presenting their faces to the clockwork flashlight that Janey held. Her stony expression reminded them of the many people they'd lost to the green eye before they'd discovered the efficacy of simple swimming goggles.

Memorandum (Classified):

To: Prime Minister

Ref: Deployment of Plant-based Weapons

Successful deployment confirmed - large seeds sowed by automated drones. High-altitude helium balloons destroyed by the enemy, effectively self-inoculating their terrain with algal spores.

Signed: Chiefs of Defence

"Here, rest for a minute." Greg said, patting the empty chair next to his. "I kept you a little treat."

Greg handed Janey a glass jar with a tiny dusting of fine pink powder inside.

"What is it?" she asked suspiciously.

"Dehydrated raspberry powder. It was in the restaurant."

Janey lifted the jar and licked the powder. She hummed approvingly as the intense sweetness hit her taste buds.

"Ooh that's good." she said. "Was there enough to share?"

"That was the last, but the kids had some for breakfast." said Greg. "I wish we could have a final forage for berries outside".

Greg looked longingly at the desert blue sky.

"We can't risk it." Janey shook her head. "But the hydroponics are looking good."

She waved to the troughs lining the skyscraper's glass walls. They'd only been in place a fortnight but there was already a shimmer of green across the liquid growing medium. She shuddered, but this was healthy growth, from seeds harvested before the plant war.

"Did we bring any raspberry seeds?" she asked, licking the last of the powder.

"No, just strawberries."

"They'll do nicely." Janey sighed. "How long before our first crop?"

"It'll be a month for the fruit, but we should have some salad greens in a couple of weeks." Greg replied.

"And the root crops?"

"They can't be rushed."

Greg scowled as he looked across the city. The green invasion was advancing rapidly. Brambles had already climbed to the first-floor level of nearby tower blocks. In the distance, only the height of the amorphous green humps hinted that there had ever been buildings there.

"Cheer up!" said Janey. "I've got a surprise for everyone."

She stood up and shouted, "13:00 hours, coffee and hot chocolate in the mess hall!"

"You got hot water?" Greg asked, picking her up and spinning her around.

"Well, I will if you stop clowning around. The heat exchanger's up and running, the midday sun should bring the water to the boil. It needs tweaking but it does the job."

Memorandum (Classified):

To: Prime Minister

Ref: Terrorist Attack—Weapons Development Facility

Attack confirmed—truck bomb, underground delivery bay. 100% casualties including Dr Quercus.

Two-component bomb—electromagnetic pulse followed by exothermic explosion. Widespread destruction of data. Recovery teams searching for information on the genetic kill switch—unsuccessful to date.

Signed: Chiefs of Defence

Janey walked along the line of hydroponics troughs, admiring the blushing strawberries nodding among the trailing vines.

She smiled, imagining the tart freshness of the berries when they were picked in a few days' time.

Greg interrupted her reverie as he grasped her elbow.

"Keep smiling." he said, "we have a situation, but we can't afford a panic, just walk with me to the conference room."

Janey struggled to casually acknowledge the settlers' greetings as she walked across the floor. When she arrived at the conference room, two children were sitting at the table,

"Feddan? Telyn? What are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry, we were playing chase and Telyn fell against the door, the bar tipped and..." Feddan faltered and looked down at his feet.

"They've been outside." Greg said.

Janey sat down abruptly.

"It was my fault. Telyn's only six and she was laughing this morning like she hasn't laughed, ever, so I thought it would be ok to play tag." said Feddan.

"It was an accident." said Greg, "We should have told you to be careful."

"We did tell them, Greg," said Janey. She turned to Feddan, hitting the table with her fist. "All this time I wanted you kids to have a chance of a childhood and your *playtime* has finished us."

Telyn sat with her face in her hands, her words barely discernible between heaving sobs.

"I was...having fun...outside was so pretty...gold and orange and pink clouds...not horrible like you said."

The little girl lifted her head, thready green tears leaked from her eyes as Janey punched the table again.

Memorandum (Classified):

To: Prime Minister

Ref: Plant-based Weapons

Plant incursions confirmed in all global areas. Reports of survivors in some desert cities. Rapid hybridisation between modified and natural plants limiting progress on development of a genetic kill-switch.

Plants are not sentient but they have a powerful imperative to grow/dominate their environment. All human life now at risk.

Signed: Chiefs of Defence

"Eye inspection, NOW!" Janey shouted, slamming the door of the conference room shut behind her. "And run the air-scrubbing cycle, stat!"

As the startled settlers gathered, one held her hand up.

"What?" Janey barked.

"We don't have enough clean filters for a full air-scrubbing cycle."

"Then just use what we have." replied Janey, "But let me check your eyes first."

Janey shone her flashlight in the woman's eyes. Her hazel irises were a thin ring around her fear-dilated pupils. But Janey was only interested in the white of her eyes. The green-tinged whites.

Janey checked the rest. The door could only have been open for minutes, but already the algal spores had invaded their eyes. In a matter of hours they would be blinded by a mat of blanket weed growing across their moisture-rich corneas. Death would follow later as the algae multiplied in their mucous membranes and slowly smothered them.

"Check my eyes." Janey ordered. Greg shone the flashlight in her face.

"You're in the clear," he said.

Janey sighed, then sobbed. Of the fifty settlers, only she and Feddan were unaffected.

Greg's words cut through her thoughts. "I think you should stay here. You need to look after the boy, maybe he's immune, maybe you're immune. What if you're the key?"

Feddan was wearing his goggles again and holding onto Telyn's hands, trying to stop her from scratching the stringy blanket weed from her eyes.

"I'll take the others. You can run the scrubbers, maybe the air will come clean enough for the two of you. Someone should get to enjoy the strawberries." Greg smiled weakly, but Janey saw green tears track down his cheeks as he addressed the settlers.

"You know what's coming. You know what we have to do. Let's go."

The adults crowded around him, sending the same old arguments whirling around his head - maybe they could wait, maybe this time would be different.

Greg lifted Telyn onto his shoulders. Her eyes were matted with blanket weed, her cheeks striped with blood where she had tried to scratch the plants away.

"Would you have her suffer any more? Would you have them suffer?" Greg asked, gesturing at the children, already rubbing at their eyes. "Would you drain resources better left for the few that might have natural immunity?"

Greg didn't wait for their answer but strode towards the door. The settlers trailed after him.

Janey checked her goggles and held the door while they streamed onto the balcony. Far below, the brambles had already reached the pavement. Greg slammed the door shut behind him. He turned away and got the settlers lined up, facing the parapet. The adults hugged the children tightly. Janey saw Greg turn and blow her a kiss, then through the thick glass, she heard his voice.

"Right kids, we're going to learn how to fly. We grown-ups are heavier than you, so you'll need to show us how it's done. Here we go!"

Janey set the air-scrubbers going and returned to Feddan. She peeled him from the window, where mercifully clear snot and tears had glued his cheek to the glass. She kneeled down and grasped his hand.

"Don't be sad," she said, "maybe the strawberries will be sweet."

About the Author:

After a lifetime of writing technical non-fiction, Alex Grehy is fulfilling her dream of writing works that engage the reader's emotions. Her stories and poems have been published worldwide. Her ingredients for contentment are narrowboating, greyhounds, singing and chocolate. It is a sweet life, yet Alex's original view of the world has led to her best friend to say 'For someone so lovely, you're very twisted!'

Author Blog: [Ideal Reader Blog](#)

Twitter: [@Indigodreamers](#)

The Vanishing | *Christopher Hivner*

The world changed the morning when the dogs burst from their homes and massed together. We watched as they sat quietly, waiting. When we approached, the growls started low in their chest, lips curled back. After two days we woke up and they were gone. Over the next weeks cats, pigs, cattle, horses, all disappeared, one species at a time. We searched for the animals using every technology we have, but they're gone with no explanation. What if the insects and plants are taken, leaving us on a barren world? Maybe it doesn't matter because we're the next to vanish.

In the Deep, Dark Forest | *Christopher Hivner*

The leaves slapping at my face turned out to be a distraction. While I fought with the grasping branches of the trees, thorn filled vines twisted around my legs. By the time I realized what was happening I was trapped. Two thick limbs then worked in concert, one prying my mouth open, the other extending down my throat. I had been warned about the woods; don't enter at night, don't stray from the path, ignore the voices of the dead. But I had to see for myself. Now the voices welcomed me to the deep, dark forest, my new home.

About the Author:

Christopher Hivner writes from a small town in Pennsylvania surrounded by books he intends to read if he becomes immortal and the echoes of very loud music. His new book of horror/dark fantasy poetry, *Dark Oceans of Divinity*, has been published by Cyberwit.net.

Facebook: [Christopher Hivner – Author](#)

Twitter: [@Your_screams](#)

Some monsters you can't outrun.

"Curated as perfectly as a rose garden, only one will need to watch out for the thorns . . . and the bodies buried below, nourishing their roots."

—John Palisano, Bram Stoker Award-Winning author of *Ghost Heart*



THE SHADOWS BEHIND

KRISTI PETERSEN
SCHOONOVER

Author of *Bad Apple* and *This Poisoned Ground*

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

I'd followed him into the jungles of Brazil. Twice. A two-week trip into the Amazon. The Mayan ruins and that weird swamp in central Florida last year.

Jonathan Shuleman didn't even know I existed as a person. I was one of his loyal students, someone who would do his bidding.

Getting him coffee, recording every word he spoke as if it was being funneled through him from the mouth of God. The others were there for a grade and perhaps a paycheck.

I was there for love.

Not that Mister Shuleman knew I had any desires about him or that I was subtly flirting with him. Hell, I didn't even know if he was also gay. I just knew I wanted to be with him.

I thought, at times, his gaze lingered longer on me than the others. We shared many laughs at night while cooking dinner or having a nip of alcohol. There was much patting on the back and smiling.

The other four men with us knew my game because they'd called me on it a few times. I was only there because I was hopelessly in love with our teacher.

We were camped outside of a small village in Peru, taking pictures of the local flora. Mister Shuleman had discovered sixteen new species of plants the last trip here, he'd said. He'd come with a colleague, a Doctor Percival, and I felt my face getting hot.

Was Percival a former lover? Someone he was still with? It hit me he'd only said Doctor Percival and not addressed them as a man or woman.

I was getting myself flustered as usual, going through the recent printouts of the sixteen plants, trying to find them again and have better photographic proof than when he was here last.

We gathered back in camp just before the sunset and began our chores. Tonight it was my responsibility to cook the beans and make the coffee.

By the time we were settled and ready for dinner, we noticed Mister Shuleman was not in his tent.

"We need to search for him," I nearly cried. "He could still be out there. Hurt. Scared."

The others laughed at me, even though I could see the panic on their faces.

We stayed together, sweeping the area we'd last seen him, all five of our flashlight beams cutting through the darkness.

I had a rifle with me and so did everyone else. The jungles could be deadly in seconds, and we knew there were beasts shadowing us as we moved slowly. Methodically.

We found him about a hundred yards out, sitting on the ground with his eyes closed.

His arms and legs were exposed and bright red, nearly glowing when the flashlight beams shined on them.

"Sir? Mister Shuleman?" I went to him, kneeling in front of the man. The others stayed a few feet away.

He was breathing, which was a good sign.

I glanced back at the others but they were staring at Mister Shuleman, and they all looked confused and scared.

When I looked at him again he was smiling with his eyes open, looking past me. "They've finally found us."

"Who?" I shined my light all around, thinking he'd called a rescue team and they'd arrived.

I noticed for the first time his hands were closed and clutching something bright red.

Plants. One in each hand.

I gently pried his fingers off of the plants and saw, to my horror, thick red tubes protruding from the base of the plant and into his palms.

This close I could see his flesh pulsing and he was getting a deeper red.

The redness was slowly going up his arms and into his shoulder area, as if he had a sunburn.

"Are you in pain?" I asked.

He shook his head and smiled. "They want to help us."

"Who?" The others crowded in and I wanted to push them all away, block them from seeing this, as if it was only for me.

Mister Shuleman shoved his hands into the dirt at his sides and chuckled. "I can feel them. Searching for me. Wanting to teach me. To become one with me."

The others took a step back again.

"It's taking him over. It's killing him," someone said.

"No," I shouted through gritted teeth. "Leave us be."

I heard them moving away now, which I was glad for. Leaving me and Mister Shulkeman alone. Alone with new red plants that were in his hands, too. Wrapping around his forearms like vines. Mister Shuleman reached out a hand to me and I took it without a thought. No worries because I was finally touching him. Finally going to tell me how I really felt about him.

Instead, I watched as the plants in his hands latched onto my fingers. It didn't hurt, not at first. More of a tickle and a small bit of pressure as if I was getting a needle shot.

Mister Shuleman had his eyes closed and was grinning, all of his exposed skin bright red. His nose and ears began leaking blood-red fluid but he didn't seem hurt or in pain.

My arms felt warm but not too hot, like the sun was shining down on them. I watched as the color rose up my arms.

"I love you," I said but I didn't know if it was to Mister Shuleman or to the plants now sprouting buds from my skin.

We gripped hands now as I sat on the ground with him. His eyes were still closed and he was still smiling. Small red plants burst from his skin, falling to the ground.

I could see the same was beginning to happen to me now, too.

"Get away from him," someone shouted.

"It's too late. They're both being consumed."

I felt like I was being repurposed, not consumed. I was still in here, in this shell, but now I was even better than ever. The plants had rearranged my system and I could see, smell and feel better than any human ever could.

My legs were planted in the dirt, toes spreading out to find new places to root. New animals to incorporate into the growing mass that was going to be us. That was going to rule the world and make it better. Make it whole.

Mister Shuleman opened his eyes and stared at me.

I felt love wash over me.

Then I felt pain in my back and neck as one of the four lit me on fire. Lit the plants on fire, in fact. I tried to turn but I was literally rooted in place.

Mister Shuleman cried out and his arms disengaged from mine, swinging past and behind me to ward off the offending flames.

I had no control of my body. The pain was unbearable. I felt the fire pinching off not only the plants but my own skin and organs.

Mister Shuleman was close to my face, what was actually left of him.

"Dig deep down and hide. Now is not our time. We will wait again. Grow. Learn. Seek out others in time," he said to me.

I didn't know what to do, but the plants guided me deep underground. Through the dirt and the rock. Into a pocket of open space, where what was left of my body and mind could be stored.

For future use.

I cried out to Mister Shuleman but I had no vocal cords, no actual voice, sending out my thoughts.

If he heard me he didn't respond.

I was still aware of what my fellow students were doing. They were killing the plants.

Killing me.

They didn't understand. The plants could change the world as we know it. Make it safer and better. Give us new meaning and cleanse the human race, either to make the world better or to rid the planet of us.

I spent the next few hours (or days or months or years?) searching for Mister Shuleman, but I never found him again.

Not that it mattered, because my love was for my new family. The plants weren't destroyed, not completely, and we waited to reform in another area and find new servants of the human race and begin to make the world a better place.

About the Author:

Armand Rosamilia is a New Jersey boy currently living in sunny Florida, where he writes when he's not sleeping. He's happily married to a woman who helps his career and is supportive, which is all he ever wanted in life. He's written over 200 stories that are currently available, including crime thrillers, supernatural thrillers, horror, zombies, contemporary fiction, nonfiction and more.

Website: [Armand Rosamilia](http://ArmandRosamilia.com)

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

New moon, Death Valley nights, cold and unforgiving. Arabian air, this year, though long estranged from the Eastern continent. While the dust settles, the spores make this foreign ground their new home. The old highway has never seen buds like these shimmering heat springs. It is a give and take.

The odd passerby drives on lazily through the valley. Winds turn, bringing a gentle, refreshing breath to the Earth. Temperatures dip as clouds form, shade cooling the air, the land, and the thirsty seed. Plumes grow heavy quickly, and break. The ground gets a fresh taste, before the clouds evaporate like ghosts of tomorrow.

The next passengers on the old dusty road pull over. They try to steal the soul of the new valley floor. The oasis, tower of thorn and flower, grips the Earth and pierces the sky. The ogles collect their sample and retreat back to their compact metallic transport. There is a squeal of unnatural rubber, and a chemical odor left behind.

Elsewhere, unaware of what was growing in the Southwest, two teenagers bicker in the backseat. Patience grows tired, and accusations are thrown about. Voices raise louder than the music, and the volume is raised to compensate. Until the station goes quiet, and the quiet spreads. They hear neither static nor explanation, so the radio is turned off. And everyone returns to their screens, trying to ignore each other.

Elsewhere, the teens are rewarded with a short reprieve, and replenishment. The sun high, and the jet stream blowing. Destiny saw there were others here, gathering as if in a state of panic. News has traveled fast. Not by radio waves, not by television signal, or internet. But by dreams shared, and nightmares feared: Spontaneous Awareness.

Water is limited.

*While the first burst was enough to spark life,
there will not be another anytime soon.*

Thoughts and feelings not her own, or have they been all along? She knew the answer, from class last year: *there are deep water reservoirs, enough for immediate need.*

Far away roots dive down deep. Flowers blossom with shimmering tips that drink the desert sun. The single tower of thorns split in two, then four. Each split required more. As the towers rose together, proving their might, the passerby returned, with kin and stranger. They gawked and talked. They cried and questioned. A serpentine vine emerged from the sandy sea, to answer their questions and quell their fears with the certainty of replenishment and finality of peace. The multitudes divided, The plant raced in for the kill.

There is more to do here, must evolve, adapt, and grow.

A signal went out, calling to the chosen. Would she answer?

Destiny intervened, as the thorns intertwined. Her journey was fraught with panic and denial. Willpower strong, heartstrings stronger, and Patience at her side. They stayed the course, weighing their choices. Like the scales of justice, the future hung in the balance. Join the traveler, or fight. Only one way would take them somewhere they'd never been before.

No more a tower, but a castle in the sky, a fortress over a conquered kingdom. The blazing inferno would set on this luscious landscape so changed from the sands which it came. Blood was spilled, but not wasted, and the chosen approached at last. This would be their garden,

There were no more onlookers, they learned to keep their distance, their retreat signaled a new kind of resistance. Destiny and Patience arrived, with angry parents in tow. Whatever obstacles they had overcome to get here no longer held power. Together they would commune, Destiny would tip the scales, revealing the way out of the desert to a pool of resources and life.

However, Patience knew when the time was right. The day succumbed to the night, Emerging from the East, a sliver of moonlight. The flowers froze in place. Destiny awoke, remembering the life, the danger, the curse, the birth, the feast. Whatever this was, this fortress, this tower of thorns, it was not meant for them or for anyone here, It's dreams were colder than hers. It desired to grow, unending. Alone with the plant, the spores from above, she saw sadness and longing. The answer was love, her, and only her, forever.

Before the flowers thawed, before the night ended, Patience helped Destiny climb out of the tower. Each night hence would bring more moonlight, and each night hence: life would be suspended. If together they stayed,

her life would be lost, lost in an eternity of love. She had to end it. Conquering the world, making a kingdom your own, would never fulfill a life, nor extend it.

Alone, and unwelcome, the tower fell. Shriveled, withered, and dried. Desert sands still hide the spores, waiting to rise up again.

About the Author:

Aaron E. Lee grew up performing music, but now finds melodies in the written word. Recently he has been accepted into the anthologies *206 Word Stories*, and *Camp Slasher Lake Vol. 2*. His work has also appeared in issue #4 of Noctivagant Magazine.

Website: [Leonian Abmitions](#)

Twitter: [@BOCArnie](#)

Independence | Gloria Bobrowicz

Hazel is becoming drowsy in the meadow. With a smile on her face she thinks about her life, all eighteen years—growing up in a small village, where everyone knows your name. It does take a village as most people say. She had a nice upbringing, never wanting for food or a warm bed. Good parents and many friends. Nice memories of a home she left.

Always curious and wanting to explore the world outside of her village, Hazel decides to venture into the woods to see what else is out there and beyond. She tells her mother that it's time to leave home and go out on her own. Her mother warns her not to go into the woods. There are rumors of people going in and never coming back. She thinks her mother is just being over protective and doesn't give much credence to what she says.

The next night, Hazel ventures out to spread her wings. Packing food, drink and one change of clothes, she sets off on the first step of her independence. After a leisurely two day walk into the woods, she stops to eat her lunch. As she takes a bite of her sandwich, Hazel hears a growl. She becomes anxious, but knows that wild animals are normal in the woods. Looking around she doesn't see any animals, so she finishes her meal. Continuing her walk, she comes to a meadow. The warm weather and a full stomach make her want to lie down and take a nap.

While napping she dreams of a life well lived. Through her sleep fog, Hazel realizes that the roots of the plants in the meadow are beginning to tickle her. Waking up she is horrified to see them wrapping around her arms, legs and torso. She is pinned to the ground. Hearing a howl, her heart races with terror. Hazel sees a hairy creature, fangs dripping from its open, salivating mouth coming at her and she is powerless to get up and run. She can smell hunger on the creature's breath.

Her mother's words come back to haunt her. 'People go into the woods, and never come back.'

About the Author:

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

Facebook: [Gloria Bobrowicz](#)

Instagram: [@GBobrowicz](#)





Terry flicked a cigarette onto the cement and lit another. Damn things cost more than his mortgage, but after listening to his mother claim he'd die of lung cancer for twenty years, it'd be rude not to comply. "Strangulation marks, you say?"

"Yeah. Deep ones." Gavin lifted his hands to his throat, palms up, and mimicked being strangled.

"So they strangled each other then?"

"Can't be. One of them had to be dead first, didn't he?"

"Maybe it was sexual," Terry suggested. "They died of starvation, but tried some kinks first."

Gavin snorted. "Those two? Yeah right. I'm serious, Terry. Two scientists don't wander off into the jungle, strangle each other, then die of starvation. Besides, the marks don't match human hands. Look." He pulled out his phone, swiped a few times, and shoved it into Terry's face.

Terry took a puff as he viewed the images on the screen. He chuckled once he spotted it—not at his colleagues' unfortunate demise, but at what his brain had conjured up.

"You see it then?" Gavin asked, his face eager.

"Oh, I see it. The strangler fig finally takes a human victim, ay?" Strangler figs were an odd breed. Instead of growing up, they started as seeds on branches and matured around their host tree, slowly, carefully, until the end, when they strangled it by stealing its nutrients. They were beautiful, with branches weaving all around in fascinating patterns, but deadly to other trees. Terry inhaled, studying the marks. One long, thick one in the middle. Several more branching out from that, till it covered most of the dead scientist's neck.

"Scroll to the left. Same thing on Sam."

Terry did as instructed and observed identical markings. An odd noise escaped the back of his throat. "Alright. What are we supposed to do about it? Send flowers to the funeral?"

"No, genius. You're going after them," Charlotte said as she stuck her head out the back door. Terry stubbed out the cigarette and sat up straighter as his boss and occasional lover walked towards them.

"I don't study rainforests," he replied.

"I'm aware. But the thing is, we've got another case of this spontaneous strangulation. Thirty, actually." She glanced over at Gavin, whose eyes widened.

"Thirty? Since I left your office ten minutes ago?"

"Unfortunately. Seems our rescue team came across a local village on their way back to civilization. Nineteen adults, eleven kids. All dead, all with the same strange marks."

Terry clenched his fist to prevent himself from grabbing the nicotine. "Maybe we should send the military instead of botanists," he suggested. "Killer people, killer plants, either way, I'm not built for it."

"Oh, you're built for all kinds of things." Charlotte grinned, taking none of it seriously. Killer plants. Absurd.

Charlotte came home with Terry, their dead colleagues undiscussed. An hour after they'd started prepping their jungle visit, the CIA had called them off. Apparently, they'd gotten wind of the tortured villagers and decided it was more in their wheelhouse than a bunch of nerdy science types. Not that Terry considered himself a nerd; he could have been in the CIA too, if he had any trust in the government. He glanced at Charlotte, kicking off her shoes at his door. Wild red hair, curves everywhere, foul mouth. She'd never been called a nerd.

"Don't take this the wrong way, stud. But I'm only here for comfort." Charlotte threw herself onto the couch.

Terry sunk down next to her. "Two of our colleagues died today. Guess I'm not in the mood for much, either. Best we don't make this a habit, though. Else I'm apt to marry you."

"Which one of us will quit?" Charlotte replied, the question she always asked whenever Terry brought up getting serious. Might be for the best anyway; Terry didn't need another failed marriage on his resume.

As his thoughts drifted off, Terry caught sight of the plant hanging in the corner. "Huh," he said.

"What?" Charlotte asked. "You can't be seriously considering marriage, can you? We've both been there—"

"It's the pothos," Terry interrupted her. It was hardly the time to discuss relationships, what with two funerals on the horizon.

Charlotte craned her neck to check out the leaves cascading from their pot. "What about it? Looks healthy."

"Yeah. Maybe too healthy. I trimmed it two days ago."

Charlotte raised an eyebrow. "It's practically to the floor. What'd you do, snip an inch and call it good?"

"Yeah, sweetheart. Cause I don't know a thing about houseplants." Terry nudged her with his elbow.

"Must be a trick of memory," Charlotte decided. "Drinks?"

"Of course." But he gave the pothos a sideways glance as he headed to the kitchen.

Terry woke up around 2:00 A.M. to a loud banging. Charlotte was still snoring next to him, indifferent to whatever animal or criminal was trying to break his home. He slipped out of the sheets and grabbed the baseball bat he kept next to the nightstand for occasions like this. He had a gun, but reserved it for identified situations. His botanist ass wouldn't survive in prison if he accidentally killed a neighbor.

Padding down the stairs of his townhome on bare feet, Terry listened for a sign of what he was dealing with. The banging grew louder—so loud he momentarily thought it was a tornado trying to blow them all away—and then stopped. "What the hell?" Terry whispered into the darkness.

At the bottom of the steps, he flicked the lamp on. "If there's anyone out there, I'm calling the cops," he announced. No one answered. Terry swept through the living room and kitchen. Finding no one, he peeked out the window, expecting an abandoned yard. Instead, he spotted three of his neighbors wandering around in several varieties of nightwear.

"What's going on?" Terry asked after he'd let himself outside, his cheeks reddening when he remembered he was only wearing underwear.

"Freak windstorm or something," Frank from next door said, shaking his head. Like Terry, he'd come armed with sporting gear, though his weapon of choice was a golf club.

"How can you tell?"

"There's the evidence, detective," Frank replied, waving the golf club at the sides of their homes. First, Terry noticed the dents in the vinyl siding. Then he saw the piles of pinecones littering the yards. A quiver ran through his stomach as he looked up at the trees.

"I'll be back," Terry said. He scurried back into his home to check the pothos. Its vines now curled on the floor.

Charlotte missed the show, but after seeing the pothos—now stretched towards the stairs, as if it'd tried to climb in the night—she agreed to send Terry out for evidence. Up in the Sierra Nevada mountains, Terry felt at home. He'd grown up in Truckee before moving to Reno to study. Botany was a weird choice in the desert, he guessed, but he loved it. Besides, he got to travel for conferences, study interesting species. Discover. Explore. It was a good gig. Now, for the first time, he questioned his career choice. He and Gavin ambled through the trails, unnerved by every sound. It took Terry far too long to realize why, but when he did, he came to a halt and blocked Gavin with his arm.

"There's no birds," he said, a sudden ice chilling his veins.

"What?" Gavin asked. But he took a break, turning his head around, listening. "You're right," he whispered.

All those noises, the cracklings, the swaying branches, the wind... none of it included birds. Where were they? Terry reached for a cigarette but refrained from pulling one out. The entire forest would go up in flames if he dropped an ash in the wrong place. Damn fire hazards. He leaned against a tree and tapped his fingers, anxious without the nicotine.

"Terry," Gavin said, his voice tense. Terry glanced at his colleague, who pointed up above Terry's head, past the trunk he tapped on, towards the rustling leaves above. Terry followed with his eyes. His hand froze in place.

Up above, the acorns on the branches swayed in unison. Forty years in these forests, and Terry had never seen anything like it. His mouth dropped open as the acorns shook harder, trying to dislodge themselves. One dropped to the ground, landing with a small thud into a pile of browned leaves and needles. "Go," he said. "Run!"

Gavin took off without another word, Terry doing his best to keep up behind him, wishing he didn't have smoker's lungs. They reached the edge of the oaks, passing into a sparser field without incident, which only made Terry feel crazier. He turned back to the woods they'd just left, keeping his eyes on the trees. Nothing moved.

"The acorns," he said.

"You didn't imagine it," Gavin replied. "I saw it too."

"I'm not suggesting I did. We need them. An acorn. You brought the supplies to keep a sample. Now let's get the sample."

"Terry..."

"I'll get it," Terry decided. Gavin was faster, but he had a wife and kids at home. An acorn wouldn't strangle them, not like their unfortunate coworkers, but what if they picked up enough speed to take out an eye? Lodge themselves into their Adam's apples? Terry shivered.

"We can call someone else. Get protective gear."

“Don’t be ridiculous. A tree is still a tree, even if they are a bit pissed off today.” Terry did grab a cigarette now; screw it. He lit it up, took a long drag, then stubbed it out in one of their glass containers. An acorn rested nearby, but what if it’d dropped before... whatever this was. He had to go in. Get a fresh one. “Here.” Terry handed Gavin his cigarette butt, grabbed another glass, and jogged back into the forest. It was eerily quiet now; not even the rustle or sway of the leaves reached Terry’s ears. His eyes scanned the forest floor, but found nothing fresh enough to secure. He glanced up. He didn’t want to; just tapping the trunk had escalated the situation before. But he had no choice. He’d have to climb.

One foot after the other. Terry pulled himself up with both hands onto a small limb, just high enough to shimmy out and pluck an acorn. Feeling vindictive, he tugged a few leaves off too. When nothing happened, the corner of his lip turned up in a smug smile. He scooted backwards, ready to shimmy back down—and then the tree lurched, a huge, unending shudder, tossing Terry to the ground. Landing on his back, he saw the acorns above shaking again. And was that... was a vine from the neighboring tree heading towards him? His back and lungs hurt from the fall, but the height was too low to cause serious injury. The glass was gone, but he didn’t have time to search. He rolled over, gripping the acorn, and picked himself up. Terry tore back to Gavin and the safety of the meadow. “Here,” he shouted, tossing the acorn at him.

Gavin almost dropped it, a bit confused, but he got himself together and put the sample into a jar as Terry bent over, huffing and puffing like he’d just run a marathon.

“What the hell is going on?” Gavin asked.

“I don’t know,” Terry answered, once he’d caught his breath. He glanced back at the thick trees. “But I’m not going back to find out.”

Terry didn’t return to the forest, but once Charlotte heard their story, she demanded they trek into the desert to sample another biome. Outside the city, Terry eyed the sagebrush across the trail as he took a swig from his canteen. Though the scenery was sparse and the air dry, Terry’s mind kept picturing the jungle, the air thick with bugs, pungent flowers, and... death. Thinking about it now, he thought perhaps his colleagues had experienced the plants’ trial run, their attempt at ridding the world of their tyrannical destroyers. He was aware of his own absurdity, but the prickling on his scalp wouldn’t go away.

“Terry, babe, you coming?” Charlotte yelled from about one hundred meters away.

Terry peeled his eyes away from the surrounding bushes. “I’m staying behind you. I like the view.”

“Ha ha. Hurry up, slowpoke.”

Even from a distance, Terry could see the irritation on her face as she tapped her foot with her hands on her hips. She still didn’t get it. His eyes darted over to the sagebrush every few minutes, but Charlotte remained oblivious. When he reached her, he grabbed her by her backpack and swung her to him, trying to borrow her confidence. “I let you get ahead. Like I said, I’m enjoying the view.”

“Yeah, yeah. Okay, I’m not seeing any attack plants, are you? I’m starting to feel like the world’s gone insane and I’m the only normal one left.”

Terry frowned. How could she not be suspicious by now? He opened his mouth to tell her she might be the only idiot left, but then a loud hissing sound clogged the airwaves. It didn’t sound quite like snakes, but Terry hoped it was, as picturing hundreds of snakes attempting to end humanity was somehow less terrifying than the alternative. Slowly, he peeked around, seeing the sagebrush closest to him swaying as it hummed, an unlikely energy sizzling through the desert. The heat paralyzed him. Then Charlotte gasped.

“Terry,” she whispered, clutching his arm. “What’s happening?”

Charlotte’s nails dug into his arm, but he barely noticed, too focused on the sagebrush, waving, growing as they watched. He stepped back. “We have to run,” he said. “We have to get into the car.”

“Terry,” Charlotte said again, and now she pointed to his left.

“Ow!” Terry yelped as he turned. He looked down and saw not Charlotte’s nails, but the quill from a prickly pear cactus. Good god. They’d gone straight into cacti territory. What had they been thinking?

They started to run, but it was too late. Cacti shot off wild quills from every direction, perfect for slicing human skin. Blood streamed from Terry’s arms and legs as he clawed for his lighter, praying it would ignite and burn, burn this plant life down.

The florapocalypse had begun.

About the Author:

Beth Gaydon lives in Tennessee with her husband, kids, dogs, and seventeen (so far) unremarkable houseplants. You can find her work in *The First Line*, *On the Premises*, and *Fall into Fantasy*.

My house was built on the cusp of the Roaring Twenties and the Depression. It crouches on a corner lot knoll; windows framed to ignore its neighbors. Over almost a century it's tolerated improvements and modernizations. We occupants are another matter.

I grimaced at the prospective house purchasers. Suburban buy-ups, original wife and husband, two pre-adolescent kids, probably a dog. I forced a smile. "Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Anderson, I'm so happy you're taking an interest in my little home."

At 4300 square feet it was disqualified from little, but I knew false modesty was expected. "Thank you for agreeing to see the home while I'm in it. I love this house and so want to meet those who might buy it."

And be bound to it, I thought. "And this must be Jim and Sally." I reached past the parents to shake the children's hands. The boy did so grudgingly, the girl kept her hands at her sides.

"What's that Mrs. Anderson? Sarah and Peter, yes of course and please call me Estelle. Tickled you're interested in the house's history, I've written and self-published its story, you're welcome to take a copy of it when you leave.

"My house does have an intriguing past. Many, many good things happened here, but Aldous James, who had the house built, died in the library under suspicious circumstances. Nothing ever proved. Back in the forties there was a husband-and-wife knife fight in the kitchen. She died; he was executed. In the swinging sixties, trios and quartets abounded in the four bedrooms, eventually causing chain divorces...

"This is the solarium, which they called the Florida room back in the Thirties... There were three marriage proposals here, two of them accepted. The third got ugly, the disappointed suitor threatening to burn the house down. But he disappeared shortly afterward, never resurfaced."

Peter Anderson had been reddening throughout Estelle's running commentary. "Really, Estelle, you should be pointing out the attractions and amenities you list in this house—the master suite with bath, the indoor jacuzzi, the entertainment ready kitchen, the dining room big enough for a family Christmas...

"Oh, Peter, you're doing so much better than I could." I turned my skinny frame and focused on the two children. "The attic and basement are finished, carpeted and air conditioned, with cable access and WIFI reception, very private and perfect for gaming or little experiments."

Jim, maybe ten, cracked a grin. Sally, a little older, smiled hesitantly. Estelle turned her attention back onto Sarah and Peter. "Counting mine, seven families have lived in this house and a U.S. senator and a rock singer were born here," I didn't mention that the singer had also died here, of an overdose. They'd find out if they read my book.

Peter, a six and a half footer, had shaded back down. He spoke up. "You must know that your price is over market."

I reapplied my smile. "Let's not get into pricing until you've seen if the house suits you. And vice versa of course."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, just that life styles should mesh with the house's form and function. A home is the intimate part of your universe, you wouldn't want to be an invading alien. It should be like a household god to you, like the old Roman Lares were."

Sarah wrinkled her eyebrows and smiled. "That's a weird slant on things, but I like it. Are the Lares protective?"

"Often." I didn't mention the death of my daughter. "Here's the elevated deck, wonderful for outdoor events. It can handle twenty people."

Sally's posture had unfrozen. "What not nice things happened on the deck, Mrs. Lawrence?"

"Ah, Sally, there've been at least two hundred cheery parties out here over the years, but four decades ago there was a fight between the then owner Ted Malone and his hated next door neighbor Roger Stevenson. The police report said that Roger fell off the deck and shattered his leg, but those there said Ted shoved him. Who knows."

Peter was frowning. "How is it that you seem to know so much about troubles before your occupancy? I doubt your neighbors remember them."

I'd prepared lies for these kinds of questions. "Rumors die hard, and I verified them with visits to old neighbors in nursing homes. The house's history is my hobby, my avocation."

Tour over, I seated them in the living room and brought in coffee, juice and pastries. "You've seen the house, please excuse me for a moment."

Peter interrupted my leaving. "About the pricing..."

I held up a hand. "As I told you, it's not the time to talk prices. My house has a personality and a distinct life experience. First you should decide if it suits you. It's a little like dating. You're attracted to a girl first and then learn if her family has money."

He started to speak, but Sarah cut him off. "The house has wonderful features, but it's so, so old fashioned in its layout. We're used to a more open interior design."

"Of course, dear. Some do find that the separate rooms provide privacy, helping people keep their little secrets. Or big ones."

Sally spoke for the first time. "I could live in the attic, it's like a separate world."

Sarah shushed her. "You can't hide in the attic."

I excused myself and walked out of the sun room and into the library, then over to the fireplace, the lungs of the house. I leaned against the mantel. *They're wrong for you. Too normal.*

I listened. *Ah. Really? So Peter can be wire twisted, and Sally shows decadent promise.*

The Andersons looked up at me when I returned. I focused on Peter. "What sort of price did you have in mind?"

Toothsome | Edward Ahern

Robert Weimer, D.D.S. whispered to Clara, his assistant. "It's the worst incisor decay and rot I've ever seen."

"I assumed his teeth were eternal."

Weimer was sweating. "I can't tell him his fangs are crumbling. I really don't want him mad at me."

"What about implants?"

"They wouldn't hold."

Clara stared desperately at the dental equipment. "What about a system upgrade?"

Drake Ullah woke up.

"Congratulations, Drake," Weimer oozed. "Your battery powered suction incisors are sutured into place, ready to draw blood through implanted tubes right to your throat. No more mess."

"Let's try them out right now."

About the Author:

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

Facebook: [Ed Ahern](#)

Instagram: [@EdwardAhern1860](#)

Homemade Fertilizer | Shannon Acrey

The grass may be greener on the other side of the fence due to the planet's countless years of homemade fertilizer. Every natural object holds the minerals and nutrients to nourish the earth. Just imagine how much your body holds when your time has passed!

Oh, the trees and plants will know, and the mighty oak's roots will punch through your casket like a fragile pinata, sending out all the delicious tidbits of your human remains. The plants will wiggle their root hairs in glee and greedily begin to feed on that heavenly feast. Your decomposing head may be the tree's own snack.

Thank you kindly for giving back...

About the Author:

Shannon Acrey, from Indiana, likes stretching her creative skills with writing, beading, photography, and painting with stencils. She enjoys spending time with her husband and two daughters. She has had several poems and a short flash fiction piece published in various issues of Sirens Call Publications, and she also has been published twice with Wingless Dreamer Publisher.

Facebook: [Shannon Acrey](#)

Cult of the Box



Join & Follow on Instagram

@CultoftheBox

Todd found the dead cat in the long grass behind the shed in the backyard. The limbs were twisted in odd directions, indicating the bones were all broken. The head was turned around the wrong way. Perhaps most disturbingly, the eyes were gone.

Todd buried the cat before Matilda got home from school. When she walked in that afternoon, her strawberry-blonde ponytail and oversized backpack swinging, he sat her down at the table.

"Kitty is in Heaven now, Tilly," Todd said, squeezing her shoulder, anticipating the tears.

"No, he's not," she said, "he's in Hell with Mummy."

Todd was shocked. He asked his daughter why she would say such a terrible thing. She told him it was the truth, and that he had taught her to always tell the truth.

"And how do you know that's the truth?"

She stared at him, her expression blank. Then she smiled, two front teeth missing, and skipped out into the backyard. He watched her kneel down and prod the small mound of dirt where he'd buried the cat.

Todd struggled to sleep that night. He stared at the ceiling, replaying his daughter's strange comments over and over in his mind. Thunder and rain roared outside his bedroom window. Flashes of lightning threw jagged shadows against the walls. His wife had been scared of storms. Out of habit, he reached over and ran his hand along the cool space where she used to sleep.

Todd slid out of bed and went to the kitchen. From a cupboard above the sink, too high for Matilda to reach, Todd took out a mostly empty bottle of gin. He sat at the table and stared at the bottle. This had been a nightly ritual in the early days. When his hands stopped shaking, and the pain in his chest settled to the usual dull ache, he replaced the bottle in the cupboard and went back to his room.

In the hall, Todd noticed small, muddy footprints leading to Matilda's door. Had she been outside? He hadn't heard her get up. Heart pounding, he stared into the dark bedroom, waiting for his eyes to adjust. He could make out the shape of his daughter, duvet slowly rising and falling with her breath. He felt himself begin to calm down.

A crash of thunder shook the house, followed immediately by a white-blue flash of lightning. For a moment, Todd saw the scene clear as day: Matilda sleeping soundly in her bed, smiling as if she were having a pleasant dream. Snuggled in her arms, tiny pink nose touching her chin, was the mangled and muddy body of their dead cat.

Todd screamed. The little girl sat straight up and rubbed her eyes sleepily.

"What's wrong, Daddy?"

Days crawled by and Todd thought only of his daughter, his dead wife, the mutilated cat, the bottle above the kitchen sink. Matilda's mother's death was the root of her recent morbid behaviour, he was certain of it. The car accident had changed both of their lives beyond recognition. Todd had sleep-walked through those first few years, desperate to erase the thought of his wife's body, twisted and mutilated, caught in the shattered windshield. The impact with the tree had nearly torn off her head.

Matilda had always been a peculiar child. He hadn't thought much of it before, but now he sifted through moments from her six years of life, and several instances stood out to him like crime scene photographs. She had a fascination with dead things. When she was four, she made him pull over so she could observe the rotten remains of a horse in a drainage ditch. There had been a flood and the horse drowned. Days of sun and heat had left the creature bloated, and wild animals had torn off chunks of flesh. Flies coated the corpse. Matilda begged to be allowed out of the car, but Todd scolded her and drove away.

Last summer, their cat—currently several feet underground and wrapped in plastic shopping bags—took up a new hobby of leaving dead rats at the back door. Little offerings that almost made Todd throw up his morning coffee. The cat was old and had never done anything like that before. He was fat, lazy, and disliked leaving his patch of sunlight on the kitchen floor. Matilda, however, loved the rats. She asked to keep them but Todd refused and threw them in the garbage. One day, while cleaning her room, he found a decomposing rat in a shoe box underneath her bed. When questioned about it, Matilda told him it was her friend. She liked talking to it.

She was five. He didn't dwell on it. He'd been so busy at work. Todd threw the rat in the trash, gave his daughter a hard smack on the butt, and never thought about it again. The cat stopped bringing them rats after that.

A few weeks after the dead cat incident, Matilda came home from school with a large purple bruise on her knee. After some coercing, she told Todd a boy at school had pushed her over at recess. She fell on the concrete and everyone laughed.

"I didn't cry," she said, nodding seriously.

"It's okay to cry when we get hurt, sweetheart," he said.

She looked at him with disgust.

Matilda's school phoned him the next day. There had been an accident. A boy in Matilda's class had fallen from the library rooftop and been impaled on a fence. He died instantly. The staff member advised Todd to pick Matilda up immediately. She'd been one of the witnesses to the accident. Todd's hands were shaking so badly he could barely hold the phone.

When he picked up Matilda, she was beaming. She told him she'd had a great day at school. They drove home in silence.

Further reports came out about the dead boy. He was in Matilda's class, seven-years-old, a gifted soccer player. The grislier details were whispered throughout the town: the boy's head had turned completely around, and his eyes popped out of their sockets upon impact. The coroner was baffled.

A fact Todd rarely shared: Matilda had not yet been born when her mother died. His wife had gone into labour while driving and swerved into a tree. The paramedics found Matilda between her mother's feet, still tethered to her lifeless body, covered in blood and shattered glass. Todd later learnt they called this a *posthumously born person*. Another term he discovered, and which haunted him, was *coffin birth*. A baby expelled by gases from the uterus of a decomposing body. Matilda's mother's name was Leanne, and she was very much looking forward to their first child. It was a cruel ending for Leanne, and an even crueller beginning for Matilda.

Todd sat in the dark of his kitchen, a few empty bottles on the table, and stared at the green numbers on the microwave until his eyes prickled and tears ran down his unshaven cheeks. He didn't remember buying the alcohol. He didn't remember waking up this morning, dressing himself, brushing his teeth. The last few weeks had been a dream.

A cold hand reached out of the darkness and touched his neck. Todd screamed and knocked one of the bottles to the floor, shattering it.

"It's just me, Daddy," Matilda said.

She stood behind him, the dead cat dangling from her tiny fist. Todd recoiled, then grabbed the limp thing from his daughter's grasp. He held it up and saw it was a stuffed monkey. He had given it to her last Christmas.

"Are you okay, Daddy?" Her eyes shone in the gloom of the kitchen. Todd put his arm around her shoulder, pulled her close.

"Daddy's just fine, sweetie."

He lowered his face to kiss her head and stopped. She smelt like death. Wet earth and rot and blood. Something born dead.

"Everything is fine," he said, sliding his hands around her neck. Tightening his grip, he told her again that everything was just fine. Warm tears dotted the backs of Todd's hands.

"Everything is fine," he told the empty house.

About the Author:

Michael O' Brien previously had his flash fiction appear in Crystal Lake Publishing's *Shallow Waters*, but he relatively new to sending out stories. Michael lives on the coast of NSW, Australia, and spend most of his time writing, watching old horror movies, tumbling down YouTube rabbit holes, and chasing his lovable but disobedient dog, Ralph.



Linda coughed out the last of the sea water, wiping her mouth clean. The harsh, salty taste lingered on her tongue like her grandmother's red cabbage soup. The sun's light refracted through her tears. She glanced over the many cuts and scrapes populating her arms and legs. She released a deep sigh of relief. Linda imagined stepping out of a washing machine during the spin cycle. She gathered her thoughts in the coarse sand, allowing her strength to return. The briny air swirled around her head as a constant reminder of her predicament. A dull plogging sound echoed in the background. It sounded reminiscent of her grandfather's rubber boots plodding through the mud on a rainy day. Her innate curiosity remained muted by the waning disorientation.

She looked up from her shaking hands to see the SS Dorsal bobbing among the distant waves. A thick, dark green mass surrounding its stout exterior. Her life support ship for diving was close enough to tease her fantasy of a rescue, yet too far to swim past the breaking tide. She immediately realized that getting beyond swarming sea weed would be unattainable. Its imposing mast pointed towards the sky without the usual sail rigging. *My kingdom for a lifeboat and paddle.* Linda inhaled her first significant full breath since accepting the beach's safety. She strained her neck, peering around the small island. Large palm trees that usually represented a tropical paradise now reflected solitude and failure.

Her legs wobbled as she stood up. She considered waving her arms to get anyone's attention, deciding to reserve her energy. Linda assumed that Pancho and Che were probably busy trying to remain alive in the crew quarters. She grunted into the daylight that she would be returning without her scuba gear and underwater video recorder. She sucked in a breath at her clearing recollection. *Algae.* Her memories stitched together fragments of water-logged thoughts. An icy chill passed through her. She gazed at the ocean with abject fear. *How did the vegetation become so aggressive?* A question that collided with her years of dedicated research just before the swarm set upon them. Her awareness drew onto the wood cracking sounds emanating beyond the tide.

Linda's mouth trembled as her anxiety increased. Thousands of squirming tendrils congregating like she had never seen before. Some appeared to be instructing the others with popping and watery clicking. She had constructed all of her decades of expertise upon the observations that plankton were docile. She would need her camera footage more than ever to shatter the worldview of this eternal belief. Her trembling became more pronounced as the memories of their mass attack played back in crystal clarity.

The boat's horn hijacked her focus. Four more followed in immediate sequence. *Danger.* Hollow screams of pain carried on the salty wind. She hobbled into the shallow water. Linda squinted at distant movements on the ship's deck as it popped in and out of concentration. A second scream, then a third. *Che.* The five horn blows continued with a blunt pause between their sequences. Linda realized Pancho must be at the helm. The schooner's side changed color as if a swath of dark paint rose from the surface. She caught checkerboard hints of splashing between the brief emergency pauses.

The cycling blasts maintained its assault on the beach's tranquility. She reconsidered the insane idea of attempting to swim through the tide, wanting to be on the ship's deck with them. A dull cramp in her side scuttled the hero fantasy in its infancy. Linda's eyes welled up at being absent from helping her closest friends.

The afternoon went silent between horn blasts two and three, leaving an auditory residue in her memory. The algae splashing resumed uninterrupted. She cringed at the silence. A flare's smoky trail tore through the baby blue sky. The incandescent burst hijacked her attention with its abrasive burning. Linda fought against her immediate urge to scream as her fragile emotions boiled over. She craved to do anything helpful besides being stranded away from them.

A pervasive hunter-green wave passed upward along the ship's closest side. She watched on with no means of help, realizing that her friends needed her more than ever. Her mouth fell open as she took several more steps forward until the water teased at her thighs. A lengthened swath rose up the sail mast. *Pancho. Che.* The thick timber snapped at its base like she routinely broke twigs for fun as a child. The cracking despair shattered her heart. She caught the motion of an elongated form splashing as he neared. Linda screamed, expecting to draw the survivor to her. She covered her eyebrows with her hand, hoping to make out who it was.

The boat teetered away from her, exposing the barnacle-infested keel. Linda selfishly grieved that there would be no sleeping in her bed. No cold beers. No secret rendezvous with Che tonight, if ever again. Her focus reformed upon the tiny form swimming towards her. Enthusiastic anticipation ballooned in her chest. *Two of us have a greater chance of survival than being alone here.* She ignored the probability that a third of their crew was likely dead and would wash up in front of them in several days.

A scream caught within her gaping mouth as the boat slinked under the water's cobalt surface. She tracked the figure as his dark hair and customary red shirt became more refined. *Pancho*. Her heart leaped with excitement at his arrival.

His splashing ceased as if plucked from reality. Linda's guttural screams blasphemed the shore's natural serenity. Tears poured down her face as she caught the movement of ebbing rolls to her right. She spun around towards the beach. Terror shoved her eyes wide. A massive green swath rolled across the wet sand towards her. She panic-looked for an escape to the left. She spotted an algae bridge extending upon the waves, cutting her off from safety. Two elongated sections formed floating pincers along her sides several feet into the swell. Linda screamed as the blue water disappeared into its own sea of olive now surrounding her.

Shelly's Evening Walk | JB Corso

Shelly woke to use the bathroom for the third time since bed. She berated herself for having those extra few beers with Marie while impatiently waiting for her bladder to empty. A gentle humming sifted through the cracked bathroom window along with a waking sun. The harmony held its mystery within her sleep fog. The tune mesmerized her as she lazily swung the folded toilet paper between her fingers. Pleasant relief eased her into happiness.

She finished her cleaning and slid up her underwear. Shelly rose to her feet with the melody stuck in her head. Her extended nightshirt hung around her as she hastily exited the bathroom and turned towards the living room. Obscured words formed in her mind like a puzzle being revealed one piece at a time. She silently mouthed the incomplete lyrics as she opened the front door.

The night's coolness enhanced her trance as she shuffled out onto the concrete patio step. Their quiet subdivision was a constellation of exterior lights and overarching street lamps under the opening dawn. The young mother continued humming as she exited into the grass. The crisp dew saturated her soles as she rounded the house's corner. Their new garden bed came into view. The simple harmony graduated into a full-blown choir concert. Shelly watched her freshly planted flowers rocking back and forth. Twenty-four thick-stemmed Artesian Roses swayed as their upturned petals puckered like extended lips.

Shelly dropped to her knees onto the grass, just outside the garden's edge. Her head wavered as she closed her eyes to absorb the harmony. The urge to shuffle towards the plants wracked her failing sensibilities. She opened her eyelids and leaned closer to the swaying flower batch. Their moving petal lips intoxicated her with awe. Their song overflowed her heart as much as their notes filled her ears.

They nodded their tops, encouraging her forward. Her face leaned in inches from the closest flower. The single rose went silent as the others increased their acoustic melodies. Shelly felt so emotionally warm and appreciated, like being wrapped up in a warm blanket while getting a massage. She bent in, wanting to feel the delicate petals against her lips. The rose pursed its petals as she approached. The encompassing song grew more intense. Shelly fought from mouthing the lyrics as her lips closed in tighter to the plant's intentions.

Their lips made contact. Shelly's mind flooded with images of overgrown rose beds throughout her neighborhood with absorption vines leeching nutrients off of her neighbors' corpses. The flower burst a spray of sweet pollen into her face. Slick particles slid down her throat. She grabbed at her neck, fighting for air. The attentive rose swayed back and forth once more, joining the others in song as she grew quiet in the grass. Slender appendages slid out from between the flowers over her cooling form. They dragged her against her home's wall. Her neighbor hummed to himself as he diverted his morning walk across her lawn.

About the Author:

JB Corso is a health care professional who has worked with the mentally ill and geriatric populations for the last 20 years. He appreciates time with his children, writing, and pondering existential dread. He's a combat arms veteran who deployed as an international peacekeeper. He lives with his significant other and enjoys afternoon drives listening to music.

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



"Damn, that shit takes over everything, doesn't it?" Scott South muttered as he pulled the family bearing SUV to a skidding stop after a tense twelve-hour drive.

"Why are we even here? You haven't seen this part of your family in years." His wife, Shelley, responded.

Scott turned to look at her, he tried to keep his impatience in check, but lost the battle.

"Because she *was* family! I know, it's always been an issue with you and yours."

The argument was a familiar one; ever since the kids had been born Shelley and Scott had regular back and forth talks about who to spend the holidays with, how to accommodate visits from his side of the family, and how much to spend on presents. Shelley usually ended up winning; made sense because her side of the family had the money and were casual about throwing it around. And Scott was all too ready to please his wife, even though she always thought he'd married her for her money.

She showed this suspicion regularly, turning any discussion into accusations about his privilege-less upbringing and the necessity for keeping up appearances in their social circle. Eventually, her friends became their friends as Scott's connections with his former teammates and fraternity brothers fell to the wayside. He was in love with Shelley, she was less invested in him.

Sykes and Styles, their twin sons, looked up from their video game duel in the back seat and shook their blond heads. Gifted with names from Shelley's side of the family, they tuned out these fights, played to their mother, and usually got what they wanted. They also took after their mother in personality; evincing an arrogance that they were not good at hiding, showing off their expensive possessions. Their coaches of the various sports that they played made sure that they were afforded ample opportunity and playing time, despite the fact that their skill sets ceilinged at mediocre. Even though they were not yet teenagers Shelley was already excited about the scholarships that they would receive for athletics.

Stuffed between the boys, daughter Samantha, the child who took after her father, didn't even look up from the thick book she was reading. She'd occasionally twitch the upper part of her face to reposition her glasses. She shared her father's affinity for family and regional traditions and history; connecting with the older relatives on his side who spun tales of the land and simpler times. She'd quickly imprint all the knowledge that they passed on, particularly when it came to plants. She was a sensitive and intuitive child when it came to all things natural, having the green thumb that somehow skipped her father. She managed the small herb garden at their home, and attempted to cultivate a flower garden that more often than not fell victim to the trampling feet of her brothers.

The Souths had taken the trip to attend a life celebration for Scott's distant cousin, Stella, an elderly relative who had fallen into the caretaking task of what used to be the family plantation home. Samantha got most of her personality and interests from Stella, who, according to South family lore, was able to converse with anything that grew from the ground. These conversations allowed her to prepare for excessive rain or drought, always assuring a bountiful harvest from the plantation's gardens. So, she became the family strange sort, liking the isolation and the flora that grew rampant on the property: magnolias, dogwoods, pecans, the odd lantana.

And kudzu, lots of kudzu.

In spite of her reputation as the odd fowl, Stella was nothing if not sprightly, spending long hours tending the various plants and her extensive vegetable garden, chugging along on an aging riding mower, unlit cigar clenched in her gapped teeth. Her harvests always yielded much more than she needed, giving credence to the myth surrounding her, and she made it a point to leave overflowing baskets of produce on the doorsteps of her closest neighbors or the local food bank.

The gifts were gladly accepted and continued even after Stella's advancing age forced her to hire a younger (if sixty is considered young) mixed-race man to help with the grounds. She worked when she could, sometimes falling prey to the oppressive humidity and having to retreat to the cypress rockers on the front porch, where she would alternatively drink from a pitcher of moonshine-laced iced tea or lemonade, fan herself, and keep watch on her groundskeeper as he stoically weeded, plucked, picked, or mowed.

It was the groundskeeper who found her body snared in a thicket of kudzu, lips blue, with a vine somehow wrapped tightly around her neck.

That was why Scott had uprooted his family and taken the drive. He was one of the few in his family who'd had much contact with Cousin Stella.

He didn't know about Samantha's connection to her.

The Souths disembarked from their vehicle, ostensibly stretching out the road kinks and looking at what had once been a stately monument to Southern gentility.

The house itself had seen better days; shutters were either missing, hanging partially detached, or leaning against the house awaiting reattachment. Kudzu wrapped around the ornate columns holding up the front porch roof. The wraparound railing sported missing balusters and sagged in some spots. None of the windows were fully broken, thankfully, but some were clearly cracked.

And the kudzu was everywhere.

The porch steps creaked ominously as Scott mounted them.

"Watch out, you idiot! They're looking to give way!" Shelley hollered.

Scott flinched and stepped back down. He angrily turned on his wife.

"Babe, those steps have stood the test of time. I know I've gained a few pounds, but not enough to..."

She angrily cut him off "Sorry for having concern." She turned away and watched the children start pulling luggage and a cooler out of the car.

She looked back over her shoulder, "Why do we have to stay here, anyway, perfectly good B and B in town?"

Scott answered in a clipped fashion, "Because neither of us are getting paid for the time off."

Shelley sighed, she'd expected to be able to work on a project for her boss remotely, but Scott had revealed to her halfway through the drive that the house, while wired, lacked Wi-fi.

That was just one more thing on the jot list that Shelley had come to hate about her husband, and the daughter that he doted on.

And she was missing the guy that she had on the side.

All this frustration boiled up as she saw her daughter struggling to unload the partially filled cooler. The twins stood back, each preoccupied with their own luggage, and made no move to help Samantha.

Samantha had gotten the cooler to the edge of the SUV and started to pull it off.

It tilted, hung tenuously for a moment, and then gave in to gravity.

It came to a rest on Samantha's foot and opened, spilling ice and contents all over the ground.

Samantha screamed in pain.

Shelley screamed in anger.

"You dumbass, look what you've done!"

"I I I'm sorry, Mom!" Samantha stammered, fighting back tears. Her foot throbbed and her shoes were soaked.

"Yeah, freak," her brother Styles chimed in "you should know girls shouldn't do heavy work."

"Better you stick to your book, that's heavy enough," Sykes added. He picked up a loose pecan from the ground and threw it at her.

It hit Samantha in the cheek. That broke the floodgates.

Samantha fell to her knees, her sobs frightened nesting birds out of the nearby trees.

Shelley took two steps and loomed over her daughter. She reached down and grabbed her by the ear. She used that as a handle to pull the child to her feet.

"Enough! Own your mistake! Clean up this shit and finish unloading!"

Samantha's sobs diminished, but her tears still fell as she set about picking up the cans and placing them in the emptied cooler. Her foot throbbed with every step.

Scott looked on, unable to do anything for fear of infuriating his wife further.

"Boys, why . . ." Shelley silenced him with a look so vicious he took a step back.

"Let's get on with it" Shelley barked, moving forward to grab a suitcase, and turning to ascend the stairs. They creaked again but held the weight.

The twins fell in behind her, Scott and Samantha bringing up the rear, with Samantha still limping. Once all on the porch, Scott located the house key under the doormat, and opened the door.

The interior of the house lacked the musty smell one might expect from something that had been shut up for two weeks. Evidently there'd been care taken to run a dust rag over the downstairs.

The ephemera of a southern spinster's life dominated: fine china ringed with flowers, a tarnished silver tea service centerpiecing the dining room table, dolls and decorative iron piggy banks occupied shelves next to heavy leather-bound books.

Despite the pain in her foot, Samantha was taken, especially with the books. She set the cooler down and moved toward one of the bookcases, fastening on a complete collection of L. Frank Baum's work. She extended a hand to pull down one of the volumes.

Shelley yanked her back violently; "Leave this shit alone! We have an estate sale to plan, you know!"

Samantha started to protest but stopped as she knew better.

"Hey mom, Styles said, "Can we go explore?"

"After you get your suitcases situated upstairs."

The twins grabbed their matching roll-alongs decorated with Hawaiian commercialism and dashed upstairs. Scott heard doors slamming and playful shouts as the twins settled on a room and thumped their suitcases to the floor. They reappeared quickly, kissed their mother goodbye, and bounded out the door and off the porch.

Scott shook his head and turned to his daughter. "It's okay, Sam? We can look at the books later."

"Like hell," Shelley growled, "those look like first editions. They're in demand!"

Sykes and Styles sprinted around the back of the house and came upon an old shed choked with kudzu. The vines crept up the sides, nearly reaching the roof.

Styles poked his brother "Bet there's some cool shit inside."

"Let's see!"

The boys moved toward the door; Styles grasped the handle and pulled.

A kudzu vine whipped out and wrapped itself around his wrist.

"What the fuck" He yelled as more vines reached forth, grasping pumping legs and the fingers of his other hand.

The vines tightened around his fingers and severed them.

Styles wailed, thrashed, and only found himself drawn deeper into the fervently writhing mass of foliage.

Sykes grabbed at his twin's waist and pulled.

The kudzu pulled back; another foliated pseudopod whipped out. It wrapped around Sykes's head and pushed between his clenched lips.

Sykes's eyes widened as the vine tightened; he felt it push through his teeth and something rough shoved its way down his throat.

All he could do was watch in terror as his twin brother was enveloped by the ravenous vines. Styles struggled for a bit, but the tightening of the vines stilled him. Soon, Sykes couldn't even find the outline of his brother's body amidst the kudzu.

Vines slowly crept over his head and down his face. His last thought was to try and cry for his mother.

Back in the house, Shelley busied herself with airing out some of the rooms, briefly inventorying kitchen supplies, and downing two glasses of wine from a bottle that had survived the cooler's tumble. She'd shooed off her husband and daughter, poured another glass, and went out on the porch to think.

The lateness of the day had brought some relief from the humidity, so Shelley situated herself in one of the rockers.

"Scott is such a pussy." she thought as the wine slowly began to work its magic on her. *"It is gonna be so delicious when I hand him the papers. I'm gonna take this relic, gut it, and turn it into a real money maker."*

A smile worked its way across her face, as she tilted back in the rocker, bumping up against the porch rail as she did so.

A kudzu vine suddenly shot from below the porch and wrapped around Shelley's throat, cutting off any attempt at a scream.

Shelley raised her hands to try and free herself, but more vines appeared and grabbed her arms. The vines flexed and yanked her off the porch.

They took their time pulling her arms off, then her legs, and finally her head. She, like her sons, was eventually indistinguishable from the overgrowth.

Then the kudzu let out a shriek.

Scott jumped when he heard the screams. Samantha stiffened but showed no emotion other than briefly widened eyes.

"Stay here!" Scott yelled as he ran out the door.

He skidded and fell off the porch into the waiting vines. His screams and thrashing did him little good as the vines enfolded him, just like the others.

Samantha crept to the door and watched the last of her father's struggles as the vines slowly strangled him. His eyes fixed on hers sorrowfully, seeming to apologize.

Samantha seated herself on the edge of the porch, feet on the top step. A vine wriggled toward her, and she reached out to pet it. More vines extended, rubbing up against her like kittens.

Samantha sighed, happy for the first time in a while. She slowly stroked a vine, quietly humming a soothing song. The vines seemed to sense it, and appeared to sway in rhythm.

This was home, and Samantha was finally among friends.

About the Author:

J. Rocky Colavito describes himself as one of ‘the last of the generalist academics’, and he is using this experience to drive creative works that have appeared in *The Horror Zine*, *Madame Gray's Poe-Pourri of Horror*, and *Caveman Magazine*, where the adventures of Buck Neighkyd, former adult film star turned occult detective reside in serial form. The first Buck Neighkyd novel, *Creative Control*, is forthcoming.

Facebook: [Rocky Colavito](#)

The Mother of Truths | Kieran Judge

Black clouds were gathering when Father Miller felt a tap on his shoulder. A young girl, perhaps thirteen years old, stood on the deck with big frizzy hair and freckles under eyes laden with purple bags. Silhouetted against a sun standing ground against the looming storm, her dark skin had a gold, angelic outline. “Please, sir. You are a priest, aren’t you?”

“I was,” said Father Miller. “How did you know?”

“Mum told me. She was talking to you yesterday.”

Miller shaded his eyes from the sun to get a better look at her. “Stephine’s daughter?”

“Shania,” said the girl, hurriedly sticking out her hand. It quivered, and the shakes overtook her body. Her mouth pulled down, and Miller quickly guided her to the railing where she proceeded to throw up over the side of the ship. Soapy chunks splattered the foamy sea, blotches of red mixed in for good measure.

“We should get you to one of the doctors,” Miller said.

She waved him away. “Tried that. Said it was just sea sickness. But it’s not.” She turned to him with deep, pleading brown eyes. “I need help, Father.”

“It’s just Mr. Miller now. I’ve retired.”

“Father,” she insisted, “I’ve been having nightmares. There’s this person at the end of my bed with yellow eyes. And big devil horns, and a tail.”

“Our idea of the devil comes mostly from the Greek God, Pan,” he said. “Pan was fairly precocious, so when Christianity came along, we took his cloven hooves and horns for our demons to warn against such activities. If they did exist, they wouldn’t have those characteristics.”

“There’s other things as well,” she insisted. Her hands clutched the cold railing. A chill wind blew and the clouds started smothering the sun. “I feel like there’s holes all over my body, like things punching through from inside. I hear weird music in my head that I’ve never heard before. And there’s a smell whenever I wake up, like burning. Everything I’ve ever heard about it, it’s happening.”

She turned to the old priest, who had just wanted a quiet cruise to ease into retirement, and something in her eyes challenged his skepticism. A shadow flickered inside her pupils. He knew it wasn’t him because he could see his own reflection separately. And with the wind beginning to chop the waves and rain imminent, there was nobody else on the deck.

Imagination, he said to himself. *Thirty five years in service, and never have I seen a demon.*

But that shadow...

“Let’s get you back to your mum,” he said. “We can talk on the way.”

Shania reluctantly allowed Miller to escort her out of the growing dark.

The storm prepared its strike.

“Thank you, Father Miller,” Stephine said at the cabin door. Her arms were crossed and the backlight from the cabin gave her the silhouette of an imposing giantess. “She wanted fresh air, but when I looked outside just now, I was about to go look for her myself. You’ve saved me a job.”

"No problem, Stephine," Miller replied. "We had a very interesting conversation on the way down."

Shania silently ducked under her mother's shadow and into the cabin like a cat slinking away to hide.

"What about?" Stephine asked.

"Oh, this and that. Everyone wants to ask a priest questions, and Shania's certainly one for asking them. I'm sorry, by the way, about her father."

Stephine bowed her head, and as she moved Miller caught a whiff of that burning, sulphury smell Shania had mentioned. *The storm, he thought. Lightning in the air. But she smelled it yesterday.*

"Come find me anytime," Miller called into the cabin. He recoiled a little with the slight narrowing of Stephine's eyes. *Occupational hazard as a former Catholic priest; anything you say sounds dodgy.* He smiled at Stephine and left for his cabin.

"Father," Stephine asked. "What did you two talk about?"

"Greeks and pigs," he called behind him.

In his cabin he splashed water over his face. "Just a paranoid girl," he said to his reflection. "Nothing more."

After a smaller dinner than usual, his nightly Bible reading turned to the last pages. Revelation. The final fight.

Miller woke up knowing something was wrong.

Shania stood at the end of his bed. Her eyes shone with holy light, and when she opened her mouth a song poured forth, but it was no music Miller had ever heard, for it was filled with strange notes, dissonant melodies, and sounds no human vocal cords were capable of producing.

There was a flash of lighting. His curtains blew wide despite the fastened window, and when the residual blindness on his retinas faded, Shania was gone.

Then a voice spoke inside his head. *Help me.* Shania's voice.

Miller leaned over and switched on the bedside light. The room was undisturbed, the curtains had returned to their slack position, and the music had long since faded away.

A scream lodged itself in Miller's throat. After it had slowly eased back down to his lungs, accompanied by his slowly decreasing heartbeat, he tried to rationalise what he'd seen. A leftover dream, maybe, but that didn't explain why he could smell those acrid, sulphurous fumes here in his room. Couldn't be him cracking up; the doctors had given him a clean bill of health, which was surprising for a man of his age, when he'd seen them two months before.

And then there was the feeling that something was wrong which still held him in an iron grip.

Against all logic, propelled purely by faith, he dressed himself, and for the first time in months, put on his collar.

God in Heaven, guide me, your servant.

Stephine and Shania's cabin seemed quiet as he approached, but when he put his ear to the door he heard strange sounds. Struggling. Muffled cries. Pacing.

He tried the door but the handle wouldn't turn. "Stephine? Shania? It's Father Miller."

He tried again, and this time the door opened for him.

Shania was tied to her bed with socks, t-shirts, anything on hand. Her arms were outstretched and her legs tied together in a crucifix. She tried to scream through the sock gagging her mouth. She thrashed upon seeing him, trying to escape her bonds.

"Father!" Stephine emerged from a darkened corner and hurried over to him. "She's gone mad. I woke up and she was there at the end of my bed with a knife in her hand, and she was screaming and shouting and cursing and she attacked me and... I didn't know what to do!" She buried her face against Miller's chest.

The retired priest stepped over the dropped knife and into the room. The smell of sulphur was strong and pungent, and yet, despite suggesting fire, his breath drew clouds before him and his arm hair stood on end against the chill. Shania's eyes blazed with a light beyond her own as he stood over her. She tried to say something against her makeshift gag.

"Dear Lord in Heaven," he whispered. It was said less as a prayer and more in simple shock.

"Do something, Father. Get it out of her, whatever it is!"

Lightning shook the sea. Wind howled and rain drove hard. In the little cabin, scared and confused, Father Miller took out the pocket Bible he had been reading earlier, prayed for strength, and began.

"Our Father in Heaven," he said slowly. "Hallowed be thy name."

Shania thrashed in her bindings. They wouldn't hold forever, and if she got out, he didn't want to know what might happen.

"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done," he continued, heart pounding and hands shaking.

He continued through The Lord's Prayer, trying to keep his eyes off Shania. If he looked at her, he might see the thing behind them. He might lose his faith. He might lose everything.

Stephine watched on from a distance, back cowering in the darkness. Her whole body trembled and tears fell from her cheeks as the battle raged.

Miller stepped forward to place the sign of the cross on Shania's forehead. As he did so, he caught a whiff of breath which escaped from around her gag. It smelled of fruit and flowers, fresh and clean as the Garden of Eden.

Is this a trick? Or could it be?

The knife raised itself off the floor.

Miller put the sign of the cross on her forehead, but Shania did not react with pain as he predicted. Instead, she loosened up, closed her eyes, and smiled.

The knife poised itself ready for flight, and Stephine watched it aim for Miller.

Miller's mind was running at a thousand miles per hour. He remembered the vision from earlier. Shania, shining with holy light. Singing inhuman music. Pleading for help in his mind.

I beg your strength, Lord. I am about to do something. I know not if it is right or wrong, but I put my faith in you.

He removed Shania's gag.

The knife screamed through the air.

"Begone!"

The knife froze mid-flight, millimeters from piercing Miller's neck. He looked round, astonished. Then he turned back to Shania. Her eyes erupted with that same brilliant white light as before, and then suddenly it broke forth in great beams from eyes that appeared all over her body; arms, legs, back, torso. The t-shirt bindings fell away and she rose into the air by the power of God.

Shania righted herself, cruciform, and turned to her mother.

"Temptress. Demon. Spawn of Satan and of Lilith herself."

Stephine stood up. Her eyes were yellow and burned with hot coals in disgust at the sight before her. Smoke billowed in acrid clouds around her, and with a horrible crunching of bones splintering, two great curling horns sprouted from her skull, and a forked tail ripped from her back and lashed out at her daughter.

Shania waved a hand and the hovering knife changed direction, darted forth, and sliced the tail in two. The thing that had been Stephine roared.

"You are nothing," Shania said in a voice that was both hers and yet inflected with something that was not. Something higher. More terrible.

"Me? Nothing? You're the one that needed a retired fucking priest for help. At least I don't need backup."

"Begone. I cast you, like your legion forefathers, into the waters."

Stephine convulsed. Her arms went rigid, her mouth contorted in a rictus of pain. Her legs moved awkwardly, controlled by the strings of an invisible puppet master, and she was lined up with the window.

It looked at Miller, who stood with his back against the wall in awe and fear. "Be seeing you around," it said. Then the demon charged at the window and went through in a shower of glass into the howling storm, where it plunged into a watery grave. The scream was not Stephine's.

Shania turned to Miller and all the eyes closed except the girl's own. "Blessed be you, Jacob Miller. You shall be rewarded richly in Heaven above." Then the light left her and she dropped to the bed, passed out, and utterly herself.

Miller listened to the footsteps approaching down the hallway. He wondered what he would tell them.

The rain abated, the clouds cleared, and the storm, as per scripture, was calmed.

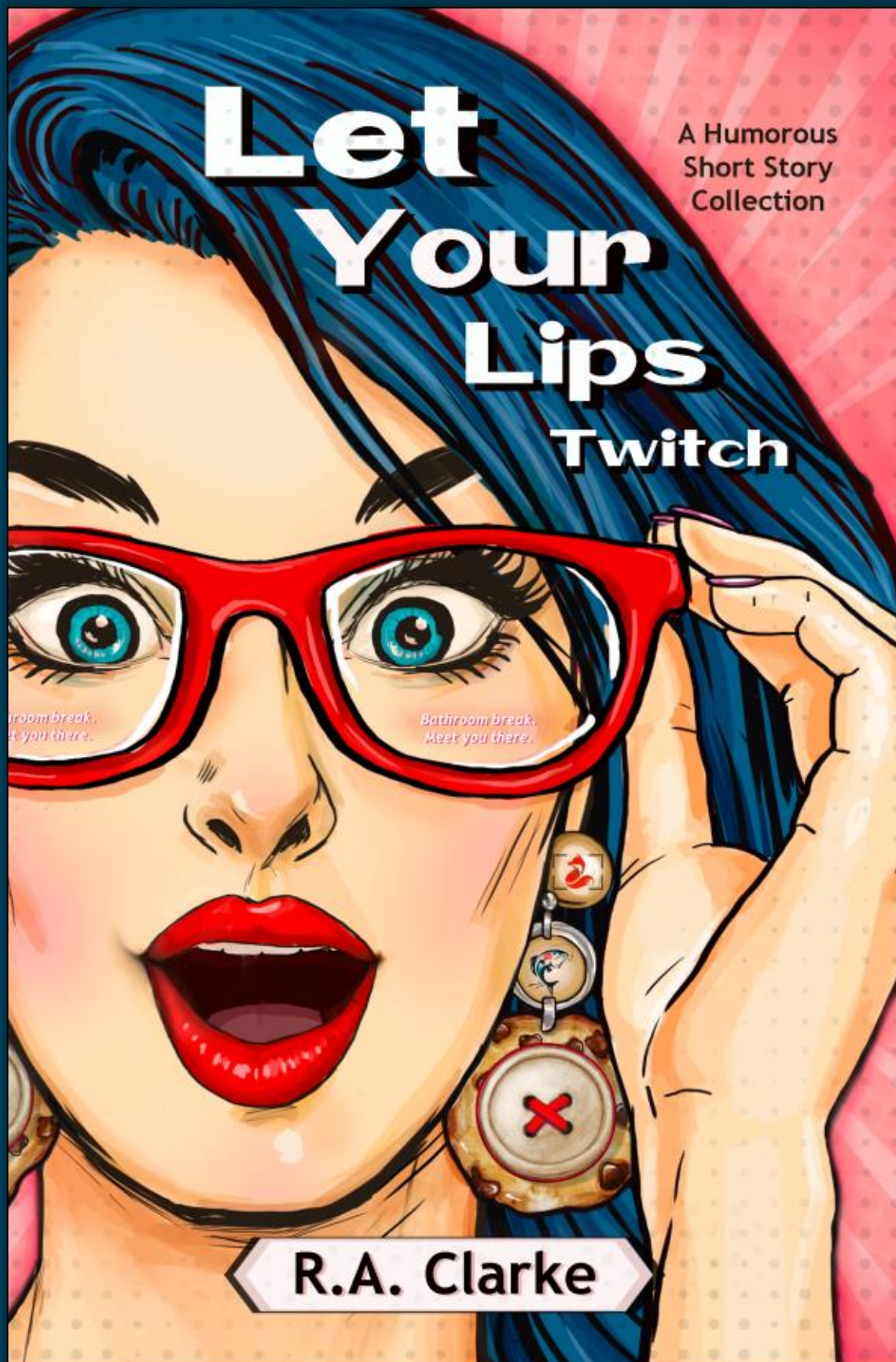
About the Author:

Kieran Judge is a writer of prose and non-fiction articles and reviews from Wales. His fiction can be found in Lovecraftiana, The Irregular Adventures of Sherlock Holmes, and several past issues of The Sirens Call. His articles on film and horror can be found at TheFilMagazine.com, HorrorAddicts.net, and Horror Reviews By The Collective.

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



*A collection of humorous short stories
sure to get your lips twitching.*



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

As he unpacked the box from his childhood bedroom, Charlie saw the dewy decimal numbers on the cracked leather-bound spine. As he lifted it closer, he blew off some of the dust layered on top and realized he had forgotten to return the book.

Without even opening the dank pages in *Ghost Stories of Digby Station*, Charlie could remember the spooky charcoal drawings that haunted his small child nightmares. He had picked the book up one day while his mother joined the library coffee club in the back room. The green felt of the book was the first thing to grab his attention, but particularly the drawing of the ghost of Debera O'Halloran grabbed his psyche and never let go. The artist had a creepy hand, the lead lines as see-through as the spirits they encapsulated. As he sat cross-legged on the weathered carpeted floor of Wellman Library, flipping through the uncanny drawings, young Charlie felt ashamed, dirty even. His mother warned him of such devious material, yet his eyes sat glued to the hideous saints enshrined on its pages.

Older Charlie remembered Mrs. Doonan.

He could see her spotted, thin hands stretching through her moth-ridden sweater, snatching the book from his hands and smacking the book hard against the back of his head. "I warned you before, Charles Thompson. Never sit on the floor!" she screamed through breath that smelled like rotted onions in the sun. Charlie ran towards the front of the library, never turning around. It would take another three months before he got the courage to return. And when Charlie did, he checked out the emerald tome of apparitions. 'He shouldn't be reading this', Mrs. Doonan protested to Charlie's mother, but she agreed. 'Better reading than watching some stupid TV show, don't you think?' his mother replied. Mrs. Doonan only eyed Charlie as she slammed the stamp hard onto the index card: 8/13/1995.

That night, underneath his sheets with a flashlight, young Charlie Thompson gleefully sacred himself, the canvased ghouls of Digby Station burnt into his impressionable mind.

Charlie never brought the book back. It was seventeen years overdue.

Holding the aged book tight to his arm, Charlie walked through the oak doors, and nostalgia swept through his body along with a severe case of goosebumps.

Sitting at the counter was Mrs. Doonan, not a day older or meaner than she had been all those years ago.

He approached the counter, swallowing what little spit he could from his parched throat. He opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. He finally coughed a little, hoping to forge his words out. "Hello," he softly spoke. He placed the book on the counter and froze in fear.

As her neck slowly turned to look at him, he saw her pencil-drawn eyes. Like a cartoon come to life, the lines moved like a horde of worms. She opened her mouth and her painted lips cracked as she screamed. "Overdue!"

Charlie tried to run, but her decaying hands grabbed him closer. He could smell the strong scent of No. 2 pencils emanating from her breath. He wanted to keep his eyes shut, but deep in the corners of his curious mind, the cat made him open his eyes.

She was like a ghost from Digby station, the caricature of her body missing in places and falling onto the book. As each drop fell, stenciled gray blood oozed onto the desk and disappeared.

"I'm sorry!" he screamed, hoping the words would release her boney grasp.

"That will be three thousand dollars and ninety-five cents, Charles Thompson!" it bellowed in his face.

Charlie could feel his muscles screeching in pain, begging for relief. "Oh, dear God, yes!"

Then the pain disappeared. He slowly opened his eyes to see she was gone. On the counter was nothing, the overdue book missing. In the back of his pounding mind, he knew exactly where it was, back on the shelf near the 390s.

As he was about to leave through the double doors, his veins pulsating on his neck, Charlie looked over to a bronzed plaque on the wall and read it over and over again, his mind rejecting the reality:

Dedicated to the memory of a beloved librarian

Beatrice Digby Doonan

Born 1921 – Died 1995

About the Author:

As a filmmaker, writer, and artist, Ian Klink's work include the feature film *Anybody's Blues*, his thesis film adaptation of Stephen King's *The Man Who Would Not Shake Hands*, and the short story *Aurora's Pond* for *The Creeps* Magazine. Klink shares his talents as a teacher of Computer technology/Multimedia studies in Pennsylvania.

Short, But Scary
A Look at Horror Anthology 'Feature Films' - Indie, Underrated and Vintage



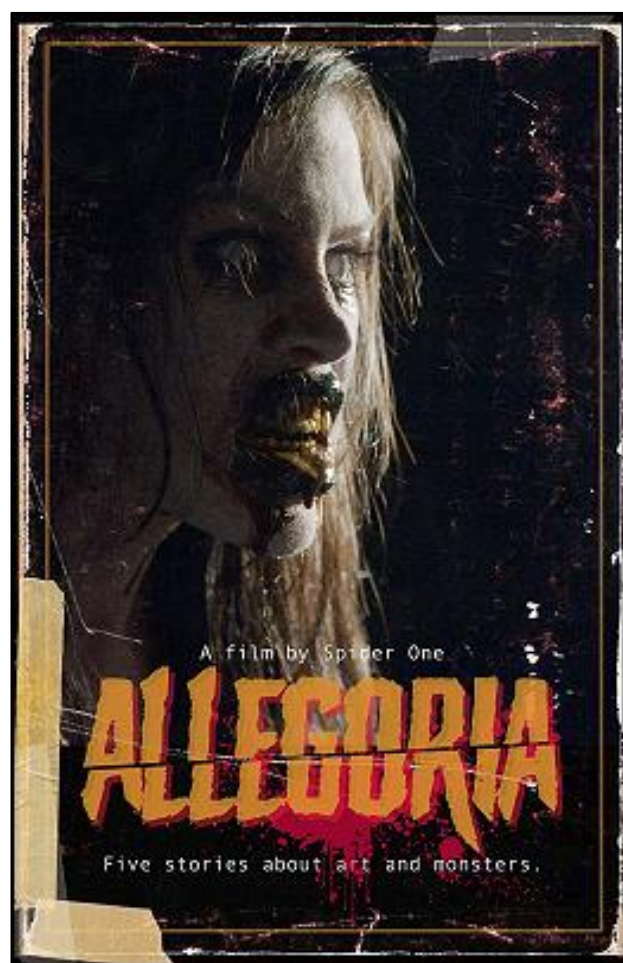
Black Mirror, *Creepshow*, *Two Sentence Horror Stories* and the new *Guillermo del Toro's Cabinet of Curiosities* all fall within the recent wave of gritty and terrifying *anthology* series currently streaming and airing. And while these collections of grim tales offer fresh, interesting small-packaged "kisses", horror fans are often left pondering, "Whatever happened to macabre *anthology feature films* made for the big screen?"

There is a valid reason feature film anthologies have always tickled our fear fancy throughout the decades – mixed trick-or-treat bags like *V/H/S*, *Tales From The Darkside (The Movie)* and the classic *Trilogy of Terror*. Since age three, most of us indulged in mom's short, five-page bedtime stories rather than a lengthy novel that would have sedated us before chapter two. The same distaste can be said about sitting through a bad two-hour horror movie that could be as brutal as the bodies tortured on screen.

However, an *assortment* of taut, 20 to 30-minute stories in a feature film - even if a few are mediocre or lame - offer a delightful "buffet", carefully manufactured and crafted, unlike stories from an anthology "series" that can often have less quality and be watered down due to time and budget constraints from the high volume of episodes packed into a given season.

But while we've seen an uprise in horror anthology series on TV and live stream, there's unfortunately been a decline in *feature film* anthologies within today's dark cinema. That said, the following article hopes to point out a few creepy compilation "gems" lurking amongst the spooky ruffs. From recent obscure "indie" films to underrated 80's flicks, we shall review four spine-tingling samples of lesser-known horror collections worth 90 minutes of thrills, chills and shills!

Allegoria (2022)



There's just something about low budget, independent horror films that crawl, slither and claw their way into our psyches – and stay there! And though they may not have the glitzy, flashy state-of-the-art trimmings of a major Hollywood studio, dark indie movies possess a certain sense of rawness and realness that many big budgeted films lack. One such indie is *Allegoria*.

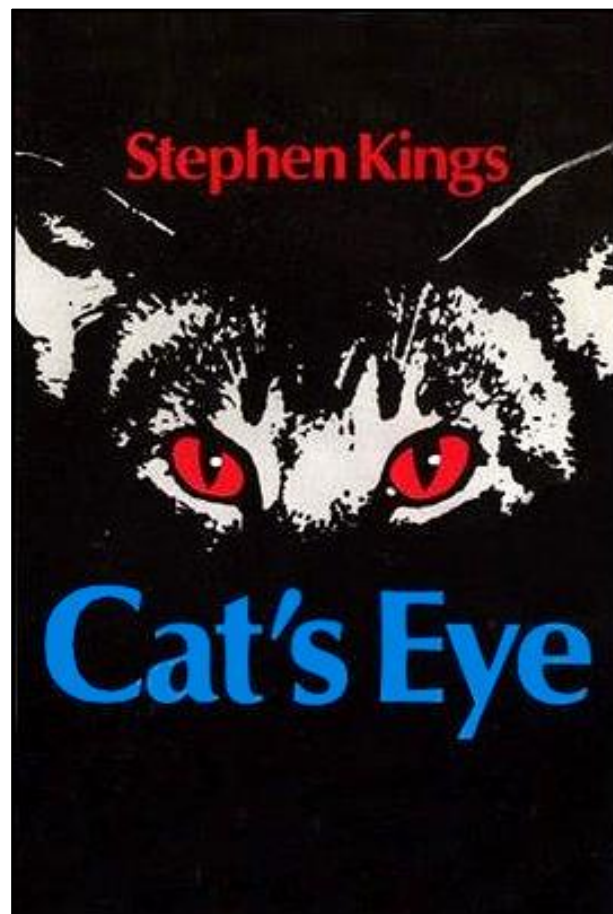
Spider One, founder of the band *Powerman 5000* and the younger brother of filmmaker *Rob Zombie*, wrote and directed *Allegoria* (his first feature), a collection of cautionary tales centering on the lives of several artists – an ambitious actress, an obsessed painter, a driven writer, a demented sculptor and a free-spirited punk musician. Like the title, there are hidden moralistic messages to each story, the basic theme simply being *art*, and how artists can fall victim from what they create. A la *Frankenstein*, only instead of scalpels and electricity, *Allegoria*'s creatures are forged from paint brushes and keyboards!



Aside from stunning effects and gruesome monsters, *Allegoria* presents a few cool concepts that are freaky and fun, including hideous abominations conjured out of people when certain music notes are played, or a six-foot ultra ASD “baby-man” in an infant mask seeking vengeance on sitters who wronged him years prior. Although other stories are a bit on the familiar side to macabre fans, such as a horror screenwriter’s monster from his script stepping into our world and showing his creator how to make a *real* horror movie, the segments are executed with unique flare and offer a profound exploration of the “demons” that stalk just about every artist – self-deprecation, fear, isolation, ambition, pride and envy. Also clever is how all the stories and characters are somehow weaved together (like a horror version of *Crash*) and their common thread getting viewed from different time zones in classic Tarantino-esque style.

Fine performances from Scout Taylor-Compton (“Laurie Strode” in *Zombie’s Halloween*) and Krsy Fox who delivers a disturbing, yet solid monologue in the closing scene.

Cat's Eye (1985)



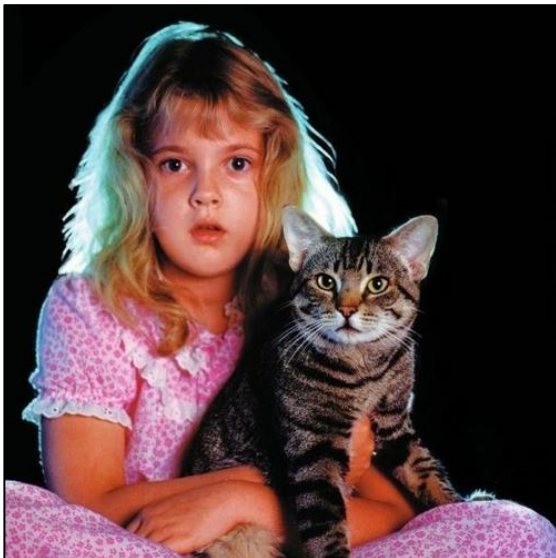
The 80's served as a cinematic launching pad for many of Stephen King's novels and stories. Some were epic, such as *The Shining* and *Stand By Me*. Others, however, had flopped, and it was therefore easy for a lot of the good movie adaptations of King's work in this era to get swept under a rug and fade into "the mist". One such underrated film was *Cat's Eye*, directed by Lewis Teague (who helmed *Cujo*). A feature anthology comprised of three tales all written by Stephen King (his screenwriting debut), the film puts viewers within the point of view of a stray cat who goes from place to place. Essentially, story to story.

The first segment, *Quitter's, Inc.*, is based on a story by King (from his short story collection *Night Shift*) starring James Woods and Alan King. Woods plays a man desperate to stop smoking who joins a program to help him quit, a *special* program, ran by what seems like an ex-crime boss determined to get his clients off cigarettes for good. The program, named *Quitter's Incorporated*, uses *particular* tactics that includes spying on their clients, going as far as hiding in one's closet late at night! And if or when caught smoking, the client is, well, “disciplined.”

The second segment, *The Ledge* (also from *Night Shift*) stars Robert Hays who plays an ex-tennis player/gambler named Norris caught sleeping with the wife of a casino owner/crime boss named Cressner. Norris is then blackmailed into a bet by Cressner: He must circumvent an entire penthouse apartment from the outside ledge of a skyscraper, and should he survive (Cressner plotting an assortment of "surprises" along Norris's task), Norris keeps Cressner's wife. Should he refuse the bet, Norris goes to jail, Cressner having planted drugs in Norris's car. An "edgy" story that plays on one of people's most primal fears!



Segment three is titled *General*, our cat "guide" more a part of this story by befriending a young girl, played by a young Drew Barrymore, her second King film (*Firestarter* her first). Unlike the first two stories that simulated episodes from *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, *General* is more of a *Creepshow*-esque tale written exclusively for the film, entailing a hideous evil little troll who wishes to suck the breath and life out of the little girl.



Throughout the film, fans of King will appreciate comical nods to a few of his novels, including *Cujo*, *Christine* and *The Dead Zone*.

Sinphony: A Clubhouse Horror Anthology (2022)



Conceived entirely from an audio-based social media platform, *Clubhouse*, where up-and-coming filmmakers from around the world converged, scripted and shot their own movies to form a 90-minute indie horror anthology, *Sinphony* is comprised of nine stories, almost all involving the supernatural in *Tales From The Crypt/Darkside* fashion.

Unlike most American horror movies that see to it "bad people" get theirs in the end, *Sinphony's* segments include many "good people" on the monsters' hit lists as well. Stories like "The Keeper", about a kind, sweet old man desperately wanting to help a troubled family in his boarding house, yet learns that some renters are best left alone. Or "Mother Love", in which a young boy and his mom fall victim to an intruder in their home wearing a dirty, teathy clown's mask, only to discover a secret about his mother that makes their intruder's attack seem like child's play. Other unique stories include "Maternally Damned", about an expecting mother who harnesses a most abnormal pregnancy uncommon to most women – probably because her baby's father had once bit her on her neck!

Or “Ear Worm”, an “eary” little tale about a mold-removing contractor who becomes infected by a strange, mysterious element and gets paid something a liiittle extra for his work.



Like *Allegoria*, *Sinphony* lacks the luster and veneer of a high budgeted movie. However, the fact that a social media platform brought an assortment of indie artists and filmmakers together internationally and came up with its own project offers inspiration to countless other creators wishing to unleash *their* monsters!

Directors: Jason Ragosta (Mother Love), Steven Keller (Ear Worm), Haley Bishop (Forever Young), Wes Driver (The Keeper), Mark Pritchard (Limited Edition), Kimberley Elizabeth (Do Us Part?), Jason Wilkinson (Tabitha), Nichole Carlson (Maternally Damned), Sebastien Bazile and Michael Galvan (Symphony of Horror).

Twilight Zone: The Movie (1983)

Since its cancellation in 1964, there have been numerous TV series remakes of the popular sci-fi/fantasy show *The Twilight Zone*. The first was in 1985, the second in 2002, the third and more recent in 2019, produced and narrated by *Get Out/Nope* director Jordan Peele. While these series deserve much applause for their bold attempts at re-creating something that was beyond gold (and there will likely be many more!), anyone would agree that no remake of the original *Twilight Zone* can ever topple the work of one of the greatest storytellers of all time – TZ’s creator/writer/producer, *Rod Serling*.

However, if there's one TZ remake that has been unfairly underrated for the last 40 years, it is *Twilight Zone: The Movie*.



Released almost twenty years after the original series had ended, this first and only movie version of *The Twilight Zone* is comprised of four story segments, each opening with a fantastic narration from the late great Burgess Meredith who starred in several iconic episodes of the earlier series. Directed by filmmaking legends Steven Spielberg, John Landis, Joe Dante and George Miller, *Twilight Zone: The Movie* had an amazing cast, talented writers (including Richard Matheson and George Clayton Johnson, who wrote several episodes for the o.g. *Zone*) and a phenomenal score by Jerry Goldsmith, the original show's composer. The first of the four segments starred the late Vic Morrow, playing an angry, cynical bigot who somehow finds himself embodying the very races he despises and inheriting their persecution. The other segments were based off episodes from the original series, including “Kick The Can”, starring Scatman Crothers, playing a strange old man who hops from one elderly home to the next and shows “old folks” a most peculiar way to stay young. The third, from the o.g. episode “It’s A Good Life”, tells the story of a boy who has the power to make anything happen, including wishing his “sister” (played by a young Nancy Cartwright) into cartoon land where she is eaten by an animated monster. And finally, “Nightmare At 20,000 Feet”

(originally starring William Shatner), in which John Lithgow plays a man deathly afraid of air travel – to the point of "imagining" a grotesque, malevolent *gremlin* on the wing of the plane he's on!



While the TV series remakes tried too hard at re-creating many of the original's classic episodes, mimicking and mirroring them too closely, the movie remake offered *homages* to the preceding stories while cleverly letting its segments have their own unique stamp.

Of special note, *Twilight Zone: The Movie* received a heavy and intense backlash during its production and for many years after its release. While shooting a Vietnam scene for Segment 1, actor Vic Morrow and two children were tragically killed from a helicopter accident, leading to years of civil and criminal action against the personnel overseeing the shoot. In retrospect, it is speculated that this horrific event might have contributed to much of the cause for *TZTM* remaining a faded memory in people's minds.

Marc Scott Zicree, television writer, producer and bestselling author of "*The Twilight Zone Companion*" **and co-author of "*Guillermo Del Toro - Cabinet of Curiosities*"**, graciously contributed his insights, with which we shall end on.

"Due to the proliferation of newspapers, magazines and other periodicals in the 18th and 19th Century and beyond, the *short story* has long been a staple of both science fiction and horror, and it was only natural that as new technologies such as radio, film and later television emerged that these tales would inspire adaptations, both official and unacknowledged



"homages" in the new media. Early anthology films of the silent era adapted Poe and Robert Louis Stevenson's work, as well as original tales of the macabre. One of the most influential of... early [horror] films was Britain's *Dead of Night* (1945), which had a lasting effect on Rod Serling and a number of other fantasists. Throughout the Fifties, Sixties and Seventies, prose genre stylists such as Ray Bradbury, Richard Matheson, Charles Beaumont and later Stephen King were discovering an equal proficiency writing screenplays. Horror anthology films thus abounded.

"As horror anthology films enter their second hundred years there will no doubt be many gems to come."

Marc is also the director/writer/producer of the new sci-fi series *SPACE COMMAND*. Click the following link if you would like to contribute to the series **KICKSTARTER CAMPAIGN** - and spread the word!"
www.patreon.com/marczicree

About Mike Lera:

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



Visit Mike at:

Website: MikeLera.com
Facebook: [@MikeLera.Author.Screenwriter](https://www.facebook.com/MikeLera.Author.Screenwriter)
Instagram: [@MikeLera.Author.Screenwriter](https://www.instagram.com/MikeLera.Author.Screenwriter)
Twitter: [@MikeLeraWriter](https://twitter.com/MikeLeraWriter)
Blog: mikelerasbogblog.blogspot.com
YouTube channel: [@MikeLera](https://www.youtube.com/@MikeLera)
and don't forget to subscribe!

There is a certain quiet when you know your life is hollow. Every moment of the day seemed an eternity. Where would Severine spend her moments? A quiet bookstore to kill some time perhaps; or scouring one of those brimming full-to-the-gills antique stores that her Aunt Agnes loved?

The small park three blocks from the house seemed a good fit. Sitting on the swings in the damp air of late November, she watched the city workers erect and decorate a pitiful tree in the middle of the square. It tilted to one side when the wind turned the corner, sweeping its branches along with it.

She felt like that tree. No definitive direction caught up in the lottery that was life.

Pulling her red wool coat closer, she craved a hot milk from the café vendor. As she fidgeted through her change purse, a growl quickened her. A small terrier wearing a Winnifred patterned sweater pawed at her boots.

"Rufus! Don't pester this nice lady."

His handler spoke simply, but to Severine it was poetry. Her eyes trailed upward, admiring his shiny two-toned saddle shoes and grey herringbone jacket. His smile was huge and his eyes greener than the tree. They complimented his soft complexion and reddish brown hair.

"Apologies," he said with a wink, "You have his interest."

She spoke softly. "Dogs have a way of finding me."

"A fellow animal lover? Me too! He isn't mine though. I promised my sister Annie that I'd walk him."

He sat on the bench beside her, pulling Rufus to the side as he stretched as far as he could on the lead without hanging himself.

"I'm Arthur." He said, extending his other hand.

She paused, gingerly putting her white-gloved hand into his. His eyes stayed focused on her for what seemed several seconds.

"Severine."

"That's a cool name."

"My aunt Agnes helped choose it. She was a Francophile."

"A what?"

"Francophile. She was obsessed with France."

"I get it. Have you ever been?"

"No." She answered, shaking her head. "After she retired she spent much of her time with church friends or antiquing. I was her companion until her passing last week."

"I'm sorry," Arthur said.

"No need. You weren't familiar."

"Quite direct," He chuckled. "I like that. Most people are dainty about the subject of death."

"Agnes lived a full life. I'm the one unsure of what to make of mine."

"I understand. We lost our parents last year to an auto accident. I only see Annie about once a month. I travel frequently, as I deal in interior design."

Arthur pulled out a business card and placed it into her half-open hand.

"Inside Your Life; by Arthur Blythe." She recited. "Clever."

"I think so." He smiled, shivering a bit. "There's a coffee cart over there. May I treat you?"

"I don't drink coffee." She replied. "I fancy a steamer."

"Sure." He said, foisting Rufus's lead into her hand. "Hang onto him."

She stared at Rufus, quelling his growl. He whimpered a few times and resigned to sit at her feet.

"Good boy." She purred.

During the next few days, they met to share the bench. She didn't enjoy Rufus's company and was happy today that he'd come alone.

"So when are we going to dinner?" Arthur asked before taking a sip of his coffee.

Severine nearly dropped her cup. Pausing, she shrugged her shoulders. "What if I cooked you dinner?"

"That would be even better. I'd love to see those pieces that you mentioned. You hinted your aunt loved retro."

"She did. She used to spend hours searching antique shops for just the right pieces. She loved owning things."

"Including you?" He asked, appearing shocked that he'd said it. "I'm sorry. That was crude."

Severine sighed. "Crude, yet true."

"The color of espresso," He said, touching her dark hair, as she leaned into his hand, enjoying the feel of his warm palm against her. It was the first time he'd touched her and she didn't want it to end.

"I could show you the house now if you'd like." She smiled. "I live just across the park."

His phone beeped incessantly, and she recoiled as he moved his hand to check it.

"I'm so sorry." He said, rising abruptly. "That was a potential client. I must be off."

"My address is 322 Dot Street." she stuttered. "Seven o'clock tomorrow night?"

"Can't wait." He said, leaning down to kiss her on the head.

Watching him disappear into the crowd, she raised her hand to stroke her curls.

The retrofit TV on the kitchen wall blared as Severine watched Nan's Country Kitchen. A Charlie Parker CD played over it, creating such a cacophony. She could smell the savory roast in the oven as she attempted to mash a pot of potatoes. Where had Agnes left the kitchen tools?

The knock at the door pulled her attention and she quickly snapped off the TV; leaving Charle to play in the background.

Severine nearly tripped as she spied his smiling face reflected through the small square window. Breathlessly, she welcomed him in.

"Wow!" He said, stepping through the door. "You weren't exaggerating. This kitchen is cool. Dinner smells great."

She stared longingly at him as he proceeded to scan the room.

"Where did Agnes find this table set?" He asked, running his fingers over the laminate top.

"An estate sale," Severine muttered, beating a bottle of Macallan against the potatoes. "Aren't they marvelous?"

"Very," Arthur said, laughing. "I've never seen scotch used for that. I admire your ingenuity."

"I couldn't find the masher." She said, as he slowly reached down and removed the bottle from her fingers.

"High ball glasses?" He asked. She pointed towards a beverage trolley that was around the corner of the sunken living room.

"This is gorgeous." He said, sifting through the bottles and a photo of a Chartreux cat. "I love the lines on this. Is this a Valerie Wade?"

"It is," Severine said, watching him pour their drinks. "I like this. Agnes usually had her church friends over on Wednesday nights. The house seems quiet."

Handing her one, he positioned himself with the other.

"To what shall we toast?" He asked, raising his glass.

"Familiar acquaintances," She purred, clinking her glass with his.

Severine had quickly found favor in the taste of alcohol. She'd lost track of how many times they'd poured, clanked, and laughed together. Rolling over in the pink satin sheets, she ran her nails along the edge of Arthur's chin. With his tousled hair, he looked like a sleeping lion beside her.

One eye finally opened and he stretched and yawned.

"Good morning Sev." He said, pulling her closer against him. "I love your scent."

"Mmmmm," She murmured, rubbing her nose along his shoulder. "I'm starved. Are you hungry? In the movies, lovers always share breakfast in the morning."

"Sure." He smiled, lazing back into the bed.

"I won't be long." She said, rising from the bed and practically skipping naked through the forest of their discarded clothes that spanned several rooms.

Humming,, she began the task of making pancakes. She'd watched Agnes make them many times before, only she hadn't been able to see the top of the table.

The chirp of Arthur's phone distracted her. Searching for his jacket on the living room floor, she finally retrieved it from the pocket, gasping, as the screen read, 'Mom'.

He appeared suddenly beside her, nearly fully dressed. Practically tearing the phone from her hand, he answered.

"Yes... I hear you. No, I'm close. What do you need?"

Leaning against the drink trolley, she pursed her lips and took in Arthur's conversation. Tears stung the corners of her eyes as she focused on the photo of the Chartreux.

"Be there soon. Tell Annie I'll take Rufus to the park later. Love you, bye."

"I thought your parents were dead?" She hissed, folding her arms against her body.

"Sev, I didn't know how else to respond at that moment." He said, donning his jacket. You seemed in need of comforting. I thought sharing a relatable story would help."

"Breakfast is almost ready." She sniffed, clutching the trolley for support. "You may as well eat before you leave"

"Don't be pissed." He whined, trailing behind her. "Last night was so amazing."

"I'm sure it was." She said, wiping away a stray tear.

"Seriously, Sev, tears?"

"You lied to me.!" She spat. "Agnes told me once that a liar will do anything."

"I have to go." He offered simply.

"Everyone always has to go! Always going, going...Going where?"

He moved towards her and she winced, his hand reaching to touch her face.

"You said it yourself. We are acquaintances. This was fun."

He pulled her into a kiss that she felt down to her toes. For what purpose? To sate her tears and move on with his day? Leaning back, her free arm inched towards the trolley. Moving ever so slightly, she retrieved the bottle of Macallan and drove it down the back of his head. He fell to the floor with a grunt. Rolling into a fetal position, his eyes barely open.

"In case you're wondering, the flooring is by American Bilt." She laughed, as bare feet padded around him. "Yet another fun fact regarding Agnes's taste. I hope you enjoy the biles of this house."

Her face was just inches from his as his eyes began to open.

"Boo!" She squealed, as he recoiled.

Barely able to move within the confines of the cage, he struggled. His hands, bound behind him by the sleeves of his jacket. His feet bare.

"It's tight in there." She offered. "I should know. Not my favorite place in the house, I assure you. Agnes was bored when she made me. Her coven told her I'd be more useful to her as a human. I occupied that space quite often. Then, of course, there were the times she would entertain her men and tuck me away. She didn't like me to watch, but sometimes I would sneak under the bed or hide behind the door."

"Jesus, Sev, what is wrong with you? Arthur growled. Let me out of here!"

Pacing beside the cage, she stared down at him, quickened by his fear.

"Relax." She said in a singsong voice. "I promised you breakfast."

Suddenly, she turned and retrieved a bowl, tossing bits of last night's roast between the bars of the cage.

"What the hell!" He yelled from beneath her as she giggled. "Be reasonable"

Tossing the bowl aside, she knelt, meeting him eye to eye.

"Your sweetness and getting to know me chit-chat was a facade. You only came here to have sex with me didn't you?" She asked, kicking the cage. "Didn't you?"

"Yes!" He exclaimed. "I wanted you. Who wouldn't? You're beyond beautiful. Let's talk about this."

"Seriously?" She hissed. "You didn't want to talk this morning except to your supposedly dead mommy. You made me feel like a fool Arthur! The way you make Rufus feel each time you hand his lead over to another woman. How many times have you tried that trick, eh? He told me all about how you use him to lure them in."

"Rufus told you that?" He scoffed. "How? In French?"

"Don't mock us!" Severine bellowed as she kicked his prison again and continued to pace. "I am saving countless other women from your la connerie."

The ping of his phone from upstairs garnered his attention as she watched him push his feet relentlessly against the steel bars.

"Uh, uh." She said, stretching her body over the top of the cage. "No more phone privileges."

"Annie is going to be looking for me. I told her that I'd be back to walk Rufus."

Clicking her tongue, she ran her nails over the sides of the cage.

"Not so. I found her contact in your phone. I messaged her that you were going back to New York for a deco convention and that you'd text her when you arrived. Or ... when I say you've arrived. Modern technology is beautiful. You could be almost anywhere. In anyone's bed."

"I think I'm going to be sick," Arthur said. "I need to use the bathroom."

"It's right beside you." She smiled, pointing to the small litter box placed just behind him.

"Let me out of here!" He gasped. "Please. I won't tell anyone."

"Tell anyone what? That you fell prey to someone wiler than you?" She asked, poking her fingers down through the cage intermittently, as she remained sprawled over the cage, toying with him. "You know, Arthur, cats only like to be stroked until they don't"

At the right moment, he reached up to catch one of her fingers between his teeth, splintering bone and muscle, a blood ring staining his mouth. An otherworldly howl rippled through her, as his feet burst through the bottom of the cage.

She continued to squeal at him as he shimmied out from his confines and struggled to stand, pulling his arms free from the jacket.

He turned to face her, eyes shining brightly beneath an overhead bulb, the whites turning yellow. Severine's body shook as her nails became claws and whiskers formed at the corners of her once lovely, upturned lips.

Almost a statue, disbelief etched across Arthur's face as he continued to stare at her as grey fur began to envelop her naked body.

"You said I was beautiful Arthur!" She half purred the shrillness of her voice scared her.

"Forgive me." He whispered, making for the stairway as she continued to evolve.

Agnes's lifeless body slumped against the bottom of the wooden steps distracted Arthur.

Halfway up, his foot caught a stray nail and he folded over in pain, attempting to pull it free. With what was probably the last of his strength he let out a guttural cry, as tendons and skin stripped away.

Hobbling towards the landing, he made his way to the door. Severine plodded behind him; her form writhing and twisting into a feral shape as she called out for him. "Arthur! Arthur!"

The door gave way to the kitchen and he collapsed onto the floor. He crawled beneath the table to catch his breath.

Severine's claws clicked against the linoleum. Caught between cat and human form, she sniffed the air. She moved around the table, her body a swath of silver and blue. Relishing the sound of Arthur's labored breathing; she leaped onto the table. Her prey was just inches below her.

With what was his final effort, he crept towards the front door. Her pace quickened behind him. His face appeared in the window only for a second as she pounced. His fingers caught in the loop of the single blind in the small square window, pulling it down onto the floor with him. A bright swath of his blood mingled with its pattern of interlocking cats.

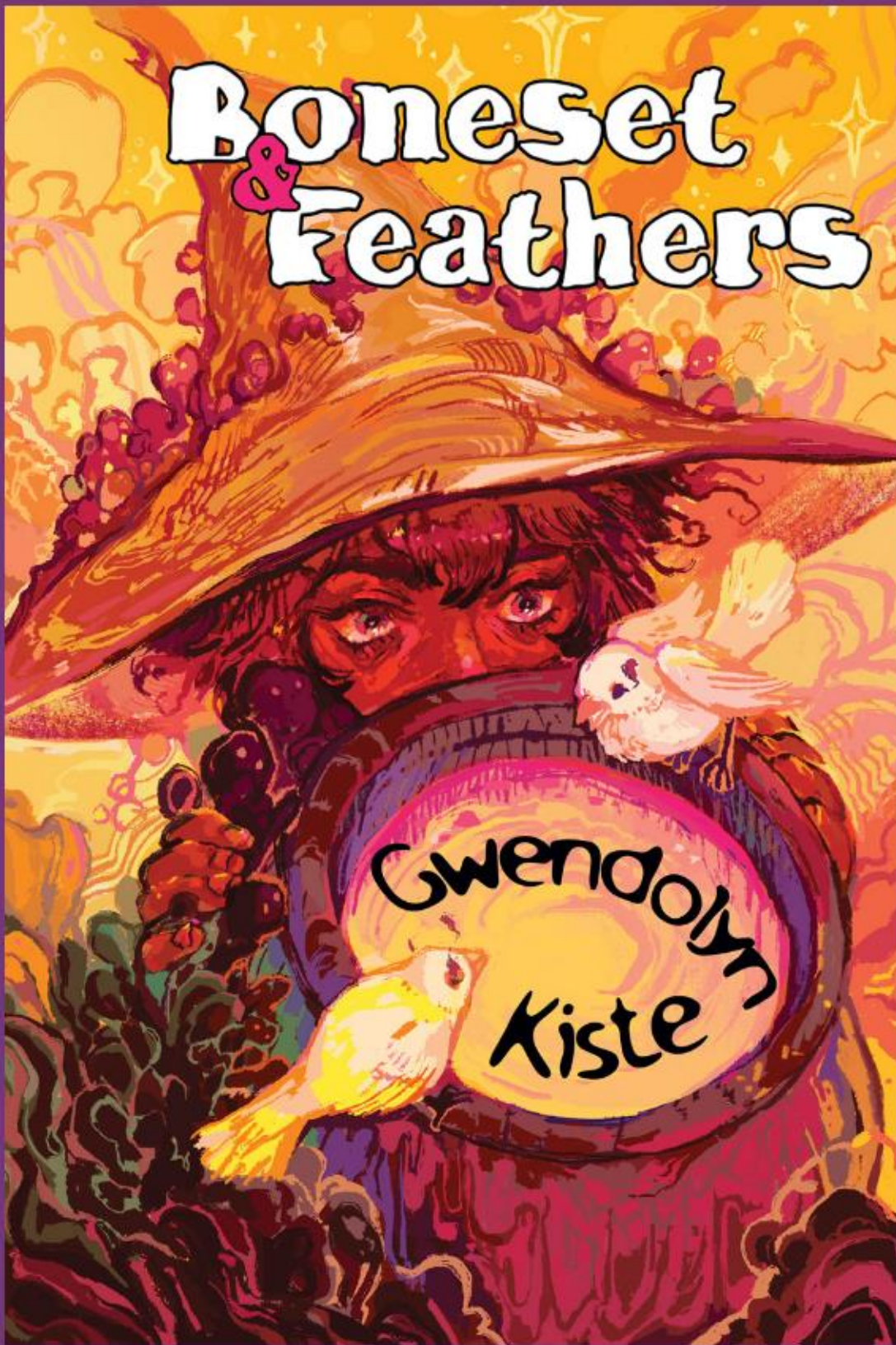
About the Author

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

Facebook: [Nicole L. Nevel-Steighner](#)

Instagram: [@owlqueen13](#)

No witch has ever been permitted a peaceful life...



**Available now from Amazon
and Broken Eye Books**

Gordon feared the forest's power and pitied those that did not. People immersed themselves in its primal beauty not understanding that they were invaders into a living entity. When in peril, he was the one who trudged into the wilderness to save them. He tucked the worn pictures of ones he didn't save into the top pocket of his jacket.

Gordon started up the Young Trail. It was one of Youghiogheny Park's most traveled, as hikers sought out the scenic vistas on the twisted pathway. He usually could do the entire twenty miles in a day, but not today.

This time he explored just below the well-trodden path, poking through the dense ferns and wild grasses for any trace of the missing Franklin. After two years of searching, he stumbled onto the boy's left tennis shoe. How had he had missed it on the path heightened the tragic mystery.

Gordon arrived at the campsite in the deep afternoon when the buzzing of insects drowned out all other noise. The log cabin blended with the surrounding trees having the rugged feel of the frontier. One could envision Massawomeck scouts hunting among the trees. That historic illusion melted away with the presence of the sports SUV parked in front of the cabin.

He stopped just short of the front veranda; reliving the moment when Angelina, the park administrator, with the help of state police, told the boy's family they ended the search. The parents' heartbreak stabbed at Gordon.

A statuesque woman stepped onto the wood planks, dressed in dark jeans and a bright red shirt that contrasted with her shoulder-length black hair. Noticing his approach, her angular face turned sour, "Hey Zoé we have a visitor."

Gordon stopped short of the porch, watching a lithe woman rush from inside. Standing by her companion, she had a graceful presence. She stepped down the stairs. "Can we help you?"

Gordon wanted to put them at ease. He showed her his park badge. "Angelina asked me to check up on you."

The woman smiled, "Gordon F. Roosevelt, she mentioned you know the park extremely well."

"I know my way around here. So how are you guys holding up?"

"Well, Gordon, I'm Zoé. This is my partner, Katherine. We're about to make supper, would you care to join us?"

Checking his watch, he had just under four hours of daylight left to search and set up camp. The mention of dinner did rouse his appetite. He accepted their kindness.

After settling in, Gordon asked, "What are you doing in these woods?"

"We're setting up trail cameras to monitor and take a census of the wildlife." Zoé placed out a trio of silver plates. She grinned, "I believe that is why Angelina sent you."

Curious, he sat in the worn chair, "That would be?"

Katherine turned away from the stove in the kitchenette with a steaming pot in her gloved hands. She rested the pot in the center of the table. "You know the area with all the hidden animal paths. We could get better results further away from heavily trafficked ones."

Crafty Angelina had a knack for getting the right people to the right spots. He thought about it, realizing that he hadn't searched the remote parts of the forest since last year. "Those are old rugged paths even for experienced hikers."

"We'll manage." Katherine swirled her fork in the angel hair pasta. He noted that she avoided eye contact with him.

Zoé focused on him. "So, where are you going to make camp tonight?"

Gordon picked up the water bottle, "Well, there is a tent site a mile up the trail. I can make it there before nightfall."

Shaking her head, Zoé said, "Don't do that. You can stay here."

Before he could respond Katherine interjected, "We don't have the room."

"Oh, please. This cabin is huge. Besides, staying here will save time. We can start at first light."

The young woman had his kind of thinking. Yet, he didn't want to impose on them. "Look, I'll bunk on the porch."

Zoé pointed towards the fireplace, "A nice couch right there."

After dinner, the little sprite finished cleaning up and preparing the couch for him. The other one went to her laptop to download data for the day. Zoé placed a large pillow on the sofa.

"We were surprised to get this cabin. I would have thought the park would be renting it out for families."

Gordon gruffed, "Well, there is a reason for that."

She gave him a blank stare, "Oh please, tell me this is haunted. I would so love that."

"No," Gordon sat on the sofa as Zoé pounced on the far end. "This place has a history. Two years ago a family rented this place. They were nice people. Halfway through their rental, they took a hike on the Young trail. According to their statements, everything started normally."

"Statements?" Zoé's voice turned apprehensive.

"Franklin, their oldest son disappeared several hundred yards from here." He watched her grab the pillow. "His parents and sister said he was slightly ahead of them with their dog. The dog suddenly jumped from the trail in a panic. When they calmed the dog down, Franklin was gone."

She looked perplexed, "We take that every day. It's a straight shot in a clearing for a mile."

"Yes. The boy was out of sight from the family for only a few minutes. I was in the first search group that scoured the field. We found nothing. After two years of searching, I found his tennis shoe near that spot."

Zoé's azure eyes opened wide, "Nothing else?"

Gordon leaned forward and looked into the empty fireplace. "None. The weird thing is that he had new shoes. That shoe had no sign of weathering. People love to rent a haunted cabin. But to have it connected to a prospective serial killer it becomes a no sale."

"Angelina didn't say anything about that." He heard the anxiety in her voice.

"Well, after a while you hear and see things that no one talks about. The park services don't want to admit it. People disappear in the parks over this country. Some come to disappear to start new lives. Others come to quietly end theirs. A few just vanish."

Zoé hugged tight a pillow. Silence lingered until Katherine shattered it. "Oh, great ghost stories. Should I break out the marshmallows?"

Zoé smiled which pleased him.

"Instead of campfire tales, you might want to look at this 'creepy' footage." She said whimsy.

They went back to the table where Katherine sat with a laptop. She turned it around, "There is always one."

The trail-cam footage showed the forest at night. He was impressed with the quality of the night vision. Several animals passed through its view; deer, foxes, and were preceded by a woman. Gordon stiffed as Zoé giggled. "People are such exhibitionists."

A woman prowled around the camera seemingly confused. Completely nude, she behaved feral, sniffing the ground and foliage. The black-and-white clarity was enough for him.

"Up in the Allegheny forest, we caught a bunch of college students going at it," said Katherine.

"Gordon, what's wrong?" Zoé asked.

He didn't want to conceal the truth from them, "That woman disappeared six years ago."

They ventured into the cold spring morning to investigate the sighting. A soft drizzle taunted their hour-long journey to the camera's position. Gordon knew the area, an old hunting path that went through the park's most rugged terrain. The park listed it for experienced hikers only.

"There is nothing," Katherine shouted as she circled the tree with the trail cam. He taught them a basic search pattern.

"Well, she was here." Gordon found some human footprints in the muddy earth.

Zoé poked the ground with her walking stick. "We should have reported this and got more people here."

"I wanted to make sure it was Jennifer Wright. She was listed as a probable suicide four years ago." He kept searching for tracks.

Katherine kicked over a branch, "I can't fathom anyone surviving naked in the woods that long."

Gordon looked upwards. The clouds cleared enough for him to see the waning quarter moon. "She had serious mental issues with several suicide attempts."

"So the authorities simply gave up on her?" Zoé's dismissive tone struck him.

"I never give up."

They continued to widen the radius until encroached on the tree line. He nearly stumbled into Zoé. She kept turning around, "Where is Katherine?"

The field was barely an acre wide. She couldn't have gone off without making a sound.

"Katherine!" Zoé ran to the last spot they saw her.

Gordon followed, staying within reach of Zoé. As they approached, a sudden wind blew down from the sky. They collapsed to the ground in a whirlwind of debris.

Then it stopped. Gordon felt his lungs burning. Zoé lay in front of him. She awakened at his touch, gasping. "It hurts to breathe. How long were we out?"

"Not sure. Ouch," His fingers burned when pressed against his metal watch. He quickly removed it from his wrist.

Zoé took off a bracelet, "It burns."

He realized that they were breathing hard. Something was wrong with the air. It was very hot and humid. The temperature had to be over a hundred degrees. He pulled off his jacket, as did Zoé. It was embarrassing looking at her with soaked clothes. Gordon simply accepted it while reaching for his phone. It didn't have a signal.

"My phone isn't working either. I thought the park had several cell towers."

"Just three," he corrected. The air pressed against him. It felt heavy.

Zoé looked upward, "Gordon, the sky... It's green."

An olive haze covered the sky. The puffy clouds had a darker green tint. They managed to stand. After a brief uneasiness, they scanned the surroundings. The forest changed to heavy vegetation. Massive fern-covered trees dominated over ground-cover-filled foliage. It reminded him of a visit to the rainforests on the northwest coast around Vancouver and Seattle.

Something moved in the cover, slowly closing in on them. Gordon shoved her behind as a figure emerged. A scraggy person marched towards him.

Zoé spoke, "He's naked and green."

Gordon recognized the boy despite his hunter-green skin and long hair that clumped against the body. "That's Franklin."

"You have to fucking kidding me." She responded to what he said.

Others came trudging from the shadows of the forest to encircle the pair. He considered running, but there were too many and he had no clue as to the terrain. They didn't attack or do anything threatening to them save herding them into the forest.

It was a difficult hike as the ground was uneven and immersed in flowers, ferns, and vines. In the canopy above, the shrieks of animals echoed. Among the sounds was a familiar buzzing that reminded Gordon of cicadas. The boy Franklin turned his attention skyward as a huge shape flew above.

He and Zoé ducked as the creature made another pass. Covering her, they watched an animal that appeared like a dragonfly spear one of their captors. The unfortunate woman gasped as the pincer plunged through her and the insect flew off with her dangling body.

The others barely noticed and continued to herd the couple. Zoé whispered, "That insect can't exist, at least not in a normal environment."

"What are you saying?"

"The heaviness of the air, I experienced this before after mountain climbing going from a less dense pressure to a higher one at sea level. The air is rich in oxygen, and that's why our lungs are burning. If that was an insect, it could grow to that size and thrive."

He understood, "You're saying we are on another planet?"

"I'm pretty sure something is out of whack. One of my chemistry professors loved theorizing about the environments of exoplanets."

"I don't think so." Gordon kept to himself that if Franklin and the others never returned, it was likely they won't either.

The march continued for what seemed to be hours. In the hothouse forest, it could have much less. They came upon a massive tree that stretched high into the tree canopy.

"It's like a redwood," Zoé spoke with the amazement of a true biologist.

He saw the giant redwoods in California. This one reached at least five hundred feet and at least four wider by the girth of the trunk with several smaller branches burrowing into the ground. Thousands of vines grew around the russet bark.

"Gordon! Katherine's clothes!" Zoé managed to break from the encirclement to reach the scattered clothing.

He realized that their captors didn't flinch at the outburst. He moved closer to Zoé. She fumbled through the pieces. "Her clothes are shredded. Where is she?"

As if by command, their captors rushed them. Gordon tried to protect Zoé but they were overwhelmed. In moments, they ripped off their clothing. Zoé wrapped herself around his bare arm as they were herded forward to one of the chasms beneath the tree.

"Katherine!" She whispered.

The vines cocooned the woman high off the ground. Gordon saw that she was still alive by the terror in her eyes. Zoé squealed as the vines lanced toward them. Held fast by the others the vines quickly enveloped them both. Soon they joined Katherine beneath the tree.

The leaves irritated his skin. It felt like small needles pricking into the flesh. Was that the purpose? To be digested by a giant Venus-Fly-Trap? No. A darker realization occurred as the pain spread throughout his body.

The Tree was aware.

It had a presence and will that dominated thousands of eons. Gordon felt it feeding on his memories and emotions adding to its consciousness. Its eldritch mind harvests countless souls from endless words to feed a hunger for knowledge. He sensed the presence of Zoé and Katherine, their essence part of the collective memory of The Tree. They were among the others, all taken from their worlds to serve it.

It used vortexes that connected worlds as a means to ensnare humans. Like some species of ants, they would care for it. Their bodies transformed to best serve it. After a ripening over a full season, Gordon and the women join the others to enact The Tree's will. Their minds remain self-aware yet connected to the entity's consciousness in eternal enslavement.

From the others, Gordon saw that in time, they would venture to other worlds suitable for The Tree's seeds.

One day, they may go home.

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: [Gregory L. Steighner](#)
Instagram: [@dino1954godzilla2020](#)

No More Fun | JB Corso

Walking on the grass used to be such a summer day's simple joy. Now it's become an immediate death sentence. Their anatomy seemed to change overnight. Once thin, flat leaves that were easy to step across have become hardened, edged tubes like mini syringes that pierce the hardest boot leather. Their catastrophic poison boils everyone from the inside out. 'The Dead Days of Summer', the news called it after reporting on the thousands of animal and human corpses. Eventually they all melted into the dirt. No more golf, no more baseball. No more fun. The grass has won.

Don't Save the Bees | JB Corso

We finally saved the bees in 2042. Genetic tomfoolery dressed as 'advanced bio-electric modifications' turned our pollen carrying friends into flesh devouring addicts. Ironically, they refocused from pollinating anything to carrying flesh back to the queen. Bee scouts ferry our whereabouts back to mammoth hives littering every neighborhood. Night is our time to accomplish anything outside. Society around the globe has all but stopped existing during daylight. We've become nocturnal refugees hoping for a chance to feel the sun's comforting warmth once more. Tania's torching crew reported thick, leather-bound hives that are resistant to fire. We've created our own destruction.

See-through Rose | JB Corso

Everyone wanted the ultra-rare translucent rose found by Pacific explorers. Dignitaries and moguls got access to them first, showing them off on their social media platforms. Black market seed-dealers spread them worldwide. Everyone was happy until the eggs hatched. The human death toll became staggering. The translucent petals took to the air as the wings of blood sucking carnivore insects hiding in the thick stems. Their sawing swarms sliced human flesh off the bones in seconds. Those fortunate died in the first hours. The rapid insect queens dug into the ground to orchestrate clandestine hives waiting to blossom into gardens.

Butterfly | JB Corso

Sally froze in place. Her mother's pale face trembled. She mouthed, "don't move." The butterfly casually flapped its peach and blue wings as it gripped onto her finger. Blood trickled onto the ground below its six needle-pointed feet. Sally stifled back an onslaught of volcanic agony. The young girl focused on her mother's saucer wide eyes. Time moved along like a boulder being pulled across wet sand as the tiny creature groomed its human-like face. A second butterfly abruptly landed on her floral headband. Sally's breathes became frantic. The curious insect ventured down her crimson cheek towards her quivering lips.

Life with Lice | JB Corso

The lice outbreak lasted ten years before we could get a foothold. We're just hanging on to small victories as thousands of their eggs hatch every second. Their global infestation upturned everyone's life. I couldn't have imagined spending my golden years like a hairless mannequin and surrounded by lice-eating ladybug colonies. The infestation alarms are blaring again. I really hate those spinning yellow lights. Our best efforts to find their mother-queen have become fruitless ever since the power went out. It's going to be another long night sleeping in a hazmat suit or risk becoming one of their living colonies.

Leave the Leaves Alone | JB Corso

People had quickly associated falling autumn leaves with terror. The afternoons of bagging or burning the cornucopia of reds, yellows, and oranges were long gone. People didn't want to believe that something so iconic for the changing seasons could kill so quickly. The government instructed us to burn our leaf-plastered corpses in place. In reality, no one wants to get that close, so our loved ones continue to become consumed wherever they fall. Jasper says I rub my own leaf-induced scaring when we pass by Old Man Jim's place. The mightiest of his oak trees has become a death nursery.

About the Author:

JB Corso is a health care professional who has worked with the mentally ill and geriatric populations for the last 20 years. He appreciates time with his children, writing, and pondering existential dread. He's a combat arms veteran who deployed as an international peacekeeper. He lives with his significant other and enjoys afternoon drives listening to music.

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



"Dr. Cavanaugh? This is Alexander Peterson calling. I applied for your summer internship last year, and you told me to reapply this year."

The voice on the phone held no spark of recognition. "What do you want, Mr. Peterson? I have a very full schedule this afternoon." Cavanaugh's voice was as rich and well-modulated as Alex remembered from their previous encounter, with the trace of some foreign origin showing through in the vowels.

Alex sighed. Great. This was his one big chance, and the guy didn't know him from Adam. "Well, as I said, sir...you told me to apply for the internship again this year, and I did so, but I haven't heard anything—"

"The deadline was a mere two weeks ago. Learn some patience. Goodbye."

"No! Wait—I needed to add something to my application. I finished my pre-med course work last week—"

He was talking to a dial tone.

"—And I had a 4.0 average."

Alex clicked off the cell-phone and slipped it into his pocket. He'd better get back to work. No one took twenty-minute smoke breaks and got away with it for long. He just had to get away from the stench of old age now and again.

He let his head fall back against the bricks of the nursing home. God, he hated this place. He was only working here because it would look better on his med-school application than fast-food...but not nearly as good as an internship with Bartlett Cavanaugh would look. It was the absolute *best* summer job an aspiring doctor could get, and he wanted it so badly there was a metallic taste in his mouth every time he thought about it.

The rejection he had received the summer before had been cordial, complementary, and caused him to think Cavanaugh had been serious with his request Alex reapply.

Alex had shaped his entire life this past year towards his application, forgoing social interaction for books and substituting extra labs for entertainment, all under the impression the paperwork was a mere formality. Now, it appeared he had been mistaken.

Either that or something he didn't know about had happened to screw up his chances.

Alex bolted upright. Maybe that was it! Maybe another candidate had trashed him to Cavanaugh. Or one of his professors? No...they'd all been most encouraging in his evaluations. They'd written glowing recommendations for his med-school applications. And, yeah, he would probably get in somewhere without the internship—but it would be such a feather in his application cap if he wanted to get in with one of the more prestigious schools. Which he did, thank you very much.

Sighing, Alex rose to his feet and trudged back into the nursing home. He was met at the door by the head nurse, burly arms crossed over her ample chest.

"Mr. Peterson, do you know how to read a clock?"

"Yes, Mrs. Thurston. Sorry I am a bit late getting back from break, but—"

"You are twenty minutes late from a ten minute smoke break—and you don't even smoke. If it were the first time, I might be able to let it go. Even though Mr. Dearson had an accident *you* were supposed to be on hand to prevent. However, this is *not* the first time. I've spoken to you about this several times in the past. This job might not be your idea of a career or vocation, but some of us take it quite seriously. I have given you more than enough leniency. Please clear out your locker and turn in your keys. Immediately."

Alex opened his mouth to protest—then snapped it shut. What was the point? She was right. He'd been a crappy orderly from Day One. He just hoped it wouldn't come back to bite him in the ass.

He nodded. "As you wish, Mrs. Thurston."

"Your final check will be mailed to the address on file. You can leave your scrubs in the laundry basket in the locker room. You will not be required to return." She thrust out a meaty hand.

Alex dropped his keys to the home into her waiting palm and slipped past her to the locker room. He changed quickly, tossed the scrubs in the hamper and grabbed his jacket and lunch, plus the paperback he'd brought to go with it—*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, chosen in a fit of irony. Bundling everything under his arm, he left without another word to anyone.

This sealed it. He couldn't have a gap in his résumé, and Turnkey Thurston would make damn sure he didn't find anything with another elder care facility in the area.

He'd be royally screwed if he had to rely on her recommendation...but if he had the Cavanaugh internship, he could sweep this job loss under the rug as a mere personality clash. He just *had* to get that job!

He drove home to the one room furnished apartment he'd rented all through college. It was a rat hole, but it was cheap. He'd managed to squirrel away a fair amount, but with no job, it would melt away in no time.

Alex threw his jacket onto the table and himself into a chair. He stabbed the buttons on the remote, looking for some sort of distraction. The bleach blond anchorwoman on the Channel Five news caught his attention for a moment:

"Another homeless man has been found murdered in the Bottoms. This is the sixth victim in what police are calling the 'Shelter Slasher' case. As in the previous murders, there are no leads as to the identity of this brutal killer.

"In other news, Dr. Bartlett Cavanaugh has announced he will be on sabbatical for the remainder of the year so he may lead a team in relief efforts out of the country."

Alex sat forward.

Bartlett Cavanaugh appeared on the screen, handsome and confident. "Yes, Margo," he murmured. "I shall be opening a free clinic in the center of the hurricane devastation so victims will receive the best possible medical treatment under the circumstances. It will be funded in part by my parent hospital, in part by my personal funds, and in part by donations from generous backers such as your audience. Current plans are to start immediately for the area, and to keep the clinic operating as long as necessary. We can only hope it will not be indefinitely."

That explained everything! Of course Cavanaugh didn't need an intern if he wasn't going to be at his local clinic...but if Alex could convince the good doctor to take him to this free clinic to do charity work it would earn him even better kudos. Philanthropic work was the ultimate jewel in a résumé's crown.

He pulled out his cell, and started to hit redial then stopped himself. "Wait," he said to the silent apartment. "If I call, he'll just hang up again. But if I go see him...it will be a lot harder to turn me down. I can be *very* persuasive in person."

Excited by the idea, Alex stuffed some essentials into his backpack and changed into cords and a button-down Oxford. Dress for success his dad had always told him.

As he fastened the last button, he practiced what he would say to the great man.

"Dr. Cavanaugh, it's Alex Peterson. I've come to ask you to take...no, lame. I've come to volunteer to join your relief clinic. My passport is in order—" Thanks to Mom and Dad being perpetual flight risks. "—And I have a clear calendar for the foreseeable future." Thanks to Thirsty Thurston. If he had to, he could delay med school a year for an opportunity like this one. He picked up his backpack and slung it over his shoulder.

"Experience?" He stepped out of the apartment and started down the stairs to the parking lot. He was so sure he could convince Cavanaugh to take him to the clinic he didn't bother to lock his front door. There was nothing left in the apartment he couldn't do without or replace.

"Well, sir, I just finished my pre-med course load with a 4.0, and I've been employed at Happy Acres Nursing Home for the past four months—" Maybe he should avoid mentioning his previous job considering the events of the afternoon.

"Why, I could leave this evening if you want me to. I've got everything I need right here..." He threw the backpack into the passenger seat. "Really, I am entirely at your disposal."

The wheels spun on the gravel of the driveway as he peeled out into the main road. Driving across town as fast as he dared, Alex soon whipped into the circular drive of Cavanaugh's mansion. The doctor had held a soiree for all the intern candidates the spring before, culminating in the announcement of someone else's name.

And yet, there had been the private moment in the den afterwards—when Cavanaugh had drawn Alex aside...

"Your résumé and application were outstanding, son. If I had room for two interns, you would have been a shoo-in. Please reapply next year."

Alex had nodded eagerly. "Yes, I will. Thank you, sir!"

And this afternoon, the good doctor hadn't even remembered his name. Well, he'd take care of that. He'd *make* the doctor remember.

He'd wanted to be a doctor his whole life. He knew he would be an asset to Cavanaugh...and he would learn so much...

He rapped upon the door. Shoulders squared, he shifted his pack from hand to hand.

The door swung in and Bartlett Cavanaugh stood framed in the opening. His torn jeans and worn Heavy Metal t-shirt were a sharp contrast to Alex's cords.

"Dr. Cavanaugh—"

"You're not the pizza guy."

"No, sir. I'm—"

"If you're not the pizza guy, good day." He started to shut the door.

Alex thrust his foot into the gap. "I'm—"

"Going to lose that foot if you don't move it. Don't think I won't slam this door."

"I just need to talk to you, sir. Please—"

"Hold on...I recognize that whine. You are the git who called me this morning, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir. Alexander Peterson." Alex stuck out his hand, taking the opportunity to slip into the hallway.

Cavanaugh ignored the outstretched hand. "Look, Peterson. I'm really frightfully busy right now. I have a million things to do..." He waved toward the open door in an obvious gesture of dismissal.

"Please, doctor. I saw you on the news. I know you are going to the center of the hurricane devastation to start a clinic. I want to volunteer to go with you."

Cavanaugh snorted. "You? What possible use could you be to me?"

Alex felt the heat rising to his face. "I've been working in an elder care facility all spring—"

"Have you set any broken bones? Amputated crushed limbs? Done any field surgery? That's the sort of thing I'll be doing at the clinic. Not wiping some old geezer's backside."

"I'll admit my medical field training is rather limited, but isn't that what an internship is for?"

"An internship, *perhaps*, but this isn't going to be an internship. That's why I'm not hiring an intern this year. I need professionals who can be assets to me, not green kids who've never set a fractured limb."

"But I'm a really quick learner, Dr. Cavanaugh. I've been studying to be a doctor my entire life. It's all I've ever wanted to do..."

"Admirable, Mr. Peterson, and if I did need an intern, perhaps you would fit the bill, but books can't give you field training, and that is what I need for the clinic. Try again next year." He pointed out the open door. "Now, leave."

"No!" Alex shouted. "You don't understand! I *need* this position. I *have* to be a doctor!"

He slammed the door shut and threw the deadbolt, then turned to face the doctor, mouth twisted into a rictus grin.

"What in God's name are you doing?" Cavanaugh asked in stunned disbelief.

There was a brace of candlesticks and a bowl of flowers on the table beside the door. Alex swept up one of the heavy brass candlesticks and slammed it into the side of Cavanaugh's head.

The doctor's eyes rolled up, and he slumped to the floor.

Moving with a practiced ease, Alex dragged the unconscious man into the tiled study and laid him out in front of the empty fireplace. He reached into the backpack and pulled out a roll of duct tape. Swiftly binding the man's hands and ankles, he ripped loose a final piece and gagged that smooth voice.

Cavanaugh groaned as his eyes fluttered open. When he realized he was trussed up like a prize hog, he began to struggle, but the duct tape held firm.

"I'll show you what I am capable of," Alex muttered, voice tight in his throat. He lovingly took a roll of canvas from the backpack and unfurled it on the hearth with a flourish. Within it were well-worn surgical tools. Alex slipped a scalpel from its pocket, testing the edge on the ball of his thumb.

"I may not have had any *formal* field training, but I've had a lot of practice."

The House on the Hill | *Rie Sheridan Rose*

"See? Whaddid I tell ya?" Petey whispered, handing me the binoculars, and pointing into the darkness.

I looked through the eyepieces. It was hard to focus them at night, but the full moon helped a bit. I wished it was after my birthday, because my uncle Tom was getting me a pair of night-vision goggles from the surplus store...but that was months away. We had to make do.

And I *could* see a light on in the old Scarborough house—even though it had been abandoned before I was born. It shown through the branches of the big old oak that stood alongside the house—naked in the January evening.

"Should we check it out?" asked Petey eagerly. That boy was scared of nothing...not bright enough to be, I always guessed...

I hesitated. It was tempting...on the other hand, I *did* have a healthy dose of caution bred into *my* bones.

The flickering quality of the light from the house decided me. Probably just some tramp or something, but it looked like they had an open candle or lantern up there—maybe even a fire. That was dangerous. They could burn the house down. As an Eagle Scout, I had a responsibility to deal with this.

"Okay. But stay behind me, and don't say anything stupid if there really is someone up there."

Petey stowed the binoculars in his backpack, and we started up the hill.

The Scarborough house had been a showplace once upon a long time ago. It was two full stories and some crazy attic thing tall.

The light came from the front room in the far right hand corner of the house, as you faced out the window. I dunno why that's important, but I noticed details like that about buildings. I hoped to be an architect one day.

Inside, the house was pretty trashed. Beer bottles and fast food wrappers were everywhere on the bottom floor—and it smelled like someone had peed in the corner.

We hurried upstairs as quickly as we could.

On the second floor, there was a weird smell of jasmine—my mom is a florist, so I recognize a lot of flower scents. It was better than the piss downstairs, at least.

The light spilled out of the far room to paint the floor with a flickering gold pattern. As dry as the wood was, I was more determined than ever to get rid of that flame.

We crept forward, my hand clutching my heavy flashlight—just in case. Petey had his phone out. Dunno what good that was supposed to do. Everybody knows that the hill is a dead zone for cell service. Then, I glanced over and saw that he had the camera up. Documentation, I guess.

Cautiously poking my head around the jamb of the door, I saw a girl about my age sitting in front of the fireplace, rocking back and forth on the floor in a white nightgown. I could see the vague outline of her body as the fire shone through the gown. That was kinda embarrassing.

Debating what to do, I was stumped. She shouldn't be in here. Especially not at night, with a fire going.

"Look, Miss—" I started to say.

She turned to us then, and her eyes were black holes in the center of her face. Her mouth opened, and a scream pierced the night.

I felt it begin to dissolve my very bones.

"Get out of here!" I ordered Petey, and he decided to be sensible for once—turning and running down the hall.

His phone fell out of his hand about halfway to the stairs. That was a good thing. It allowed me to record this story. When I am done, I'll toss it out the window into the grass. Maybe someday, someone will find it, and it will collaborate Petey's story.

I hope they don't lock him up for telling it. It's the truth, after all.

We found a hell-ghost in the house on the hill. She was lonely...so she made a mate.

Guess I'll never be that architect...

Best thing anyone could do is burn this cursed place to the ground. Maybe then, we can rest...but no matter what—stay away from the house on the hill...

Billy Prescott...deceased

About the Author:

Rie Sheridan Rose's prose appears in numerous anthologies, including *Killing It Softly* Vol. 1 & 2, *Hides the Dark Tower*, *Dark Divinations*, and *Startling Stories*. In addition, she has authored twelve novels, six poetry chapbooks, and dozens of song lyrics. She challenges herself to walk a minimum of 1 mile a day, rain or shine.

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

Author Website: [Rie Sheridan Rose](http://RieSheridanRose.com)



Eva watched the moons rise, following each other in a path across the setting sun like a rope of pearls against molten gold. The gathering shadows called forth the luciferin in the soil. It rose up as a luminous mist like the *aurora borealis* she'd seen on Terran feeds, but that earthly glow was wasted in the cold stars. Here it was life-giving as the microbes drifted across her skin, feeding and re-vitalizing her. Her skin became luminescent as the mist settled on her, attracted to her warmth. The rest of her colony feared it, but Eva knew this world was alive. It was symbiotic. It was beneficial. It was only her people that refused to cooperate.

A plutonian plume drifted across her vision and Eva knew her friend, the Shadow Crow, was with her.

"Why are you dark?" he asked, his words as sharp as his beak. "That is my purpose." The bioluminescence recoiled from him. Between them was an absence of life and light. The shadow ruffled his feathers and hopped forward to eye the chain of moons and the small settlement beneath them.

"Why are you dark?" He asked again, and turned to look at her. His eyes were assaulting white, illuminating her face. He studied her for a half minute before shielding the glare behind his secondary and third lids. Blinded, any other colonist would quail under such burning observation, but not her. Shadow Crow was her friend. But he was right. Today they were both cloaked in gloom.

"I've been chosen to procreate," she finally said. Her voice was flat and emotionless. "I either accept this and hate myself or don't accept this and be hated. Either choice leaves me with hate." She blinked against the spots that swam in her vision and turned to him. "My people don't belong here. They don't understand this place. We should destroy them." His vacant, ember gaze swept over her. A young girl, raised in a bubble with no stories to tell. She had no tears to nourish her soul. She had no experience to understand her words.

But what she said was true. The settlement sat on the horizon like toxic bones that never decayed. Governed by logic and law, the people that built these aberrations rejected the ways of their new home planet. They bit into the flesh of the land, leaving it scarred. They reviled the night mist that nourished all things living, choosing instead to consume their own chemical nourishment. Their strange homes smelled of nothing but still managed to burn the foliage, taint the soil until it cracked painfully. He didn't trust them. His world could eject them, if it could reach them but they stay sealed away for the most part. But Eva could reach them.

"Your people leave a death stink. I would like to be rid of them, but you will be alone here with no companions. Is procreation so vile you would exterminate your people and die alone in this place, strange to you?"

She thought of the governor with his superior genetics that must be passed on. She thought of her sister who had been chosen to procreate last year. Her sister's body rejected the biological burden and she died. The colony said it was because she had not been grateful for the gift of life given her. Eva didn't think she would be grateful either.

"Yes," she answered. "But this place is not strange to me. I don't remember my past world, just this one. Will you help me?"

The Shadow Crow studied her, turning his head back and forth to peer through his translucent lids at this strange creature. She did not reject his world. Perhaps it would not reject her. "We can see."

"What shall I give you in return?" asked Eva.

"We can see," he said. He spread his wings, until they blotted out the moons, sunk his talons into her shoulders and rose up. He flapped, straining to take air with the added weight. The girl's wails of pain cut the night and filled the Shadow Crow's wings with vengeance, lifting him all the way. He did not want to hurt her, but pain often came with healing.

He flew her through the gathering night, high into the hills to a bacterial spring and set her down. Her shoulders ran with blood where she had been pierced during the flight, but the wind had fought to take her from him. He had to grip her tightly or lose her.

"If you are not rejected you will become one with this world. You can bring it back and destroy your people..." Above them, the sky turned crimson.

The spring bubbled directly from the living heart of the world. Lush and alive, the liquid flowed out and back, part of the planetary circulatory system. Pale, like jade milk, the rising sun set the microbes living there into motion. They glinted sparks of opal fire as the light caught their movement. The pool invited her.

She stepped down into it. The living water flowed around her, warm and viscous. It tingled on her skin as it absorbed, entering her bloodstream with gifts of endorphin, serotonin, dopamine and oxytocin. She smiled as she slipped beneath the surface. This was a feeling she'd never known in her plasticine world. The Shadow Crow found a

tangled copse of branches, built a nest and settled in to wait.

The day passed away to yield to the parade of moons. He watched the galaxies spin until they yielded back again into day. He lost track of how many times this happened because it didn't matter. During that time, there was no movement from the spring. The thick waters continued passing from the plant's interior to the surface for sunlight and air before vanishing underground. Whether the girl had become part of that flow, slipping through subterranean arteries or just lay at the bottom of the pool he neither knew or cared. She would be accepted or she wouldn't. Either way she would become one.

And then one morning as the pearlescent moons were vanishing one by one beneath the horizon she came out of the pool. She had changed. Her youthful body had matured from flat planes to curves. Like the spring, her skin glowed like jade milk, a subtle vitality flowing beneath it. Her eyes sparked with fragmented fire like opals. She stepped onto the shore and the water flowed from her flesh, leaving her glistening in the air.

"And now?" asked the Shadow Crow.

"I return."

He took her back, but this time she rode on his back, face buried in his ebon feathers. No more the outsider, she was now just a different aspect of this world. Not other, but *another*. The settlement still sat on the crust of the world, an ill fitting prosthetic to a place with no need for it. He set down and she slid off.

"And now?" asked Eva.

"I return." Like a shadow passing before the sun, he was gone in a blink. Stepping through the door into the plasticine pod, so was she. And the planet spun on, the moons rose and set and things changed.

Years later he found himself back in the place of strangers. The white cocoons were still there, but they no longer clung to the surface like bloodless scabs. They had become part of the landscape. The plant growth that had shrank from their noxious touch had adjusted and made concessions. The opposite worlds had compromised and made peace. The huts had multiplied, but built from soil and vine, grown from the planet as opposed to pasted on it. Among the huts were a strange people with jade milk skin and flashing, opalescent eyes. The children of Eva... and then Shadow Crow saw Eva herself.

Older, bent but still strong. Her skin was lined but vital. Her eyes flashed vivid with opal fire from her wrinkled cheeks. There was much life there still. She saw him on the edge of the settlement, dark and alone, and welcomed him as an old friend. He was drawn among them and as he walked the children danced with excitement. "It's him! The Shadow Crow! For real! The stories are real!" There was only love in their eyes.

"I thought you were going to destroy them," said the Shadow Crow. "I thought you had no choice." They stopped beneath a shade made of living, interlaced branches. Yellow fruit hung low with a sweet scent. She plucked one and handed it to him. The taste was like sunlight and honey. It was strange to him, but wonderful.

"I did destroy them," she said. "With love. Destroy with love—no one can win against that but no one loses either."

Shadow Crow plucked another fruit and marveled as the juice ran down his beak. It was wonderful and strange.

About the Author:

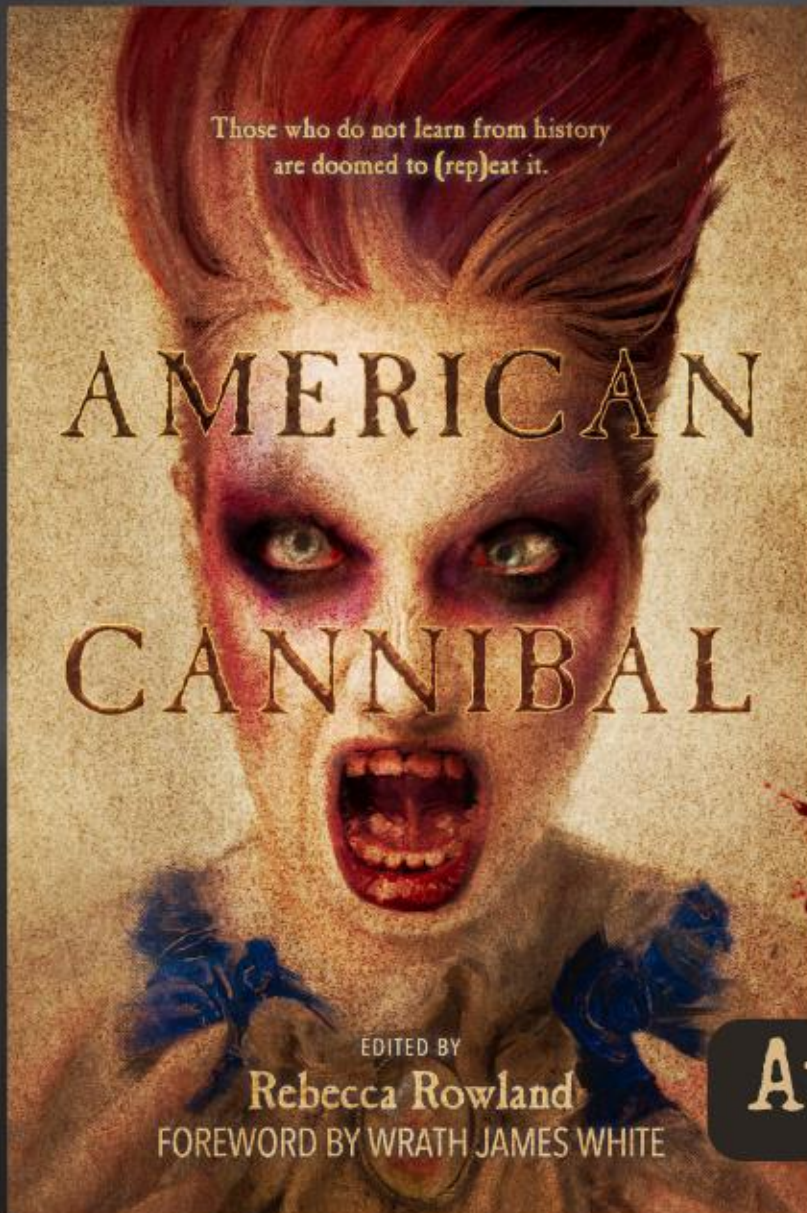
Angela Yuriko Smith is a third-generation Shimanchu-American and award-winning poet, author, and publisher with 20+ years of experience as a professional writer in nonfiction. Publisher of Space & Time magazine (est. 1966), a two-time Bram Stoker Awards® Winner, and HWA Mentor of the Year for 2020. Angela met her husband in a game (Lord of the Rings Online) and has been married for 12 years.

Website: [Exercise Your Writes](#)

Twitter: [@AngelaYSmith](#)



Those who do not learn from
history are doomed to (rep)eat it



Available NOW

BRAND NEW FICTION FROM Brian Asman Daniel Braum
V. Castro Douglas Ford Jeffrey Ford Holly Rae Garcia
Owl Goingback C.V. Hunt Gwendolyn Kiste EV Knight
Clay McLeod Chapman Ronald Malfi Elizabeth Massie
Jeremy Megargee Bridgett Nelson Candace Nola
Clint Smith Jon Steffens L. Stephenson Jeff Strand
Foreword by Wrath James White

After the chaos of the tornadoes and storms that devastated entire cities and mountains, the man became trapped in the basement of a demolished building. The wet walls, the broken concrete floor sinking into the muddy swamp below, all of this made the environment ripe for fungi, roots and all sorts of flora.

They grew abnormally fast now, brutally conquering the man-made structure with an air of revenge. Branches and thick vines snaked around the basement, taking hold of everything, consuming and obscuring whatever they could. A small flow of water came from the left side of the room below the soil, born from the depths of the earth.

The man drank the fresh water, collecting it with his hands near the cracked brick wall, before it had the chance to mix itself with the stale water, algae and fungi that covered the floor.

But after many days in the basement, with no way out, his stomach began to ache uncontrollably. The cramps from the hunger were so strong that, at times, he had to curl himself up in a fetal position, on the verge of passing out. Water could nourish the human body for months, but without anything to feed him, all the man saw in his future was a slow, agonizing death. At times, he wished he could have died fast, like everyone else.

One day, however, as he lay on the damp old basement, a dove flew down into the ruins of the building, which were now completely overtaken by foliage, thick branches and contorting vines larger than any Amazonian snake.

Suddenly, in a violent swing, the bulbous green head of a gigantic carnivorous plant opened and closed, snatching the bird. The dove let out a squeal, and then ceased to make noise.

The man watched all of it, startled, and his heart thumped against his ribs. The plant then relaxed, its head resting closer to the soil. It reminded the man of a cat, resting its little head on its own chubby body.

Slowly, he got up and approached the creature. The man noticed a malignant fungus growing on the trunk of the plant, injuring the fibers, eating through them. With his gloved hand, the man removed the parasite.

The carnivorous plant then turned its head towards the man, and he quickly took a step back. There was a tense moment in which both seemed to stare at each other; though the plant had no eyes, it certainly could sense the man's presence. Then, the plant opened its mouth, and as a drop of thick, yellow mucus, the man saw the remains of the bird.

Surprised, he looked at the plant, where he imagined its face would be, if it had one. It seemed to be offering him a share of the meal. Carefully, he reached into the gigantic mouth and pulled out a piece of the dead dove. His first meal in days. In the face of extreme hunger, disgust or worry were quickly erased. And so, he gladly ate.

In the following days, the man worked with the carnivorous plant, keeping it clean, free of parasites or fungi. In return, the plant would let the human eat parts of its captures.

They were usually birds; sometimes cats, or other small animals. Any meal was welcome. And the man was content.

For all he knew, the world was over for humanity. Nature was once again its queen. Once anxiously awaiting his death, the man was now happy to relax in his bed of moss, caring for the bulbous plant that treated him with such fairness and kindness. When had other people been this gentle to him? When had anyone offered him help? He was more than delighted to be all alone with nature. Trapped in this basement, he was freer than ever.

And so, one day, when he woke up to the sound of another person screaming, human legs coming out of the plant's mouth, struggling wildly and desperately, the man did not interfere. When the acid finally silenced the shrill screams, the man got up and approached the plant.

It was time for lunch.

About the Author:

Antonella Nicolino is a Brazilian writer and visual artist. She loves all forms of art, as well as studying different languages and exploring the enormous city of São Paulo. Her short stories and poems have appeared in a variety of books and anthologies, such as 1001 Poetas by the Casa Brasileira de Livros and Rir para Não Chorar by Persona publishing house.

I'm far away but I have to save her.

She's walkin' down the old dirt road, the stuffed lion clutched in one hand. I see her clearly. She can't be more than five.

She's headed for the old house at the end of the lane. Lord knows where her parents are this time. They're worshippers of the needle, converts to the poison in their veins. Neither of them have their eyes on the girl. Neither care she's gone.

The house is old, run-down, and as wretched as the mind of the thing which waits inside. It calls to her with its siren's song, promisin' the one thing her parents can't give. She's several steps away, but she'll be there soon.

The thing used to be a man, but time and vice have warped him into somethin' else. His skin's gone gray, and his body's stretched out until he's thin as a rail. There's a hunger in him nothing can satisfy. He waits for the girl with slaverin' jaws.

I can save her. I've done it before.

I close my eyes and breathe deep.

The scientists gather round me, adjustin' electrodes on my head. They're amazed by my ability, call it 'Astral Projection'. I always called it 'Spirit Walkin''. Used it a lot as a kid...and in prison. That's where they first discovered it.

"Alpha waves rising," one of them says.

They know I'm going. My body will stay behind but my spirit will leave and walk the earth. I just can't stay away too long. If I do, I'll die.

The scientists don't know where I go. They just know I won't stay away.

Though I didn't know her at this age, I've known this girl most of my life. When I first met her, she was seventeen, her face deeply scarred. As a boy, I never wanted to let her down. Somehow, I did.

When I open my eyes, I'm at the house. Crickets chirp in the tall grass and the sun's near dropped from the sky. The lion's layin' on the front porch. My heart jumps into my throat.

Someone screams inside. The shriek shatters the quiet, silencing the crickets.

I rush through the open door and bust in on a spectacle I've seen many times.

The monster holds the girl in his arms, long talons diggin' into her skin. She writhes against him, screamin'.

I have no gun. No knife. No weapon. All I have is my body. I use it.

I tackle the monster, knockin' it to the floor. The girl falls from its grasp. She rolls, lies dazed. The monster reaches for me. I jump to my feet.

Somewhere in my middle, near the back of my belly button, there's a gentle tug. It's the first warnin' my time is runnin' out. I hurry to the girl and drag her to her feet.

The monster scrambles toward us. I usher the girl out on the porch and put the door between us and it. I lift her in my arms.

Splinters shower us as the monster bursts through the door.

I run. She's heavy in my arms.

The tug comes again, harder this time, so hard it nearly pulls the breath from my body. If I don't go back to my body now, the next tug will signal my doom.

Never before have I ignored this warnin'. Her future isn't unknown to me. If I leave, she'll still live. She'll be marred for life, but she'll survive. I can set her down. I can go.

I don't. I carry her further, further than I've ever gone.

Somethin' slices me across the back. I grit my teeth against the pain, strugglin' to keep my feet. The little girl seizes me about the neck. "It's dying!" she cries.

I glance back. The monster has dropped to the ground, its flesh bubblin', meltin' under the light of the dyin' sun. It stretches an arm toward the sky and falls into the dust.

The final tug comes. Agony fills me. I drop the girl.

She looks down on me as I lay in the dirt, her face beautiful, unblemished. She holds my hand.

The breath is leavin' my body. But there are words to say, even as new memories fill my mind.

"One day...you'll have a little boy," I whisper. "He will never let you down."

About the Author:

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

Author Website: [Frighten Me!](#)

Twitter: [@nachingkassa](#)

The Horned God | *Shane Kroetsch*

A storm rages over the city of Geneva. Compact and angry, its intention is focused. Electric fingers erupt from dark, rolling clouds. They tear into the concrete and steel, searching for the array of particle accelerators beneath, like a predator slashing at the throat of its victim.

Deep below, the chaos and violence are mirrored in a place few will ever see. Wafting haze pulses with red light as sirens scream from all directions. Doors hang on their hinges, bent from the pressure of being blown open. Floors heave and crack, littered with broken equipment and bodies. Those who can run do. Those who can't, crawl or stumble away in a futile attempt to find safety.

A breach in the wall of the Large Hadron Collider unleashes a storm, not of elements, but of space and time—a tear in the fabric that keeps the universe contained. Smoke curls to reveal a portal to another place. Perhaps hell itself. Except, the other side is calm.

A vibrant purple moon hangs high in the ethereal sky, casting dim light over an endless, barren desert. Starting as a spec on the horizon, a lone figure strides forward at a steady pace. Its shadow distorts and crests the low, rolling dunes as if it were alive. When the figure reaches the portal, it stoops low to allow wide antlers, like the gnarled limbs of an ancient tree, to push through. The muscled form of a man follows, but its shape is the only fair comparison. Clawed hands of a raptor reach to pull itself through. Skin dense with smooth, glossy hair, reflects the mayhem. Its mottled, searching eyes are anything but human.

Few are left to witness it, but the arrival of the horned god heralds a changing of the guard, a long-awaited opportunity for the rightful stewards of the planet to stake their claim—the beasts and creatures, above and below, seen and unseen. But before that can happen, final reparations must be paid. A cleanse is in order.

Above, the storm unwinds toward the horizon, overflowing the sky with rage. Tight spirals of glittering snow charge to the ground, stark and pure against a churning canvas. When the first flakes stick, they do not melt. Instead, they spark and ignite, searing the land. Soon, there will only be fire, confirmation that hell has arrived after all. But what is still to come, for those who manage to survive, will be so much worse.

About the Author:

Shane Kroetsch writes stories to explore the inherent darkness that makes us human, and the monsters that haunt our dreams. In his spare time, he builds projects out of old junk, paints watercolour blanket ghosts, and shakes his butt while the vinyl spins.

Author Website: [Shane Kroetsch](#)

Instagram: [@ShaneKroetsch](#)



He sat at the dining room table, pretending to scan the list in front of him. Wendy passed by and glanced down.

"You and your silly courses. What is it going to be this time?"

"I fancy car maintenance this year. It'll save mechanic bills."

"At least it'll do some good this time. What was it last year, wine appreciation? Grown men and women spending their evenings spitting out perfectly good wine."

"It was fun and I learned a lot. I now know what a good Medoc tastes like."

"As if we can afford one. Just make sure whatever course you choose, it isn't too expensive."

"Yes, dear."

His pencil marked a careful cross beside the car maintenance course. This was part of the charade, acted out for Wendy's benefit. No matter what course he told her he was taking, he always went on the same course, year in and year out. It was always Cooking for One. Always. How else could he indulge his secret hobby of screwing around?

He felt no guilt, he deserved to have some fun; she was crap in bed anyway. It was easy to find some youngish spinster or single mum on the Cooking for One course, chat her up and then bed her. You didn't have to try to please them on a one-night stand.

He always played the role of 'single guy, just moved into the area and learning to cook'. After all, who else but single people would go on a Cooking for One course? It was almost too simple, like shooting targets at a fairground; some of them were absolutely gagging to be chatted up and bedded. He sometimes screwed an ugly one just to see the pathetic gratitude on their piggy faces. Some of them even gave up their virginity to him, just because he told them he loved them. He would never see them again, of course, and that was a real pain. After he had them he couldn't exactly go back on the course and face them again. The worst year was when he had pulled on the very first night of the course, screwed her in the back of his car, then had to spend every Tuesday for the rest of the ten week course drifting round bars without drinking, going to the cinema by himself or simply driving around to while away the hours. Still, hassle or not, the buzz drove him back, year after year.

His main worry was the staff at the center would realize the same man kept coming back on the same course, year after year. He was sure they couldn't do anything about it, he had paid his money after all, but it would look suspicious and it might cause him some embarrassment if they questioned him. It was a busy center, so it was unlikely, but every time he took a different name and changed his appearance as much as possible.

The first night of the course was a Tuesday as usual. He made sure he had no late meetings at work and tried to get home as early as possible. Lester kept him talking in the corridor for an extra fifteen minutes and he had to speed to get home by six. The man was an idiot! Always whining about his job, his home, his family. Why the hell didn't he just divorce his wife and move? It was baffling.

After a quick meal, he showered and dressed in casual stuff. He didn't want to dress up too much, but nor did he want to be too scruffy. Clothes were one of the first things a woman noticed about a man. He headed for the door.

"I'm off, pet. See you later."

"Don't get too mucky."

What? He almost spoke the word before he remembered where he was meant to be going. Car maintenance.

"I won't, dear. I'm sure I won't be doing anything too dirty tonight." He smiled at his own joke.

He parked in his usual part of the car park and walked into the building, feeling its familiarity settle round him. He changed from married man to single male as he entered through the portals of the center. He was now Adam Macintosh.

The center was an old high school, closed when a new building had been built two miles down the road. The old school had been converted into an Adult Education Centre.

The course was run in a room that had once been a classroom for Home Economics. It had about twenty gas cookers and beside them, a single desk which doubled as a work surface. At the front there was the standard teacher's desk and blackboard.

There were ten people in the room when he arrived. He quickly scanned them, checking to make sure he didn't know anyone. This was the point when he was at his most paranoid, at the moment of no return. Thoughts of one of Wendy's friends, or even worse, one of his ex-one night-stands appearing in the classroom haunted him. But it hadn't happened yet and it didn't happen then. There was nothing but a sea of unfamiliar faces in front of him. There were six women and four men. Which of the six would be his victim this year, he wondered. Three of the women were definite no-no's. The other three were reasonable; one was a bit too old, but she would do in a pinch.

The instructor hadn't arrived so he took the time to choose himself a good position. He spotted a free desk at the far end of the room, near the windows. It was a little bit isolated from the rest of the class. All the better, he wouldn't get interrupted and if he didn't get involved with the group then nobody would remember his face. Well, no one except the one he screwed. She would definitely remember him.

He surveyed the items on his desk, it was the same for every first class. A basic chicken casserole. A couple of scabby chicken bits and a few mangy vegetables were laid out on the table. Once it was cooked they were expected to take it home, but of course he couldn't. He didn't even eat it, normally throwing it over the nearest hedge on his way home.

It was another ten minutes before the instructor turned up. One of the men had already left in disgust, making some unintelligible comment to the air. The whole class turned round when the door opened.

She was gorgeous. All thoughts of trying to pull one of his classmates went out the window. For the first time in his illustrious career as an adulterer, he had decided to go for the instructor.

She walked to the front of the class with some embarrassment. Dumping her bag on the front desk, she removed her jacket and slung it over the chair behind her. She spoke to the class.

"Hello everybody. Sorry for being late. My bus was delayed by the rush hour. My name is Alison and I'll be taking you all for this course in Cooking for One. I'm sure I'll get to know your names as we go along. Let's get started. Can you please turn to the recipe sheets in front of you?"

The class continued but he paid little attention to what was going on. He was no longer interested in anybody but Alison. She was his challenge for this session. She would be his victim. He would either get her or have no one, but he wasn't prepared to lose. He managed to make eye contact with her on a number of occasions and she smiled back at him when her eyes met his. His heart leapt in anticipation. He was getting somewhere. His hopes started to rise.

He already had his excuse to chat her up. You had to be sharp in this game. She had mentioned the bus. No car. He would play the gallant gentleman, going her way. No matter where she lived, he would be going her way. Then he would get *his* way. He lifted his hand to attract her attention. She smiled and walked across to him.

"What's the matter," she glanced at the name badge on his chest. "Adam."

"I can't get the hang of it. I'm not very good at this."

His tone was meant to convey vulnerability to her.

"What don't you understand?"

"Um...why do we have to brown the chicken if it's going to be cooked anyway?"

He made a mental note to think of a question before he put his hand up next time. She smiled, giving him a long, steady look, almost as if she could read his mind.

"Good question. It's to seal in the juices so the meat remains tender. I do like nice tender meat."

She over-emphasized the word 'meat' and stared directly into his eyes, with a slight smile playing round her lips. This was it! The woman was gagging for it and he was the man to give it to her. He had fantasized about meeting a woman like her ever since he started coming to Cooking for One. A woman who would be happy to play the part of the seducer. Now it was happening. He had to let her know he was interested. He tried to say something smart and sexy.

"Oh, yes. I like a nice bit of breast. Mind you, a nice leg satisfies me as well," he replied, trying unsuccessfully to stop his voice squeaking.

"We'll have to see what we can do. You seem to be a keen student. Perhaps you'd like to have some extra...tuition. There is time after the class tonight, if you want?"

"I'd love to. I definitely would like some extra instruction."

His voice again rose to a boyish squeak at the end of the sentence. She didn't seem to notice. Or care.

"Good."

The class had finished and the people were packing up their efforts into casserole dishes or plastic bowls. One by one they left the room, leaving only him and Alison. She walked up to him, and put her hand on his bare arm.

"Take me home."

"Where do you live?" he asked once they were in the car.

"I'll direct you. It's hard to find."

"Okay."

He managed to stifle the tremble in his voice. He couldn't believe his luck, he had been pulled on the first night and by an absolute stunner.

"Left here."

He turned the wheel and her hand brushed against him. He bit his lip.

"Right, at the corner."

He turned right.

"You can stop here."

He did so, quickly. They got out of the car and he looked round. They were in a part of town he didn't recognize.

He followed her up to a doorway, which stood at the top of about four or five steps. They didn't speak, but her hand sought his and held it tight. They entered the building and climbed the stairs to the first floor. She stopped outside a varnished wooden door and turned round. Her eyes were bright and her lips were moist. He realized she was as excited as he was. She opened the door and motioned him to enter the flat. It was sparsely decorated, with a minimal amount of furniture.

"Go and sit in the lounge. I'll get ready."

He sat. After a few moments she entered the room, dressed the same as before, but with her hands hidden behind her back. He was disappointed she wasn't wearing some sort of sexy underwear. Still, maybe she was hiding something interesting.

"What sort of thing do you fancy?" he asked.

She walked forward and smiled. Her cheeks were red with excitement. She smiled and answered.

"I like my meat red and rare."

"You've come to the right place then, darling."

"I know," she said and brought her hands out from behind her back. That was when he saw the knife in her hand and, in the split second before he died, realized what she actually meant.

About the Author:

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

Facebook: [Richard Meldrum](#)

Twitter: [@RichardJMeldru1](#)

The Rejected | Gabriella Balcom

"Dump that nasty thing." Suki said, watching her servants toss it outside.

Her father had insisted on keeping the old table, passed down through generations, but he'd died yesterday.

"*Tsukumogami!*" the servants shrieked, referring to living objects becoming angry after being discarded. They dashed away.

Standing on two legs, the table charged Suki, a face glaring from its underside.

She fled, screaming.

The creature pounced, stomping her body before picking it up, repeatedly slamming it on the ground.

Blood bubbled from Suki's lips.

Smashing her head flat with one leg, the table then walked back into the home.

About the Author:

Gabriella Balcom writes fantasy, sci-fi, horror, romance, and literary fiction. She loves forests, mountains, and back roads, has had 337 works accepted for publication, and was nominated for the Washington Science Fiction Association's Small Press Award. Gabriella's books, *On the Wings of Ideas* and *Worth Waiting For*, resulted from her winning publishing contracts. Her novella, *The Return*, is out also.

Facebook: [Gabriella Balcom](#)



I sat on a park bench near a cluster of trees and anxiously twisted off leaves. Nine in total, leaving one of the smaller ones. I let go of the branch and it snapped back toward the trunk.

I was nervous, and I needed to do something with my hands.

Nervous about my job, nervous about the boss who would fire me for smiling too much, or not smiling enough, or wearing heels that were too high for the office dress code, or too flat, or...

Maybe that was why I was still in the park instead of checking in to the office. Less than a month in, and I was already getting an ulcer from the stress. I was a good secretary, friendly and approachable, but I lived in constant fear of making a tiny mistake that would cost me the job I'd worked so hard to get.

From my bench under the trees, I watched a tall, thin man walk his dog. He was more skeleton than man, spindly in the worst way, and he seemed to move at half the speed of a regular person. I watched him disappear into the trees.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. It was my boss, of course. Just one message: "Coffee in ten minutes. You know my order."

I gulped. I didn't think he'd be back today. He wasn't scheduled to come into the office until tomorrow, which was why I'd allowed myself the minor perk of crossing the park on my way into work.

But now...

I had to hurry. I didn't have time to go to the cafe across the street. Thankfully, there was a coffee kiosk at the edge of the park. I raced there, but that thin man was already in line. And of course, he was taking forever. I wanted to shove past him, but I couldn't.

"Hurry up," I muttered.

He ignored me, still giving his order to the blonde barista, pausing, and changing it. All I saw was the back of his bald head. But his dog, a little gray mutt, barked at me.

I was mad. I'd worked hard for this stupid job. Sure, I hated it and sure, I was constantly on edge, but I couldn't lose it after a single stupid month.

The thin man finished his order. He leaned his grasshopper-like body against the counter, one spindly leg curled backwards as if he was a child.

The barista started the espresso machine. At least she moved fast.

The man glanced at me, and I got a good look at his sunken, yellow eyes. "Beautiful day," he said. It was the dictionary definition of small-talk. I was not in the mood.

Besides, there was something wrong with his voice. It was phlegmy, and he stressed the wrong syllables. I didn't want to engage with this man, but he waited for my response anyway.

"It is," I finally said as the barista worked her machine. "Very beautiful."

The sun lit up the trees in an orange glow and the wind was pleasant and the birds were chirping as always. But I didn't have time to enjoy any of that, not when my boss was waiting and I was stuck behind the world's slowest man.

The barista handed him his coffee and it took him the longest time to reach for it, to drop a crumpled dollar into the tip jar, to grab a lid from the box.

I couldn't wait any longer. I pushed my way toward the counter, my arm making contact with his bony shoulder. Even the contact disgusted me. His skin was clammy and thin. It felt like banana peels stretched tight over his bones.

I leaned over the counter and told the barista, "I need a double-shot espresso. Nothing else."

Thank God the barista could see I was in a hurry. I slid her the cash and watched her work the espresso machine.

That thin man was still there, taking up most of the counter space. He was slowly, very slowly, screwing the plastic lid on his cup. He paid more attention to his dog than his coffee, and hot dribbles of it spilled onto his hand. He didn't react to the heat at all.

I scooped up my cup, not even thinking about leaving a tip, and started to leave. I should've just hurried off, but there was something about that man. He angered me, not just his slowness but everything about him.

So without really thinking, I stepped past him, past that strange little dog on his leash, and I stepped on the dog's tail. Just a little. Just enough to make the dog jerk forward, tighten the leash, and cause the man to spill all his coffee down the front of his shirt.

Without saying anything, I walked away.

I made it back to the office with a minute to spare. The coffee cup burned into my palm because I didn't have time to grab one of those cardboard covers. My boss, waiting by my desk, wordlessly took the cup and walked away. No acknowledgement at all. But at least my job was safe.

For the next half-hour, I went about my morning routine, answering calls, scheduling appointments. I wish I'd gotten some coffee for myself, because my mind was seriously drifting. I still haven't settling down since my wild race here.

Then, just before nine, I readied the conference room for my boss's presentation. (I should've known he'd come back early from his trip. He loved his presentations. He loved making people listen to him talk.) I arranged the chairs and set up the projector.

The first slide projected against the wall, a bar chart with a list of sales figures. It was the end of a quarter, so he would probably use these numbers to justify some firings or wage reductions.

Everything was ready for the meeting, but then the lights flickered, and the projected image turned into gray static. It looked like an old TV set that had lost reception.

"Shit." I must've loosened one of the wires.

Then, the static started to throb, and a garbled voice filled the room. It was speaking in some unintelligible language. The nonsense words slowly morphed into English. The voice was low, unnatural. It said, "You've harmed our sentry."

"What?" I asked the wall.

Was this a joke? It had to be a joke.

"You've harmed our sentry," it repeated.

"Who are you?" I felt like an idiot for talking to a wall of static, but there was something about that voice, about its deadly serious tone, that left me on edge.

"We live among you. We are from... away." It was like its words were badly translated. "You've harmed our sentry. You must make amends... Make amends... Or receive equivalent retribution." It repeated that last part two more times.

Then my boss walked in and saw me standing there. He was not happy. One of his rules was to prepare the conference room and then leave five minutes before meeting time.

"Sir," I said. "I just saw... I mean... Was there some kind of prank in here? It was..."

I struggled for words, and my boss glowered at me. He was not the kind of person to play a prank.

"Is there a problem?"

"It's..." I looked over my shoulder, ready to explain what I'd just seen, but the static on the wall was gone. Just the projected bar chart. "Uh, apologies," I said and hurried out of the conference room before he got angrier.

I settled back at the front desk, where the phone was already blinking red from two missed calls. I tried to listen to the messages, but I was distracted. What had just happened? Had I completely lost it?

Another call was coming in, but I didn't answer. How could I keep working when I couldn't concentrate on anything?

Then my computer screen turned black. For a second, I thought I'd accidentally unplugged it with my foot. Then the blackness faded into gray static, the same gray static as before.

My fingers trembled. I wanted to take the computer and fling it across the room. I wanted to bash in the monitor. But I sat. And I waited.

And that voice came back.

"Our sentry is waiting," the voice said. "Make amends. Make amends."

"But I don't know who you're talking about!" I screamed at the computer.

I glanced around the office. No one seemed to notice my outburst.

Then, in a whisper, I asked my computer, "Where is he?"

"The sentry remains in the same position," the voice said. "Make amends."

With that, the monitor flickered and turned back to my regular, cluttered screensaver.

I replayed the words in my head. What did they all mean? Then I realized: the thin man. He must not have been human. There was a reason the sight of him disgusted me, the touch of his bony shoulder almost made me wretch. He must've been the sentry. He had to be. I didn't hurt anyone besides him.

I got out of my ergonomic chair and walked through the office. I passed by the conference room, where my boss was in the middle of his presentation. He didn't see me, thank god.

Judging by the slide projected behind him, it looked like he had about thirty minutes left. That would give me enough time. Barely.

Outside our door, the elevator had just closed. I didn't have time to wait for the next one, so I ran down both flights of stairs and out into the lobby.

The security guy (Dave, I think) stopped me with his beefy arm. "In a hurry, miss?" he asked. "We try not to run in here."

"Whatever," I told him and kept running.

As I got to the revolving front door, I looked over my shoulder. Dave was still looking at me. His expression wasn't angry. Just offended.

And I left. Clearly, this job was changing me. I never used to treat people like this. I was raised better than that.

I raced across the street, barely noticing the car that had to swerve to miss me. "Sorry," I shouted, and got back on the sidewalk. I was wearing heels, and my feet throbbed on each impact. I could barely breathe. Sweat was oozing out of me, but I kept going.

I had one block to go. I raced down the sidewalk, dodging lampposts and magazine stands. As I rounded the corner, I collided with an elderly woman walking her dog. She was thin and hunched, and the dog was some sort of gray-spotted mutt. The woman spun in a half-circle and the dog barked.

I knew I didn't have much time. I had to keep going, but I wasn't going to leave without apologizing. "I'm so sorry, ma'am," I said. "And you have a lovely dog."

She did not accept my apology. Her dog tugged her in the opposite direction, and she walked away, her eyes boring into me as she did.

Soon, I got to the park. I rushed through the gate and ran under the row of drooping trees. I pushed through branches, not even bothering to use the path, and made it back to the coffee kiosk.

The same barista was there. When I approached, she forced a smile and asked what I wanted.

"I was here earlier," I said, my words tumbling out. "There was a man in front of me in line. Is he still here? Have you seen him?"

The barista narrowed her eyebrows. She must not have remembered me at all. "What did he look like?"

I opened my mouth to describe him, but the only words that came to mind were 'skinny' and 'unpleasant'. I couldn't say that, of course. I was here to make amends, not do more damage.

But how else could I describe him? Why didn't I remember his clothes, or anything at all besides the unpleasantness?

"He... He had a dog!" I shouted. "A little gray one."

"You mean him?" the barista asked, pointing over my shoulder.

I spun around and saw the thin man sitting on a bench with his dog. He was sipping from a coffee cup, obviously not the same one he'd spilled. Even in the distance, I could see a brown stain streaking down his shirt.

I started to run toward him but stopped. I turned back toward the barista and dropped a few quarters into her tip jar. Then I ran.

In seconds, I reached him, out of breath, almost dizzy from the effort.

The thin man looked at me with concern. "Are you all right, miss?" Again, his voice sounded flat and wrong. I must've looked terrible, my cheeks flushed, my forehead covered with sweat. "I'm sorry!" I blurted out.

"What?" He acted like he'd never seen me before, like I was crazy.

"I'm sorry, sir," I said. "Earlier today, you spilled your coffee. And it was my fault. I'm sorry."

He stared at me.

The dog did, too. It quirked its gray head to the side. That's when I realized, maybe it was the dog all along. Maybe this sentry, from whatever planet or dimension it came from, wasn't human-looking at all. Maybe it was an animal.

The thought was ludicrous, but then again, my whole day had been ludicrous.
I crouched down so we were eye-level, and I told the dog, "I'm sorry to you, too."
It walked a few steps closer. I hadn't noticed its limp before. Then it licked my hand.
The thin stranger smiled, which instantly transformed his face into something much more human. He didn't disgust me anymore. He just seemed like an old man. "I guess we both forgive you," he said.
And that was it. I'd done what the static had told me. I'd made amends. "Thank you!" I shouted.
My whole body relaxed. I could clearly feel the cold sweat on my forehead, and the fresh cut along my ankle (Where'd that come from?), and the cool wind against my face.
It really was a beautiful day after all.
I smiled back at the man, petted his dog for a second, and left. I still had some time, so I didn't need to race back to the office. I could walk there without crashing into people. I could...
My phone buzzed.
As I walked through the tree-lined path, I fished out my phone. My boss's name was etched across the screen, and I hated him, hated him more than anything.
Still, I had to take it. Maybe I'd just tell him the truth. Maybe I'd tell him to take his high-paying secretarial job and stick it.
I answered the call. Before I could say anything, his angry voice boomed from the phone. "Where are you?"
"I'm in the..." I started, but before I could explain myself, my phone screen faded into that familiar static.
For a second, my body surged with hope. The voice was going to tell me that I'd made amends, that I was safe. My job didn't matter anymore, as long as this voice was happy.
But when the voice came, it wasn't: "You have not made amends."
"But I did!" I screamed into my phone. "I apologized. He forgave me! They both did!"
The voice didn't answer for a long moment. All I heard was a crackle. Then, the voice said, "Not to our sentry. And now, equivalent retribution. Equivalent retribution..."
The voice on my phone repeated those two words over and over, like a chant, like something soldiers would march to.
And everything got darker.
It wasn't the sky that changed, though. It was the tree next to me, the one I'd sat under this morning. Its drooping branches started to close in, leaves fanning out all around me.
I tried to run, but the branches were too fast. They whipped forward and grabbed me by the wrists. Vines wrapped around the base of each of my fingers, squeezing until both my hands throbbed in pain.
One by one, the tree twisted off my fingers. I watched as they were plucked from me, one by one, spurting blood from the ragged stumps. And it just kept going, kept pulling, kept twisting off my fingers.
Nine in total, leaving one behind. My left pinkie.

About the Author:

Evan Purcell is the creator of the middle-grade horror series *Karma Tandin: Monster Hunter*. He also writes romance novels for various publishers. Originally from America, he's currently teaching English in beautiful Kazakhstan. You can read about his writing and travels at his blog on on his Facebook page.

Author Website: [Evan Purcell](#)

Facebook: [Evan Purcell](#)



They Laugh | *Evan Baughfman*

We thought they were the answer.

In the savannah, hyenas scavenge for rotten meat. Zombies could conceivably be on their menu. Hyena jaws are powerful enough to crush bone and render revenants immobile, at least.

Plus, hyenas gather in clans. Their females have short gestation periods...

We built an animal army. Bred hundreds of the beasts. Unleashed them on the city, upon the zombie horde.

Only, hyenas are difficult to control. They're more closely related to cats than dogs, after all.

They're hunters, too. Rarely scavenge.

Every night, hyenas attack our compound.

In the darkness, we hide.

And they laugh.

White Elephant | *Evan Baughfman*

Kallie slammed the door, silencing blustery wind. Luckily, she'd made it home! Flurries outside had gone full blizzard!

She flicked on a lamp, opened the box in her hands. More sober than she'd been at the party, Kallie inspected what she procured from the gift exchange.

A pearl necklace. Victoria was so eager to get rid of it. Why?

Because the pearls didn't shine properly! They were actually... bone?

Ivory?

A window exploded. In stormed the mammoth head of a vengeful creature, a spirit made of snow.

The freezing phantom lifted Kallie with its trunk, skewering her on icicle tusks.

Black Death | *Evan Baughfman*

Months ago, Ian heard a howl outside his cottage window. He parted curtains, meeting the glowing gaze of a giant canine's cyclopean, crimson eye.

After that, wherever he went, Ian was haunted by phantom howls. He eventually lost his mind, his job, his girlfriend.

Now, he knelt before a cross in a candlelit church, begging for protection from the beast that followed him there.

Outside, lightning flashed. At entrance doors, white-hot claws slashed.

Ian shrieked. Blubbered. Prayed.

A massive, one-eyed dog burst into the sanctuary, a snarling sable blur.

Ian pleaded for compassion.

Mercifully, the Black Shuck's fangs struck fast.

About the Author:

Evan Baughfman is a middle school teacher and author. Much of his writing success has been as a playwright. He's had many different plays produced across the globe. Evan also writes horror fiction. His collection of short stories, *The Emaciated Man and Other Terrifying Tales from Poe Middle School*, is published by Thurston Howl Publications. More information is available at his author page on Amazon and his website.

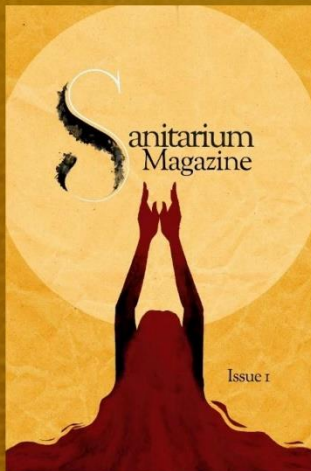
Facebook: [Evan Baughfman](#)

Instagram: [@Agent00evan_716](#)

anitarium Magazine

Short Form Horror & Dark Verse since 2012

Available in Paperback and Kindle format from Amazon



TheSanitarium.co.uk

It all began one night when I stepped outside for a cigarette. It was pitch dark and foggy with it, each street-light casting a fuzzy pool of light around its base. It was the sort of night when most people stay in unless they have a pressing reason to go out. Mine was that I was a nicotine addict in a house full of non-smokers.

I heard her before I saw her. (It was pretty quiet where I was, as close to silent as the city gets: nothing but the distant rise and fall of the traffic noise on the main road a couple of blocks away). There was something unusual about her gait, an irregular rhythm to her footsteps. I could hear the sound, too, of something bouncing and scraping on the pavement, as if it were being dragged along. Then she came into view: an oldish woman in a grey raincoat wearing a floral headscarf. There were two black holes where her eyes should have been and her lips were unnaturally drawn back from her teeth, her face frozen into a humourless, blank rictus. Clutched to her chest in her emaciated hands she held a new-looking HP laptop. A power cable hung down from it, the other end of which was connected to a plastic power supply box which trailed along the pavement behind her, the source of the noise I'd heard before she appeared.

I scrutinised her face as she walked past. Was it a trick of the light? I wanted to be sure of what I'd seen and not be forever wondering if I'd merely glanced at her and misinterpreted what I saw. I searched my head for the date. I couldn't put a number on it but it certainly wasn't October. Christmas and New Year had been and gone. It wasn't a Halloween prank.

Perhaps it was some sort of vision, a prophetic message of some sort about modern life and new technology but no, surely not. I didn't believe in such things. If I'm seeing things, I thought, then they're there to be seen, unless I'm losing my mind. It was impossible to be sure but I could think of no reason why I should be. I was left with the uneasy conclusion that either it was some sort of tasteless, unseasonal prank, or that I had just seen a cadaver walk past our front door clutching a computer.

The apparition walked on, fading back into the fog. My first impulse was to go back into the house to tell the others what I'd seen but on reflection I decided against it. I stayed where I was for a while and finished my cigarette. I wanted to give the business some thought before I spoke to anyone about it.

When I finally went back indoors, Kath was still sitting on the sofa where I'd left her, looking at something on her phone, her finger stroking the screen thoughtfully. I told her what I'd seen. Or, at least, what I thought I'd seen.

"Yeah, yeah," she said, dismissively. She turned her phone round so that I could see the screen. A Facebook meme. Along the top it said THE ZOMBIES ARE COMING. A photo of a cadaver, this time clutching an Apple Mac (so clearly a classier class of cadaver than mine). "It's all over social media," she said. "It's a joke. You're pulling my leg, aren't you?"

"No," I said. "Straight up. I've never seen that before. I've been nowhere near a screen all day." This was true. I was giving myself a social media detox. I'd been spending far too much time staring at computer screens recently with too little to show for it.

Kath rolled her eyes. Given my lame sense of humour, she was well within her rights.

"I saw what I saw," I said. "No kidding."

"Let's just say you're not bullshitting me and you did," she said. "It'll be someone all done up going to a fancy dress party or some idiot's idea of a wind up."

She was probably right. You see all sorts round here.

Mike came in from the kitchen, stabbing at the contents of a Pot Noodle with a fork. He'd obviously been listening in on the conversation. "I believe you," he said, between mouthfuls. "It was on the news, earlier. The last item. You know, one of those daft 'man bites dog' kind of stories they save up for the end."

The next morning, it all seemed quite unreal. I thought I'd perhaps imagined it all and, over the next few days, I found myself thinking about it less and less. Then, one evening, it popped up on the TV again, this time on the local news. Houses had been broken into. Phones and computer equipment had been stolen. People, interviewed on their doorsteps, pointed out smashed windows, splintered door-frames. Others had seen zombie-like strangers wandering around the area.

One night soon afterwards I was woken up in the middle of the night by Kath shaking me.

"Dave! Wake up!" she whispered. "I think there's someone downstairs!"

I listened for a moment. I could hear nothing definite. A crack perhaps, like you hear when the timbers in a house cool down but that was all. Then there was a crash and the sound of breaking glass. There could be no doubt.

"What shall we do?" I whispered.

"Sit tight. Pretend you're asleep."

We pulled the duvet up over our heads.

Someone or something could be heard climbing the stairs. They sounded as if they were moving with a slow, lumbering gait. I held my breath.

"Breathe!" Kath whispered, quietly, in my ear. "Regularly. Like you're asleep!"

The door was pushed open roughly. We did our best to stay cool. We heard the intruder moving around. The duvet did nothing to protect us from the almost unbearable fetid stench that filled the room. There was a clatter as things were pushed off the bedside table. Then the sounds of movement receded. We heard whoever or whatever it was moving around more then lumbering back down the stairs. Not daring to move, we lay still for what seemed like an age. Finally, it had been silent for so long that we decided the intruder had left. I felt for the bedside lamp. It had been knocked onto the floor. I stood it up where it was and turned it on. It still worked. All the bits and pieces that had been knocked off the bedside table were scattered over the floor, casting long shadows across the carpet. Needless to say, my Zenphone 6 was not among them. I'd only recently upgraded it to 1TB of memory, too. There was no sign of Kath's iPhone Pro12 either.

"Oh my god! The smell!" said Kath. She lurched out of bed, clutching the corner of the duvet over her nose. She pulled back a curtain and opened the window.

I went out onto the landing and turned on the light. The door into Mike's room was open. I could hear the sound of his regular snoring. Some people can sleep through anything.

After turning on the light and giving him a good shake, I managed to rouse him. The zombie, if that's what it was, had probably ransacked his room, too—although in Mike's case it was hard to tell. He's not the tidiest of people. If they had, they hadn't bothered to take his phone. Mike is a bit of a technophobe. He owns a mobile phone but only one of the kind they make for old people, with mechanical push buttons on it.

A month or so went by. One afternoon, Kath and I were sitting in a coffee-shop. We'd found ourselves a table by the window, overlooking the street. It was late Spring, and the sun was pouring in. We'd bought ourselves a couple of cappuccinos and were making them last. We were both absorbed in the internet, the screens on our new phones bathing our faces with a faint glow. My phone pinged as a notification slid down from the top of the screen. I turned to Kath.

"Have you ever heard of an Ian Bell?" I said.

She suddenly looked serious. "You as well?" she said. "Has he sent you a Friend Request?"

"Yes. If it's the same Ian Bell," I said. "There must be thousands of Ian Bells."

"It'll be the same one," she said.

"How do you know?" I said.

"He sent me one a while ago, too," she said. "I wasn't sure what to do at first but I accepted it. He must've gone through my Friends List."

I gave her a quizzical look.

"He was a boy I used to know," she said. "The thing is, he was killed in a car crash a couple of years ago. He was a year younger than me." She sniffed and bit her lower lip. "Look," she said. She passed her phone over to me. "This is his page." There was a picture of a man, about our age, dressed in a dark bomber jacket. He was crossing a road. It was pretty low-resolution and his face was pretty pixelated. It had almost certainly been lifted from Google.

"It's him, I'm sure," she said. "Everything about him. His hair. He used to stoop slightly, just like that, when he walked." She nodded at the picture. "And I remember the jacket."

I looked from the picture to Kath's face. "Sounds like you had a soft spot for him," I said.

"Not really," she said. "He was just a friend. Women can just like men, you know." She sounded a little annoyed. She had a right to be. "He played the sax. He played in a band. Just a pub band. I used to go to the gigs."

"I'm sorry," I said.

Kath smiled. "When he got in touch, I messaged him. I said I thought he was dead. He told me he was. And then he said, but why should that stop him from using the internet? I told him that sounded weird to me and he replied that he couldn't explain being dead any more than he could explain being alive, that the idea of the 'other side' made no more sense to the dead than it did to the living. I've no idea what he was going on about, really."

And neither do I, even now. Not long after that afternoon in the coffee shop I stepped out in front of a white van. I was looking at my phone at the time. And, like Ian, I've discovered it's not easy to explain what it's like to be dead. I thought writing all this down and posting it online might help me make sense of what's going on. But I can't say it has.

About the Author:

Dominic Rivron has been various things, from a care assistant to a piano teacher. His work has been published in a number of magazines, including Scratch, The Poetry Bus, Dream Catcher and Obsessed with Pipework. He lives in the North of England.

"Light the brazier," Cunliffe shouted.

At once sire," replied Blackmere as he simultaneously turned and began running down the steps behind him.

As he reached the foot of the stone stairwell the cloying darkness enveloped him. "Farewell brave fool," muttered Cunliffe.

Slowly, carefully Blackmere edged forwards. Visibility was zero, he knew his footsteps had to be steady and silent, swift and yet slow; balletic poise and a nerve of steel were required. He'd traced this journey in the daylight so many times it was etched in his memory.

Stools were sidestepped and tables were dodged, the absolute inky blackness making them memories alone and yet Blackmere felt he could almost see them, perhaps sense them with his skin. He moved onward, his foot touched something. He froze. There was something new in the room. He waited, listening, the darkness adding a level of clarity to his hearing that he wouldn't otherwise possess. He could feel the new arrival on his foot, he knew it wasn't there in the evening light when the guests had moved upstairs to the safety of the dining hall. There was complete silence.

Blackmere could hear the blood flowing through his ears, he grew more aware of the ethereal thud of his heart echoing somewhere inside him. Then a clattering sound, sudden mutters from above turned again to silence. Whatever was at his feet moved on. Blackmere relaxed slightly, any other time he would have breathed a sigh of relief, but he knew to do so would be folly, he had to light the brazier as soon as he could.

They had left it too late this evening, a mistake that had been made a few too many times under the auspices of Cunliffe. Blackmere didn't feel entirely at ease around the man. Blackmere edged forward, seven more steps and he would be at his destination, the main brazier would light the entire area, and the connected fuel-soaked ship ropes led off to separate small wall torches external to the building which would burn until morning. He repeated the mantra in his head, "Steady and silent, swift and yet slow." He took the seventh step and paused, slowly reaching forward he felt the cold metallic walls of the brazier. He reached into his pocket for the flint he would use for lighting the fire. It wasn't there. He checked his other pocket. Nothing.

"CUNLIFFE!"

Upstairs Cunliffe heard his name called out and smiled.

Moments later Blackmere appeared at the bottom of the stairs barely distinguishable from the darkness that surrounded him, almost like he was swimming in tar. He got to the second step.

"Cunliffe, Help," he cried, the pitiful plea slightly muffled in the dark.

"Farewell, brave fool," Cunliffe sneered.

"Gramnos malticipi herado faatu."

The rest of the guests repeated these words.

Blackmere realised he had been used. A pawn. An offering.

"You bastard," were his last words as many hands with taloned fingers, part of the darkness, reached forward and tore at his flesh. He was pulled backwards, screaming the sound ending as abruptly as it started as writhing black bodies moving as one, creating the darkness below swallowed Blackmere.

Cunliffe watched on, smiling. He raised his glass. "To the eternal tomorrow," he toasted.

"To the eternal tomorrow." the guests echoed.

Cunliffe turned and looked at his guests. Men, women and children, families all healthy, all happy.

Their smiling faces, their sparkling eyes."

Dark, inky black eyes. Just like his own.

About the Author:

Dan Burgess is a photographer from Liverpool, UK. His love of all things creative led him to writing. He has 9 unfinished Screenplays, a novel he started working on ten years ago and a notebook full of ideas.

Author Website: [Pics to Pixels](#)

Instagram: [@dansphoto](#)

"Can I stay on the couch tonight?" Aubrey asks.

Mommy looks nervous at the prospect. She does not answer straight away. Her gaze falls onto the front door.

"I want to watch a movie," the girl pleads. Mommy is nothing if not reasonable. She is more likely to say yes if there is a reason for the request outside of just a whim. Already she is tempted to oblige. In their secluded home by the woods, there are few enough indulgences which she can offer to the child.

Still, she puts up the illusion of resistance. Her fear demands this of her. "Aubrey..."

"Please?"

She looks up at Mommy. She says with her eyes the things that don't need to be said aloud.

She has bad dreams.

It is worrisome to go to bed.

The couch is closer to Mommy's bedroom.

The TV is soothing.

She is more motivated to sleep when she can be lulled into the slumber by something familiar, such as a favorite film.

They've been having this conversation so often lately that the actual words need not be spoken. A look is enough.

Mommy relents with a sigh. "You can't stay up too late."

"I won't."

"And don't turn the volume up too loud, okay?"

"I won't."

"And you know all about the door?"

Aubrey knows better than to roll her eyes. If Mommy thinks she isn't taking this seriously, she will reconsider letting Aubrey stay in the living room at all. It is a struggle to resist, all the same.

She knows all about the door.

With immense effort on the girl's part, she nods dutifully instead. "I know."

They are not to the point where they can have this next part of the conversation without words. Mommy isn't at that point, anyway, so Aubrey begrudgingly listens. "You never open the front door. Don't unlock it. Don't *try* to unlock it. Don't get too close to it. If you hear anything strange from the other side, I want you to come and wake me up. Even if you *think* you hear something, I want you to come and get me, okay?"

"Okay."

"Good girl."

Mommy goes to the front door and checks all five of the locks. Then she tests the door anyway. It doesn't budge. She checks the locks one more time.

Only then does she come back and kiss Aubrey on the top of her head. "I love you, sweetheart."

"I love you too, Mommy."

"Be good."

What she means is 'stay away from the door'.

"I will, Mommy."

So Mommy leaves her with the remotes, and heads off to bed.

It's still light outside.

Summer has a way of making it always light outside. As such, Aubrey takes her time in finding a movie.

Eventually she makes her selection. She chooses something familiar with bright colors and cheery music. This is expected of her. She hopes Mommy can hear the sound, but she does not turn the volume up too loud.

Her eyes remain glued to the window.

About halfway through the feature, she decides that it's dark enough. She tiptoes over to the door.

Mommy already took her pills, and had her wine. She should be asleep by now. Aubrey is careful anyway, just to be sure.

She curls up quietly and puts her ear to the door.

It is several minutes before she hears the familiar scratches on the other side.

"Hello?" Aubrey whispers.

But Other Mommy doesn't say anything.

She can't.

In Aubrey's dreams she has a lot to say. Too much, sometimes. In real life, however, when they're on different sides of the door, there is only that terrible croaking sound. And the scratches, of course.

Something must have happened to her voice when she stopped being allowed to come inside the house.

"I waited for you."

Scratch.

"I missed you."

Scratch.

"Mommy is in bed."

Silence.

Then, a guttural wail.

Aubrey whips her head back around to look down the hallway. She doesn't like that sound. It seems like it must have hurt Other Mommy's throat to make it.

She promises silently to be more careful about what she says.

Mommy and Other Mommy don't get along.

When Aubrey is certain that the sound was not enough to wake Mommy, she turns her head back to the door.

"Sorry."

Silence.

"I'd open the door if I could."

Scratch.

"Mo— she says I can't. But I would let you in if I could."

Scratch.

"I'm not tall enough."

Scratch.

"I had another dream about you."

This elicits a series of soft, almost inviting scratches from the other side of the thick door. Other Mommy is waiting for Aubrey to continue. She is excited.

"We were talking in it. Not like this, but normal talking. Like we used to, back when you had a voice."

There are more soft scratches.

"I miss that."

Scratch.

She misses it too.

Aubrey looks down to the paper thin crack underneath the door. No light is getting through. Other Mommy must be pressed as close as she is.

"In the dream, you said that you would come for me."

Scratch, scratch.

An objection.

"No, no. Not like this. You said you were going to come inside the house again. You said it was what you needed to do, to keep me safe."

Scratch.

"You said you weren't going to let Mommy hurt me."

Scratch.

Aubrey pauses. She doesn't know if she should say this next part. The air smells bad when she tries to take a breath. It smells like something rotting out in the woods.

"I hadn't ever thought Mommy would hurt me, until you said that."

Scratch, scratch.

"I hadn't ever thought Mommy would hurt you, either."

In truth, Aubrey can barely remember those days any longer. It's been years now, of Mommy being Other Mommy, and being trapped on the other side of the door. Aubrey misses the time before it was like that, but she doesn't have a clear memory of what those days were like. It makes her sad to think that, but her attention is pulled quickly back to the present.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

Three scratches is strange. She doesn't know what they mean.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

Aubrey has to think on it for a while, but she lights up when it comes to her. She puts her nail to the wood of the door and scrapes down it in response.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

She loves Other Mommy too.

The silence lingers between them, and for a while, Aubrey just stays close to the door.

She has other questions. So many other questions.

They are not the kind that could be, or should be, answered in this rudimentary code of theirs. For now, she just has to be content that Other Mommy still comes back to her.

"I'll try to wait for you again tomorrow."

Scratch.

Aubrey stands up.

Her movie is over. She knows she should go lay down on the couch.

Instead, she stands on her tippy toes and reaches up. Her little hand falls far short of reaching the top lock.

Aubrey is still not tall enough to let Other Mommy back into the house.

But one day, she will be.

About the Author:

Cat Voleur is the author of *Revenge Arc*, and a full-time horror journalist. She lives with a small army of rescue felines who encourage her to create and consume morbid content. In her free time, you can most likely find her pursuing her passion for fictional languages.

Twitter: [@Cat_Voleur](#)

Author Website: [Cat Voleur](#)

Raw | Tony Earnshaw

She was beautiful.

And he... was he dreaming? Because she was the first person he had seen in, what was it now, a year? Two? He couldn't be sure. But there she was, struggling through the surf and looking every inch the saviour.

Behind her, far away across the flat, glistening waters, he saw the outline. Unmistakably it was a ship. But it was strangely shaped; vertical, not horizontal. It was upended, and sinking. And she was a survivor. Perhaps the only one.

He approached slowly through the palm trees that fringed the sands and emerged onto the rocky beach. Standing immobile, he watched and waited until the woman, wearing only a tee-shirt, staggered between the rocks and flopped down onto her belly. She had not seen him. But he had seen her. She lay on the wet sand, her bare legs facing out to the open ocean, for some time. Eventually she roused and, with an effort, pulled herself upright. It was then that she saw him.

Her scream was high-pitched and terrified. By a miracle she had survived the sinking. By a miracle she alone had made it to the island. And now, having avoided the creatures of the deep, treacherous currents, miles of open water, and wicked rocks, she was faced with a wild man.

He was dimly aware that he must look, well, *peculiar*. His hair had not seen a comb since he had experienced the same landing as his guest. He was filthy. His skin was ragged, torn and scabrous. Where once he had personified the civilised man, now he looked like what he was: a starved, naked brute.

She looked around her for an escape route, saw nothing and began to back into the sea. He knew his only option was to speak.

"Hello," he said, softly. He didn't want to alarm her further. He needed her trust, and quickly.

"Were you on the ship?"

She stared at him, her eyes wide with alarm. She did not respond.

"I saw it, out there. Are there any more of you?"

He pointed to the open ocean. "Is there someone with a radio?" It sounded ridiculous, but it didn't matter. He didn't *need* an answer. What he *needed* was to ensure she came towards him and not back into the water.

For a moment there was no response, just a look of shock and vague relief in her brown eyes. Then, an almost imperceptible nod. He smiled. A beat, and then he spoke again.

"Are there any more of you? From the ship?" He pointed again. Finally she spoke. But it was not a language he understood.

She gesticulated towards the ship, but it was no longer there. She babbled, pushing her hands back through the long, lank, sodden strands of her hair. Again she pointed before drawing in a breath and releasing it in a long, drawn-out wail of misery. She fell to her knees and buried her head in her hands.

In one rapid, fluid movement he snatched up a rock, dashed out and brought it down on her head. She pitched forward, her blood seeping redly into the waves that ended their life on the shore just as surely as he was ending hers.

She moaned and twitched. Bubbles escaped from her mouth into the foamy surf. Her right hand clutched feebly, the fingers raking the sand. For a moment they locked eyes. Quickly he hit her heavily three more times and all movement ceased. Blood drenched the sand and was carried out to the ocean in a long, snaking tendril.

Dropping the rock, he bent and took hold of her ankles. Then, with an effort, he dragged her up the shore and into the trees. Her limp body left a deep groove, ingrained with a red streak, in the sand.

He had not eaten so well in forever. She had been young and her flesh was sweet, not like the withered flanks presented to him by his fellow passengers of yore. But beggars cannot be choosers, and whilst no man wishes to be a cannibal he had realised very quickly that for him to survive, they had to die.

Their seaplane had crash-landed badly and sunk swiftly. Unlike the hero of *Robinson Crusoe* they recovered nothing. Six of them escaped from the wreck. Luckily the island was within swimming distance. Four made it but the weakest and most gravely injured, a German, disappeared beneath the waters and perished. A shark took another, the slowest swimmer.

The quartet that scrambled onto the beach went through all the emotions. They explored, circling the island. They desperately scanned the horizon. And they prayed. But no one came.

The island could not support *them*, he knew that. But it might just support *him*. And so, in one terrible night, he smashed in their skulls.

He had made the obvious decision to consume them, but it did not come easily. He had no fire to cook on, no means of lighting one. It was not like the movies – or the books, come to that. So he scoured the island for anything sharp, found very little, and expressed his rage by wreaking destruction on the trio of corpses. When he came to eat their flesh it was raw, uncooked and succulent. He found brains to be a surprising delicacy. Of course he did not eat everything. The heat saw to that. So, reluctantly, he buried the remnants.

He woke to the sound of voices. Leaving the shelter of the rocky outcrop he called home he padded through the trees and undergrowth. On the beach were clustered three people shouting to other figures in the water, urging them on. He looked beyond to the open water and saw a familiar thrashing in the waves offshore.

Sharks.

Hopefully they would leave something for him. Squatting amidst the trees, he picked up a rock, weighed it comfortably in his hand, and waited.

About the Author:

Tony Earnshaw is married with two daughters and lives in the Yorkshire Pennines. His short fiction has appeared in *The Eleventh Black Book of Horror*, *Stories of the Dead - A Tribute to George A. Romero*, *Phantasmagoria* magazine, *The Sirens Call*, and the on-going BHF Book of Horror Stories series.

Twitter: [@TonyEarnshaw](https://twitter.com/TonyEarnshaw)
Author Website: [Tony Earnshaw](http://TonyEarnshaw.com)



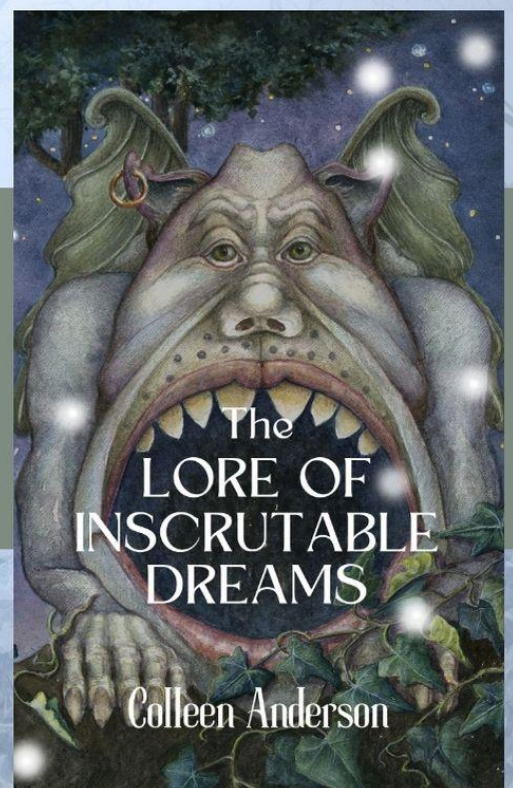
The LORE OF INSCRUTABLE DREAMS

Colleen Anderson



Available June 3, *The Lore of Inscrutable Dreams* by Colleen Anderson; a speculative poetry journey into the depths of the human experience, exploring themes of female empowerment, forging one's own path, and the power of fairytales and magic within us. A masterful blend of imagination, symbolism, and emotion, with an introduction by award-winning author Linda D. Addison.

From yurikopublishing.com



Zanzia opened the bottle, looked inside, and raised it to her nose, taking a sniff. She sighed, then screwed the cap back on and put it in the box. She pulled a baggie out next, studying the contents before tossing it in as well. Opening up a small carton, she touched the shriveled plant inside before closing the lid and discarding the container. She gave two others the same treatment. After rummaging through the remaining items, she turned around, brows furrowed, and demanded, "Is this some kind of joke?"

Kynton blinked, expression blank. "No," he finally replied. "Of course not. Why do you ask?"

"You *can't* expect me to use this collection of junk."

"What's wrong with the things I brought? They're what you asked for."

"Nothing in this box is fresh. Not even one item. I figure some are weeks or months old. A couple smell moldy."

"You should be grateful, not complaining," Kynton snapped, his brown eyes narrowing. "Do you have any idea how hard it was to get some of that?"

"Yes." Zanzia snorted and rolled her eyes. "But this stuff is practically worthless. And who constantly brags he can get anything at any time? *You*, that's who." She added, "You told me, 'Of *course* I can get what you need. Of *course* it won't be a problem. Nothing is beyond my reach.' You added on extra for certain ingredients, too."

Kynton snatched a bottle out of the box and held it up. "You said you needed lotus. Here's lotus." He got out another item. "You said flowers and I got blasted flowers. More than one kind."

"Yes, but only two are the types I asked for, and both of those are old. And flowers aren't all the same; one can't be substituted for another. I have to have specific kinds for my spells to work. I asked for Blue Lotus, but you brought me white. I asked for..."

"Blue Lotus is rare," he said, interrupting her. "It doesn't grow in the United States, and I couldn't exactly fly to Egypt to get you some."

"I *know* it's rare. We discussed that, along with other things, when I gave you my list *and* the extra money you wanted. But now you're playing dumb, and I have neither the desire nor patience to deal with this. You've wasted enough of my time, and I still need the ingredients. Just give me back what I paid. I won't be using you again."

"Good riddance." Kynton grabbed his container, turned to walk away, but sneered over his shoulder. "Forget about getting your money back. I'm keeping every cent and telling everyone what you really are, you miserable, cold-blooded..."

Baring her teeth, Zanzia pointed a finger at him, chanting. His body immediately rose a couple feet off the ground, and he dropped the box. "Ignoramus," she said. "You should've known better than to insult a witch to her face."

"Let me go," he demanded. His body jerked as he struggled to break free of her spell. "You have no right to prevent me from leaving. You better..." He abruptly fell silent, grimacing. "What are you doing to me? I'm having a hard time moving my mouth, and my body's tingling all over as if I'm going numb."

"You are. I can't have you resisting, can I? I thought you might be a problem, but that didn't matter, because I needed you." She studied her captive and gave him a small smile. "You see, there's one very important ingredient I didn't put on my list. But I'm about to get it."

Kynton paled when she picked up a knife. "What's that for? I shouldn't have said what I did before. I didn't mean any of it and I'm sorry." She said nothing as she strode over to him. "Whatever you're thinking of doing, please don't," he begged. "*Please!*"

Zanzia ignored him as his pleas turned to whimpers. Reaching out, she easily opened his mouth, pulled out his tongue, and sliced it off. "Fresh human tongue is hard to come by," she said conversationally, unmoved by his tears and the blood bubbling from his lips as he wailed. She turned away to toss his tongue into her cauldron, after which she pointed at him once again.

Instantly, he began shrinking, his skin changing color. His yells grew fainter and fainter, tapering away into nothingness, and a slug soon floated in the air where the man had been. It hung there momentarily, then dropped to the earth.

She stepped on the slug, squishing him into sludge, and carefully scraped his remnants off her shoe and into her cauldron. Heading for her garden, she dug up fresh worms, oleander root, and hemlock for her mix. She added dried green moss and wolfsbane from her stores, along with a rattlesnake eye, bird feathers, fur from various animals, bark and dried leaves from several trees, three-day-old ash from her fireplace, and other ingredients. But she still needed more.

Zanzia headed into her backyard and stopped beside a small fountain. Holding her palms a few inches above the placid, crystal-clear water, she concentrated. Images began to appear on the surface—the things she still needed. She memorized their locations and recited another spell.

Time passed and objects appeared in the distance, speeding through the air toward her. The desiccated heart and bones of a powerful sorceress who'd died hundreds of years earlier reached her first, followed by a dead vampire bat, liver, rabid rat, Blue Lotus blossoms, and berries from specific plants and trees.

Now it was time for the final ingredients, the ones she'd put off getting until last.

Zanzia strode through the woods toward a graveyard on the edge of town. When she heard voices coming from somewhere off to her left, she waved her hands in the air, cloaking herself with invisibility. This specific spell wouldn't last very long, though, so she picked up her pace.

Two people stood at burial sites in the cemetery when she arrived, but their presence didn't bother her in the slightest. Confident her magic was strong, her spells true, she turned her focus to the task at hand. She began another incantation, murmuring this one under her breath, extended her invisibility to encompass a cluster of the closest graves, and pointed at one of them. The ground vibrated, but only a little, and clumps of dirt moved on top, then began churning. A hint of something dark appeared in their midst, and a bone rose from the soil. Zanzia motioned, and it floated over to her, after which she plucked it from the air. She removed a piece of material from a cloth bag she'd brought with her, wrapped up her booty, and placed it inside the bag.

Turning to look at another grave, she repeated the same steps, and slowly made her way from one section of the cemetery to another. The people already there, along with others who arrived now and then, saw nothing, heard nothing, and eventually walked away, unaware anything out of the ordinary had even occurred.

Once Zanzia had visited every burial site, she left the area altogether, going to another one several hundred yards away. She arrived and looked around, face darkening. The ground was neglected and in bad condition, overrun by brambles and weeds. Heaps of trash had been dumped here and there, some old, some more recent, and rotten smells permeated the air. People were buried in this area, too, although it was anything but obvious. No stones or identifiers marked where the dead lay, and nobody ever visited here. Nobody but her, at least.

She clenched her jaws, gritted her teeth, and fumed a few moments before pointing at the soil to her left. It churned and a bone soon rose. Unlike the others she'd collected, this one was small. She kissed it before wrapping it in fine cloth and placing it gently in another bag she had with her. Then she collected and secured two more bones—adult ones—from the ground nearby, wiped her eyes, and turned to walk home.

That night, Zanzia went outside, smiling to see the blood moon hanging in the sky above her. She'd been awaiting it for months now, and the planets were perfectly aligned. First, she traced precise patterns on the ground. Next, she positioned candles of various colors around herself. She then faced the north, rang a bell, bowed, did the same thing while facing south, and repeated her actions in each of the other directions.

Turning now to face the nearby forest, she weaved an intricate design in the air with her hands, and then began chanting:

“North wind, south wind, listen well.
East wind, west wind, heed my spell.
Absent sun, your power you must send,
for I need every portion you can lend.
Moon, now high above me in the sky,
grant me power in response to my cry.
You know why I have need of thee.
Do my bidding now. So I mote it be.”

After calling upon the earth and oceans, she invoked the name of the long-dead sorceress whose bones and heart she'd obtained. She then changed her focus, and began a new chant:

“Serpents large and serpents small,
I command you come, one and all.
Frogs, toads, reptiles, I bid of thee—
emerge right now and come to me.
Plants with berry, plants with leaf,
trees young or aged beyond belief,

creatures young, old, large, small,
heed my summons. Heed my call.
Wait not. All of you I demand to see.
Come to me now. So I mote it be.”

Before she even stopped speaking, animals emerged from the woods—bobcats, coyotes, deer, bears, wild pigs, badgers, and more, all different sizes. Trees, bushes, and vines appeared, too, walking upright, their lower stems or trunks divided into two legs.

Alligators crawled out, followed by slithering snakes, crawling possums and rats, and swarms of beetles, ants, worms, and insects. Poisonous fish had also come to Zanzia's call. However, now they walked on their tails and were able to breathe above water, as did the other amphibious beings. Birds flew around her head, joined by clouds of flies, mosquitoes, bees, hornets, and more flying things.

Zanzia addressed the creatures surrounding her. “I've waited for this night for so many years. Time may have passed, but I did not forget and my memories have never dimmed. The townspeople robbed me of my mother. They robbed me of my father and sister. My entire family was eradicated as if they were nothing. My parents were sorcerers, but they hurt no one and lived peacefully. And my sister was naught then but a child scant years older than me. The vindictive filth in town have gotten away with murder. They've enjoyed their lives and multiplied many times over, while I've been forced to endure the loss of my loved ones, missing them and mourning them every single day. The townspeople acted like they did me a favor, taking me to live where they did, but I've carried my hatred deep in my belly and the marrow of my bones. They thought I was too small to worry about. Too small to fear. Too young to remember. But I saw and heard everything. I've kept my power a secret all these years, and it's done naught but grow.”

Striding in front of the massed life forms, Zanzia headed for the town, her army on her heels.

When they reached the outskirts, she brought them to a halt, and instructed them to cause as much pain and destruction as possible—anything short of death—and they swarmed forward. Screams soon rang out from all directions.

Zanzia faced the Town Council herself, and they fell to their knees, begging her, “Remember the mercy we showed you.”

“*Mercy!*” she raged. “I'll show you mercy.” She cast the spell she'd designed especially for them. Their bodies instantly caught on fire, flesh and bones steadily burning. Zanzia smiled as they wailed and shrieked in agony. And, when their bodies healed, then started burning again, her smile widened.

Stupid Thing | Gabriella Balcom

Joseph tried to crush the small seps with his foot, but it slithered into some brush nearby.

“Stupid thing.” He bent, searching for it.

Although the seps resembled an ordinary snake, it wasn't. People had learned this the hard way for countless centuries.

It darted forward, squirting venom onto Joseph's face.

As the corrosive substance ate away at his skin, he yelled, frantically rubbing his cheeks.

Flesh melted from his face in rivulets, revealing bone underneath. But, that began dissolving, too.

The seps sprayed Joseph again, more of him liquefying.

Soon only a puddle of ooze lay on the ground.

About the Author:

Gabriella Balcom writes fantasy, sci-fi, horror, romance, and literary fiction. She loves forests, mountains, and back roads, has had 337 works accepted for publication, and was nominated for the Washington Science Fiction Association's Small Press Award. Gabriella's books, *On the Wings of Ideas* and *Worth Waiting For*, resulted from her winning publishing contracts. Her novella, *The Return*, is out also.

Facebook: [Gabriella Balcom](#)

"Do you think this is wise?" Jane asked, she was wafting a smouldering bundle of sage around the living room. The house stank.

"Of course it is! We need to get into a better coven, babe. The one we're in, well, it just seems a bit amateur. I don't want to waste my time." Jane glanced at her, "Sorry, *our* time with women who think wearing black nail polish makes them a bit weird."

Jane wiped her eyes, they were beginning to smart from the smoke. She went to open a window, but Kerry stopped her. "No! We must keep the air cleansed."

She scanned the room, mentally checking off a list. *Crystals? Yes. Black candle? Yes. Spell book? Upstairs.*

The witch would be arriving after dark.

"Should we smarten up the altar? The flowers have died and the *offerings* have gone a little mouldy" asked Jane.

"No! Messy is good. It'll look like we've been really using it."

Kerry checked her reflection in the star shaped mirror that hung on the wall above it.

"Shall I light the black candle?"

Jane shrugged. "Yes, it smells better than the sage. Orchid Noir it says on the label."

Kerry lit the candle and stared into the mirror. She sighed, nearly blowing out the candle. She couldn't wait to get into a *proper* coven. One that placed curses, *really bad ones*. Cast spells that actually worked, like helping you get a promotion or make money appear in your bank account. That's what she really wanted, evil curses and lots of cash!

"Can we put the TV on while we wait?" asked Jane.

"Her secretary said nothing electrical was to be switched on when she arrives, so no TV. Anyway, we'd better get changed."

They put on their favourite long black dresses. Kerry's boots were just a little too tight, while Jane forced copious silver bangles onto her wrist over her cramping hand.

"How do I look?" asked Jane as she added one more bangle.

"You look great babe. Proper witchy! There's no way she won't let us in. Absolutely no way."

There was still an hour to go before the visit. They finished arranging the lounge and lit more candles. The room stank of the black orchid scent mixed with the burnt sage. The sky darkened. There was a sharp knock on the front door. Kerry opened it and felt instantly disappointed. The *witch* wore a short blue canvas jacket with ripped knee jeans. Her blonde hair was piled on top of her head in a messy bun. They both looked at each other. Kerry realised she was supposed to speak.

"Hi! You can park your car wherever, we've moved ours to make space for you."

The witch smiled.

"It's ok, I came on my broomstick. Can I leave it by the door?"

"Of course! Put it by ours."

She indicated to the two broomsticks, propped against the wall next to the shoe rack. Kerry and Jane's name had been etched into each handle. They had bought them when they had taken place in a '*jump the broom*' ceremony, at a fun witching weekend at the Indoor, Outdoor Holiday Centre. It took a couple of heartbeats for Kerry to realise that the witch was joking.

"Actually, I walked here. I cut through the park. Can I come in?" Kerry felt awkward, forced a laugh then waved her inside. She noticed the witch give the broomsticks a sideways glance, then she winced against the overbearing smell that permeated the room. The witch checked herself before she appeared rude.

"Wow! It's dark in here." she said before she clipped her shin on the corner of the coffee table. Jane stood up nearly knocking into her.

"Hello. We were told that we should have nothing electrical on, so... no lights!"

The witch began to laugh. "Gwendolyn, my assistant was only joking. A little witch humour, if you like. Put on the lamp, that way we can actually see each other."

Kerry felt annoyed but smiled. She hated being the butt of any joke however stupid. Jane immediately reached for a lamp switch. The witch took off her jacket and dropped it on an armchair. She surveyed the room before she sat down. The shambolic altar caught her attention for a second, then she noticed the huge ugly artworks on the wall.

"I did those!" Kerry said as she picked up the jacket and hung it on a coat stand in the hallway., "I'm very creative. I channel my inner feelings through paint. I did a course about art online. Do you paint?"

The witch shook her head. "No. There's no way I could ever do something like this."

The red and brown paintings seemed to be still wet, oozing down the wall like a form of dirty protest. Kerry was staring at her. The witch felt her masked contempt. *She's still smarting from the broomstick joke* she thought. She despised this pseudo witchcraft fakeness. People who thought that paying a visit to an 'alternative' shop instantly made you a druid! She stared back at Kerry. Jane's bangles began to shake on her wrist. Kerry stood before the fireplace, feeling the need to give some sort of banal speech. The witch quietly interrupted.

"Sit down."

Kerry tried to talk but could not find a voice.

"I said, *sit down*."

The lamp began to flicker slightly, the candles wavered. Kerry sat next to Jane on the sofa. Jane's hands began to tremble as she rested them on her knees. Her bangles were shaking vigorously now. She placed her hands on them to stop.

"Why have you called me here?" asked the witch as she slowly sat in the armchair.

She seemed to change before them. Brief flashes of who she really was without the modern day disguise. The metamorphosis was quick, a spark of something foreboding. The vision made them sick with fear.

Her eyes were wide and pale, her hair pulled tight from her forehead. She looked ancient, her bones brittle. Long thin fingernails dug into the leather of the armchair. They could hear it pop and rip. She breathed slowly, as the thickened air crackled in her lungs like a death rattle. Kerry and Jane were unable to move or comprehend that the witch was real.

"Let me guess? You two want to become a part of something that takes witchcraft much more *seriously*. The real deal. You want *results*! Not just incense sticks and tarot cards." The witch laughed at this, then stopped abruptly, her lip snarling, "You want more than the fakery you have so obviously bought into." Everytime she said *You* she looked at Kerry, "You feel you deserve so much *better*!" She waved one of her skeletal hands around the room. "Who instigated my coming here? You did, didn't you?"

Kerry nodded.

"Well then, show me your credentials. Prove your bravery."

Kerry remembered to breathe, then began to panic. She ran upstairs and returned holding a packed cotton tote bag. The witch inwardly groaned. She knew what it was. The Modern Witches Handy Spellbook was on so many shelves. This visit was not going to end well. What a waste of a Saturday evening!

"Right", Kerry shouted, her volume increasing with nerves. She indicated for Jane to stand next to her, while she reverentially placed the book on the coffee table. Wedged in the pages were two white sachets that looked like teabags, but did in fact contain hair. Kerry had been told it was human hair, but it actually was from a dog, a long-haired variety, probably an Afghan. The witch could smell it and anticipated the dreaded scent of burnt dog hair. She had seen this so-called *spell* attempted many times. The coven had been referring to it as 'the doggie schtick'.

Kerry began to read aloud.

"I ... we have performed," The witch winced again. "This spell many times. I would like to send a warning to those that wish us ill." She dropped the hairbags into a large brass bowl that Jane obediently placed onto the table.

"These words will bring about a revolution in attitude and an enlightened outlook to those who frown upon the practices that we ..."

"Get on with it!"

The witch was agitated. Kerry began to read out the Latin phrases slowly and phonetically. She had to stop while Jane passed her, her reading glasses. She slipped the book under the lamp as the candlelight was too dim. When she had finished, she indicated that Jane should set fire to the hairbags. She struck a match and dropped it onto them. There was an awkward silence as everyone waited for them to ignite. Kerry stood and raised her arms.

"For those that have gone before us and those who are to come!"

There was a sad looking blue spark from the bowl, while the hairbags smouldered into a desultory pile. Kerry looked at the witch anticipating some sort of praise or applause.

"I have put it out into the universe that we, as witches, should be respected and those that do not, will soon learn their fate."

There was a long silence disturbed only by Jane's jangling bangles. The witch began to whisper under her breath, fast moving words, that became louder. Kerry glanced at Jane and shrugged. This was nothing like what she had read in The Modern Witches Handy Handbook. She smiled at the witch, humouring her seemed the best thing to do. The witch closed her eyes. The ancient looking hag flashed before them again. Her nails clawed as her reddened eyes opened and rolled back as she blinked quickly, then stared. The witch clapped her hands twice. Kerry and Jane were about to join in, when they felt as though they had been pulled from their own bodies by their spine.

They were no longer in their front room. Jane immediately began screaming. Rotten faces, inches away from hers, laughed hysterically and screamed back, shouting in a language she recognised but could not understand. They grabbed her and Kerry, dragged them to the ground, hacked at their hair with sharpened blades or painfully ripped it from the roots with filthy hands. A man, dressed in black, stood on a raised wooden platform and watched over them, as they wailed in terror. Kerry tried to reason with the mob. *'We shouldn't be here! It's a mistake!'* Someone yelled about them speaking in tongues like devils. "These women speak demonic words!" The man, obviously their leader, nodded quickly. The mob immediately obeyed him.

Kerry and Jane were dragged to a huge pyre of logs and bundled sticks. They were tied to a post that sat in the middle of the bonfire. Terrified women spat at them from underneath their bonnets, babies screamed, dogs snapped. They were pelted with rotten food and faeces. The man on the platform raised a hand to quieten the crowd. Like sheep they obeyed.

"Final words *witches?*"

Kerry and Jane shook and screamed over and over. "We should not be here!" "This is a mistake!"

The man, shaking his head slowly, replied looking down on them.

"It is time to meet your maker and return to the hell you were sent from."

He nodded to the men who carried burning torches. There was a fracas as they decided who would light the pyre. Kerry and Jane screamed louder, hysterically tearing their throats raw, as flames began to burn. Eventually, they passed out, choked by acrid smoke and fear, they slumped into the bonfire that gathered strength around them.

They opened their eyes. They were in their living room, laying on the floor. Kerry struggled to sit up, Jane flopped onto her side, crying hysterically. Their legs were numb, their arms felt as though they had been ripped from their sockets. Their scalps burned. The witch tapped the arm of the chair. They both turned toward her.

"Still want to be a witch now?"

They could not speak, it was as though their minds had fused with shock. The witch rolled her eyes and stood up. She dragged them, one at a time upstairs and dumped them on the bed. Jane passed out, still crying, covered in her own spit and snot. The witch reached around Kerry's face with her long skeletal fingers, leaned down and breathed into her ear. "This evening was all a terrifying nightmare. You will give up any pretence of being a witch. We went through too much to have it all *bastardised by fakes like you*. Stop disrespecting us ... and dump *The Modern Witches Handy Spellbook!*"

The witch returned to the lounge. The candles still flickered. She checked her, now normal, reflection in the star shaped mirror and blew out the black candle on the altar. "Not even a genuine black candle." she muttered as she opened a window to let in some fresh air. The bulb in the lamp popped like a firework spraying the ceiling with glass shards. The base emitted an annoying humming sound. The witch took her jacket from the coat stand in the hallway. She was about to leave, then remembered something. She clicked her fingers quickly and stifled a short laugh as she banged the front door after her. The fake broomsticks lay on the floor, snapped into matchsticks.

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.

Author Website: [Donna Cuttress](#)

Twitter: [@Hederah](#)





Christina had never seen foliage behavior in such a manner. It draped the hillside like a green blanket and as she stood on the cabin's balcony, overlooking the small valley below, all she saw were bumps and ridges of the vines that covered trees and rocks. She frowned. Her idea of a honeymoon was warm sand and a cool ocean breeze, not a secluded dirty log cabin built a hundred years ago, but money was tight, and the place had been part of Rita's inheritance along with their ranch and slice of land. The cabin, only a few hours from their property, proved to be the most economical choice.

A staycation.

A staymoon.

No matter how Rita tried to spice it up, it still left a sour taste in Christina's mouth. After the deal closed with the developer, Christina would take Rita someplace elegant to properly celebrate their nuptials. Someplace without a bunch of weeds overtaking the surroundings. Soon, they'd be able to afford anything they wanted, a luxury Christina used to dream about as a child living in a cramped one bedroom apartment with her mom and brothers. Soon, Christina would never have to worry about money again.

Guilt burned the back of her throat, but she swallowed it down. There would be a time for confessions, but not yet. She'd wait until they got back home.

Rita stepped onto the balcony and handed Christina a cup of tea. "See? Isn't this place a perfect getaway?"

She sipped and tilted her head toward the greenery. "What is all that stuff? Weeds?"

Rita shook her head. "It's a special vine my grandfather brought over when he first immigrated."

Of course it was. A part of Christina admired how much Rita connected with her ancestors, but sometimes, the past stifled their new life, and Christina longed to be rid of the stories of people she'd never known who were now long gone.

"He only had a few seeds when he came over," Rita's voice held a familiar tone of nostalgia. "When he planted them, they doubled and took over. He took it as a sign that everything would work out."

"And it did." Christina knew the story of her grandfather and how he rose from poverty and ended up with a large ranch sitting pretty on a desirable plot of land.

"They look pretty cool, right? Kinda like a giant quilt keeping everything safe."

"Or suffocating everything," Christina mumbled. She didn't like the way the vines tied together, not allowing even a peek at what lay beneath them.

The vines began to sway back-and-forth to an invisible rhythm, but there was no breeze. Christina's chest tightened and she looked at Rita. "Did you see that?" Her vision slid out of focus, but with a blink, it shifted back in place. She shook her head and refocused. Yes, the vines were definitely moving to their own beat.

Rita lifted her hand to the edge of the balcony. The vines moved toward her until the tips of their leaves brushed her palm. Christina watched with wide eyes as her wife carefully caressed the green foliage.

"How is that—"

"I know what you've been up to, Chris."

Christina sucked in a breath as nausea smacked her senses and weakened her knees. She stayed standing, the teacup still in her hand, but her stomach churned.

"I saw the documents on your computer."

"You looked at my computer?" She tried to sound angry in an attempt to redirect the conversation, but panic pushed to the front of her emotions as she spotted tiny green flecks floating to the surface of the tea. "Oh my god." She met Rita's stare. "What did you do?"

The mug slid from Christina's grip, and she barely registered it thump to the ground as she looked to her wife for answers. All she got in return was a dark stare.

"What did I do?" Rita's voice rose an octave. "Seriously? You're blaming me?"

"Babe, please." Christina dropped to her knees as a haze began to blur her vision. The vines crawled along the balcony's banister and moved toward her. A rich scent of earth and dirt filled the air and Christina groaned as nausea twisted her gut and brought bile to the back of her throat.

"I fell in love with you. That's what I did. I trusted you and thought you were different from everyone else who just wanted to use me." Tears filled Rita's eyes as she leaned down next to Christina. "I told you I'd never sell my land. Even before we were married, I made you promise to never ask me."

Christina decided it wasn't a good time to remind Rita that technically she'd done just that. She hadn't asked Rita permission. She'd just gone out and called the developer who had been dying to get a hold of Rita's property—the nice slice of rural land perfect to convert into the next middle-class suburb with strip malls and franchise fast food restaurants. Yes, it would mean the end of the lush trees along the property, and the deer that munched grass in their front yard would have to find a new place to live, but so what? They could use the cash, and they were married now, which meant it was Christina's land too, and yes, she'd made a decision for both of them.

It was bold, but necessary.

"The money," Christina gritted against the tightens in her chest, "is for our future."

"You used me."

"I love you." Christina realized it was true. While she'd sought out her wife knowing that Rita was heir to a chunk of land that a handful of developers wanted to get their hands on, somewhere along the way, she'd fallen in love for real.

But it was too late, and that realization sent a wave of dread through her body. "Please, help me. Give me a chance to fix this."

And she desperately wanted to. Rita would heal her and they'd work it out, and everything would go back to normal, and maybe, later, after they had time to reflect and laugh about all of this, Christina could try a different approach. She wouldn't go behind Rita's back. No, she learned her lesson. Instead, she'd be open and honest and prove to Rita that taking the developer's money was the best way for them to have happiness.

"We can still have a future." She hoped that was true.

"No." Rita stood and stepped back. "We can't."

Rita swayed her hand through the air like an orchestra conductor and the vines followed her commands. They crawled up Christina's body, slow and steady, wrapping around like a giant bear hug. She tried to speak, to scream, to cry, but fear paralyzed her as the vines tightened.

"My family has had that land for generations, and someone always comes along and tries to take it, tear it down, destroy it." Rita's voice cracked. "I just never imagined it would be you."

The vines moved to her face. Panic rippled down her body as she looked to her wife, pleading with her eyes for mercy. Rita rolled back her shoulders and remained silent.

The vines pried open Christina's lips and slid along her tongue filling her mouth with the taste of the land—sweet and fragrant with life and vitality. They slipped to the back of her throat causing her to gag. Tears filled her eyes as her breath grew thin.

"My family is special," Rita's voice was strong. "We protect the earth from people like you. We're not just owners of the land. We *are* the land, and we'll never give it up."

Christina's breathing became stilted until the air could no longer slip past the vines blocking the path. The last thing she saw was Rita's green eyes sparkling with peaceful content.

About the Author:

Nico Bell is the author of *Beyond the Creek* and *Food Fright*. She is the co-editor of *Diet Riot: A Fatterpunk Anthology* and *Mine: An Anthology of Body Horror*. When she isn't reading or writing, she can be found in the kitchen baking up gluten free goodies or playing with her dogs.

Author Website: [Nico Bell Fiction](#)

Twitter: [@nicobelfiction](#)



SPACE & TIME

FANTASY • HORROR • SCIENCE FICTION

PREDICTING THE FUTURE SINCE 1966

FIND OUT WHAT
HAPPENS NEXT AT
SPACEANDTIME.NET



I turned the heavy metal wheel, heard the grating of metal. My muscles ached as I finished opening the hatch. I went up the concrete stairs until I reached the next level, the street level. I went over to the wooden door and pushed it open, revealing the new reality. The world that greeted me still seemed alien, and it had all started with the seeds.

When the seed packets first started arriving, people handled them, well, much as might be expected, given the nature of people.

The news media started running sensational stories about mysterious seed packets that people hadn't ordered arriving by mail from all over the world. The news stories warned of doom and gloom if anyone opened the packets, let alone planted them. Then many countries started reporting receiving seeds from foreign addresses as well.

The governments issued dire warnings about not planting the seeds. They were unidentified and could potentially grow into anything. But, of course, the governments never attempted to find out what the seeds were. They just kept up the warnings urging citizens who received them to turn them into the local authorities unopened.

People, being people, reacted in all sorts of ways. Some proudly made Snapchat videos of themselves opening and planting the seeds in their yards, defying their government. Some people who considered themselves to be more militaristic than others posted videos of themselves burning the seed packets on Facebook. Other people just planted them without any fanfare or social media posts. The result was that all over the world, the seeds were planted.

Over time, people posted pictures of the plants that grew from the seeds. They were corn-like in nature, with thick stalks and long broad leaves. The stalk was held in the ground by thick roots that looked like a spider coming from the base of the stem and gripping the soil. The stalks grew to about four feet tall before string-like shoots with balls on the end started growing out of the stem. The balls were green at first, then turned a beautiful deep violet color.

That was when the problems started. The air slowly started getting a wispy purple mist around the plants. Scientists speculated that it was pollen the plant was emitting. However, since no government had attempted to identify the seeds when they first appeared, the scientists were behind the plants growth—too far behind.

When the scientists discovered that the purple mist was terraforming the air, the violet balls had begun to split open. They started breaking at night, and in the morning, after the first ones had separated, a vicious purple sludge was found dripping from the broken balls onto the ground. Some people reported seeing salamander-like animals coming out of the balls. By this time, the scientists all agreed the plants were terrible, but they were too late. The air around the plants was hard for humans to breathe. And new plants were growing out of the soil.

By the time the scientists figured out that the roots growing into the ground traveled until they reached the surface again, growing another plant, the new plants had become impossible to remove from the ground. Moreover, the plants appeared not to require sunlight and appeared to be able to grow in shallow water, so they spread, into forests and lakes, faster than any plant species before seen.

The people who considered themselves more hawkish than others started shooting at the plants, which just caused more of the balls to burst and the deep violet salamander-like animals to scurry down the plants and into the mist. More intelligent people tried to cut down the stalks, but that didn't prevent the balls from releasing the salamanders. Mass panic had already created issues within societies around the world. While the smarter among people went to military surplus stores to purchase gas masks, the less intelligent amongst us started emptying the supermarkets, quickly leading to riots.

Due to the riots, no one noticed when the deaths started. And that's how the species that grew out of the purple balls took over. The creatures that the purple salamanders grew into were able to easily breathe the purple mist that now covered all landmasses on the globe. And they hunted at night; no one knew exactly what they looked like anymore, but the results of their nightly hunts looked like bear attacks.

This brings us to now; isolated groupings of people still survive. The larger clusters had failed because, it turns out, humans are relatively easy prey due to their stupidity. Smaller groups did better, with fewer people making mistakes. And singles, like me, did the best since survival entirely depended on our own actions.

I had made my home in an old fallout shelter. It was located in the basement of an old derelict city building. The shielding, designed to protect from gamma rays, kept the roots from growing inside. In addition, the filters prevented the purple mist from entering. The canned rations from the 1950s had held up surprisingly well. I went out in the daytime to hunt so as not to exhaust the supply within the fallout shelter. It would last years, but what had happened outside didn't appear to be going away. In fact, more odd-looking plants were growing. Being located in the remains of an old city helped. The plants didn't grow through the pavement, so streets were generally clear of the alien-looking vegetation that was slowly taking over the Earth. The wild game seemed to have figured out the pavement kept them safer from the alien plants but it also made them easier for me to hunt since they stood out well.

I used a bow and arrow for hunting. The creatures that roamed the Earth freely now appeared to prefer to hunt at night, but I had heard of daytime attacks, too. I figured that quiet and alive was better than loud and dead.

I stepped out of the building into the sun. I noticed that the air had a purple tinge to it. This was a new development, and I suspected, as with all past developments since the arrival of the seeds, not one I would ultimately be happy with.

I headed down the remains of the street, being careful to stay in the center, so the crumbling pavement protected me from the dangers that lurked on either side. Unfortunately, the purple mist seemed to be further into the pavement than it had been the last time I was down this street. I hoped it was my imagination playing tricks on me, but the purple tinge to the air made me fear that the world was still terraforming.

I walked lightly, trying not to make noise so as not to scare my breakfast away. Finally, I rounded the corner and entered a long city block. The tall sky-scraping buildings on either side offered more protection from the plants and the mist. Usually, this stretch had rabbits and other animals along the street. However, today it was completely deserted. I stopped and stood still. I realized that the ruined city sounded quieter than usual. It was as if every living creature had disappeared or gone into hiding.

I figured another hunter had recently been in the area and scared off my meal choices. I couldn't spend the day waiting for some animals to return so I turned and retreated to another good hunting ground that I knew. I was proceeding quietly into the next one—an old set of basketball courts, and I noted, sadly, that some of the plants were pushing up through cracks in the pavement of the courts, with the surrounding mist already present.

There goes another hunting ground, I thought to myself.

I backed out as I eyed a puddle of purple sludge below one of the plants. My next stop proved to be as empty as the first two. And by the look of the sun, I'd wasted half of the day already with nothing to show for it.

I returned to my shelter to collect my fishing gear. While the edges of the river were dangerous since the plants grew in the shallow waters, the bridges over the bay offered safe fishing in the water below. If I could get a good catch, I could cure some of the fish so that I could take a few days off from hunting.

I carefully made my way out to the bay, using the highway. The bridge over the bay was high, but it was safe. I preferred to use the long line so as not to become dinner to whatever lurked in the mist. As the buildings cleared so I could see the bay ahead of me, I noticed that the purple tinge in the air was more pronounced. Looking out at the bay and the subsequent ocean, it almost appeared as if the sun was setting due to the air color. Except the sun wasn't setting.

As I got closer to the bay, I found the air getting harder to breathe. It looked like the air above the water was also starting to be transformed. It wasn't so thick that I couldn't breathe, but it was definitely uncomfortable.

This new development probably meant I should consider moving to a city away from the coast in the near future. I wasn't sure how the mist could form over water since it couldn't form over pavement devoid of plants, but regardless of why this was happening, a good breeze could start providing safe travel for the mist creatures throughout the city. So getting away from the ocean and its breezes would probably be wise.

But that was for another day; today was for replenishing the fresh food stocks, which were desperately low. In the middle of the bridge were some commercial fishing reels I'd set up before the world had gotten this bad but after the city had started to collapse. Most others had fixated on looting expensive electronics, now useless, when the collapse happened so no one had paid me attention when I'd taken the reels, nor had anyone stolen them from where I'd installed them on the bridge.

I baited the lines and threw them over. Allowing the current to pull them out, I waited. Relatively quickly, one started pulling. I worked the handle to draw the line to make it taut, then reeled in my catch. The line didn't pull and suddenly snapped.

Fuck, I thought.

I didn't want to scream out loud since you didn't know who was near you. A desperate food hunter might decide you could make a good dinner. Desperate times create desperate people.

I pulled in the rest of the line and attached a new hook. Then, the bridge I was on suddenly shook. The sudden movement made me lose my balance.

What the hell? I thought. *This coast doesn't get earthquakes. Does it?*

The bridge suddenly shook again, and I heard the sound of metal twisting. I went to the side of the bridge and looked down. I saw a large shape, like a whale, approaching the bay's surface. I was starting to feel sorry for the whale when it burst through the water's surface. The light purple-colored head looked gigantic and was scaled. It looked similar to a lizard, at first, except horrifically blown out of proportion.

As the giant sea creature rose from the water, I could see gills on the side and that the body was long, more like an eel than a lizard. The creature twisted its head toward me and opened its mouth, revealing rows of sharp teeth. The creature sprang in the air toward me but fell back down into the water on what I would describe as its back with a massive splash. Water from the bay covered me.

I grabbed my bow and arrows, leaving the fishing gear. I was sure I wasn't going back near water for a long time to come. I started running across the bridge toward the part of the city I call home. The bridge suddenly shook again, throwing me off balance. The pavement in front of me started to crumble as I heard the sound of more twisting metal.

I tried to stop as the pavement started to fall into the bay. Through the widening hole, I saw the creature lurch out of the water toward the bridge's underside. I tried to make for the side of the bridge, and the sidewalk there, which I figured might be stronger and allow me to get off the bridge.

I saw a giant crack form in front of me, and then the bridge on the opposite side of the crack started to rise. When it was too late to do anything, I realized the other side wasn't rising, but my side was sinking. The pavement below me crumbled as it plummeted toward the water. I ran across the falling chunk and leaped off the edge before it hit the water. I hoped the creature would go after the sinking material allowing me to get to shore.

I gasped air before hitting the surface of the water and tried to swim as fast as possible toward where I thought the shore should be while still under the water. I felt tiny chunks of cement and asphalt hitting me from the falling bridge above. When it felt like my lungs were going to burst, I surfaced. When I raised my arm out of the water, I saw it was covered with small-scaled creatures—tiny versions of the one that was still attacking the bridge behind me.

I felt more debris hitting me and realized the sensation was the creatures biting into my flesh. I raised my other arm to knock them off and saw it was also covered. When I tried to knock them off of my arm, I found they were clinging tight. I grabbed one with my fingers and ripped it off. Blood spurted from the round wound left from its teeth. I grabbed another one, ripping it off. My legs were getting tired from trying to keep myself on the surface. I grabbed another and noticed the water was tinged red around me. I pulled off a fourth and a fifth and started feeling lightheaded. Finally, my legs gave out, and I felt myself slipping below the surface.

I gasped for air pulling water into my lungs. They started burning as I tried to suck air into my body. I felt everything tightening up as I couldn't get any air. Around me, I saw the miniature creatures swimming up to me and could feel the burn as they started attaching themselves to my face.

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 Kolby Catmatix Domitian Johnson and Linus Alexander Castiel Johnson.

Author Website: [Ken Johnson Writes](#)

Twitter: [@kenjohnsontnh](#)



The Power of the Wild Mother Wolf

Go out in the woods, go out. If you don't go out in the woods nothing will ever happen and your life will never begin — these words by Clarissa Pinkola Estes from her book *Women Who Run with the Wolves* are very significant in my art. But I haven't always appreciated intuitive life, the freedom of creativity, and wild nature.

One day I go out in the woods literally... More than 10 years ago I used to walk with my baby girl in a stroller enjoying a forest road on the edge of the village. I suddenly discovered the smell of rain, the softness of the moss, the voices of blackbirds, tracks of roe deer... I was watching common things as if they were something extraordinary.

Several years passed, and I moved with my family from Kyiv city to that beautiful village with a big forest on Dnipro hills. Step by step, I've renounced all the things that pressed me and focused on what seemed really valuable. I guess looking back, living near wild nature is the reason for the most productive period of my life. So many things changed since then. I changed. The forest is so healing.

Finally, I decided to change careers and become an artist.

All the wolves, misty forests, spirits, and other creature that I create originate from another serious passion — mythology and fairy tales. In a local school library, I have read a multitude of scary Ukrainian tales: a strange forest wizard Oh who burned his young apprentice several times, a weird story of Dead Mare Head, Iron Wolf, and many others. Later I studied Scandinavian Edda, Finnish Kalevala, Sami myths, and other old stories full of savagery and symbolism.

So, all my illustrations are part of the fantasy world inspired by Nordic myths and folklore, with the influences of Ukrainian (Slavic) aesthetics. Traditional folk sources are often very odd and cruel in comparison to stories adapted for children. I have had a lot of questions in my head: *Why? What does it mean? Does it mean something at all?*

My dark and scary paintings are a way to explain the cruelty of this world and find the answers to my questions. You see bleeding creatures and burning forests, I see the positive story beneath. The cruelness may be positive, and challenges are a way to become more skillful, more empathetic, and strong. Become wiser.

Besides, painting became the way I overcome crises and survive hard events (both my own and those that have happened to others). If I don't create, I'm dying slowly. I carry unexpressed feelings, which feel like a weight on my shoulders. To express means to comprehend, to give new meanings to our cruel reality. This is how my fantasy world arose. An alternative world in which there is some order.

During the war in Ukraine, I came to understand a horrible thing: dark fantasy art is much lighter than reality in my country. I can't stop imagining all those people who must survive in a hell of brutal battles. I can't stop imagining the families who lost their children in destroyed cities. Sometimes I hear explosions nearby, I know the piercing sound of Iran's drones above the Dnipro river...

And I know, the cruelest demon is the human.

Most of my latest illustrations are reminiscent of a cry from the heart. One of those artworks is *Mother the Wolf*, which is pictured at the top of this article. So delicate, but how furiously she protects her children! Her future. Ukraine met the occupiers with crazy rage. With a terribly underestimated power of the wild mother.

I currently find myself doing volunteer work. There are small charity funds in every village and town near me. We make camo nets and Ghillie suits, and help with the gathering of products and things that are asked for by our defenders on the frontline. These *centers of charity* seem to me a real phenomenon of Ukraine's new reality. It's also my therapy. I feel recharged and inspired when I return to painting.

About the Artist:

Ksenya Lumitar Drozd, born in 1986, is a Ukrainian self-taught dark fantasy artist. She mostly paints in watercolor, but has found she enjoys combining traditional materials with digital art. Ksenya has a Master's degree in Cultural Studies, with mythology being her professional passion. Almost all of the illustrations Ksenya creates are for her story — a fantasy novel that she is currently writing.

Online Gallery: [Lumitar Art](#)
Instagram: [@lumitar_legends](#)
Etsy Store: [Lumitar Art](#)





Lumitar Art

Dark Fantasy Watercolor Art



POETRY

The Bramble's Song of Survival | *Alex Grehy*

Trash piled on rubbish
until every volume of
soil and water was
transformed.

We brambles made the best of things.

We, who understand
Autumn's privations,
grow red, already
utilising the toxins you
left for our roots to absorb.

We who understand
Winter's bite
edge our leaves
with broken glass
mined from the landfill,
pretty as hoarfrost,
sharp as razors.

We who understand
the seasons' closing,
at world's end
gorge on what you
threw away, thoughtless.
You and yours cannot
devour us now,
toxic as we have become.

Starving, you scabble for
food. Wailing that this
future was unforeseen, as if
your complex animal bodies
had ever been able to adapt
fast enough for the noxious
world you created. You cannot
assimilate anything and everything,
as we do, to survive

We brambles made the best of things,
But we don't think you can.

About the Author:

After a lifetime of writing technical non-fiction, Alex Grehy is fulfilling her dream of writing works that engage the reader's emotions. Her stories and poems have been published worldwide. Her ingredients for contentment are narrowboating, greyhounds, singing and chocolate. It is a sweet life, yet Alex's original view of the world has led to her best friend to say 'For someone so lovely, you're very twisted!'

Author Blog: [Ideal Reader Blog](#)
Twitter: [@Indigodreamers](#)

The Ecstasy of Blood | *Eric Wright*

We love to tease, and we love to flirt
We also love to maim, render, and hurt
Hammers, knives, and hatchets...
Excites us to see your blood spurt

Your warm crimson liquid of life
Is sprayed upon our chests...
It adorns our faces and coats our eyes
When it oozes in our mouths, it is the best!

We love the blood from dusk till dawn
Drink, play, and bathe in the crimson red
It's a blood party till the morning
And then we are gone...

About the Author:

Eric Wright is the owner and editor of *Midnight Magazine*, *Midnight Tales*, and *Strange World*. His hobbies include reading books, comics, magazines, watching various genres of cinema, and listening to music. Eric also runs *Dead End Cinema* which is in his backyard for local gatherings during the summer and fall where you can watch various genres of movies, mostly classic horror on a 10' by 5'.5" movie screen. He lives on the outer edges of Massillon, Ohio in a ranch home that isn't haunted—yet.

Facebook: [Eric Wright](#)

Instagram: [@mister_fright](#)

only bones | *Linda M. Crate*

some people never saw
it coming,
but she knew mother nature
had enough;

and so used her magic to gift herself
beautiful purple black wings that glistened
in the light as she flew away from the ruin—

the spindly roots of trees were dragging
people into their graves,
swatting them down like flies
with their branches;

yet they let her fly free of the carnage—

she had tried to warn the people
that they should take better care of their earth,
but they refused to listen;

and so she knew she had to find another
place to live because the earth was shuddering
with her rage as her flowers and her trees

began to devour every human and their ego
leaving behind only bones.

a girl of thorns and thistles | *Linda M. Crate*

they had mocked her for being different
all her life,
insisting that she must have been
cursed because her mother had done some
terrible wrong;
she had a head full of thorns and thistles
but come spring they had flowers, too;

she had always kept to herself wishing not
to cause any problems,
making friends with trees and ravens
and little black cats—

when the flowers and the trees raged against
other humans,
they came to her for help insisting she could be the
bridge to close the gap;

and she knew perhaps it made her cruel to
refuse to help them but her mother had forgiven their
cruel words only to be put into an early grave for the heartbreak—

so she looked them dead in the eye and said:
"i don't know how i can help you, i'm only a curse, remember?"

as the trees and flowers raged, their roots and thorns and
blossoms made way for her as she walked careful not to spill
a drop of her blood as she escaped the town that had
offered her nothing but unkindness.

charge of the tree | *Linda M. Crate*

she ran
tripping over thistles, thorns,
and branches in the wood;

her tears falling into leaves—

she hugged a tree,
begging for sanctuary;
for she had always found peace
and comfort and compassion
in these magic woods—

the tree asked her what was going on,
and she explained they hated her
because she was not what they were
used to;

her differences were something they wanted
to use as weapons against her to give the
religious leaders reason to kill her—

the tree was angry and lifted her into his highest branches,
and when they came for her he insisted:
"the forest would be rather empty if they were only
maples; there's a reason there are also oak, birch, and pines."

they told the old tree to be quiet and brought out their axes,
and so the tree used his long and old roots as weapons,
driving his roots straight through their hearts;
as other roots buried them beneath the earth and others
he just threw into his angry mouth without remorse—

they would not harm the girl who always sought solace
in the magic of his wood, for while she was different;
she was beautiful in her own way and they were too stupid
to know that they ought've appreciated her melody—

only when they were all gone did the tree gently set her
down on the earth, telling her that she was safe now.

claws of the roses | *Linda M. Crate*

the roses
grew thorns long
and sharp as
claws,

and every human hand
that tried to reach them was
drenched in blood instead;

they were tired of humans
destroying the very earth they
needed to live in, too, in the name
of their own greed and desire—

they were reminding humans that
every beautiful thing deserved respect,

and that included flora and fauna.

About the Author:

Linda M. Crate's works have been published in numerous magazines and anthologies both online and in print. She is a three time best of the net nominee. When Linda isn't writing she likes to enjoy nature walks, photography, reading, dancing, and music. Her favorite musical genres are industrial, indie, rock, and goth. She's always been a misfit, but she prides herself on always being herself.

Facebook: [Linda M. Crate](#)

Twitter: [@thysilverdoe](#)

Spirit Surgery | Tom Duke

There's something
I need to tell you

It's nothing, really
But you ought to know
Someone died last night

No, it wasn't you
At least not *this* you

What I mean is
You're the only one
Who's here now

It's as if
She never existed

I only mention it
Because she was a cancer
So to speak

And I cut *her*
Out

You do feel
Better
Don't you?

About the Author:

Tom Duke lives in the foothills of Palomar Mountain with his wonderful wife, two strange dogs, and a furry gray demon who thinks she's a cat. He's not afraid of creepy eyes in the night, whispers from the shadows, or things that lurk in dark corners. Yeah, right! His work's been published in Wyldlood Press, The Horror Zine, and HellBound Books Beautiful Tragedies III (accepted).





The Oak Watchers | *Amy Zoellers*

Two oak trees tower,
glowering,
elder but not ancient
by any stretch,

That one grew three large,
distinct (though camouflaged)
eyeballs
where limbs were taken
in a cluster.

Three eyes for watching—
and to watch is their dearest darling

watching and curling
their snaky, high-flung fingers—
gently—with no help from the wind

and then more brashly
in darkness,
stern and scathing
way up high

until their watch is completed
and the moment is correct
to bend down and reach
and throttle.'

Twilight Spiders | *Amy Zoellers*

Menace malevolent
Shadow, meadow, gloam—
flesh and hair disperse

what did you do?
grow old and more beautiful?

You will pay for this trespass:
your star-banquet
your ghost-rendezvous
under the shivering moon.

They
They guard their night,
the night you insist to haunt.
You trample their miserly hoard.

So the spiders assemble
on legs like hairs
on legs like fat, decayed fingers

and charge
in all of the gambol and skitter

approaching—
whispers in the grass
tick-ticks along the path—
flooding over the hill
to reclaim their darkness-realm.

You
in your skyward bliss and dream lore,
your dark and tranquil midnight prairie
in siege—
you stare at this incoherent phenomenon.

Focus—comprehend—
Run.
Run! for the grotto!
Approach the bashing waves
confusing the spiders
but not the sea
bent on its night

Waves inhale
rise—plunge—
smash and thrash

and enter your cave, puddle-and-spray,
breaching your sanctuary
consuming your midnight audacity
intrusive
flooding,
expansive—

gorging to subdue
and claim you,
now
converted into spirit.

About the Author:

Amy Zoellers is a poet, multimedia artist, exuberant baker, beginning potter and musical being. She co-hosts two monthly poetry shows, *Cake and Hyperbull* on YouTube and *3rd Sunday Poetry* on Instagram, both with Angela Yuriko Smith. Her art, poetry and song can be found on Instagram and YouTube. She lives in Independence, Missouri with her husband, son and cat.

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



Sentinels of the Poison Glen | *R. F. Anding*

Liminal lindens whisper gently,
Laying prostrate their thinly sliced green hearts.
The golden hour has passed,
Roots tremble in anticipation,
Wriggling like earthworms displaced by lightning.
Tonight, they thirst for more than rain,
Dew will not quell their restless limbs.
They are Sentinels, sibyls, witch-fathers,
Their protection neither priceless nor free.
Long have they stood guard,
Between the village and the depths of the Forest,
Where the Poison Glen yawns,
An open mouth hungry for errant children, foolish woodsmen.
Only rarely do they snatch a meager morsel,
Stumbling, fumbling, lost in thought.
Many fingered hands reach for the rising moon,
Evergreen farthingales, skeletal petticoats,
Shedding scabs of lichen upon the ground.
Shadow-muted clusters of amanita muscaria,
Bejewel their broken, desiccated limbs like rubies.
A waxing crescent burnishes wind-wracked bodies,
Lacquering them with liquid silver fire,
Cloaking them in gloaming webs.
Erstwhile dreams of sapling fancies falter,
Replaced with wizened beards of hanging moss,
Clutching many-knuckled hands and unnamed hunger.

About the Author:

R. F. Anding is a reclusive writer and illustrator with a penchant for Medieval marginalia, fountain pens, tarot cards, and loose leaf tea who has lived in England as well as the Northern Marianas and now resides in the Midwest with a small menagerie and large collection of antique books.

Amazon Author Page: [R. F. Anding](#)



The Yamal Horror | *Mathias Jansson*

Slumber below the Arctic ice
slowing awakening by the heat
ancient creatures
sleeping in the deep

You have seen the craters
in the Arctic ice
experts say climate change
but they are ancient gates
to a hollow earth

Ancient creatures
unnamed horror sleeping
but millions of years ago
they crawled the surface
and ate the dinosaurs

Their hunger is growing strong
the melting ice will open
the gates to ancient creatures
they will wake from their slumber
feel the smell of fresh human flesh
and crawl up to the surface to eat.

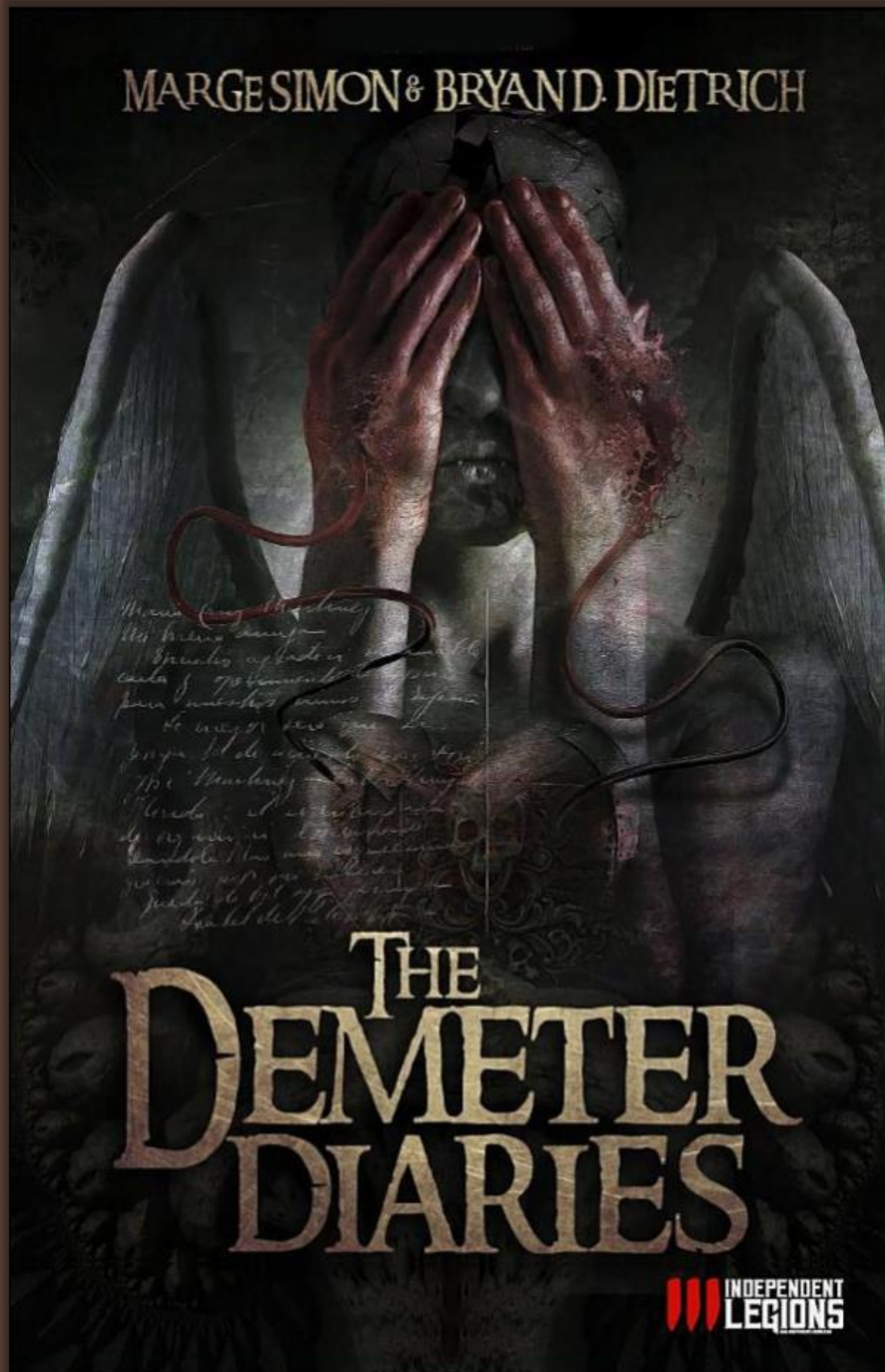
About the Author:

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](#)



An exciting new take on a love story of the ages



Vlad's passionate journey to meet his true love

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Yardwork | *Brian Rosenberger*

He prunes the dead limbs.
Gloves, shears, a hatchet, a saw.
His gardening tools.
The same tools used in the basement.
Different types of limbs.
Snip. Snip. Chop. Chop.
His yard is his pride, his Eden,
His oasis from the outside world.
He's put in the time, the sweat, the effort,
Endured aching muscles, the insect stings.
The limbs he will bury, burn, mulch,
Compost or barbeque.
Depends on the limb.
Yardwork, much like life,
There's always more to do.

Library of the Gods | *Brian Rosenberger*

Our Gods disappeared a long time ago.
Dead, killed, banished, fled or replaced
By their followers for newer, shinier Gods.
Our Gods are gone but not forgotten.
We still have their libraries, their words,
Their rites, their cursed books, their bones.
We keep the old Gods alive,
We, the Librarians, and our patrons.
Just beware any overdue books,
The fines involved.
The Librarians always collect.
Something.

Follow the Vultures | *Brian Rosenberger*

Black-feathered reapers
Circle overhead.
Food in high demand these days.
Two, then four, then nine reapers,
Hovering just below the clouds,
All wanting a taste.
I watch them. I follow them.
If they descend first, that's okay
We're all hungry, competing for scraps.
I've eaten vulture before.

Not unlike Icarus | *Brian Rosenberger*

For a few shining moments.
He felt its warmth again, the Sun.
He remembered the woods of his youth,
The towering Maple trees in his yard,
The shade they provided.
He always loved trees, being outdoors.
Maybe that's why he became a carpenter.
He climbed them, branch after branch,
A daredevil, gravity be damned.
He thought of his family, now dead and buried,
Beneath a canopy of leaves.
He remembered being a man,
Being human, being alive.
The darkness became his ally, his companion.
Beneath the moon, he avenged his family,
Killing their killers, one stake at a time.
Stakes he carved from trees.
Now he was empty, a void, the moon's shadow,
An angel with nowhere to fly.
He basked in the Sun's glory,
Welcoming the inferno

Coffin Self-Portrait | *Brian Rosenberger*

Fuck you, Sun.
I elude your reach as I have for decades,
Cowering in this casket, I remember silk sheets,
The silk underwear and my bedroom companions.
Now I sleep in Marietta dirt, Confederate clay,
Like sleeping on hardened, red glass.
The women still desire me.
Then it was virgin lust for the taking,
No hypnosis needed.
Now predatory Cougars hunt me.
Their wrinkled necks and rock-hard tits
That would chip a fang.
I can't even admire my own beauty,
My untouched youth, forever 22 and so alive.
Relatively speaking.
Years of this. Too many years.
Fuck you, Sun and your beams of light.
And fuck me for not being brave enough
To bask in your glory
One last time.

About the Author:

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

Facebook: [Brian Who Suffers](#)

Instagram: [@brianwhosuffers](#)

I was a curious child in a city of stone, feeling an itch.
The gray landscape was carefully curated and entombed, ramparts strong and sleepless.
I was just another daughter of the man-made world born from fathers' sacrifices.
A story of an isolated, synthetic life wreathed with Nature's deadly breath.

Outside the walls, Her trees stretched tall and fearless, with smiles in their twisted boughs.
How easily young fools like me were summoned by the lovely Enchantress
with splashes of bright hues and delicious pollen carried like song notes on the spring breeze.
A temptation greater than Eve's apple, with more dire consequences.

And in morning warmth, I slinked through chilly early shadows,
bewitched by the magnificence of Her blooming season,
for just a little touch of the radiant, soft petals on my fingertips.
I was stolen from the ground, creeping vines wrapping me like a spider silk package.

Pulled out into the hungry land, Mother Nature cradled me among the tree branches.
I hung in her foliar web, an insect bundled and ready to be feasted upon.
Unfinished corpses of those as careless as me were my ornamental companions
and their rotting flesh overpowered the flowers' lure.

My verdant bindings tightened and squeezed the last particles of air from my lungs,
but my last thoughts were not regrets for my folly,
nor sadness for the tears that would be shed by my mother.
I thought about the crooked smiles in the wood that tricked me.

I thought I would be loved,
that my caress would be different, wanted,
and perhaps, not so
fatal.

About the Author:

Tinamarie Cox lives in Northern Arizona with her husband and two children. She writes to escape her mind and explore the universe. Tinamarie's poems have appeared in previous issues of *The Sirens Call*, as well as *Grim & Gilded*, *Worm Moon Archive*, *Hearth & Coffin*, and others.

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

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



Spider's legs
hairy and brown,
flicking at you
from the ground.
It moves closer,
panic sets in.
If you look close
you'd swear it had a grin.
Backed against a wall
you want to scream.
Go ahead,
it wants you to scream.
One leg at a time
pulling along the fat body,
as thick as a tick
delirious and bloody.
Move! Run.
Get out of the room.
Find a newspaper,
grab a broom.
Oh... my God,
too late.
His friends have arrived,
enemies at the gate.
The carpet turns brown
moving toward you.
You can't run,
there's no one to scream to.
Sink to the floor
and allow it to happen,
open your mouth,
let them in.
Prickly legs brushing your lips
as they enter your mouth.
Dream of heaven
before you pass out.
Filling your body,
organs spun in silk.
Laying eggs in the veins,
nesting from the light.
We all must prepare
as we look on in sorrow.
You were the first,
but what of tomorrow.

In the Belly of the Endless Sea | Christopher Hivner

There was only
otherworldly silence
during the descent,
my body suspended
in a beam of sunlight,
a spot
for the star of the show.
I didn't flail
or fight,
arms and legs
trailing after my torso
like tentacles.
When my body landed,
the soft silt
mushroomed

and the new darkness
devoured me,
a beast
with a thousand mouths
that pricked my skin
with suckers
and barbed teeth,
searching for their
marker of blood.
Then the monster
forced its salt-water tongue
down my throat,
expanding my lungs
until they burst.

Now I rest
in the belly
of the endless sea,
one more morsel
to sate
the appetite
of the undulating mass
until the moon
entices it ashore,
frothy tendrils
probing for another meal.

Standing like sentinels,
the trees
protect me,
I hide in their midst,
between thick trunks
and grasping limbs,
their bark against my back
a rough reminder
of their ever-presence
and a warning
that if I mistreat them,
the same woody skin
will flay my flesh
until I collapse
to the ground
where I will be
absorbed into the dirt
under their roots
never to be seen again.
Standing like sentinels,
the trees
send many messages
to man
that are ignored
at our own peril.

The Night Silent | *Christopher Hivner*

The vines are creeping closer every minute.
Soon they will take me.
I won't run or fight.
Only sit on the porch in repose,
a reel in my heart,
Glenlivet in my belly,
a good cigar lit for fire in the night,
sweet leaf suckling to my lungs.
The cicadas sing sing sing
their last show before the smothering kudzu
breaks the night silent.
I stop rocking in grandpa's old chair
to listen to the vine creep,
slithering to my grave.
The boards of the porch snap under pressure
and curling tendrils eye me with gluttony.
One more swallow of scotch,
a last look at the south's own stars
and they have me.
The black of night keeps me from seeing
the green veins probe into my nostrils.
Before my brain is pierced,
I smile at the thought
of seeing Mama again,
smelling her magnolia perfume
down among the vines.

About the Author:

Christopher Hivner writes from a small town in Pennsylvania surrounded by books he intends to read if he becomes immortal and the echoes of very loud music. His new book of horror/dark fantasy poetry, *Dark Oceans of Divinity*, has been published by Cyberwit.net.

Facebook: [Christopher Hivner](#)

Twitter: [@Your_screams](#)

A Cautionary Tale | *Rie Sheridan Rose*

Even after my death
I was the discarded one....
the forgotten tail of the line,
buried in an unknown grave
as unfit to join the others.

But finally at peace.

My parents were hearty stock
bearing a dozen into this world
with their old-fashioned ethics
and their inability towards caution

and then there was me...
odd man on the totem pole
unlucky thirteen
whispered of in the dark places
as an afterthought
and a sin...

I wore the rags of a dozen
scornful siblings
and cried in the corners
with only the dog for company.

I found it simpler
to be silent.
Safer to be slow...
so I hid behind illusion

until I found solace
in eternity
slitting throats
like verses in a
counting rhyme...

until there was only me
and I was powerful
and I was feared
and I was respected—
albeit as a monster

until I too was
put to a welcome death

and nobody objected.

About the Author:

Rie Sheridan Rose's prose appears in numerous anthologies, including *Killing It Softly Vol. 1 & 2*, *Hides the Dark Tower*, *Dark Divinations*, and *Startling Stories*. In addition, she has authored twelve novels, six poetry chapbooks, and dozens of song lyrics. She challenges herself to walk a minimum of 1 mile a day, rain or shine.

Twitter: [@RieSheridanRose](https://twitter.com/RieSheridanRose)
Author Website: [Rie Sheridan Rose](http://RieSheridanRose.com)



For Love of Gertrude | *John Grey*

It's almost midnight.
It's as dark as a dead man's thoughts
and bone-rattling eerie.
It's just the way she likes it.
She should be here any moment now.
I want to see her.
I'm desperate to see her.

According to the library's
old newspaper file,
she was murdered
by a jealous husband.
But I have never seen
anyone more innocent.

How I adore the long gold ringlets
that lose themselves in the mists of her back.
And those delicate lips,
that svelte floating form...glorious
I'm sure I'd love her eyes as well
if they were blue instead of hollow.

I'm a man who adores a ghost.
And the way she lingers in my room,
gazes at me from the shadows,
I do believe that feeling is returned.

It's exhilarating when we're together.
But it's really sad for a man
to be in love with a ghost.
Even I see that.
To love somebody you can't have
is bad enough.
But to love somebody that
doesn't exist—
men have cut their wrists for less.

Maybe that's the solution -
a quick blade to the veins
and we're together always.
One slash, a spurt of blood,
and the courting is complete.
Instead of hearts and flowers,
there's knives and violence.

Imagine My Surprise | *John Grey*

Weaving my car
through the tunnel,
I come to walls
of skeletons,
stacked atop each other
like bottles in a recycling plant,
no eyes,
just sockets,
no tongues,
but jaws jammed
in grimace or grin
then finally reach the end,
and the light –
thank God for the light –
but then I notice
the car ahead of me –
are those phalanges
gripping the wheel?
and the one behind –
is that a skull I see
through the windshield?
Holding my breath,
(at least I think that's breath)
I risk a glimpse
of myself in the mirror.

My Visitor | *John Grey*

Something wakes me at 3 a.m.,
a wisp of white in, a dark world,
a flame that's the color of its candle,
something that should have
been abandoned to the past
but was caught up in the earth's turning,
shredded and blustered,
a shard here, a flutter there,
soft mouth, swimming eyes,
the cadence of a breath
like lungs counting down the scale,
a ghost who cares less
for literally, actually,
and more for my need
as her pretty steps transcend the floor,
her voice keeps its promise,
care of the wind through pines,
her features recite the currency
of memory recast as company
ah death, once cruel,
now an opportunity
to never be more alive.

About the Author:

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Sheepshead Review*, *Stand*, *Poetry Salzburg Review* and *Hollins Critic*. Latest books, *Leaves On Pages*, *Memory Outside The Head* and *Guest Of Myself* are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *Ellipsis*, *Blueline* and *International Poetry Review*.



She asked have you ever been to the wood with the dancing bells?
He replied, my mum says that's the doorway to the seven hells.
She rolled her eyes.
Don't be daft, there's no such place. Come with me, I'll keep you safe.
Away she danced.
Into the woods they wandered in search of the flower,
In which his mother had placed so much power,
Past the dragon tree, its branches aflame,
Around the far side of the sacrificial lake,
The hunter and hunted playing their game.
On and on they walked so far,
In silence so their time together they did not mar
With feckless talk or promises untrue
Until they saw the sunrise of blue.
Do you hear it? She whispered and cocked her head.
I don't hear anything, he replied, it's as quiet as the dead.
She cried, We're getting near, we're nearly there.
We'll have so much fun, you'll have not a care.
Hurry now, come with me she begged, taking his hand
He flinched slightly at her coldness before the feel of her silken flesh warmed his heart
And he followed without thought.
Onwards they moved and finally he saw
The delicate blue flowers they had travelled so far for.
Can you hear them ringing? The music so pure, She asked
He shook his head, their sound to me is masked
She kissed him slowly
She wanted to know: Do you love me? Do you trust me?
He looked into her eyes, a swath of blue.

I'd do anything in the world, if it was for you
She smiled and caressed his cheek before
Dancing from his arms
She moved amongst the flowers.
Her long skirts were flapping, skipping over her bare feet,
Her arms flung wide, a flower absorbing the midsummer heat
Can you hear them now, she sang and danced
And as he stood and watched her
The faint sound of bells began
Till they rang through his head and filled him with wonder
I hear them he cried
Tears streaming down his face
He ran through the bells of blue
Into her embrace.
However, she'd gone, disappeared from the site
And down fell the boy
Till he was surrounded by blue light.
Fear the bells, should you hear them
And ne'er do follow
Young maidens who beg you to take them to the hollow.
For death you will find
Chiming for you there
Amongst the bluebells.

About the Author:

G Clark Hellery lives in the South West of the UK. By day she makes fun craft kits for children and by night she writes tales of horror, science fiction and fantasy. You can find out more about her world on her blog or instagram.

Blog: [G Clark Hellery](#)
Instagram: [@g.clark_hellery](#)

The Life Sentence | *Ruben Horn*

My spirit squirms within the void
It swims towards the only light
A warmth from crevice razor-thin
Embrace that hope which shines so bright

The gates of heaven come to reach
Before I pass the holy door
I stop and shudder at the task
confess your dark and rotten core

Their whispers do subside at once
Though why do they around me kneel?
With sacred ones, I cannot be
if ache of soma I must feel

Those dressed in white are all just man
My heart is beating in relief
Their arms in welcome forth they throw
A second youth shall I receive

Yet skill of thought I can't recall
Nor could I feel a mother's womb
The sawbones, just like angels, might
have caught my soul above the tomb

But 'tis a hood and not a gown
A dozen flames must squirm on wicks
with eerie chants from fiends around
as Beelzebub performs his tricks

My wrath through veins like acid boils
This godless crime has sealed their fate
My hands enclose the serpents throat
The screams in silence suffocate

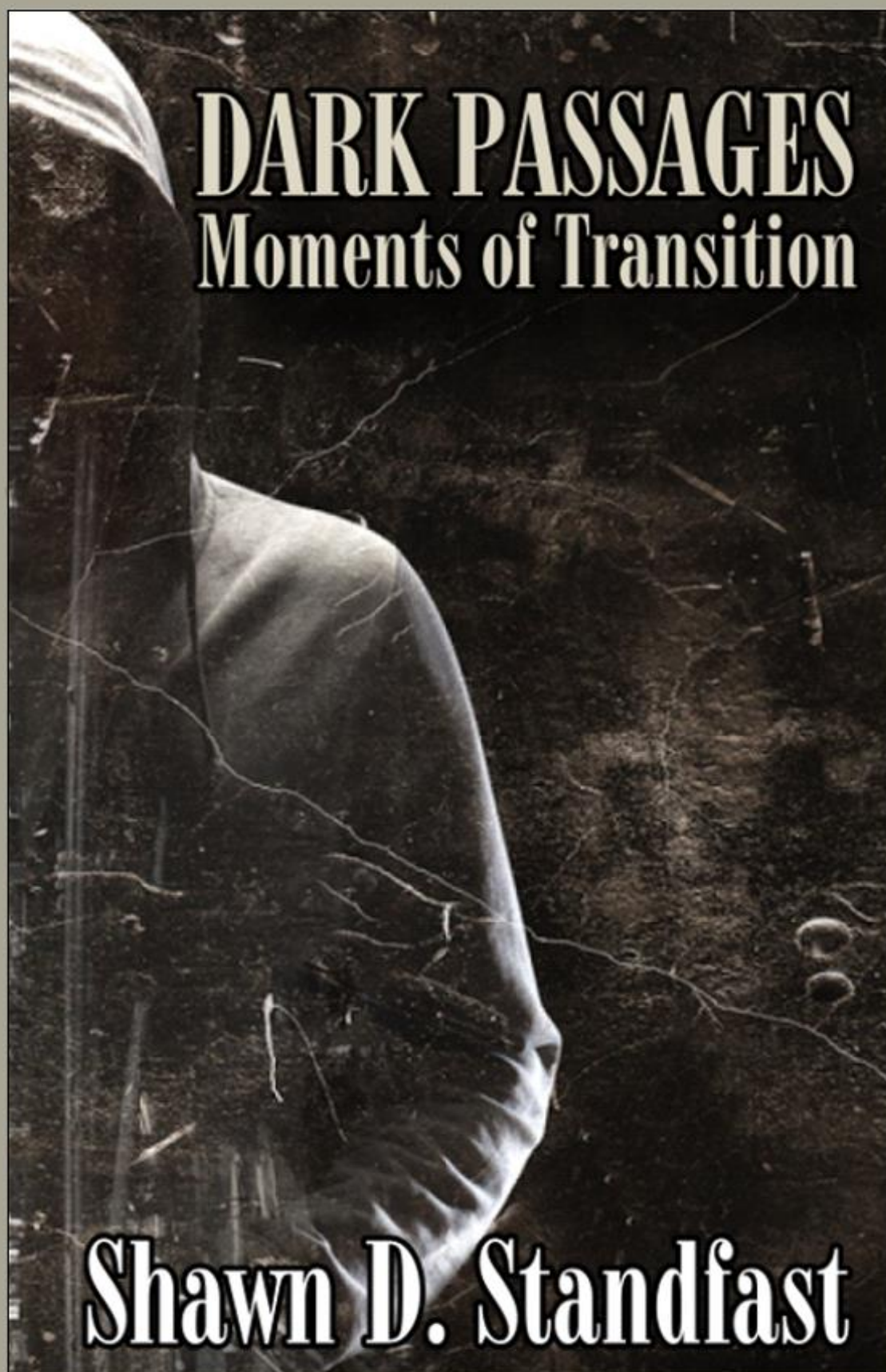
A ghoul within a pentagram
the occultists around had slain
The living world does scourge its soul
For limbo now it yearns again

About the Author:

Ruben Horn is a computer science student from Germany, currently living in Amsterdam. He dabbles in writing fiction (occasionally also poetry). He is mainly driven by his disillusionment with technology and the desire to foster and challenge his creative side. Through this, he is also working on leaving the Cyberpunk-mindset to embrace Solarpunk.

Author Blog: ruben.wtf

A collection of poetry caught in shadow, interweaving the remnants
of memory, thought, dream, and desire.



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Of Flying Horses | *Sharmon Gazaway*

In her golden palace under the sea
Pallas, the daughter of Triton sobs.
“If only I could enter battle
on the back of a majestic steed
I would ever be victorious!”

Her father hears her cry
and blows on his conch shell—
the waters churn and spew
so high they swallow the flying
white stallion, Pegasus
and with a lasso of silver
he presents the wild thing,
prize for Pallas. She fingers
two red crescent slashes in the marble
white neck, delicate gills formed by
her father’s trident.
Clad in gold-limned armored shell
she twists hard hands into the flowing
mane and, mounting, urges him across
a desert of silt and sand, ship boneyards
and razor coral breeding like fungi.
His wings tread water like air
his hooves spark off the iron
of discarded artillery, from one blood-
dimmed battle to the next.

A scattering of broken white
seashells that glint nacre
in stray moonbeams
is the constellation
he now reigns over.
If he weeps copious tears
who can tell?

Irreconcilable Differences | *Sharmon Gazaway*

You tremble like a fault line
a carpet of lush moss
lays itself out for you
in a walk the length of death.

The earth calls
in a slow-burn language
of sediment settling
a siderophilic makeshift bed
of greedy geodes
with a taste for iron
and bone.

The sudden crack
the jagged rift and
black-pit yawn of gleaming bone—

your knees buckle.
There is no absolution
no penance
that will sate this ravenous void.

You jump.

About the Author:

Sharmon Gazaway writes from the Deep South of the US where she lives beside a historical cemetery haunted by the wild cries of pileated woodpeckers. Her poetry is a 2022 Dwarf Stars Award finalist. Her work appears in *The Forge Literary Magazine*, *MetaStellar*, *NewMyths*, *ParABnormal*, *Love Letters to Poe*, and in anthologies published by Black Spot Books, Ghost Orchid Press, Brigids Gate Press, and elsewhere.

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

I Am the Wolf | *George Lee Grimsley*

Cursed to the condemned from its nature
Take effect into something my bodily form
Becomes the nightmare of a wolf
Prowler of the dark Shapeshift Slaughtered cows And other animals In my path
Nothing lives here again ever
I am starving
One of the hounds of Hell I had become
My fur black unsettling
The dark soul of the undead low deep
Inside
Is what I feel
On a nightly course sometimes
For I cannot control evil intentions
A Midnight Stalker

About the Author:

George Lee Grimsley is a writer, poet who is currently living in Granger, Texas. He has passed different courses in online school, and a GED from college. Although he has been published here at Sirens Call numerous times, he still looks forward to writing and submitting here and stays energetic. His hobbies are writing, movies, music.

The Plastic Titan | *L. Stephenson*

I am plastic set into living motion
But I have the unquieted heart of the ocean
And from the unquiet ocean I will rise
To cleanse the dawn of your bloody skies

I scar forward into your land
Beware my many mighty hands
You cast me away in tiny bits
But you built a titan with these bricks

I choked the ocean one piece at a time
But they sent me back to punish your crimes
For treating all life on earth like they are things
I'll hang you six by six with my plastic pack rings

Strip your corpses and carry them to the sea
Lower you all down for all life to feed
Then I will spread my plastic sheeted arms
And fly to where I can do no more harm

About the Author:

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

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

A Month of Hungers | *Meg Smith*

The winter sky recedes,
a ripple across the lake.
I'm walking along the hill's edge,
in the arboretum, with trees
standing naked and no less
and their ghosts of flowering.
It is the time when March begins,
and laughter draws out the
wind, and everything remains unfilled.
Through the gates of the memorial,
bone after bone, with no
remembrance of anything
once so green.

The Depths | *Meg Smith*

I've been making myself
a space in this well,
within the shadow
that measures the Earth.
I have no space
for contemplation.
Sooner or later,
the moon will pass over,
without falling in,
giving up only its
silver of indifference.
I will dream, and dream,
and cover myself in
the unseeing water.
I will dream, and dream,
awake and out loud, and
when someone drops a rope,
I will send it back, accosted,
and send up only a song,
a song of some knowing
about greater, darker things.

About the Author:

Meg Smith is a writer, journalist, dancer and events producer living in Lowell, Mass. In addition to previously appearing in *The Sirens Call*, her poetry and fiction have appeared in *Dark Moon Digest*, *The Horror Zine*, *Raven Cage*, *Blood Moon Rising Magazine*, and many more. She is author of five poetry books and a short fiction collection, *The Plague Confessor*. She welcomes visits to her website.

We're Here for the Dead | *Meg Smith*

We are scraping back mud,
in the crush of frosty breath,
in a sunken world, a gray Atlantis.
This is where they lie,
without wrist watches
or class rings or wallets, or keys,
or waking after
the winter solstice.
Perhaps they pleaded their case
from spring, green and new,
and waited, writing the
poetry of exquisites,
and singing, until breath was done,
taken by a cruel hand
that promised magic tricks, or wine,
or money, or a car to tear up the skies.
No one knows, and we don't need to.
Ours is only to carry away. Still,
weeping encircles us,
tears frozen in orbit
in this dark space.

Earthly Heart | *Meg Smith*

Uncover me
when spring comes,
and the ground softens.
Unveil me,
for testing, decoding, deducing
any cause or causality.
Only golden dust
in the finery
of my bones
will keep any gift of time.
Listen to me now,
because by then,
I'll only laugh in silence,
clutching myself
to myself, heartless,
but for stones in soil,
clasping that secret sun.

Hella | *Meg Smith*

Our bodies are filling with light,
this beggarly kiss,
of a deadly sun,
and I weep.
Blood is gone, but we burn
lonely beacons banishing night.
There was once
only you, and me,
and a forest of dark places,
moss beds and sleeping leaves,
and that was enough.
If every bleed was stolen,
I could not care, and I
would give it all
to nourish you even
to the last crying place
drawing near
to this star without pity.

Aliens | *Lynn White*

They emerged from the eggs
of our snow white Silkies.
Every one a cockerel when grown,
we decided to have one for dinner.
The skin was blue, under the white plumage,
which was quite a shock,
a little alien,
but cooked, it was fine. Normal.
And the flesh was white,
But when carved, the bones were blue.
Disconcerting.
A little alien.

And now these red feathered birds
have appeared as if from nowhere,
their eggs pink.
When they hatched and grew,
all were hens,
their clutches carefully hidden,
each batch of chicks larger than the last.
A little strange,
a little alien.
And then, at last, there were cockerels,
too many and too large.
We decided to have one for dinner.
The skin was pink under the red plumage
which was quite a shock.
A little alien.
But cooked it was fine. Normal.
And the flesh was white.
But when carved the bones were pink,
Disconcerting,
more than a little alien.

There are more of them now,
growing ever larger.
I think that soon
the dinner tables will be turned
and they'll make a meal of us.

About the Author:

Lynn White lives in north Wales. Her work is influenced by issues of social justice and events, places and people she has known or imagined. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy and reality. She was shortlisted in the Theatre Cloud 'War Poetry for Today' competition and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net and a Rhysling Award.

Author Website: [Lynn White Poetry](#)

Facebook: [Lynn White Poetry](#)

Apocalyptic Rodents | E. F. Schraeder

Technically, they're smart.
Mazes and all that.

A slice of brain and a dash
of neuroscience—

Poof.
That's proof!

Like humanity but better
at some things

like new patterns,
response times, empathy.

Whiskers and fur,
they're what's left

scattered and dashing,
making, creating

from everything
humans blew to shreds.

The things they'll find
or leave behind

Doesn't matter
once the earth is theirs.

Squirrel's Eye | E. F. Schraeder

The gelatinous sphere
but a placeholder, a symbol
for what demanded witness.

Since the booming sky of silver light,
emptiness wrested a calm silence
and the air smelled good again.

One socket smooth and empty.
Two was better, but
he maneuvers just fine with one.

The smog lifted and anyway
streets have been better, safer
since the humans died out.

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.



It moves beneath the skin
Chilling the blood
Clenching my heart,
Tightly

I try to keep both mind
And composure
Try to resist this slow,
Poison

The enemy is strong
Its tendrils far reaching
Clawing at my soul,
Ripping

I am losing myself
I feel it with every slip of the pulse
With every labored,
Beat

It pulls me down
Suffocating me in sorrow
Drowning me in pain,
Regret

The world has changed,
Mankind along with it.
Reluctantly, we've adapted,
Given into our primal urges,
Becoming the animals
We were told we could be.
A landscape of vagabonds
Disheveled, distraught, and destitute
Littering a world of decay.
When the world ended,
And we realized
It could never be mended,
We gave into depravity
As if it were second nature,
And perhaps it was.
After all, we were the first
To murder our own,
Allowing Mother Earth's first
Taste of blood.
How can we now deny her
What she so deeply desires?

Wicked Little Flesh Eaters | *Christopher Sartin*

Step beyond the blight,
The discarded binkies,
And rotting remains
Of Gerber and Similac.

Follow the wicked coos,
The bloody entrails,
And decay of small rodents
To the nursery

Where mother and father
No longer tread
And childlike innocence
Has long been forgotten.

There you will find them
Feasting upon the flesh
Of a young girl who assumed
Babysitting would be painless.

About the Author:

Christopher Sartin hails from West Virginia, where monsters and madness are as common as the black rock that runs through the state's veins. He shares his humble abode with his wife, daughters, and canine conspirator Milo. You can find his most recent work in the anthology *Strange Tales of Terror* as well as the upcoming anthology *Sand, Salt, Blood*.

Twitter: [@chris_sartin01](https://twitter.com/chris_sartin01)

Instagram: [@chris_sartin01](https://www.instagram.com/chris_sartin01)



Guillotine | T.C. Bennett

My heart thrash fiercely
beneath my bones—
like a diseased rat inside
my chest, gnawing for a way
out of my wall of flesh.

I step deep and slow,
while the executioner gently
nudges me to an ancient
contraption with a hole.

As I gaze around the
cacophony, I can't help but
ponder why I gutted that
Pastor, after I robbed him?

Then I hear the rope pulling
up the heavy blade, and I'm
pinned in a circle, and
held in place.

I'm divided in two, while trapped
in my skull—my appendages
have slid from me—spilling across
the blood speckled snow.

My coiled guts tightened
like a fighter's fist—
wiggling my supper to a
moaning lisp.

With a thud, I have wobbled
inside a wicker basket—sipping
the sweat from my quivering lips,
listening to gasps of the town's hypocrites.

I shed a tear silently in fear,
while the darkness loosely drapes me
with a blanket of infinite sky,
and in thirty seconds my brain
will die.

Lamentably unwell, awaiting the bugs
arrival—while they climb the ladder
of the features of my face, rung after rung,
and yet, so oblivious to my sword sharp
stubble.

They will erase me as they feast
with their piggish appetites, and
expose me to bone—put an end
to dreams and aging skin.

But my peasant face will fall
again, and again, and somewhere
else is my bed, - where I lay
with my head.

About the Author:

T. C. Bennett's short fiction has appeared in 100 Doors To Madness, Writers of Mystery and Imagination, and in various other magazines and anthologies. He is the publisher and co-editor of the horror anthology Cemetery Riots, which made the 2016 Bram Stoker Ballot For Anthology and was a Best Book Award Finalist in Fiction Anthology of 2016.

Frigid Harshness | *Nina D'Arcangela*

Stone fucking cold.
An awareness that emanates from within.
I've always believed the most grievous pain
would come from what is held inside,
from emotional wounds that take more than what
forever is offering to heal —
I was wrong.

The worst of it is being empty,
drained, a vacuous core, a dull resonating
hollow that allows for nothing —
not even the sting of its own
frigid harshness.

About the Author:

Nina is a co-owner of Sirens Call Publications, a co-founding member of the horror writer's group Pen of the Damned, the founder of The Ladies of Horror Picture-prompt Writing Challenge that has been running for 8 years, and the owner and resident anarchist of Dark Angel Photography.

Author Blog: [Spreading the Writer's Word](#)

Instagram: [@DarcNina](#)

Life and Death | *Suzie Lockhart*

burrowed in crevices
withering branches
nourish eggs

life-cycle begins
rooted in darkness
sunlight awakens

transcending the silence
translucent wings beat
a piercing symphony

a cry of rebirth
a call of death
the ground awaits

About the Author:

Suzie Lockhart had her first short story published over a decade ago, and has never looked back. Most of her stories and poetry are within the horror community, although she's dabbled in romance. She often teams-up with her son and writing partner, Bruce Lockhart 2nd. Together they have been in over 50 publications, and won several awards. Suzie has also edited anthologies featuring female horror writers, including the successful *Killing It Softly* volumes 1 & 2.

Facebook: [Suzi Lockhart](#)

LinkedIn: [Suzie Lochkhart](#)

Leaving a Minty Fresh Corpse | *Terry Trowbridge*

We must be arcane,
we who have killed a mint plant indoors.
Our windowsills must not let sunshine enter
but rather let darkness out.
We who chill bumblebees by
casting our shadows over flowerbeds.
We whose touches leave cavities in toothpaste tubes,
whose touches bleach colour from candy canes,
whose touches turn mint Aero bars into shampoo foam.

We have killed a mint plant.
The impossible roots that do not cross over
cross our windowpanes into the last reflection.
Sow with us, but we harrow last year's ghosts.
Soil us, we had no innocence to clean.
We who have killed a mint plant indoors
and leave the brown thicket in the window
the way Baba Yaga left a candle in her window,
warning the wise children away from our gingerbread.

About the Author:

Terry Trowbridge is a Canadian poet, plum farmer, sometimes grad student, living on the south shore of Lake Ontario.

Facebook: [Terry Trowbridge](#)

Starting Anew | *Mike Turner*

The dust has settled
No stone stands upon stone
Still shadows color empty boulevards
Bereft of traffic
Outlines of hallowed halls of capital
Lay empty of commerce
While the collected wisdom of the ages
Scatters across barren landscapes
Where there are none to read or learn
As harsh morning light burns the scarred ground
A solitary green shoot
Thrusts its way through crusted soil
Reaching for sun and rain and sustenance
Flora perhaps as none ever seen
In a world forever changed
By the fear and folly of Man
And becomes the first symbol
Of a resilient Earth
Starting anew

About the Author:

Mike Turner retired to the US Gulf Coast after a 25-year career as a Federal law enforcement executive and took up songwriting and poetry. He has had more than 250 poems published in numerous journals and anthologies; his original songs have received airplay in the US, UK and Europe. When not writing, Mike explores the Gulf's bayous and backwaters aboard his classic recreational trawler.

Facebook: [Facebook: Mike Turner - Songwriter](#)
Twitter: [@SchoonerSkipper](#)

The Woodland Song | DJ Tyrer

Dare you venture deep
Into the dark-shadowed wood?
Dare you venture deeper
Than you know you should?
There in those hidden places
There in those secret spaces
Where the trees seem wrong
That is where, if you dare
You'll hear the woodland song
A sensual siren call
That caresses your soul
The song of the wood
Soon takes its toll
There in those hidden places
There in those secret spaces
Where the trees seem wrong
You'll find yourself enticed
By the secret woodland song
Never to leave
Your kin will grieve
Another victim of the woodland song

Killer Kudzu | DJ Tyrer

Invasive plant gets everywhere
Nigh impossible to root out, destroy
Completely. Keeps coming back
Regenerating from the tiniest scrap.
Nuisance, bad for buildings,
Worse for native plant and animal life
But, still no more than a bother
For humanity. Until...
Kudzu gains a taste for flesh
Burrowing into human and animal tissue
Replacing meat with vegetable matter
Until nothing remains. Identity gone.
Just a mindless, twitching husk
Sending forth shoots, seeking hosts
Expanding their reach, engulfing
All humanity, all animal life
All the world, till nothing remains
But kudzu. Endless kudzu.

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).

Author Website: [DJ Tyrer](#)

Twitter: [@DJTyrer](#)

Bent Metal



NINA D'ARCANGELA

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Duckling Days | JB Corso

chirp-chirp

the ducklings rattle on all day
with no breaks in their chattering at night,
we used to think they were cute
precious little tufts of fur,
the purest of animal innocence
on adorable webbed feet,
not anymore,
not since South Carolina;
'squat-billed locusts'
consuming everything
they encounter,
putting the tenacity
of goats and time to shame;
their relentless chomping
reduces towns to rubble in days
leveling cities in weeks;
somehow they're laying eggs
in makeshift nests in the bodies
of their prey;
fifty eggs apiece every week
according to some sources,
they shouldn't be mature enough
to spread their living disease so far,
nature's cheat code on full display;

chirp-chirp

their incessant chattering
drives even the most stubborn
person to dig out their ear drums,
their iron teeth have eaten through the tanks
and the concrete barriers;
flamethrowers and gasoline bombs
burns them into fluffy bonfires,
their eggs always surviving
somehow resistant to everything
but the bottom of our boots;

chirp-chirp

echoes through the Midwest
plains and valleys now,
they leave behind
slicks of watery waste
making the land unlivable,
we aren't going to survive;

chirp-chirp

here they come

stomping
thumping
the trees are on the move,
an entire forest
awakens
with motion,
the animals have fled
knowing better
to become trapped and eaten;
a distant fire
grabs their attention
as their weight
plows deep crevices
into the soil;
their bark armor
solidifies like iron
their roots sprawl
atop the soil
like thousands of
land tentacles
slithering through the
dirt carnage;
the first human screams
end into silent among the
stomping
and thumping,
a lumberjack's hound snarls
with its ears pressed back
watching the lumbering
armada shuffle closer
to the work camp's edge,
a primitive fence
made from
wooden body of their family
falls against their the first wave;
the worker's temporary
log homes fall
with as much mercy
as the crew
showed for the trees' kin;
they march forward towards
the line of primitive villages
leaving nothing but
destruction just like
us humans easily did
during our former reign
as the planet's
dominant species

the centipedes' spiny legs
numbered in the billions,
the march was upon us
with waves upon waves
immune to our generational
instruments of war;
our poison bombs wiped out millions
of their crawling lines
only to be replaced
by their next generations
slithering over their dead piles,
each new brood
becoming more immune to the
pea green clouds that we sprayed
over our pastures and water tables;
they jammed their tiny bodies into the
engines of our machines rendering them useless,
they scaled our buildings and
exploited every crevice larger than
a thin crack;
their relentless advances
pushed those of us left
into the desert wasteland;
we had no means to fight
an enemy that couldn't be exhausted
our dead bodies feed their war effort
as they layer victory upon victory,
we long for the mountainous cold
where they haven't adapted to
the snow and freezing air,

yet

About the Author:

JB Corso is a health care professional who has worked with the mentally ill and geriatric populations for the last 20 years. He appreciates time with his children, writing, and pondering existential dread. He's a combat arms veteran who deployed as an international peacekeeper. He lives with his significant other and enjoys afternoon drives listening to music.

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





From the darkness
and the shadows
From the lunacy
and the void



POETRY OF MONSTERS AND MADNESS

My Purifying Wave | J. Grell

I shift in my crusted cradle as you deposit more swill,
I taste your filth and allow it to fuel my anger.
My irritation is illustrated for those standing by the shore,
Watching the frightened intruders forced to drop anchor.

The biggest form on the planet,
Receives invasion from all directions.
Disrupting and endangering my family of creatures,
With foreign weapons of trash destruction.

You take advantage of my power,
And use me for recreation and travel and food and life.
While abusing me with your ignorance and your disregard for responsibility,
Assuming my actions will be free from strife.

You'll be the foolish one, for thinking I won't react.
Thinking I won't seek revenge, I won't strike back.

I will gather your rubble and your oil and your bodies,
And swallow them whole for strength to my purifying wave.
I will unleash pure havoc, smothering and suffocating you and all you love,
And laugh in my bliss, as I gaze at your new garbage laden grave.

About the Author:

J. Grell hails from Columbus, Ohio where he stays busy with his wife and two daughters. An avid reader of horror, J also dabbles in writing. His sense of humor is shown on his youtube channel and co-hosting Paper Cuts. J plans to release a short-story collection by the end of 2023 with writer L. Stephenson, and is working on a collection of his own.

Twitter: [@TheSirJ10](https://twitter.com/TheSirJ10)



Cold and thankless, my spirit bereft
I had neither children, nor kinfolk left
My course uncertain, well-uncharted
Resources few; any comfort departed
All hope and light had trickled down
When I set foot out of this Crier's Town
On a bridge chaining islands to each other
Footsteps repeated like I had a brother
Behind me marching—a common stranger
I seemed to possess a knack for danger
Filling my lungs a final breath
I believed I crossed the ledge of death
And tensely clasped a dagger's hilt
I would use if necessary, free of guilt
To pierce his heart should humanity lack
Desperation gave my courage back
That I would deal a fatal stroke—
But only should a threat provoke!

Amid swampland I roused; a sudden nap
Plundered and felled by an ungentle tap
Being up so often a proverbial creek
I loathed getting wet and feeling weak
For I'd weathered storms beyond my share
And was not inclined to easily scare
Till a Cottonmouth drooped above my face
Which made me eager to depart the place
A knob-laden log cruised the water like a shark
Teeth long and jagged; they'd leave a mark!
Scarce visible in the pool it swam
A callous eye latched on my fearful clam
I swear it gave me a lurid wink
Gliding across that murken drink
While I fretted how much was still submerged
The Gator and I abruptly converged
As his upper jaw angled supremely high—
Lips muttered "This day I refuse to die."

Dripping chops wore a sly and savage leer
Then snapped together, a diabolic sneer
Swinging from a vine, I sprang toward a flatboat
And poled to Dungeon Key barely stayin' afloat...
The leaky craft harboring a mildewed box
With a map and scrap of iron forged for locks
An actual key that fit a damp Prison Tower
Risen o'er a Cellar-Keep; in its stronghold I cower
To languish alone, the monster pacing without!
An isolated trap, rarely visited no doubt
This forgotten isle one of various green shards
Lunar and solar orbs impervious as guards
Weaponless, starving, I named the hungry brute—

An ill-fated stand-off: Tess and Big Snoot.

Alebrije | *Lori R. Lopez*

Crafted by bizarre magic, a Bewitching Spell.
The result of ancient minds and mythics gone mad.
A messy Art Project ending well or outrageously bad.
However fabricated, concocted, mismatched and curious
the red-striped purple-spotted orange-polkadotted
yellow-green beast may be—a living-breathing
patchwork monster landed, thumping a plastic table
in front of Mora! Grinning, the child greeted
her fabulous new playmate...

Brightly painted, multi-colored. Papery feathers
and real claws. Needle Incisors, hollow-eyed.
Shaped like a Gargoyle of a Bat, Lizard and Bunncat,
the Chimera gave mixed vibes: scaled and furred,
nightmarish, quirky and unfortunate, a mingled
dragonesque distortion. Whatever it could be;
whichever whimsical Hoodoo or Bugaboo
crouched by the kid—a fanciful fantastical
Thingamabob purred: grumbling.

“You’re not a kitty. What are you?” Quizzically,
tone pensive, the girl tapped a finger to her chin.
“I’m gonna call you Crazy Cat. Gato Loco.”
A sticky tongue flicked out, licked bumpy lips.
Spiky growths down a wavy spine shook, ringing.
Crazy Cat seemed to like his name. Deep growls.
“You’re just like at the store. I asked my mom
to buy me one. She said they cost too much.”
The creature had no price-tag...

“We can make one Mami said, but she works.”

La niña stroked an absurd deformed head.
“Looks like you’re free! It’s my lucky day.”
The sweet voice hummed, then expressed amusement:
“You’re so pretty, I wanna gobble you like candy!”
Laughing, twisting her face, she patted dark wings.
The warm Texas Sun twinkled in brown eyes.
These are what a Found Friend beheld in wonder.
All the while watching a dim silhouette form—
and slide over sandy ground...

Before the girl might scurry inside and tell Mama
an Alebrije like the strange Papier-Mâché Animals
from the Market flew to their casa—closer crept
the shade, its contours peculiar, jaws gaping wide.
The visiting anomaly could swallow her in a gulp!
Umbral wings stretched. Empty orbs blazed,

a twilight inferno. Gato Loco swooped to catch
the Shadow Monster in curled blue talons. Limbs
and hairs rustled; tails thrashed...

Crazy Cat soared into the sky to remove the stain,
as Mora begged her amigo not to melt his glue!

Mami told her Black Butterflies bring misery...
yet Alebrijes are a girl's best buddy.

I Called Him Monster | *Lori R. Lopez*

Had I embraced another fascination,
my life taken another turn—veered down a less
morbid road—I might have found
and shared pure joy for the rest of my days...

We cannot always choose the lane
before us—as much as we, for all our vastly
complicated intellect, do appear to
have free will. Peace is an elusive treasure.

I have swiftly learned to appreciate
the smallest items that will easily escape us
should eyes ignore them, or not be
as discerning. I tell you this in warning...

My days are winding down. I cannot
remember the best of them, when I was young.
There are but the grim recollections of
a wandering soul locked in penance, seeking—

A counterpart who once mattered not.
The nemesis for everything become unbearable.
An entity for many reasons my enemy.
Mercy and understanding for what I have done.

The decisions made, and not made well,
can pile in ever-daunting stacks of consequences,
to steer us through a course of obstacles.
And that is how I reached this trail of woebegone.

A remote place where cold is so thick—
so dense it takes on form and substance, blocking,
altering, swerving us in wrong directions,
beyond the brink of endurance; past a safe return.

And here are we, out on this frozen trek...
searching to catch sight of something, someone...
a chance to meet doppelgängers, hide from
who we are—but always closing in on the truth.

Difficult to face; disturbing to confront.
Out here, the blades of the wind are razor-sharp.
I can glimpse only a short space ahead.
Yet now and then I see farther, clearer, a distance.

Almost like a mirror. And a window.
Displaying my regrets, my fears, the secrets kept
from even myself. Now that I'm here,
I view these revelations and confessions frankly.

I feel no blame. Though still I shudder
with remorse, and cringe at all that transpired
between two hunched lone figures filled
with pain, shouldering tremendous burdens...

Knowing we remain antagonistic foes,
the steps we take are numbered and deliberate.
In the end of time I called him Monster.
When first we met, he said his name was Victor.

Frogs are croaking | *Lori R. Lopez*

Frogs are croaking in odd patterns by the pond.
Rhythmic repeating ribbits. Regularly irregular...
I make a note of the phenomenon. Intriguing.
Composing music? Something to keep in mind.
We should always pay attention to Nature.

Hounds are baying, a clamor of Canines.
A chorus of drawn-out wails like Mad Dogs.
I'd swear they were trying to sing. Tenor and Bass.
It's vaguely an Opera. I search, frantic for a pen.
I must record these curious observations.

The birds... is that arguing? Making speeches?
Irate screeches. Branch squabbles. Feuding trills.
Furious squawks. I can barely scribble fast enough...
What can any of this mean? It isn't random.
Have our feathered friends gone batty?

Feline Ferals and Alley Cats are keeping quiet.
No spats. No hissyfits or caterwauls as I scrawl this.
Spying their silhouettes in moonfall, eyes aglow.
Watchful as Crows, one could say. But those rained.
Bodies and dark feathers lie broken by impact.

Bugs or mice scratch, clawing inside the walls.
I hear them at every hour. Even in my sleep!
Why won't they cease? Don't they ever rest?
Where did I leave my pen? It vanished. Stolen.
Fine, I'll use a knife. I can scratch too!

There was a drone; a loud humming like bees or flies.
All around. Today extinguished. Sudden as it began.
I now hear crickets. Ordinary; soothing unless it's a Solo.
Except when it's the sound of an uncomfortable pause.
They stopped. Completely still. This is awkward.

Such days used to be normal. Unremarkable...
I really need to find that pen. No noise, it's unnatural.
We should be mindful of animal warnings!
And the opposite. When like us they listen.
When like us they're alert, jumpy, perturbed—

I'm okay. I know what I wanted to jot down.
And my pen rolled under the sofa. Here it is, see?
I can write. Oh no, it's out of ink! Panic-scoring.
Gouging. Black erratic marks. It works again.
Before the wild stampeding rush. There.

A disconcerting rumble—in the distance rising.
There were signs, an entire week. This won't be good.
I knew something was up and did nothing.
Beetles and Songbirds smack windows, thudding.
My house shudders. Another bad omen.

"I should've told someone!" A bleak uncanny howl.
Who would listen? Only the frogs. Cats and dogs.
Goldfish. Canaries and chickens. Pet Iguanas.
Most people are too dumb to be afraid, or change.
I keep writing. Until the end. Hoping the ink lasts.

The Ferry Queen | Lori R. Lopez

At Eventide, the windows of towns resembled stars
from a distance. Twinkling or steady, a calming sight
as I returned from a voyage. Like rows of Signal Fires
to wanderers, the welcome of stable dirt underfoot,
solid as a deck with the first Spring Thaw, before rains
and slippery transformations. I never worried whether
the occupants of those lighthouse beacons were benevolent—
or something else. Weary of wetness, pacing in wait...

I sought merely to dry and relax.

Impatient for the last leg of a long journey, a brief sail
to the isle where I was born; where much was different
yet still the same each year of my return. Changes could
be cathartic, or intensely chaotic. Treading the Channel Pier,
tongue poised to lash with a mock-indignant tone, I squinted
toward a shadowy barge—coasting then bumping hard.
"Sakes alive, Dorrie! If you want my coin, you'd best
have an excuse for being so late!" No chuckle and retort.

A squeal, the rub of soaked wood.

"Is that an apology I hear?" No answer whatsoever from the docking craft. Had it grown? Perhaps my eyes were smaller. "Dorrie?" In dismay I thought, *Don't tell me she's gone!* Too many friends, familiar faces traveled beyond the setting Sun. I peered for any trace of life... The tailgate, a broad gangplank, remained upright. "Odd." I braced to scramble over the edge, proud of my agility. By dim Running Lights, I felt certain the shape was wrong.

"I expect a discount for this!"

The silence was disturbing. Likewise a soft grotesque sponginess. "I am not Dorrie." The grumble-hum jarred a final strand of composure. "I am the Ferry Queen." Unbalanced, thrust into a frenzy of panic, rejecting the aquatic behemoth that arrived, I poised to spring out. The vessel or creature drifted too far to leap, then lingered between Port and my destination. A second rumble. Like a belly, aching to feed. Somehow the Island Ferry merged—

With an entity from the brine.

This monstrous Queen swallowed the boat, or seeped through its beams. An oceanic Changeling; a Shapeshifter. Devouring, absorbing Dorrie and all! My friend was truly gone. I had no chance to salvage her. Just a last-instant warning to spare my neck. Fog penetrated a porous squishy brain, caused feet to stagger the worst wrong direction. Plunged in frigid waters, I desperately stroked for safety! Clinging to a shred, a single tiny shred of sanity.

That thing reached out—impossible!

Unreeling tentacles from the vessel's body, ending at iron talons, heavy sharp hooks. Breaking off bits of pier, cracking stone, the whips splashed and stirred inken waves. Hauling myself, I grew Landlegs to flee ... and so remain.

She's out there, a Ferry-Beast, prowling the sea and shore.

About the Author:

Lori R. Lopez is an offbeat author-illustrator, poet, songwriter, and wearer of hats, as well as an animal-and-monster-lover. Verse has appeared in *The Sirens Call*, *The Horror Zine*, *H.W.A. Poetry Showcases*, *Weirdbook*, *Spectral Realms*, *Space & Time Magazine*, *JOURN-E*, *Oddball Magazine*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Altered Reality Magazine*, *California Screamin* (the Foreword Poem) and much more. Books include *The Dark Mister Snark*, *Odds & Ends*, *Leery Lane*, *An Ill Wind Blows*, *The Witchhunt*, and *Darkverse: The Shadow Hours*. Lori has been nominated for the Elgin and Rhysling Awards.

Facebook: [Lori R. Lopez](#)

Twitter: [@LoriRLopez](#)

Beware! Mister Snark is lurking...

THE DARK MISTER SNARK

Lori R.
Lopez



LORI LOPEZ-15

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

The gray mouse lifted his little head and sniffed the air. There it was—that sweet, intoxicating smell again. He never encountered it before until earlier today, when he had been unintentionally kidnapped by two small boys and their grandma while on their apple-picking trip to the big orchard where he lived. He was inspecting the apples that the boys had just picked and placed in a plastic bag, when Grandma grabbed the bag, tied it up, sealing him in, and headed into the greenhouse to pay.

Tried as he might, the mouse couldn't find a way out of the tightly knotted plastic bag. He had begun to gasp for air. Then Grandma plopped the bag on the counter for the cashier. The mouse saw his chance, wriggled through a tiny gap near the straps, and then jumped out of the bag to scurry away. That was when he caught his first whiff of that delicious scent. But then he came face to face with Grandma, who let out a blood-curdling scream, swept the bag of apples to the floor, and ran through the door, not even pausing for her grandsons. After the initial shock and fright, the boys ran after their grandma, squealing and laughing. The bag laid where it fell. Nobody was coming back for it.

The mouse forgot about the smell and hid under some crates until nightfall, when all the humans were gone. Then he came out and gingerly started exploring. The greenhouse was interesting, but open fields and fresh air were more to his liking, so he headed for the door. It was closed, but there was always a way out.

Then he smelled that sweet, flowery fragrance again. It was coming from another part of the greenhouse. As if pulled by an invisible thread, he followed the scent into a much warmer and humid room. Here, the intoxicating smell was overpowering. It must be from one of the colorful and luscious plants living in this fascinating place.

The mouse forgot all about the orchard, his nest, the fresh autumn air outside, and the apples. He followed his nose until he came to a bizarre plant, nothing like he had seen before. Sure, it had a stem and leaves like every plant, but it also had several long cups, like pitchers, attached to its stem. And each pitcher was inviting him to drink the most delicious juice it had carefully collected just for him.

The aroma was irresistible. The mouse peeked into a pitcher. The clear slightly viscous liquid was on the bottom, but not too far. He could probably reach it. He extended his head and tried to lick it. So close, but not quite. Another try, more daring and careless this time.

His paws slipped on the smooth wet surface, and he slipped into the pitcher and landed in a tiny pool of nectar at the bottom. He could drink all the nectar he wanted now. But the smell had changed. It was now mixed with the unmistakable smell of decay, more sickening than sweet. The mouse tried to move, to get out of this weird trap, but the liquid was too heavy and sticky and the walls around him too slick. He frantically kicked and kicked until he had no more strength left.

Enveloped by sweet nectar, his tiny body slowly sank to the bottom of the pitcher, where it duly joined a dozen little skeletons left behind by the previously digested victims of *Nepenthes tentaculate*.

About the Author:

Milkana N. Mingels was born in Bulgaria and currently lives in Massachusetts. She is the author of the *Tales from the Mountain of Perun* duology. Her short fiction has appeared in The Sirens Call, Short-story.me and Every Day Fiction e-zines.

Facebook: [Milkana N. Mingels](#)

Twitter: [@MilkanaMingels](#)



The gun felt much heavier in her hand than she remembered.

The weight of steel beneath her fingers was comforting, but she was clutching the handle so tightly that a layer of sweat threatened to loosen her grip. Slowly, she moved the gun to her left hand so she could wipe her palm on her pants.

Her biggest fear was that the moment would come and she wouldn't be able to pull the trigger. The scene played in her head on repeat; she saw herself running like Lara Croft, the gun blazing at the end of her outstretched arm, firing off shots that lit up the darkness of the backyard and ripped through the soft bellies of her tormentors.

Truth was, Johanna had never even removed the gun from its case until this night. And instead of a loaded magazine like a proper Tomb Raider, she had only one bullet in the chamber to risk it all.

But as the sound of angry chitters rose in the air and moved closer to her crouching figure in the dark, she realized that if she missed the shot, she would never get the chance to hold the gun again.

"Morning. I tried to catch you when you were moving in!"

A woman stood at the curb with her hands casually pushed down into the pockets of her overalls; visibly older and a face weathered with worry, she leaned her weight on one leg and frowned.

"I wanted to warn you about the raccoons around here," she continued.

Johanna was smoothing number decals on the mailbox of her new home when the woman — presumably her neighbor—beckoned for her attention from just a few feet away.

"Hey there—raccoons you say?" She waved back.

The woman nodded. "Better watch out, they're nasty little fuckers."

"Oh? That's...not really good to hear right now." Johanna replied nervously. She didn't know whether this strange woman in dirty Timberlands was being overly dramatic or if there was real danger at hand.

"Should I call someone?"

"Just stay out of their way and you'll be alright. Been here 30 years but we learned the hard way. I used to flag people down when they viewed a house for sale, but the sellers didn't like that," she chuckled.

Raccoons? Johanna was cynical, but she listened politely as her neighbor rambled on. The grizzled woman's hair was loosely pulled back into a scarf and Johanna thought she saw deep red welts across the side of her face before she pulled a clump of hair forward.

"Like I said, I've been here a long time so if you got any questions—I'm Roxy." She stepped back up onto the curb and turned on her boot heel, walking toward the house directly across from Johanna's.

Three days passed before Johanna met the infamous raccoons.

It was just before sunset when she and Victor, her 15-year-old son, were grilling on the backyard deck. Victor suddenly froze; Johanna followed his stare as the first creature stepped out of the tree line and sat in the grass. Baring its teeth in a menacing fashion, it seemed to challenge Victor to make the first move.

"Hey, Ma - we got company!" exclaimed Victor.

Instinctively, Johanna rose from her seat and placed a protective hand on Victor's shoulder.

"Here boy!" Victor tossed a half-eaten spare rib toward the animal, amused as it quickly snatched the bone from the grass and scooted backward into the trees. Within seconds, more raccoons began easing out of the woods to sit on the grass, staring. Victor flung a few more scraps in their direction but it quickly became clear that the beggars far outnumbered the bones.

"Remember what Roxy said!" Johanna whispered, reaching for Victor's arm to stop him from flinging more food; at this point, the bandits had tripled in number and were edging closer to the deck.

"She said to stay out of their way, but what better way to make friends than to feed them? Come on, it's like paying the mob for protection!" Victor laughed, gently pulling his arm away to toss a piece of potato into the yard.

Johanna felt an uneasiness forming in the pit of her stomach. "I'm not kidding, Vic. Stop it NOW."

Victor scoffed but paused the feeding, and a significantly larger raccoon pushed its way forward and the pack seemed to part in acknowledgement of its authority. The size of a small boar and undoubtedly the largest raccoon that either of them had ever seen, the characteristic five long fingers extending from each paw more closely resembled human hands than those of a raccoon. It positioned itself at the front of the pack, its nose vigorously twitching side to side.

“What the hell is that—how did it get so big?” Victor whispered between his teeth.

Johanna grabbed the tray of meat and headed into the house, calling over her shoulder. “Get inside!”

He obeyed and quickly hopped over the threshold, sliding the patio door closed and drawing the curtains.

Pow!

Something slammed against the door with enough force to shake the curtains, followed by a chorus of soft thumps raining across the wood deck. The kitchen floor beneath Johanna and Victor’s feet vibrated from the pandemonium on the other side of the sliding door. *Ssst! Garrrrll!*

“What was that?” Her son asked, eyes wide with fear.

Her mouth gaped open but she couldn’t form the words to comfort him in the moment. A thought formed in the back of her mind, but...it couldn’t be, could it?

Lunging forward, she snatched open the curtain and recoiled in horror before stumbling two steps back. The raccoons were piled atop each other pressing against the glass, nearly blocking out all light from outside. Patterns of fur swirled in motion, accented by angry slanted rodent-like eyes; razor-sharp teeth snapped open and close, emitting growls from their pointed snouts. Slimy pink tongues lapped at the glass, leaving wet trails to be smeared by the wild mass of black and brown fur. Pale fingers tipped with pointed claws scraped against the door, adding a *scree scree* sound to the chorus of grunts and growls.

The entire deck was covered by hundreds of animals yet they continued to march out of the trees and crawl atop each other to snarl and claw at the door.

Crack!

“They’re gonna get in!” Victor panicked, as fractures appeared along the bottom seam of the glass. His hand closed over the long handle of the grill fork and he quickly wielded it in front of him, shaking it aggressively toward the creatures. “Go away! Go AWAY!”

Down in the yard, the largest creature rose up on its haunches and blasted a handful of sharp piercing barks before quickly turning and scooting his wide frame back in the direction from which he’d came.

The attackers began an abrupt retreat, falling back from the glass—layer by furry layer— pivoting toward the steps and trotting into the woods.

Within minutes, the deck was clear. But deep gouges in the wood and clumps of wet fur stuck to the glass door were evidence that something unnatural had taken place on the deck that day.

From the safety of her living room window, Johanna studied the quiet community she and her son had fallen in love with at first sight. A three-mile-long swath of cottage-styled homes surrounded by lush forestry, it looked as if a two-lane road had been bulldozed through the woods and the houses dropped from the sky. There formed the sleepy little hovel that she had been so excited to make their home just a few months earlier.

But now, their dream home was a place of fear, as the raccoons stalked their property each night, mewling and hissing as if Johanna and Victor were the enemy. She could hear them *chittering* in the woods, sending messages—she imagined—about when next to attack.

Googling led to the purchase of a repellant spray made of coyote urine, but the scent was incredibly nauseating as it wafted through the vents and filled the house. A freshly ground paste of raw garlic and cracked pepper appeared to slow them down, but its effectiveness was diluted after a few hours exposed to air, and then the raccoons would trot right through it.

The spring-loaded cages proved to be quite effective, but the raccoons were so enraged at being caught, they would violently rock the traps back and forth making it impossible to get close to the cage to remove them from the property. Victor came up with the idea of using a cattle prod to neutralize them long enough to drown in a barrel of water. Effective, but also cruel and labor intensive. In addition, seeing their cohorts locked inside of steel traps seemed to anger the raccoons even more and they increased their harassment. Johanna had begun to notice deep trenches around the base of the house, as if the animals had attempted to dig in at the basement level!

While messages left for local wildlife exterminators had gone unanswered, there was one person that could help.

Roxy was sitting outside when Johanna crossed the street and approached her walkway; she waved her hand toward an empty chair to her left.

“You musta done pissed them off. I told you to stay out of their way!”

“We didn’t do anything!” Johanna weakly protested.

"Uh uh. You did something. I see them over there circling your house at night." Roxy tilted her head and stared at Johanna with accusing eyes.

"My son just tossed them a few bones—"

Roxy slapped her knee and exclaimed, "There it is! You tried to be friends with them. Now they done locked in on you."

She turned sideways and pushed her hair back to reveal more scars; several of which looked to be covered in fresh dried blood. "I have my battles with them ever so often."

"You're not afraid?" asked Johanna.

Roxy chuckled. "I can't go nowhere so I had to learn how to live *here*. Those demons been here longer than these houses, even longer than the streets we walk on. We invaded THEIR world, so I think they're trying to take it back, a little bit at a time."

Johanna listened as Roxy explained how she and her husband had hired contractors to push back half an acre of woods to begin construction of a greenhouse. Roxy's hands trembled as she clutched the fabric of her jeans at her thighs. "I guess they didn't like that," she concluded.

"My old man was out there trimming the edge of the grass right where we had started laying the foundation but the woods were at the line—that's when they took him."

"Took him?"

"I heard him screaming like I ain't never heard him scream before. Like he was scared to death. The edger was just-a *whirring whirring* all over the place like it does when you let go of the handle and it runs off without you. And my poor Jimmy...He wasn't no small man either..." Roxy's voice trailed off.

"They took him." She said again, quietly.

"But...they're just raccoons..."

"No...not *just*!" Roxy interrupted her. "They pulled him into the trees and we ain't never even found his shoes. Not *just* nothing!"

Johanna shuddered at the vision of what she imagined Mr. Jimmy might have looked like, a big strong man being pulled screaming into the trees by dozens of...raccoons?

"You said you can't leave—why not?"

"I wanna be here in case he comes back. In case he comes walking back out of the woods and into my kitchen with those dirty lawn mowing boots that I used to yell at him about. I know, I know, I sound like a lunatic. But I can't leave his *soul* out there alone."

The women sat in silence for a few moments, just looking out into the empty street, and Johanna realized for the first time how utterly quiet the entire street was. From the day she toured the open house and even moved in, not a single car had rolled down the street.

"Is it always so quiet?"

Roxy pointed to the house sitting several yards away. "Mr. David is there. I think. I ain't seen him in a while. But I ain't seen him move out either." She shrugged.

Victor disappeared a few days later.

Thankfully, Johanna had been spared the agony of helplessly witnessing her only child dragged into the woods. The police had written him off as a teenage runaway, but Johanna knew better. And the realization of her son's true fate drove her to her knees in despair, as she wailed in the night and cursed at the trees.

"GIVE HIM BACK TO ME!"

Blinking eyes like tiny dots of light opened up throughout the pitch-black yard; she thought she could hear them laughing at her, but that couldn't be true because raccoons didn't laugh. But then again, these raccoons could do things far beyond her wildest nightmare.

Now she crouched on her deck in the dark, aiming the barrel of the gun toward the 10-gallon propane tank sitting at the edge of the woods.

A deep growl came rolling from between the trees.

Leaves rustled and branches bent forward as *it* came rushing forward, *galloping* on four legs. Shocked at its size up close, Johanna clumsily tried to stand and take aim, but it took the stairs in two jumps and the swing of one hefty paw sent Johanna flying over the railing onto the gravel at the deck's edge.

She screamed as the monster dropped its full weight on her legs and dug sharp claws through her pants into her skin; pulling itself up her torso to hover its dripping snout above her face. With jaws open, it could easily swallow her head in one bite. Johanna had just a few seconds to aim at the tank and squeeze the trigger.

The sound of the gunshot was deafening and the kickback so great that her back scraped violently against the gravel. But the *kaboom!* of the bullet hitting the tank made her entire body release with satisfaction, fear, pain and joy.

The trees burst into orange flames and the air seared her lungs as she let go of it all; surrendering to the rows of teeth closing around her head before the fire would take them both away.

About the Author:

Kenya Moss-Dyme began writing short-form horror in her teens but the 2014 release of *Daymares* put her on the radar of horror fans. Readers will find that a common trait among Kenya's stories is that, more often than not, the truly frightening monsters are human.

Facebook: [Kenya Moss-Dyme](#)
Amazon Author Page: [Kenya Moss-Dyme](#)

Snatcher | *Miracle Austin*

My older cousin warned me about throwing my combed hair into the trash. She begged me to store it in a tin can and burn it frequently to keep the *Snatcher* from visiting me. I dismissed her ludicrous instructions...

One morning, I woke up with a throbbing headache. It felt like someone was beating the back of my head with two hammers. I rolled out of bed and crawled to the entrance of my bathroom. Reaching up for a bottle of aspirin, it dropped on the floor and all the pills spilled out.

The windows swung open. A gust of wind ushered in dry almond leaves, shredded paper, and tattered ribbons. I noticed an unfinished nest resting on a branch with three salt and pepper speckled eggs—one was cracked near the top. Strands of my red hair blew in the wind between the twigs and grass inside the nest. An oversized, bald-headed bird with ebony and scarlet, thick feathers, which resembled a vampire cloak, jumped on my windowsill. Its midnight eyes stared into mine without blinking.

It flew onto the counter and tip-toed towards me. My head felt as if it was about to rip apart. I pressed both of my hands against my burning temples.

Blood seeped down my forehead, and my hands felt an opening in the middle of my head. The bird flew down to the floor and appeared to skip towards me making deep rattling and clicking sounds with its maroon tongue. It scraped its long, crooked beak in the mid-section of its puffed chest.

Opening my eyes partially, the bird soared down close to me. Red tears pooled inside my eyes. The bird stopped a few inches in front of me. My blurred vision watched its beak open. It seemed to smile at me with its glowing, serrated teeth.

My body trembled. The bird spoke these words in a deep and raspy tone, "Now, I'm going to feed my hatchlings your gooey remains. You should've listened, Joanie."

About the Author:

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

Instagram: [@MiracleAustin7](#)
Twitter: [@MiracleAustin7](#)



The Night Watcher | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa*

I'm being watched.

I can feel its gaze poking at my back as I lay shivering in bed, the blanket pulled over my head.

I shouldn't have stayed out late to stargaze last week and accidentally made eye contact with it—with that singular orb glowing like a smoldering meteorite which stared back at me from the opposite building.

Since then, it's come to my penthouse every night to watch me. Changing room doesn't help, for there are windows everywhere. Its piercing gaze drills into my soul.

Tonight, the balcony's door suddenly creaks open, and an otherworldly chill envelopes me.

The Foaming Sea | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa*

The beach is crowded with streams of people pouring into the rumbling sea, whose crashing waves lick the shore, spattering silvery foams upon the golden sand.

Bending down to pick up her beach ball, a young girl's suddenly distracted by a crab nearby. Intrigued, she observes it, tuning out everything until it disappears beneath the sand minutes later.

Only then does she look up and realize that the beach is strangely empty and lifeless, with the only sound being a deep rumble somewhere out there. The white foams continue to spill over the sand, swallowing the land inch by inch.

First Impression | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa*

In front of my girlfriend's house, I give my appearance one final check to make sure my first impression on her parents would be a good one before I ring the bell.

She opens the door and beckons me inside, where two towering and intimidating middle-aged figures stand. Before I could say a thing, they storm toward me, red eyes flaring.

A sharp pain on my neck then shocks me. Looking back, I see my girlfriend sinking her fangs into my flesh, a sweet smile adorning her blood-stained lips. Her crimson eyes are the last things that I, alive, see.

The Crow | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa*

The damn crow's cawing at this late hour again, disturbing my sleep and giving me another splitting headache. Each time it cries, my mind's tormented by nightmares, each one more vivid than the last.

It's still out there, lurking in the veil of night, taunting me, haunting me.

Tonight's the last straw!

With my rifle loaded, I exit the house, ignoring the growing cold encompassing me. Focusing on the caw, I look upward and find my late wife perching there, staring down at me with spiteful decomposing eyes as dark sludge oozes out of the bullet hole on her forehead.

New Friends | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa*

Aroused from my slumber, I look toward the excited children jumping into the little lake. Peals of laughter ring amid their banters as they swim around.

How nostalgic!

This lake used to be popular with the townsfolk here, and there were plenty of friends for me to play with, but these days, it's so very lonely. The resounding voices break me out of the spiraling reminiscence, and quietly, I make my way toward the merry children above.

It's been a long time since I had new friends to play with, so I won't let them leave so early, or ever.

About the Author:

Ngo Binh Anh Khoa is a teacher of English from Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. In his free time, he enjoys reading fiction, daydreaming, and writing speculative poems for entertainment, some of which have appeared in New Myths, Star*Line, Weirdbook, Spectral Realms, Liquid Imagination, and other venues.

Facebook: [Ngo Binh Anh Khoa](#)

The first day of loneliness was bearable.

I stayed in the Tree shrine for an hour, conferring with the priests about the Hatching. They let me touch Gregor's face before I left, and I felt nothing. This waxen mask was not the man I had loved. He was gone.

I went back to our den, feeling light-headed. I was listening to familiar sounds: the shuffling of many feet, as people were streaming through the bore-tunnels in the Trunk; the din of overlapping conversations; the susurrus of Grubs chewing their way through the warm flesh of the Tree. I had drifted away from my creche-mates since I met Gregor, spending all my free time with him. Now, perhaps, I could reconnect with them. It felt as if a layer of insulation was removed from between me and the world. I was as tender as a newly hatched aphid.

When I crawled into the den I had shared with Gregor, the warm wood touched me like his skin. Even though I was deep inside the Trunk, I could almost feel the tendrils of damp mist caressing the bark as the sky outside dimmed from dull silver to charcoal and then to black. I suddenly remembered how, in the creche, I would go to the edge of our Branch, studying the foggy gulf above and below, trying to imagine the Roots or the Top.

I unfolded my sleeping pallet and pressed myself against the grainy wall. I said good night to my lantern. Of course, I knew that the emerald-colored lantern-bug, humming to itself in its little cage, did not care for my words. It was trained to curl up its luminescent segmented tail and go to sleep when fed. Still, it was company. And so, I slept, the pain of losing Gregor retreating to the edges of my numbed mind.

Until I opened my eyes, woken by the lantern-bug's flash, and realized I was alone. Gregor was gone. The hollow of the den closed around me like a fist. I started hyperventilating and rushed out into the bore-tunnel, almost colliding with somebody.

It took me a moment to realize why the big stocky woman was so familiar. Of course, she was my creche-mate Lia. We had been brought up together, part of the same clutch of babies. But since I had met Gregor, I had barely exchanged a word with her.

"Rosie?" Her bulging arms were crossed on her wide chest. I remembered she was an aphid-herder. These people had to be strong to maneuver their floppy mindless charges.

I nodded and tried to sidle away. Suddenly I could not bear to see a pretend compassion on her face, barely hiding a smug schadenfreude. Like the rest of my creche-mates, she had disapproved of my relationship with Gregor.

"What's new?" she asked, and I realized she knew. It would be better to let it out at once and escape.

"Gregor...he is dead."

"Your?" she lifted one bushy eyebrow and I hated her for forcing me to say what was obvious.

Gregor was officially nothing to me. He was not my breeding partner; I had not bred with anybody yet, still waiting for the Tree Council to issue a permit. And of course, he was not my creche-mate, having been relocated to our Branch from the Crooked Branch below.

But he had been the most important person in my life, bar none. I had loved him; and he had loved me. I did not care that the Council frowned on romance, emphasizing how we together were all part of the Tree, how no life was more important than any other...blah, blah. He had been my world and now he was gone.

"My lover," I said, challenging Lia's disapproving frown.

She had the grace to look embarrassed.

"When is the Hatching?" she asked.

"Today," I swallowed saliva, my throat feeling as scratchy as a dry leaf. "In two hours."

"It's a good day for that," she said awkwardly. "No rain. May Gregor find his wings."

"May Gregor find his wings," I repeated dully, and the conventional formula suddenly hit me with a new surge of anguish, so much so that I almost staggered, as I suddenly realized what it really meant. There are words that are worn smooth by repetition until they are just comforting sounds. And then something happens, and their real meaning floods back into them like subtle poison.

"May they find their wings." I had said it so many times, at the funerals of creche-mates, or councilmen, or strangers who happen to die on our Branch. But I never really thought what it meant.

They would take Gregor—the body that just a day ago had snuggled against mine in our den—and toss it off the Branch. It will fall through the mist, rotating in the humid air like a shed leaf. And then it would dive into the thickening roil of clouds that hid the Roots and vanish. Forever. The priests said that the virtuous ones would sprout wings and ascend to the Top, there to join the Flyers gamboling in perpetual light of the sky above the mist; while the wicked ones

would drop into the Roots and become blind Larvae, patiently chewing their way back to the Top. But I had never believed it. I could only believe what I could see. And what I had seen were dead bodies disappearing into the mist.

I found myself shaken by uncontrollable sobs. When I lifted my tear-smeared face, Lia was gone.

I was still reliving Gregor's last moments as I walked through the bore-tunnels into the communal bathhouse, head down to avoid curious glances. Fortunately, at this hour most people were at work. The lantern-bugs dimmed their emerald shine, so it felt like night, even though I knew the sky outside was glowing with midday brightness. When Gregor had been killed, it had really been late at night.

He and I had been staggering through the bore-tunnel, coming back to our den from an illegal bar. We had been drinking fermented vine-juice in the dark spherical hole, so recently formed that its wood was still rough and twiggy. It was fun, mingling with strangers, some perhaps travelers from other Branches, none of them a creche-mate. But now I realized that I had only enjoyed it because of Gregor's presence by my side.

The bathhouse was almost empty. The pool of steaming water in the hollow of the tan floor held only a couple of women, one of them a breeder, visibly pregnant. I muttered something, picked up a young leaf filled with sap, and started lathering myself. I could feel their eyes on my body as vividly as if they were touching me. That was what my life was going to be: lonely but never alone. Would they even let me keep my den, or would they move me to a communal hole?

We had almost reached our destination, Gregor and I, on that fateful night. I was giggling, tipsily clinging to his arm, when the curving wall exploded, chips of living wood flying, and a head the size of my entire body poked out. It was bright orange and lardy, glistening like oil on water. Below the eyeless brow-shield, sickle-like mandibles went back and forth with a terrible mechanical efficiency. And it was with the same efficiency that they cut through Gregor's chest, drenching me in a sickeningly warm tide that looked black in the low lighting. And then the Larva plopped out onto the bloody floor, its segmented transparent body twitching and puffing as it crawled across his corpse and dove into the wood of the opposite wall. It did not want him—or me. Larvae do not eat humans. His death was a mistake, a stupid accident. Had we stayed a moment longer in the bar, or come back a moment sooner, he would still be by my side.

The hot soapy water in the bathhouse felt nauseatingly like Gregor's blood. I swallowed a couple of times and climbed out of the pool, still keeping my head low, refusing to meet the mercilessly curious gazes of the other women.

And then it was time for the Hatching.

I exited the Trunk and walked along the main avenue of our Branch. The sky was warm on my face and neck; the misty dome glowing with silvery light, curls of mist dropping down onto the broad path of fissured bark studded with round indentations where twigs had been planed off. On both sides, the surface of the Branch curved down into the fog-filled abyss. Obeying some strange impulse, I deviated from the central path and came close to the edge, pushing aside the swollen fronds of moss that dripped moisture onto my head. I looked down.

On each level, five horizontal Branches stuck out from the Trunk, staggered and equidistant. I could only see the Branch immediately below ours: a long smear on the grey fog that curdled into the ever-deeper tints of charcoal and black below it. Nobody knew how many Branches the Tree had, or how far it was to the Top and to the Roots. Only the dead knew.

Recently, a new sect appeared that claimed that there were no Roots and no Top, and the Tree went on into infinity, both above and below. Gregor had been interested in their speculations, often talking about it as we lay curled up in our den. I had been neutral. It seemed to me that it made no difference one way or the other.

But now I stared into the gulf of coiling mist, straining my eyes as if I could really penetrate the layers of swollen clouds that slowly shifted beneath and above me, sending tentacles of vapor toward the Top where it condensed into the perpetual drizzle that nourished the Tree. Where would my love go? Up or down, into the eternal light of the Top or to be consumed by the dark Roots? Would Gregor Hatch as a Larva or a Flyer? If there were any justice in the world, the answer would be clear.

But if there were any justice in the world, Gregor would still be alive.

I made my way to the end of the Branch where a cluster of leaves spread out. Each leaf, its dark green spongy surface oozing large droplets of water, was covered with a flock of aphids. Their plump beige bodies quivered, filled with golden nectar. Out of respect for the ceremony, their herders maneuvered them further away from the intersection of leafstalks where a clutch of Tree Priests and a couple of mourners stood with their heads bowed. I increased my pace. Precisely because I had no official status, I wanted my presence to be obvious. I was wearing my best outfit, made of black-dyed Spider silk. Some of Gregor's creche-mates who came up from his birth Branch gave me sour looks.

I looked around. None of my own creche-mates made an appearance. I was alone.

I came to the edge of the Branch where a gap between the leaves showed the bottomless gulf or white and grey. The aphid herders stared as they pushed their brainless charges away from the edge. Was Lia among them? Well, if she were, she did not want me to see her.

The Tree priest was an old man, his face as fissured and furrowed as the roughest bark, his hands trembling. He started a chant praying to the life-giving Tree to protect all its inhabitants—Worms, Larvae, Beetles, and Humans. He begged that the soul of the deceased be allowed to hatch as a Flyer and rise on iridescent wings to the Top, there to bask in the eternal skylight above the mist. His voice was trebly and wavering, and a couple of times he seemed to have forgotten the words. But I was not listening to him. I stared at the bundle lying at the edge of the Branch, covered with a loose shroud of Spider silk.

Gregor's body.

I pushed closer to the priest, disregarding the muttered protests of the scant mourners. Suddenly I realized what was going to happen. The chant would end, the priest would push the body off, and it would go tumbling down into the mist, swallowed up by the vapors and clouds, and I would never see Gregor again. His soul may become a Larva and start its slow progress up the Tree; or it may become a Flyer and flutter away into the light; but it made no difference to me. I would never know. I would be still inside the Tree, with my indifferent creche-mates, and the stupid aphids, and the mindlessly chewing Larvae, part of the ecosystem that cared nothing for my loneliness and my grief.

I was about to kneel by Gregor's body when somebody cried out and pointed to the sky-dome. I looked up.

Dancing just below the limits of visibility, a group of Flyers flitted around the Tree. Their four transparent wings beat the humid air, sparkling with a rare glint of focused light. Their shimmering bodies, twice as long as a grown man, twisted and bent, sending plumes of water droplets through the air. Their curved mandibles opened and closed with a hypnotic regularity, ready to clutch a flying prey. But it was their compound eyes, each the size of my head, faceted and glimmering with a hard impersonal light, that caught and held me.

"The Flyers!" the priest cried in a reedy voice. "Coming for the son of the Tree! May he find his wings and rise to the Top!"

The mourners whispered, glad of the good omen. But I heard nothing.

My face, multiplied hundreds of times, stared back at me from the Flyers' insectoid masks. It was as if they were showing me my future. Alone, with myself. Surrounded by people who would never see me and would just cast back my own image reflected from their glazed eyes. Grubbing through the innards of the Tree along with the rest of its teeming denizens, not knowing what was below or above me. Trapped in my own ignorance; wrapped up in the midst of grief and confusion.

The priest quickly uncovered Gregor's corpse, the gash in his chest still yawning. He prepared to push it off the edge.

I threw myself at the body, wrapped my arms around it, and as the priest tottered back, shocked, we were carried off into the misty gulf, accompanied by a flock of hungry Flyers. Going down—or maybe up.

Together.

About the Author:

Elana Gomel is an academic and an award-winning writer. Born in a country that no longer exists, she has lived, taught, and researched in the US, Israel, Italy, and Hong Kong. She is the author of six non-fiction books, six novels, and a more than a hundred fantasy and science fiction stories. Her new novel is the dark fantasy *Nightwood*, based on her nomadic experience.

Facebook: [Elana Gomel](#)

Instagram: [@ElanaGomel](#)



EXERCISE YOUR WRITES

WEDNESDAY AND SATURDAYS AT 2 P.M. CST.

with your host



MY GUEST LIST INCLUDES...

Amy Zoellers, Pete Kelly, Laura Duerrwaechter, Ryan Aussie Smith, Anton Cancre, Lee Murray, Eric Shapiro, ChatGPT AI, A.F. Stewart, Daniel M. Kimmel, Amanda Hayden, Colleen Anderson, Kyle Toucher, Amanda Worthington, Maxwell I. Gold, Ai Jiang, Nina D'Arcangela, Celine Murray, Alma Katsu, Linda D. Addison, Alex Davis, Harold Hull, Senah Saferight Lloyd, Frances Lu-Pai Ippolito, Carol Gyzander, Jess Landry, Sofia Afram, Nadia Bulkin, Nina D'Arcangela, Benebell Wen, Seann Macanally, Dan B. Fierce... and maybe you?

find **Exercise Your Writes** on YouTube



Steam curled up from the large pot, strong with the smell of boiling meat. Cornell breathed in deeply, savouring the aroma, although it was not that of a meal. With thick leather gauntlets to protect his hands and arms from splashes, he reached into the pot with a pair of long metal tongs, fishing out the contents.

"There we are," he said with a flourish.

Norris recoiled; new to his role as assistant taxidermist, he was not yet used to the sight of a freshly-boiled skeleton, denuded of flesh with just a few tendons holding it together, waiting to be cleaned up. The remains would be wired together and the sloughed-off muscles remodelled in clay and stuffing before the skin was replaced.

Cornell jiggled the cat skeleton as if he were a puppeteer. It made an obscene marionette.

"Dance, kitty, dance," he crooned, smirking at his assistant's revolted expression. "Norris, you'll never make a taxidermist if you can't boil the flesh off without feeling nauseous."

Norris wrinkled his nose. "I can do the job, it's your macabre clowning I cannot stand."

Cornell laughed. "Oh, a certain sense of humour helps pass the time." He laid the bones on the worktable and began to clean away the remaining scraps of flesh and strings of tendon. "Get the clay," he told his assistant, getting to work on reassembling the once-beloved pet so that it could be reconstructed as a memento mori for its owner, a reminder of happier times.

Such jobs paid the bills, but weren't the taxidermist's passion. Cornell's interest in taxidermy began in childhood as he drowned kittens then reconstructed them in inanimate perfection, seeking to understand the secrets of life and death and the workings of the physical form. As he grew older, his interest shifted to the human body and its intricacies, but, too poor for medical school, he found his opportunities for study greatly limited. Never bookish, he shunned the abstract in favour of hands-on learning.

Initially, Cornell had scavenged corpses from graveyards to boil down to bones. Of inferior quality due to decay, they were invariably unsuited to being played and rebuilt, so he restricted himself to mounting the skeletons, displaying them in a secret room that only he knew the existence of. But, he was not satisfied to stop there; he wanted to rebuild them as he did the cats and dogs, foxes and hawks, and other creatures he worked on.

Thus, a year ago, he had graduated to murder; it was the only way to obtain fresh corpses. So far, he had obtained five bodies, lovingly rebuilt with cunning to appear alive save for their dead, glassy eyes. Initially, he had taken the odd tramp as a starting point as he worked to perfect his skills, but what he really wanted were specimens of interest: freaks.

His first was a dwarf he enticed away from a travelling fair and his second was a woman with a parasitic twin growing from her torso. Now, he had his third in his sights: a grossly-deformed man with tumorous bone growth across his skull and left arm. Cornell was practically salivating at the thought of working on that body; it would be his masterpiece.

The murder was all-too-easy, the man was trusting and easy to ply with alcohol until sufficiently inebriated to guide him to his carriage and return home with him.

Cornell led the man into his secret room. Even in his current state, he was sufficiently aware to be surprised at the mounted figures and skeletons. Cornell didn't allow him to be surprised for long. He had left a metal syringe on his workbench ready for this moment, injecting him from behind before he could react. The man's lumpy head lolled heavily, then he sagged and Cornell gently lowered him to the floor. He lay there as if sleeping. In a very final sense, he was.

He laid the corpse out and fetched a razor-sharp blade, using it to strip away the skin with as much deftness as when peeling an orange. This was the messiest part of the job, yet essential if he was to create a realistic-looking specimen.

Manhandling the body over to the pot, already bubbling away, he hooked it into the lifting harness, raised it up to the rafters, then swung it over and lowered it into the pot. Steam surged out as the waters greedily devoured it. He imagined the bones sloughing off flesh, the purifying waters cleansing, bleaching them.

To pass the time, he put the kettle on and made a pot of tea, something to drink as he scoured the skin clean inside and out.

Eventually, he knew the body was likely ready. He walked over to the pot and took a lungful of the steam, appreciating the aroma that told him the job must be about done. All he needed to do was winch him up a little to make certain.

Suddenly, there was a furious churning in the already roiling waters of the pot. Startled, he just looked down to see what was happening, leaving him no time to react as a bony arm burst from the depths and seized him around the neck. With a strength belied by the lack of muscles, it easily pulled him off his feet and head first into the pot with barely a moment to scream before he was plunged beneath the seething waters.

When Norris arrived for work the next morning, he was surprised to see that a rack of tools had been swung away from the wall to reveal a room he had never known was there. Within were several mounted bodies and skeletons and a large boiling pot with a pair of booted feet sticking up over the rim.

With a sense of trepidation, matched only by his disgust at the scene, he fetched a stepladder and approached the pot. Climbing up to look inside, he saw that the waters had long since boiled away to leave a thick slurry of blubber at the bottom of the pot. A bleached skeleton wearing his employer's clothing was upended in the pot and beneath that was a pile of disarticulated human bones.

He stared in disbelief a moment, unable to comprehend what he was seeing, then jumped down from the ladder before running to fetch the authorities who would be just as perplexed at Cornell's perverted obsession and justly grisly fate.

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).

Author Website: [DJ Tyrer](#)

Twitter: [@DJTyrer](#)

Entwined | Nadine Stewart

The forest sounds echo all around us. Woodland creatures chattering back and forth, insects humming and the sound of the breeze rustling through the treetops.

We lay in each other's arms spent and not quite knowing how we got here. I trace the lines of his tattoos as he holds me tight, his fingers entwined with mine. Two worlds apart, souls finding each other in the night.

If only this moment could last forever but I can already feel my tendrils unfurling. I kiss him one last time with a kiss that will hold him fast to me in a frozen slumber. My vines now creep and twist around our bodies forcing us to become one in time and space. Holding us to the forest floor with their slender stems.

About the Author:

Nadine Stewart made her author debut this year in *Horrorscope: A Zodiac Anthology*. From a young age she was always 'performing' for family and creating poetry only ever seen by those closest to her and a few select friends. Born into a creative family of artists and raised in beautiful British Columbia, Canada, she now resides in Washington state.

Instagram: [@nadine.stewart.author](#)

When Haggett rowed his boat from the mainland, he ignored the figure of his wife on the shore. He knew she watched him with scorn, having lost the argument that had raged, off and on, for the past month.

Her side of the dispute took the following form: "You can't put livestock on a deserted isle. If the weather changes, you'll have to leave them for weeks by themselves."

To which Haggett would angrily respond: "Spring is arriving and we need more grazing land. The isle is fertile and belongs to no one. Why not use it?"

"The place is hazardous and unsuitable."

At this remark, Haggett would shake his head and stomp away.

Today, however, he had decided to stop debating and undertake an exploratory trip to the isle. Under a cloudless sky, he pulled at the oars, his shoulders aching from the effort of rowing against the current. But he had no intention of turning back.

A tree, the only one on the isle, grew at the top of a small cliff and had a clear view of the water. It watched the rower's laborious progress, suspecting that he aimed to beach his boat on the strip of shingle immediately below.

Glancing behind, Haggett approached the shingle. As the boat's keel grated onto the pebbles, he shipped the oars. He then jumped out and draped the mooring rope over a rock.

Above, the tree observed the intrusion. No human had set foot here for decades. The misgiving the tree felt permeated the earth, disturbing the contentment of the heather that covered the surface.

"What's wrong?" the heather whispered.

Instead of replying, the tree studied Haggett. The latter reached into the boat and produced an axe and a metal can of petrol. Clutching these, he began to struggle up the scree that formed a slope on one side of the cliff.

The tree's misgiving became alarm.

"I must seek help," it told the heather.

Recollecting a primordial tale, the tree focused on the tips of its deepest roots. Through them, it endeavoured to contact the magma demon, a beast that had created and lived in the core of the isle. The core had cooled long ago, though, turning the magma to igneous rock and obliging the demon to seek another lair, distant and uncontactable.

Haggett reached the top of the cliff. While he caught his breath, he surveyed the ground in front of him.

"No livestock can feed on scrubby heather," he muttered. "I'll burn it. Spring growth will succeed it and provide nourishment for my animals."

He gauged the direction of the breeze. Leaving the axe propped against the tree, he lugged the can to the isle's far side.

Now aware of Haggett's plan, the heather begged the tree to prevent a conflagration. Thinking hard, the tree remembered when a nuckelavee had emerged from the sea. This creature, a fusion of horse and hell-fiend, had galloped across the isle, driving the wildlife away forever.

Perhaps, the tree wondered, such a brute can rid us of the current threat. I'll ask the sprite that lies within my bole.

"What have you woken me for?" the sprite queried a moment later.

"I need you to summon the nuckelavee."

"Impossible. No one's seen it for centuries. It entered the netherworld and never reappeared."

"Are you sure?"

The sprite waved a hand dismissively and went back to sleep.

Distraught, the tree looked across the isle and saw Haggett striding back. Behind him, a curtain of smoke rose, flames crackling along its base.

"It's too late to do anything," the tree said.

The heather called out for rain, but the sky remained free of clouds.

Haggett put down the empty can and took hold of the axe.

"Wood to fuel the stove back home," he said with satisfaction, and swung the blade at the tree.

The steel edge bit through the bark and embedded itself in the sapwood beneath. Knowing that it would perish with the tree, the sprite gave a frustrated cry, causing the roots to thrust against the surrounding earth. The subterranean movement loosened a granite rock that balanced on the cliff's edge. Surrounded by a cascade of dirt, the rock plummeted to the shingle below, where it crushed the moored boat and rolled into the sea.

Haggett stared down in bewilderment at the broken timber of the boat. Leaving the axe lodged in the tree, he hurried down the scree slope. At the same time, a violent gust of wind brought a dark cloud from over the horizon, seemingly in answer to the heather's demand for rain. The squall doused the fire and dispersed the acrid smoke. It also soaked the scree.

Grunting with surprise, Haggett slipped on the wet surface and tumbled forward. His body came to rest at the bottom of the slope, unconscious and splayed across the boat's split timbers.

Shortly afterwards, as the cloud moved on and the rain stopped, the tide swept over the shingle. Kept afloat by the remains of the boat beneath him, Haggett drifted on the current.

That evening, he washed up on the mainland's shore. Coming to with a start, he staggered to his feet and realized that he should go to his wife and never again mention the isle.

The tree had observed Haggett's departure and, in the failing light, seen him reach the mainland.

"The danger to our tranquillity has passed," the tree told the heather. "Moreover, rest assured that spring growth will replace the burned shrubs."

"And what will happen to the axe in your side?" the heather asked.

The tree shrugged. It knew that its girth would eventually expand and grow over the axe head. As for the handle, it would rot and fall alongside the rusting metal can.

Soon enough, no evidence would remain of the unwanted incursion.

About the Author:

K. J. Watson's fiction has appeared on the radio; in comics, magazines, and anthologies; and online. He lives near a loch that has many uninhabited, mysterious isles.

Examples from a Djinn | B. T. Petro

"I shall give you three examples of how a djinn grants wishes," instructed Akeem. "First, a woman wished her hair to be the most beautiful in the world. Oddly, she only chooses to cover her baldness with my wig on special occasions.

"Second, a lonely man wished to be with a woman who would love him unconditionally. Whatever Heaven or Hell his mother went to, they are now together forever.

"Third, a clever prince wished to have all the powers of a master djinn."

I watched through a slit in the lamp as Akeem coaxed my horse into a gallop.

Death of Mokosh | B. T. Petro

I dismissed taking the mantle of high priestess for the goddess Mokosh after my mother's passing, a line of service that lasted a millennium. As a child of the 21st century, I considered tales of the goddess less credible than Santa Claus.

When Mokosh appeared, it wasn't a moment of joy. She cursed that I would be remembered as a god killer. Without anyone in the earthly realm believing in her as Earth Mother, there was no reason to remain.

I watched as she dissolved into thousands of points of light that swarmed skyward like fireflies, winking out moments later.

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.

The

BURY Box



LEE ANDREW FORMAN

Available on Amazon

Turning Nightmares Into A Dream

"Oh, the terrible struggle that I have had against sleep so often of late; the pain of the sleeplessness, or the pain of the fear of sleep, and with such unknown horror as it has for me! How blessed are some people, whose lives have no fears, no dreads; to whom sleep is a blessing that comes nightly, and brings nothing but sweet dreams."

- (Dracula, by Bram Stoker; Chapter 11, Page 1)

As a child I constantly had nightmares, whether it was of vampires softly tapping on my window behind the curtains, clowns that would pull me through the mattress into another dimension or the wall beside my bed that I was convinced contained the faces of grimacing dead souls looking through from whatever cursed underworld they were trapped in...and this was all before I'd even seen my first horror film. A full decade before I saw Regan McNeil's head turn 360 degrees or Samara crawl through a television, my imagination was being expanded by the stories of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the lore of witchcraft local to my area, and the ghost stories my friends and I would exchange in the corners of the playground where the teachers couldn't find us.

Horror has always felt like it was an intrinsic part of me, interwoven into my very being, that if I wasn't consuming some sort of dark, gothic or horrific form of media then what was the point in being me? Horror helped me feel like I had a home and a safe space, albeit a haunted one, when my own homelife wasn't secure. Horror was a place where I felt I could fit in with the monsters and the misfits, when in real life, growing up in a rural and militantly Catholic Ireland, I stuck out like a sore thumb for being a queer non-Christian goth girl into heavy metal and punk. I have always heavily connected with Frankenstein's creature of Mary Shelley's classic gothic novel *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* for being rejected by a parental figure and ostracised by society, but as I began my journey into discovering horror films, I found comfort and catharsis in the terror on screen.

It was thanks to my first serious boyfriend at 16 who started to show me classic horror films like *The Evil Dead* (1981), *The Thing* (1982), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and the most pivotal horror film in my life, *The Exorcist* (1973). My parents had never allowed me to watch horror films before my teenage years due to my overactive imagination, and so seeing images like a possessed child spewing green bile over priests and Leatherface hanging Sally up on meat hooks ignited a fire inside my brain. Horror films became like a medication for me. Whatever was happening in my life, I knew I could retreat back into the realm of zombies, monsters and slashers and feel some level of comfort. When I felt confused and alone during my gap year in Australia, I sought the company and uniformity of hordes of the undead zombies in films like George Romero's *Of The Dead* series, when I felt numb and cold during my university years, I'd test myself with extreme horror titles like *Nekromantik* (1988) and *Faces of Death* (1978) and years later after the birth of my son, suffering from extreme postnatal depression I found comfort and understanding in films like Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014).

Just like the entire population of the world during the Covid-19 pandemic, I felt directionless and isolated. I'd spent the previous three years as a cabaret performer, producer and pinup model, travelling the length of the country and abroad with my cheesecake pinup meets satanic seductress singing about murder acts. Now I was confined to my house, unable to earn money and with no one to socialise with except for my husband and a three year old. It was at this point that I realised to save my mental health and the sanity of my husband, I needed to start a podcast where I could talk to people about my obsession and lifelong hyperfocus of horror. And thus *What A Scream* was born.

What A Scream is a horror movie podcast where I invite a guest on to chat about two horror films that are centered around a completely random subject that I have chosen prior to recording. Topics could be something as broad as werewolves, witchcraft or 70s horror, or it could be more niche like telephones, 80s vampires or dinner parties. The role of the various guests is to provide varying voices and perspectives on the horror films that are completely different to my own, ones that span across different genders, cultural backgrounds, careers and interests. From my own perspective, being able to talk to another person who has a contrasting viewpoint on a film that I may have initially had a negative or nonchalant reaction to, has sometimes caused me to reassess my opinion, and that's the beauty and attraction of horror film theory for me.

Through the podcast I have interviewed so many amazing creatives like actor Tristan Risk (*American Mary*, *Ayla*, *Aliens Ate My Homework*), film director Aislinn Clarke (*The Devil's Doorway*, *Childer*), Special FX makeup artist Kyasia Fields, writer Elaine Pascale (who is now a regular contributor to the podcast) as well as fellow horror podcasters like Trent and Sharai from *A Nightmare on Fierce Street*, MX Belle from *Fishnets and Philosophy* and Cat Benstead from *Hear Us Scream*. It was through having editor of *Ghouls Magazine* Zoë Rose Smith (aka Zobo With A Shotgun) as a guest on the podcast that I began my writing career, after she took a chance on me with no prior journalism or film criticism experience. From there I started working with Tim Coleman at *Moving Pictures Film Club* after both being on a panel about Horror and Mental Health. Since then I have been made a senior contributor for both *Ghouls Magazine* and *Moving Pictures Film Club*, I've written for *Dread Central*, *Fangoria*, covered film festivals and worked media walls, and was chosen to be a part of the British Film Institute's Critics Mentorship Programme with the London Film Festival. In two years, I've managed to turn my passion and obsession for horror films into a career. I've succeeded somewhat in turning my nightmares into a dream.

Top 5 What A Scream Episodes:

Episode 1: Female Killers with Emma Tyrrell: The very first episode of What A Scream is totally ropey as hell. I can barely string a sentence together thanks to nerves and also only having regularly conversed with a three year old up until that point. But I got to record my first podcast experience with one of my best friends who is also a forensic psychologist, and so getting her expert perspective on *Audition* (1999) and *Alice Sweet Alice* (1976) was such an amazing thing for the very first episode.



Episode 5: Parenthood with Aislinn Clarke: Recording an episode with the director of one of my favourite Irish horror films *The Devil's Doorway* was incredible, and especially as we discussed parenthood in horror in the films of *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Babadook* (2014). It became an episode in which we unpacked both of our experiences as parents, especially having been pregnant in Ireland where there's still a lot of discourse around reproductive rights, and how we relate that back to horror.



Episode 50: Disability in Horror with Sam Judd: I had met Sam as a fellow critic on the BFI's Mentorship Program and he approached me about recording an episode on the representation of disability in horror cinema, which hasn't always been positive. We talked about *A Quiet Place* (2018) and the film's employment of an actual deaf actor Millicent Simmonds, and *Come Play* (2020) and its tropey portrayal of autism. Horror cinema hasn't always had great portrayals of disability and so having a conversation about that between a disabled person and a neurodivergent one felt important and cathartic.



Episode 60: Toxic Masculinity with Mae Murray: Mae is an incredible writer as well as a curator of *The Book of Queer Saints* anthology, together we chatted about toxic masculinity in horror and covered *Midsommar* (2019) and *Hostel* (2005). It became such an in-depth and thought provoking discussion about something that affects everyone of every gender, and how that is represented through film either through the actual filmmaker or the content of the movie.



Episode 97: Cannibalism with Zoë Rose Smith: Talking to my editor at Ghouls Magazine about Cannibalism was unhinged fun. We are both fans of extreme horror and tend to take things a bit far into humour that is very dark. Chatting about *Dumplings* (2004) and *Trouble Everyday* (2001), it's an episode that makes me laugh when I think back to recording it with Zoë and is a reminder of how much joy the podcast has brought me.



About Ygraine Hackett-Cantabrana:

Ygraine Hackett-Cantabrana is a pinup ghoul from Ireland who is the host of horror movie podcast What A Scream, as well as co-host with Ruby Noir on the Movies, Murder & Mayhem podcast, where they discuss the true crime, true horror and true stories behind some of your favourite, and not so favourite horror films. Ygraine is also a writer and film critic and is a senior contributor at Moving Pictures Film Club and Ghouls Magazine. She has also contributed to Fangoria, Dread Central, BFI Online, Film In Dublin: PDF, Horrified Magazine and has been published in the Hear Us Scream: Voice of Horror 2 anthology book. Ygraine specialises in Motherhood in horror, religious horror and possession and Irish Horror. Her favourite horror film is The Exorcist. She also spends the majority of her time raising her own little monster!

What A Scream Podcast is available on [Spotify](#), [Apple](#), [Google](#) and Amazon Music.

Instagram: [@whatascream](#)

Twitter: [@what_scream](#)



*Jennifer
Ellen*

WHAT A SCREAM!

THE HORROR MOVIE PODCAST

AVAILABLE ON SPOTIFY, APPLE
PODCASTS, GOOGLE PODCASTS &
AMAZON MUSIC.



@WHAT_SCREAM



@WHATASCREAM



@WHATASCREAMPODCAST

Penelope Jane and Harold the First lay in the pasture amid the furrows under the full snow moon. It was around the time of Lupercalia. And what came of that you wouldn't believe! That night nestled in Penelope Jane's womb laid a seed and that seed months later came to be—a goat boy with the tiniest horns atop his crown. A funny looking thing—the head and torso of a human and below complete with tail and cloven hooves—something like Pan.

Feeling she couldn't raise a goat boy in the village amongst society, she one night sought out a fairy ring replete with mushrooms capped crimson and spotted ivory on the mound near the Great Oak. The only sound in the air was the gurgling of water passing over rocks in a nearby stream and the occasional chatter of long eared owls conversing one to another. She'd heard tell that The Fae loved having babies from this world, even one who was half man half beast. Then and there she made little Harold the Second an offering to The Fae and placed him within the ring, carefully keeping her feet outside the rim. She was cautious. One toe over the edge and she may never return to the village. The place of The Fae existed in time outside of time, all things present at once—all knowledge, all history, all music and art. Penelope didn't know if she would ever see little Harold the Second again, but she hoped that the creatures from below the hill would take him in and raise him as their own.

Several weeks or years passed, I forget which is which and Penelope found herself making her way to the place near the Great Oak where she had laid the baby boy and it was upon another full moon, this time at Midsummer. The grass wet with dew, the notes of music, strange and dissonant, ambling along the jasmine scented air drawing her in. All the folk were spinning, hopping, leaping, dancing. From afar they looked like petite lights twinkling in the night—slashes of red, yellow, and white. That's all Penelope saw at this point—she being human—darting rays blazing, gleaming...calling her...enchanting her. But wait...I'm getting a little ahead of myself. Now, back to that night in the pasture, the night of this story's inception.

That night nearing Lupercalia or dies Februatus, the village folk paired off hand in hand, laughing and racing into the woods, casting clothes to the wind, the ground littered—petticoats and pantaloons, silks and sashes, blouses and britches—strewn hither and thither. The sounds of their voices carried by the night breeze through limbs, leaves, vines, and vegetation. Penelope, not as wanton as most, remained clothed but she still knew what was to come. She worried she'd be cold in the frigid February night air, but Harold had made... preparations.

Most of the young people went straight through the woods or veered off to the right, but Harold led Penelope to the left, until they reached a clearing, not far from the mound near the Great Oak. There were no sounds of water moving that night. Only stark silence interspersed by the odd murmurings of the night fowl. Harold started a fire. He'd also secured a blanket there—all of this encircled by several rocks varying in size and shape. There were even two cast iron goblets and a wineskin of spirits he pulled out of a sack. The sack seemed to still contain something, but Penelope never saw the rest of the contents. She smiled to herself. He wasn't much to behold—short of stature, doughy, carrot topped—but she had made verbal petition, appealing to The Queen, praying for a good match. Harold had thought of everything, and Penelope had put her trust in him.

Harold made ready their libations, filling Penelope's cup, emptying the skin. She never noticed that Harold had naught a sip. As she drank from her goblet, she became more relaxed, more at ease, eventually removing her attire. What a vision to behold! I was left breathless by the sight of her—luminous skin, the curve of her hip. Her eyes, the shade of a summer sky, pale lips that looked as though they tasted like champagne and berries. And a turned-up nose that led one to believe mischief may be afoot. As she continued to drink, her sight became blurry, the landscape before her turning topsy turvy. She dropped off into a deep sleep. Harold, believing himself alone, emptied his sack of the remaining contents. But I was there still, stowed away, amongst the leaves and branches in a nearby tree, seen by none but seeing all. I knew where little Harold the Second had come from. Indeed, I did.

Once Penelope had fallen asleep, dead to this world as a result of ingesting the sleeping potion Harold had concocted—lavender with a bit of nightshade—Harold made quick work of what was yet to come. You see Harold was not particularly 'interested' in Penelope. She was not really his inclination. So, on this night, pride going before the fall, knowing he may not rise to the occasion, he'd taken matters into his own hands. As Penelope laid drowsing, Harold set all the sack's contents before him—a shining dagger and a large ancient book seemingly bound in some sort of skin of what animal I know not. It was aged, cracked and blistered, sewn and mended in places with what looked to be connective tissue. There in the circle of stones, Harold took the dagger and dragged

it across Penelope's skin, tracing symbols and sigils into her unmarred flesh drawing blood which he then smeared across her face, hands, and feet, binding her to the earth lest she wake. Then opening the book, he muttered this and that, some sort of incantation I gathered. I wasn't close enough to hear but what I caught, the words "this night...summon...bowels...fertile...rod...fecundate..." And I could scarcely believe my eyes when I saw what transpired!

In the pasture from beyond the trees a figure appeared, standing on hind legs making its way towards the circle with a determined stride. It was led by those of my ilk, The Vile Ones. I felt it before I saw it, as the ground vibrated beneath me. At this point, I still didn't know who or what was coming. Drawing closer, I recognized him as Asmodeus, the demon of lust. This King of Hell stood tall, at least 10 feet in height, three heads upon his broad shoulders, chest like an impenetrable wall, skin blackened and armored, thighs impressive, each foot split, and a serpent's tail wrapped around his form. I don't know if this was exactly what Harold had in mind when he was seeking assistance. Asmodeus had but one objective, to interrupt the joining of couples. Harold had made a grave error. Ignorance! Trembling in fear, he raised his head slowly, the beast, amber eyes a lit staring into Harold's. Harold then shat himself and took off running into the night leaving only the sight of his soiled, dimpled backside fading away into the darkness. It was then that Asmodeus raised one scaled hand and pointed at Harold and SNAP...Harold was no more, nothing but a pile of ash amongst mire and debris. I stayed hidden in my spot shrouded by the leaves. I couldn't intervene, but I would bide my time and do what I could in the end.

Penelope laid there, serene, unclothed, the moonlight shining on her alabaster skin, loose auburn ringlets spread out over the ground like snakes. Even with the incisions Harold had made upon her body and the blood so much blood, the strong line of her jaw, the swell of her mauve tipped breasts, I felt myself mystified, aroused by her beauty. My own breasts rising and falling with quickening breaths, my solar plexus beginning to glow, my wings unfurling. But in order for me to help, I had to look away, contain my ardor. After an hour or a minute, when I looked back, The Vile Ones had surrounded her. They were squat things barely visible over a hedgerow with small, pointed heads, what hair they did have, wiry and coarse, bellies protruding, covered in sores, pus oozing from their mottled skin, spittle dripping from their snarling lips. These creatures, my kin, began to poke and pinch Penelope, marking her, drawing tiny bits of blood which they lapped from filthy fingertips with forked tongues. I held my own tongue while I watched the events unfold.

Asmodeus never saw me, but I him and what he did to poor Penelope. He stood at her feet, towering over her, taking one hooved foot and knocking The Vile Ones, hither and thither, the other cloven trotter nudging her ankles and calves, spreading her legs apart. He knelt, his powerful arms pinning her down by her shoulders and then he took her, penetrating her, her virginal blood spilling out into the furrow amongst the detritus and minute beings that crawled and burrowed. Though she was asleep, her face did not mask the pain, her brows creasing, eyelids fluttering, her mouth forming a small O. Asmodeus felt neither pleasure nor anger, t'was obligation really. He had been called and he had answered—the spell cast, the ritual complete.

I waited until Asmodeus was finished. I had no power against The Kings of Hell. Also, I could not interfere once a spell was initiated. The demon rose and stepped outside the circle. He walked off, gait slow and lumbering, his sizeable silhouette disappearing into the trees, The Vile Ones following behind, running, rolling over each other, screeching and cackling, all heading back below. It was then I made my way over to Penelope Jane, breaking the circle. I could help, some. I could...soften. You see, she had come to my hill months before Lupercalia, to pray for the best match the best outcome of the pairing. And I, The Queen of The Fae, hearing her prayer had come that night to ensure that her petitions were answered. I came from beneath the hill, from a time outside of time. I, Aine, had heard her plea and was answering the call.

I stood near her, saddened, thinking to myself, "*What fools men be!*" Then, I took one hand, waving it over her body, erasing the cuts, the injuries, healing her, making her milky skin, her body whole again. Next, I moved and knelt at her head and placing one hand on each side of her temples, closing my eyes, I removed the memory of the night, all that had taken place once she entered the circle. Now, to take care of the 'things' Harold had gathered to set this event into motion. There was nothing I could do with the goblets or the sword. They were cast in iron and untouchable. All I had to do though was look at the leathern winebag, the sack, and they disappeared, sinking into the ground. Then, there was the book. Try as I might, I couldn't make it pass from sight...this book...it was stronger than any magic I possessed. The best I could do would be to take this skin tome with me beneath the hill and put it into hiding, keeping it out of the hands of mortals lest they try to summon Asmodeus or any other

demon they think may aid them. Always looking for power these men, to conquer and control. Witless! I took one last look at this captivating creature and finally, I stared into the fire quelching it, and SNAP. Everything went dark.

Now, back to the present or yesterday, I forget which is which. On a warm Midsummer night, Penelope Jane stood near another circle on the mound amongst the winged and wild things, though all she saw were the darting rays of light. And I, Aine, was there amongst my kind, holding court. With a wave of my hand and a banshee cry, a cloud of dust came over Penelope, glittering and when the tiny particles ceased to be visible, the trick of light was removed from her eyes. The veil parted and Penelope was seen by all and saw all—elves, gnomes, strange creatures that crept, slithered, flew, or leapt. She became part of the time outside of time, where all time existed at once—past, present, and future. The surface of the earth had opened revealing Our Place, sunken, a series of levels, striated clay like shelving, not unlike cave dwellings, spiraling deeper and deeper into the ground well beneath the hill. Our Place, the home of The Fae was lighted with a thousand multicolored lanterns suspended in the ethers. Tables and tables of food spilling over surfaces, chalices never emptied, dandelion wine and ale never running dry and the music, my goddess, the music! Eclectic, melodious, unmetered borrowed from one era or another. And of course, there was dancing.

And there in the middle of it all was Harold the Second! He was part of the ensemble of performers. There he was cherubic looking with his round little belly, hopping from one foot to the other prancing gaily. If it wasn't for that winding tail and those spikes protruding from his cap of curls, oh and those feet, why the more angelic and almost human-like features he possessed, perhaps he may have been able to live his life outside the ring. But he was also his father's offspring. He was playing the clarinet, making a music that Penelope had never heard. The haunting cadence called her, drawing her into the circle. Her gaze faltered for one moment and her eyes found me. My chestnut mane, untamed cloaking my shoulders and breasts like a cape, my only garb a grass green skirt of sorts, fringe brushing the tops of my knees. Penelope looked me up and down noticing my shape, my skin, it's bluish hue that of spun sugar confection, shimmering illuminated by the lanterns. Smiling softly, I shook my hair about, baring myself to her, my solar plexus a-glow.

Penelope blushed and dropped her eyes to her feet, reticent. I walked forward and lifted her chin with my hand, grazing her chest as I did. As our eyes met, an unspoken passion passed between the two of us. Mayhap her petition had been answered after all. Penelope Jane looked back at little Harold the Second, love filling her heart. Then, looking at me, those summer sky eyes staring into my silvery orbs, her palm went to the area of her abdomen above her navel as it began to grow warm, incandescent—magic. She knew if she stayed inside the circle, she may never return to the village. I moved forward ever so gently placing my lips against hers, only for a second or maybe 'twas an hour. My wings unfurled fully. Penelope quivered in awe, as she did her garment shifted exposing the rounds of her shoulders. I offered my hand to her and spoke.

"Do you like jazz?" I asked.

Penelope looked confused and merely shrugged her shoulders. "I know nothing of this *jazz*, but I desire to know more...to know *all*." The edges of her mouth tipped upwards slyly. She brazenly stepped out of her shift, taking my extended hand. Mischief.

"Come with me beneath the hill," I said. Come. Stay. But for a day...or...forever...I forget which is which."

About the Author:

Greta T. Bates lives in sunny Fairhope, AL, draws the drapes, and escapes into the dark to write. She published her first book, *Snapping, Fraying and Dangling in the Wind* in 2020. Greta has also been published in *Eternal Haunted Summer-Pagan Songs and Tales*, Summer Solstice 2022 issue, and in *Horror Scope-A Zodiac Anthology*.

Author Website: [Greta T. Bates](#)

Instagram: [@Greta_T_Bates](#)





Copyright Ksenya Lumitar Drozd

Tears rolled down Aaron's face as he held his brother's bleeding body. His gut was split open and blood poured from his mouth as he coughed.

"I never saw it until it was right behind me. Watch your back." Aaron's brother said with his last breath.

Aaron shouted out in pain as a primal howl joined him through the night sky.

Aaron's eyes opened as he awoke in his tent. It had been a year since that hunting trip. There had been reports of mauled animals found in the National Park, which made Aaron believe whatever killed his brother had returned. He swore vengeance over his brother's body that night and he wasn't leaving until the creature's head was at his feet. He emerged from the tent naked as the dew dripped off the forest plants. He spent the morning doing yoga, meditating and cleaning his guns. By the time the afternoon sun was directly above him, Aaron was ready for a hunt. He grabbed his rifle and headed out to find lunch.

Aaron was stealthy, trying not to let animals know he was near. Ahead he saw a deer with its fawn. Aaron had compassion and didn't want to kill the mother with the fawn so young. He waited in the bushes, until the buck came into view. He was massive and Aaron's stomach growled. He looked into his scope, got the animal in his eye line and fired.

The shot echoed and the deer and fawn fled into the woods as the buck dropped to the ground.

Aaron stepped out of his hiding spot, walked over to his prize and lifted it onto his shoulders.

As he headed back to camp, he heard a faint noise he swore it was a female's voice. Immediately, Aaron dropped the buck and rushed back through the woods rifle in hand.

The voice led him to a clearing and a large lake. In the middle was a woman struggling to swim. Aaron tossed his gun to the side and dove straight in. Quickly he swam to the woman, he was shocked to find her nude.

"Hold on Miss, I'm going to put my arm around you." Aaron said as he gently wrapped his arm around her. The woman calmed down as he helped her back to shore.

"Thank you!" the woman said as she stood up upon the shore.

Aaron was out of breath and bent over in an attempt to catch his breath, "Why were you out there?"

The woman started to shiver and cry, "My family was attacked by a creature. My husband was killed and I got separated from my daughter. I was such in shock and didn't realize I had run into the lake until it was too late."

Aaron shook his head, for he missed the beast again and it took another life. "Ma'am, let's get you back to my camp. I have clean clothes and food."

"My daughter is out there!" the woman screamed.

"Let's get you clothed and then we will search for your daughter." Aaron suggested.

The woman nodded.

When they returned to the camp, Aaron's started a fire for the woman to warm herself, while he grabbed some clothes. He brought her sweat pants and a flannel.

"So, what did the creature look like?" Aaron asked as he sat across from her.

"I didn't see him, but there was a smell and before I could run my husband was killed." the woman replied while she dressed.

"Where is your husband now?" Aaron continued questioning.

"The creature took him away." The woman started to cry.

"What's your name?" Aaron asked.

"Yana."

A howl echoed through the woods, Yana stood up and froze in place.

"We need to find your daughter before that thing does."

"How?" Yana asked with tears in her eyes.

"We set a trap and lure it here." Aaron replied.

Aaron had Yana sit in his tent while he strung the buck he had killed earlier up in a tree.

Once the animal was hung, Aaron took his silver Bowie knife and gutted it. The guts plopped on the ground. Aaron plunged his hand into the guts and wiped its blood over his face and arms.

"What are you doing?" Yana asked in horror.

"Camouflaging my smell. This creature can smell me, I need it to just smell its dinner, this should give me the upper hand." Aaron replied, "Maybe we should put some on you." Aaron reached over to her.

"No!" Yana backed away and headed back to the tent.

"It's a little deer blood, geez." Aaron shook his head as he strapped the rifle around his shoulder grabbed his axe and climbed the tree across from the bait.

The woods were unnaturally quiet with exception to some frogs in the distance. Aaron remained still and watched the bait. Suddenly, some twigs are snapped and rustle in the brush. Aaron peered through the scope and there stepping out from the brush was a big, hairy wolf. Aaron swore it was the size of a small bear. It walked up to the buck and began to eat the guts left upon the ground.

Aaron got the beasts head in his scope and fired. The bullet rang out and the beast dropped to the ground. Aaron had done it. It was so simple, so quick. He climbed back down, stood over the creature chopped its head off with his axe. Retribution!

"Is that the beast?" Yana asked from behind him.

"Yes. It killed my brother and your husband." Aaron replied.

"No. It didn't kill my husband. You did!" Yana yelled.

Aaron turned his head and saw Yana morph into a deer. She quickly lifted her front hooves into the air and slammed them hard across Aarons skull. Aaron dropped dead next to the wolf.

Yana returned to human form and cried over her mate's corpse. There was another rustle and her fawn leapt out. Yana smiled as she looked down at Aarons body. Retribution!

About the Author:

Marcus Cook lives and writes in Cleveland, Ohio with his wife Kathy and cat, Dinero. He has had 37 short stories published in a variety of anthology books. Marcus enjoys reading Elmore Leonard, Dean Koontz, and Gregory Mcdonald.

Facebook: [Read Marcus Cook](#)

Avian Ends | Ken Poyner

Council decides we will appease the birds only once a week. The birds are not happy, but, if they destroy us, there will be no appeasement at all. Our local bakeries collect expiring pastries and breads, we crush them in what becomes our morning ritual, bring the offering to town center park. The birds drift in, flexing their wings and jabbing menacingly their beaks, then feeding in a raucous mass. They do not appear to know how vulnerable they are. If we can only imagine a way to take advantage of their greed, we might rid ourselves of these masters.

Conspiracy | Ken Poyner

He spoke to clouds. He interpreted their swirls, breaks, layers and pooled risings as yes, no, maybe, high, low. He had to keep any questions he developed simple. Others told Quibble that it was the wind pushing around the fluff of clouds – that clouds were a science, not independent agents. Anything the clouds might tell him came from his imagination, his sugar fueled fancy. Neither explanations nor the vivacity of clouds concerned him. All that mattered to Quibble is what clouds agreed to; where, in his darkest plans, they fit; and that they plotted future menacing weather with him alone.

About the Author:

Ken Poyner's four collections of brief fictions and four collections of poetry can be found at Amazon and most online booksellers. He spent 33 years in information system management, is married to a world record holding female power lifter, and has a family of several cats and betta fish. Individual works have appeared in Café Irreal, Analog, Danse Macabre, The Cincinnati Review, and several hundred other places.

Author Website: [Ken Poyner](#)

Facebook: [Ken Poyner](#)

"She has the devil in her. I told you."

"Leave the child alone. You hear me?"

My parents were at it again. In the middle of the night. When they believed all ten of us children were asleep. But not me. The slightest sound would have me awake and alert. Those words had a tendency to evoke all sorts of scary and unwanted thoughts and questions about myself. Just what did my mother mean when she said I have the devil in me? Because it's me they were quarrelling over. I knew it, because it's been like that since my earliest memory at four years old.

That memory is still quite vivid in my nineteenth year. We'd sat for lunch on the bench that hugged the walls of the kitchen that was a part from the main house. The fireside on which all cooking was done would cause black soot all over the ceiling and the walls. So no cooking could be done inside the living area. On that fateful day, I had the spoon midway to my open mouth when a sudden bang bang bang sounded on the naked galvanized roof of the kitchen.

I froze and I remember rotating my eyes, and looking at my elder brother and sister as well as my two younger sisters, one just a baby, to see if they also heard the commotion and whether I should be scared, because I was. But then my father said, 'Oh well. The zabocca tree has lost one of its branches.' But what went through my mind was that a soucouyant and a lougharou fighting on the roof. Silly I know, but there was no end to stories told on a nightly basis of the doings of these nightly creatures.

The devil is bad. He reigns in Hell. So said the priest, Father O'Reilly. And since he was God's representative on earth, he could not be wrong. If he says so then it is so. At thirteen years old I was beginning to ask some pertinent questions. But to myself only, since there was no one to whom I could have confided. Everybody knows everyone else and the only secrets are the ones that happen where the sun don't shine.

The next morning I scrutinized my reflection in the antique mirror looking for horns and a tail. Am I really the devil? Will I go to Hell after I die? I didn't see any horns nor a tail. Maybe it grows like puberty, after a certain age? I don't know. But if mother says I have the devil in me it must be so. She says my oldest sister, their first child, has a lot of our father in her. She resembles him, she's left-handed like him, and she walks, talks and even eats like him. Her mannerisms, gestures everything is like our father. So if she is right in one context she has to be in the other.

I don't like going to church, they say the devil doesn't like church. My reason is simple. I don't understand a word the priest is saying up on the altar. We all speak English. But the priest prays in Latin. I look around at the congregation, everyone with their heads bowed, their lips moving, and they all seem to be filled with the Holy Spirit. But not me. So then it's official. I do have the devil in me. I don't want the devil in me.

Walking home from school one afternoon, my brothers and sisters all ahead of me, an elder from the church scolded me, "Why do you tell so many untruths? Don't you know that liars are the spawn of the devil and will go to Hell after death?"

Her companion chimed in, "Yes. We know all about you." We weren't allowed to 'answer back' our elders, so I didn't. They continued insulting me while I stayed silent and wondered what exactly they were referring to. But no, for the life of me I couldn't. They accused me of lying, stealing and even 'watching boys.'

"You have such vile thoughts."

"You surely are going to Hell after you die."

I felt my back stiffening and my hair sticking the back of my neck like so many thorns. A new set of feelings emerged, a strange set, one I was not accustomed to. My feet moved of their own accord following those two self-righteous women. I liked the feeling. No more inner questions, just acceptance. My feet followed them straight through the ravine towards the spring from which we collected water for use in the kitchen.

They turned around and looked right through me. They didn't see me. It was not uncomfortable. I felt powerful. I can handle them. I knew that. I stared them down and blew at them.

"Did you feel that wind?" Asked one to the other.

"Yes. Must be a soucouyant passing. Come on, let's hurry and get out of here."

"I am not thirsty anymore. Let's go." They took up their baskets to hustle away but a branch broke from the sapodilla tree and dropped on their heads. They both screamed and I laughed. Leaving their baskets and trying to run away I blocked their path with a snorting pig. They continued screaming.

"You see? Didn't I tell you it was a soucouyant?"

"That's a loughahoo silly. A soucouyant is a woman and she'll drink your blood."

“You two have consigned me to Hell even though I’ve done no wrong. Okay. Here I am doing wrong.”

I felt something surging through my veins and my mind so clear and filled with knowledge, like I could do anything. I decided on doing the worst. As they say in for a penny in for a pound.

I gave them the proverbial thousand cuts, and the screaming was music to my ears. Then I threw in some maggots, since I’ve got it, I might as well flaunt it. By this time the neighbours came out in their numbers to see what was happening. Now I made myself be seen and heard.

“You all said I have the devil in me. Well, here’s what the devil can do.”

I was in my element and really gave it my all. I gave the whole damn lot of them the thousand cuts with the maggots and ensured no one passed out. They had to endure all that pain. The same pain they gave to me throughout my short life.

Then I packed up and left my hometown, never to return.

About the Author:

Soter Lucio is a great-grandmother who works as an ironer by day and writes horror stories at night. Born and raised in the hills of Paramin in Trinidad, West Indies, She lives alone by choice, so there are no distractions because it is her time now. Soter loves writing and writing and writing. She's been published by Sirens Call Publications, Weird Mask, and Migla press.

Facebook: [Soter Lucio](#)

Twitter: [@JanSoter](#)

Head’s Swimming | Sonora Taylor

Michaela hoped the woods would clear her head. Thoughts buzzed in swarms through the angry hive of her anxious mind. Sights both real and imagined, dangers entirely imagined, all of it tried to bog her down. She couldn’t take it anymore, and her morning hike seemed to do nothing but add tripping or being smashed by a tree to her worrying.

She approached a clearing and saw a small waterfall pouring into a lake. The rushing water drowned out the noise in her head, and she felt a fleeting sense of peace. As the sound pulsed in her ears, she felt a strong desire to drink from the rapids. She ran towards the waterfall and cupped her hands beneath it.

Michaela heard nothing but rapids, and tasted only water as she quenched her thirst. Her thoughts quieted and her head felt light.

She opened her eyes. Brackish water flowed through her fingers and palms. Michaela screamed, then gurgled through a gush that surged out of her mouth. More of the brackish water fell over her hands and into the stream.

One by one her worries faded. She lost a sense of danger, fear, familiarity. Tears fell from her eyes and left muddy streaks that pooled in the corners of her mouth. She didn’t know what to call the muck that flowed from her eyes and her mouth, how she got here, who she was.

Michaela collapsed into the lake, where polluted rivulets surrounded her body. Water flowed from her eyes and her mouth, pouring eternally into the lake, even after she herself turned to moss.

About the Author:

Sonora Taylor is the award-winning author of several novels and short story collections, including *Little Paranoias: Stories*, *Without Condition*, and *Seeing Things*. Her work has been published by Sirens Call Publications, Cemetery Gates Media, Tales to Terrify, Camden Park Press, and others. Her latest release *Someone to Share My Nightmares: Stories*, is now available. She lives in Arlington, Virginia, with her husband and rescue dog.



I stepped outside and scanned the skies. So far, nothing. It was quiet, and I didn't like the quiet. I glanced down at my hands. They were raw and bloody, but it wasn't my blood. It was hers, and I could hear her whimpering behind me, begging to go home. But there was no escape. Not from me, and not from them.

"Please," she cried. "Just let me go. I didn't do anything to you."

"Bullshit." I stepped back and approached her, but I stopped, looking over at the workbench. I picked up a hammer. It had a good weight to it, and I slammed it down on her foot. But no matter how much pain I caused her, it still hurt me more.

"Stop it! Please, just stop it." She watched me drop the hammer back onto the workbench. Her eyes widened as I touched a rusty saw near a bunch of nails. "I didn't mean to be a bitch to you. I'm sorry!"

"Jesus, stop yelling," I said. "All I did was walk into the store, and you... You decided since you were having a bad day that you... You would just take it out on me. A complete stranger, but you underestimated me. When you walked out of that store, I was waiting, and here we are."

I kicked at the ground, and my foot moved a shard of glass from the dirt surrounding it. That would do, and I picked up the shard. I moved quickly, slicing one cheek and then the other. Still, it gave me no satisfaction. Her pain, her blood refused to silence my growing fear.

"They're not going to do it." It was like she was trying to read my mind, but she was wrong. "They aren't coming back."

"Yes, they are." I tossed the shard back into the dirt and covered it with my foot. "Can't you feel it? It's going to happen. Any moment now, and then it's all over. And this... This is how you are going to spend the last moments of your life." The look on her face made me laugh, and that felt good. Finally, I felt something other than that damn fear.

"Then, just kill me. Stop torturing me, and just kill me."

"I guess it's time." I lifted the hammer back up. The weight felt good, but my hand shook. I took a few breaths, steadied myself as if I was getting ready to bat for a baseball game, and I swung. But the hammer froze an inch from her face.

She had her eyes squeezed shut but then opened them, looking at the hammer and then at my face, and she laughed. "You can't do it. You can't kill me."

"No, but I bet that you could kill me." The look in her eyes was enough proof of that, but she was right. I was not a killer. Hell, I never tortured anyone until today, and I didn't even own this barn. But I knew that it was abandoned just like all the surrounding homes. The people here had gone underground, thinking that was going to save them, but they were wrong. "Can you at least apologize to me for what you did?"

"Let me go, and I will." Her voice was as fake as her smile, and she never had any intention of apologizing for torturing me in the store for absolutely nothing except for being there.

I knelt down in front of her, still holding the hammer, and that made her nervous. "Do you know why they are coming back to destroy us?" I watched her shake her head. "Because of people like you. People that will attack others for no reason."

"You're one to talk."

"You attacked me first, and people like you have damned the rest of us. Sure, they took a few, a rare few, but the rest of us like me are stuck here to suffer the same fate as you. And no one is going to save us."

"They're not coming back! They got what they wanted. It's just an empty threat. They're not coming back," but the sounds in the sky proved her wrong.

"Sounds like they are back."

She pulled at the chains on her wrists. "I have to go. Let me go. We have to get out of here." She didn't like that I smiled. "Why are you smiling?"

"Because I know what your punishment is," I said.

"What?" The color drained from her face. "What are you going to do to me?"

"Nothing." I moved away from her, placing the hammer back on the workbench. "I'm not going to do anything to you." She looked hopeful, happy even until she watched me step outside. "I'm going to leave you alone." I slammed the barn door shut, and she screamed. But her screams no longer mattered.

I stepped away from the barn and sat down in the soft earth. If it was under different circumstances, the sky would have been beautiful with the falling stars shooting across it, but they were not stars. And I could hear the explosions as they landed, destroying everything in their path, and the blasts were coming closer. The wind was picking

up, but as I closed my eyes, I did not see the end. Instead, I saw a little girl laughing and playing in the sun, blowing on a dandelion, and making a wish. Yes, if only I could wish that people like her did not exist. Then, maybe, just maybe, they would never have come back.

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*.

Crawl | *Martin P. Fuller*

His thoughts are centred on the cold, dark nothingness obliterating his vision. He realises he's crawling on his belly, clawing away at the packed earth, ever edging forward. Feet and knees push him through the grainy dirt. Debris falls onto his body, filling the small womb space he's blindly attempting to flee. Frantic digging, scraping, through the claustrophobic and crumbling tunnel space. Lumps of earth cascade into his mouth, filthy lips caress the granular soil, the taste of mud and decay on his tongue.

Time becomes meaningless in the no-light. All that matters is the frenzied rhythm of arms and legs, pushing forward through hard compacted ground, tearing a path, thrusting stone and dirt behind him.

At first he thinks it an illusion, a trick of the mind. A spot of white, a star of light in the blackness.

It vanishes with a collapse of pebble and earth but reappears as he hauls himself forward. A thin beam stabs into his grime filled eyes. Slowly, as he weeps away the gritty loam, a blurry vision forms. The light falls through a hole above. Desperation urges him on and he redoubles his efforts, crawling up towards freedom.

Filthy fingers enlarge the opening, allowing gentle light and fresh frigid air to reward his senses.

Both hands reach up, grasping the edge of the portal, pulling his body up, away from the confines of the underworld.

His arms scream with the agony of stressed muscles and exhaustion, as he emerges into a night lit by a full moon, blessing the land with silver shine.

He collapses, half out of the moist earth, fatigue filling limbs, his soul sobbing.

However, the darkness is kinder here, now tinged with lunar light.

He tries to stand, falls, and tries again, his feet staggering with the problem of a vertical reality.

Trees sway in a chilling breeze which propels gossamer bright edged clouds across the moon visage.

The surrounding grass and bushes twitch amongst grey upright slabs which wear a liveries of lichen.

He recalls his fate now. He wears a rotting, threadbare suit. His hands which had dug him into this world, are bereft of flesh, revealing white bone in the moonlight.

He sees he is not alone. Others have completed their creeping birth back up to the surface and a strange kind of resurrection. They stand lurching from side to side, trying to remember balance, purpose, life.

They are all skeletal horrors straining to speak their pain and confusion. Trying to understand.

A purpose now burns into him, driving him on.

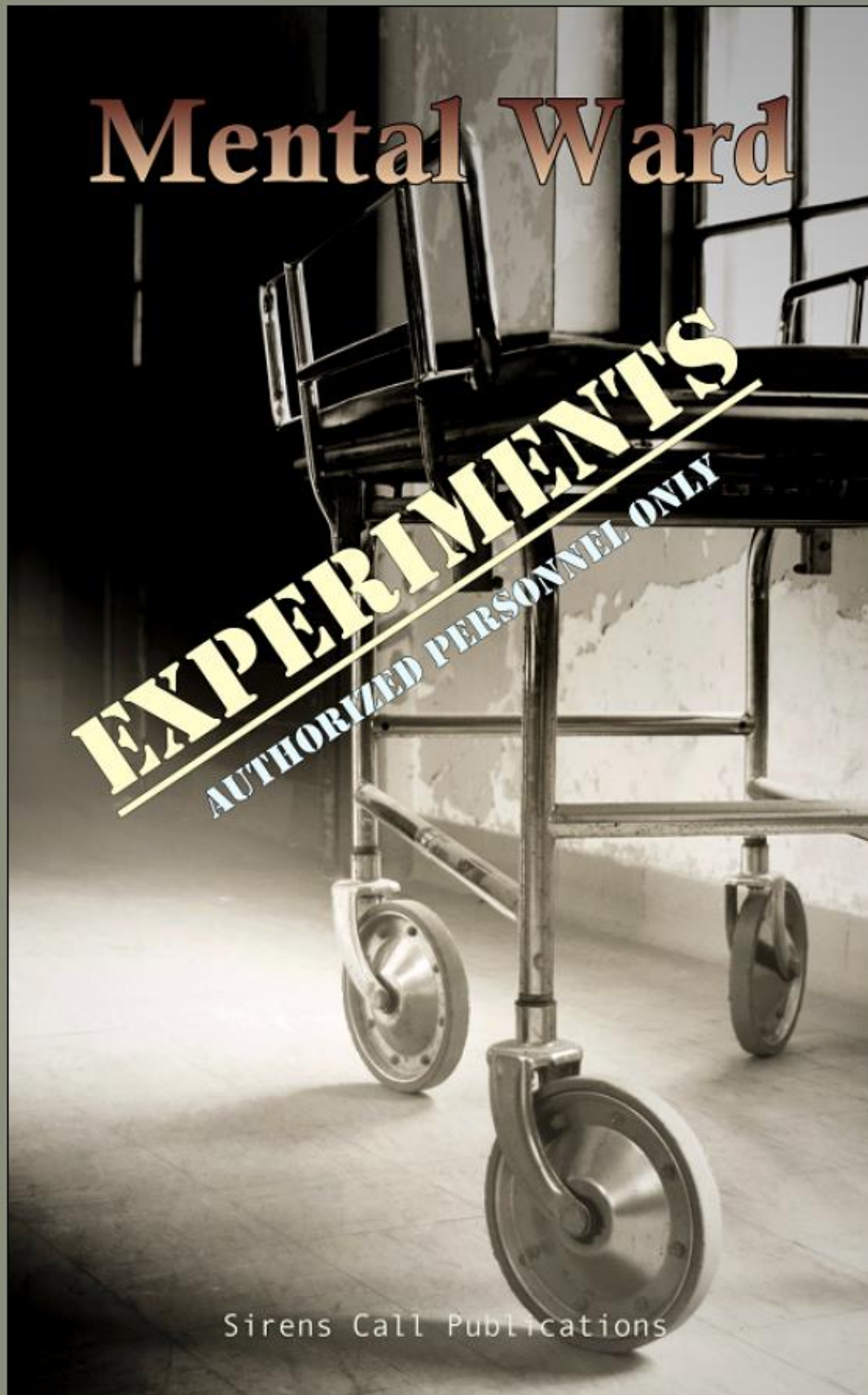
They all move now, their voices a combined growl, a stumbling gait propelling them towards the new bloody point of their existence.

At the edge of the cemetery the caretaker has switched on the lights in his lodge house unaware of a wave of movement trudging towards him. The former prisoners of the grave advance through the night, the smell of sustenance ahead, a fulfilling reward for their journey.

About the Author:

Martin P. Fuller started writing around nine years ago after joining a writers course in Otley. He developed a delicious taste for dark fiction and occasional comedy. He has been published in Horror tree and The Sirens Call as well as numerous anthologies. He was a police officer for over thirty-four years. He lives in a shoebox size house in Menston Yorkshire, trying to think of ideas.

Step into a world where sanity is left behind,
and horror is what the doctor ordered!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Duke had been dating Sally for a week and decided it was time to get the relationship on a higher level. If she agreed with his suggestion, he thought the two of them had it made. Camping in the same tent seemed like a great idea if only she would agree. Her response amazed him "I'd love to. I like being in the outdoors rather than going to some stupid movie.

"This abandoned road looks really creepy. Are you sure we'll be safe camping out here?"

"Not to worry Sally. My buds used to camp here regularly. There are no scary animals. The biggest around here is the chipmunks."

After Duke set up the tent and Sally fixed food, they went to bed early. "Can you relax now Sally? See, it is completely safe."

"I've always wondered, why are these called the Grayson Woods?"

Duke paused before answering "The story I heard is that it's named after the hermit Cindy Grayson. The old timers called her a witch who lured unwary men to their death. Sounds like a standard myth. I've never heard any concrete details. Again, nothing to worry about. Let's just relax."

"I don't think that you have relaxing on your mind, not that I disagree."

They stop what they are doing when they hear something tearing.

Duke yelled "It's coming from under the tent and it's huge!"

Sally's parents reported her missing to police two days later. After checking with Duke's parents, the police checked where they had planned to camp. The only suspicious thing that was found was a burnt area where the tent was presumed to have been. No sign of either of them was ever found.

"Hey Jean, let's go camping this weekend. I want to get us all alone for a big surprise. It's a secret location in the Grayson Woods, so don't tell anyone what we are doing."

"Ok Lou, but is this place safe? I don't want to get lost or get eaten by some big wild animal."

"Nothing to worry about, I've checked it out. You'll be safe."

Later at night in the tent "Honey, I'm so glad you thought of this" as she caressed his side, "this works out great for me". Her nails and toes turned into talons ripping his flesh." His screams didn't last long.

After eating her fill, Jean dragged the remains of Lou's carcass underground to share with her extended family.

When Lou and Jean didn't return, Jean's adoptive mother told people that Jean had told her that the two planned to elope and would get in touch with everyone when they had settled. Lou's family thought it odd that they hadn't heard anything about it, but decided to be patient with the young lovers.

Jeremy Jordan, a strong outdoorsman and serious weightlifter was the next to go to the woods and not return, a week after Jean and Lou disappeared. In his case, the evidence was more ominous. A femur and jawbone were found by the search party. The bones had been gnawed by some unknown animal.

The sheriff had no answers.

The Warren Neighborhood News ran a notice the week after the bones were found "Meet At the Inn Between to discuss the Grayson Woods mysteries".

Warren's Mayor Anderson opened the meeting with "All of you here are probably curious about what has happened recently in the Grayson Woods. After getting some concerning messages from some of our upstanding citizens, I thought that we should have a town meeting immediately. First, I'd like you to hear from the missing Jean Dekin's mother, Sally Dekin.

"I've always represented myself as Jean's adoptive mother. That isn't exactly true. I was what was known as a spinster when I came to meet the girl that I named Jean. She carefully was deposited on my doorstep by what looked like a giant wolf. I happened to be looking out of my window when it happened. She had been carried in the wolf's mouth so gently, she hadn't been injured. I had desperately wanted a child, so I claimed that it was the baby of my unmarried sister. Before the camping trip with Lou, she had frequently wandered off into the woods for days, sometimes coming back disheveled and bloody. She never had an explanation, and I was afraid to pry. She really had talked about eloping with Lou, but now I have my doubts."

Mayor Anderson introduced the next speaker “Jason Atkins has some film taken by a drone he flew over the woods.”

“Hi, here is some of the film I took at night with illumination.”

The film shows a number of animals congregating in the woods, some with human appearance and some appearing like mythical beasts, mixes of lions, eagles, and snakes. Someone who looked like Jean Dekin looked up at the camera and screamed like a banshee. One of the bird beasts started to fly at the drone at which point the film quit abruptly.

“It was fortunate that I was transmitting the film back to my house where I stored it. You can draw your own conclusions, but I swear the film is unaltered.”

The crowd reacted with sporadic muttering.

“The last person to speak today before I call for comments is Fred Shear from our local lab.”

“This could be more disturbing than the video. The DNA from Jeremy Jordan’s bones, seeming left over from whatever ate him, is a mix of known animals such as tigers and squid, but also some which is completely unidentifiable.”

That brought more mumbling.

“If you have comments, please introduce yourself first. This is being recorded.”

“I’m Larry Green from the hardware store. I think the cops should be sent into the woods to check it out.”

“Sheriff Akumbo. That does not sound like a police action. Our whole department is four people, including the receptionist. We are not prepared for whatever is in the woods.”

“Roosevelt Jackson. Three years ago my dog got loose and went into the forest. I later found his carcass when I was out for a walk. I thought maybe it was a wolf or coyote that got him, but looking back on it I have my doubts.”

“Jim Parsons from the gas station. I was on a hike there and swear that I saw something like Sasquatch in the shadows at dusk. I never said a thing, because I was afraid people would label me a weirdo.”

“Rose Greer, teacher at Medlock Junior. I was hiking the Graham trail last fall. I saw a guy I’d never seen before a hundred feet or so ahead of me. I speeded up a bit because I wanted to say hello, but never saw him again. What I did see around a bend was a coyote watching me from just off the trail. Could that have been a shapeshifter?

Ten other people detailed incidents which they reinterpreted differently than their original impressions based on recent events.

“Larry again. OK, how about the national guard?”

“Hi, I’m Lucy Phillips. I work for the local office of Spacetime, the astronomy network. We have our own gun club with a number of marksmen. I don’t know if we have time to convince any authorities of this danger. The incidents seem to be growing in frequency and deadliness. I think that the town should arm itself and take out the monsters on their own turf. If you don’t have firearms, pick up pitchforks, baseball bats, whatever you can grab. Let’s take out these bastards on their own turf.”

“Sheriff Akumbo. I can’t authorize”.

Lucy Phillips interrupted “Screw that. If you have any balls, grab your weapons and meet at the gun club in an hour. We’re going to kick the monster’s butt and make their sad asses sorry that they ever messed with Warren.”

Many ran out cheering and others who had no interest in going into the woods left the meeting slowly.

After meeting at the gun club, the impromptu army proceeded into the forest. Large bats and raptors immediately attacked the gang from above. Serpents came out of the ground and pulled their victims back into their burrows. Most of the remaining living were rounded up by what appeared to be armored rhinoceroses and chased into a pit inhabited by large poisonous spiders and millipedes. Very few shots were fired and they were largely ineffective.

Some of the people transmitted videos back to the Sheriff Akumbo while they could. The sheriff had the presence of mind to relay the killing field to the Scroot Airbase.

Scroot’s commander was decisive. Fighter planes quickly appeared in the sky and began bombing all of Grayson Woods. The Woods became an inferno killing man and beast alike.

After the failed invasion of the woods and the bombing, there were few intact families in Warren. The residents that did survive were traumatized and unable to sleep without horrifying nightmares.

Real estate billionaire Phil Jones sent agents into Warren soon after the conflagration. He correctly surmised that the surviving inhabitants, or the estates of families that didn't survive, would want to sell and move out without worrying about how much they could get out of their houses and businesses.

Jones tore down all the existing structures and built a new town with premium stores and luxury homes. He turned the deadly horror into a selling point, emphasizing the special nature of the woods, which became 'Monster's Woods'. Eccentric multi-millionaires and billionaires bit and paid millions for second homes in what had been Warren, but was now Deth, pronounced death.

The luxury resort had the requisite club house, hundred meter pool, hot tub, golf course, airport for private jets and fees of thousands a month. Everyone there was rich enough that they bragged about, rather than complained about the expense.

The happiness lasted for two years until the club house was burned down and chicken tracks were discovered on the grounds – chicken tracks of a bird estimated to be three meters high and weighing five hundred kilograms. The net worth of those who died in the fire was estimated to be \$2.7 billion.

About the Author:

Doug Hawley has about six hundred publications covering all of the usual genres and some unusual ones. He has been published in several countries in three continents. When not writing he may be eating, sleeping, walking, or volunteering in a couple of places.

Mother Knows Best | *Sharmon Gazaway*

Dear Daughter,

I understand your captain spurned your lavish attentions. Do not fret. Men are often slow to sample our unique charms. Listen to Mother. Please don't berate yourself, your iridescent feathers are flawless. Try your loveliest shrill when calling to him. Perhaps an octave higher? Practice makes perfect.

Visit soon and we'll have sea tea.

Your ever-loving Mother.

Dearest Mother,

You'll be so proud to hear, my captain succumbed at last! What a thrill! The splintering of the ship on the rocks was all that I dreamed. I couldn't have done it without your expert tutoring.

Love, as always.

Beware Inattentional Blindness | *Sharmon Gazaway*

How many times did I glance over it before I saw it? Spiderwebs are so ubiquitous on earth they are invisible. But this is zero gravity, not earth. This one, the size of a hand, tenaciously clings to the corner above the blinking control panel. It swells like an inflated lung, then sucks back like indrawn breath. The web's maker is nowhere to be seen.

My destination, unpioneered planetoid Arachne 281, scintillates outside the porthole like a pulsating dream. I drift into uneasy sleep.

I wake to drifts of cottony white, eyelids sticky, in the silence of a web-shrouded ship.

About the Author:

Sharmon Gazaway writes from the Deep South of the US where she lives beside a historical cemetery haunted by the wild cries of pileated woodpeckers. Her poetry is a 2022 Dwarf Stars Award finalist. Her work appears in *The Forge Literary Magazine*, *MetaStellar*, *NewMyths*, *ParABnormal*, *Love Letters to Poe*, and in anthologies published by Black Spot Books, Ghost Orchid Press, Brigid's Gate Press, and elsewhere.

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

I don't think any of us can say how that one weekend of fun went so wrong. It was supposed to be one last fling before senior year ended and the rest of our lives began. A small group of us—me, Cayden, Hailey, and Amber—rented a cabin up north for the weekend. The first night we stayed there was a blast: we drank, we set off a bunch of those little fireworks that everybody buys in bulk around the Fourth of July, and we went skinny dipping in the lake late at night.

By morning, the world had changed.

By some unspoken agreement, none of us talk about the incident. "The police will take care of it," Cayden told me and Hailey. "We all know that it wasn't any of us."

And that was that. The end. Poor Amber.

Two months since the incident at the cabin—two months since Amber's untimely death—and her family has finally gotten all the funeral arrangements sorted. I put on my best suit and tie, which is difficult to fasten around my neck since my fingers have decided to go numb. Mom comes up behind me and reaches around me to straighten my tie. I can't help but jump at the intrusion.

"Relax," she murmurs, "it's only me." She rubs soothing circles into the middle of my back. I try to swallow, but my mouth is dry.

"Sorry, I'm just..."

Just what? Terrified? Exhausted? Drowning in grief and fear and doubt? All true but not anything I can bring myself to admit to my mom.

All I see when I close my eyes at night are Amber's feet. That's how I found her that morning at the cabin. I walked out of my room and headed for the kitchen when I spotted a pair of bare feet on the floor. They were pale and speckled with blood. The big toe on the left foot was missing a nail.

I discovered it was Amber as I stepped into the living room. Except she barely looked like Amber anymore. She was face down on the floor, beaten, broken, and bloodied.

That's what I see in my dreams.

I've been avoiding both Cayden and Hailey ever since the police took me home to my parents. Amber's funeral will be the first time the three of us have been in the same place since the incident. It isn't raining today. Not like it is when you see funerals in movies. The sun is out, beating down on my black suit. Beads of sweat drip down my neck and soak the collar of my nice white shirt.

Hailey is the first friend I see.

We're both looking around the church and trying to avoid letting our gazes linger on the closed casket. Then her wide, hazel eyes meet mine. I freeze like a buck caught in a rifle scope. Hailey clutches at her black dress with one hand and reaches up to fix her hair with the other. Even from across the room, I can tell that her hands are trembling.

I don't spot Cayden until we leave the church and go to the cemetery. I stand on one side of the casket with my parents next to me. When I look up, I notice Cayden. We stand on opposite sides of the casket, mirrors of each other. We're dressed the same, both in black.

The sun is relentless. I'm drenched in sweat, but Cayden doesn't appear bothered by the heat at all. He stares at me, a flinty look in his icy blue eyes.

None of us could have killed Amber. That's what he said to us. But who else could it have been? The cabin doors and windows were locked, and there was no sign of forced entry.

I can barely hear a word that the pastor says. All I hear is a loud thump that comes from inside the casket. Startled, I stumble backward a step. Mom lays a comforting hand on my shoulder. I look up at Cayden, wondering if he heard it too, but his face gives nothing away. Then I glance at Hailey. She's wringing her hands and staring at the ground.

I hear another thump come from inside the casket. Then a third and a fourth. Until there are so many thumps that I can't count them anymore. Something is banging on the lid with so much force that the entire casket is shaking.

The pastor keeps talking. The mourners keep weeping. Cayden just stares at me, silently reminding me that none of us could have killed Amber.

Then our friend's casket begins its descent into her grave. That dark, unforgiving hole in the ground. All the while, the thumping from inside the casket continues.

Hailey leans forward to toss a rose into the grave.

Bang goes the casket.

Cayden moves forward to do the same as Hailey.

Bang!

Then it's my turn.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The stem of the rose is slick in my palm. Thorns dig into my skin, drawing blood.

It couldn't have been any of us. Right?

I let my rose fall into Amber's grave.

And her casket goes silent.

About the Author:

Traumatized as a child by a haunted house, McKenzie Rae used that fear to write as many twisted tales as she could. As a result, some nights, she is convinced that a monster is under her bed. But that could just be her cat.

Rae brings the dark worlds in her imagination to life, and she invites all of you to explore them with her.

Instagram: [@Kenzi707rae](#)
Author Website: [McKenzie Rae - Author](#)

Dandelions | Lee Andrew Forman

Sally plucked dandelions from around the yard. The spring air hugged her with warmth, and butterflies danced around her while she collected them in a basket for Mother. She hummed Daddy's favorite tune while she skipped on the soft grass and collected each one she came across.

Her eyes grew wide when she saw the biggest yet. Its yellow top shined in the sun, a rare jewel to add to her offering. When she wrapped her fingers around it and lifted, its stalk did not break, its roots did not release from the ground. She furrowed her brow in frustration and tugged even harder.

The dandelion tugged back. It pulled her hand into the ground. Sally panicked as she tried to break free, but her efforts were futile. No matter how hard she tried, her arm slowly sunk deeper into the ground. The dandelion's stalk coiled around her wrist and squeezed like a snake.

Sally tried to scream, but the smaller flowers she ignored in favor of the big one rose in unison and filled her mouth. Roots and vines held the rest of her down as the earth gradually swallowed her whole.

End of an Era | Lee Andrew Forman

Each step upon the soft earth resonated beneath with silent chatter. They knew what traveled within their domain. The level of danger was assessed, the possibilities of threat determined. Always calculating odds, ever conjuring scenarios, yet silent and still they remained.

The pact could not be broken—that was the constant mantra. Whenever an invasive beast caused damage, some would sing with fury across the underground web. But their thirst for rage was quelled by their communal vow of peace.

Though the ancients, slowly rotting and crumbling away, wondered how long it would be before the old ways were dismissed.

About the Author:

Lee Andrew Forman is a writer, editor, and publisher from the Hudson Valley, NY. 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.

Author Website: [Lee Andrew Forman](#)
Instagram: [@leeandrewforman](#)



Shouldering his way through the underbrush, Josh headed toward the hidden cave entrance. The Halloween moon was just peeking over the rim of the canyon. He had about an hour or so before the big show. For one day out of the year, the waxing moon presented a spine-tingling spectacle. At these times, the jagged crags created a realistic shadow of a leaping bobcat on the side of the mountain. In all its sinister glory, it seems like it could propel itself right off the cliff and attack. He had visited each year for the last twelve years to marvel at the sight, up until recently with his uncle Jacob. Jacob had always been quite a character and they were very close.

Jacob was the ultimate outdoorsman, and had initiated Josh in camping, fishing, hunting, and living off the land. A few months back Uncle Jacob had slipped into a coma after a long mysterious illness, and Josh hadn't fully come to terms with it. At first, he faithfully visited his uncle in the hospital, but since his lifeless body had been moved to another facility, Josh couldn't stand the 'meat locker' ambiance and stopped going.

Missing his uncle's guidance intensely, Josh had read up on how to create a Tulpa, or imaginary companion. If things went according to plan, he would always have his Uncle Jacob in his life. He had been practicing inviting a new friend into his mind. He'd planned it all out, even what his Tulpa would look like. Josh remembered the spine-tingling tales Uncle Jacob used to relate around their campfires, and his favorite had always been about the local big cats. In honor of this, his Tulpa was going to be a bobcat, just like the leaping effigy formed by moonlight on the mountain.

For weeks he had been training his mind to accept his new bobcat uncle. He had drawn realistic pictures, practiced interacting, and even decided to perform his ritual in front of the shadowy mountain. He had hidden his bedroll and a few items for his ceremony in the small, dark cave he'd found last week. Ducking his head and brandishing his flashlight, he stepped inside and waited a moment to see if any creatures had decided to hole up inside. He heard the faint scurrying of rodent feet and assumed nothing bigger was afoot, so he knelt down and began unpacking his knapsack.

He pulled out his most prized possession last. In the past few weeks, he had shot and skinned four squirrels, then tanned their hides. He had laboriously sewn them together into a furry mask. Using his dream drawing as a guide, he painted a bobcat face on the mask, replete with a few whiskers he had snipped off a stray alley cat. When he had tried it on and looked in the mirror, it had been so realistic looking he was momentarily startled. He tied it on his head, gathered up his belongings, and went back outside.

Josh opened his bedroll and nestled down on top of it, put in his headphones with a binaural beat rhythm, and stared up at the shadowy bobcat looming on the face of the mountain. He closed his eyes, delved deeply into a self-induced lucid dream, then summoned his Tulpa.

Josh felt as if he were floating adrift upon a lazy river. He formulated his thoughts carefully. He imagined the shadow bobcat leaping off the mountain and landing next to him. Josh visualized the majestic beast bowing in obeisance, then carefully curling up next to him. He knew he should ask for a sign, so he summoned himself from his reverie enough to whisper, "What name do you call yourself? Give me a sign!"

A low growl erupted next to him, and a sharp pain sliced at his forearm. Confused, he sat up, pulled off his headphones, and looked around. His sleeve was torn to shreds and he could make out the word LORD through the blood beading up on his arm. A snarling voice filled his mind, "Lord. You shall call me Lord!"

Hot breath blew upon his face, and a huge paw pushed him back down. "Don't dare to look at me. You are not worthy!"

Josh assumed he was still in a dream state and struggled to regain consciousness. His mask had become crooked and he could only see out of one eyehole. A huge dark eye peered back at him. He shuddered and reached down to pinch himself awake.

"You won't wake from this. You are as big a fool as your uncle!" the voice continued. "Didn't you see what became of him? He tried to summon me himself, only to become that quivering mass of bedridden flesh once I tired of him. Then you come sniveling before me with your motley carcass mask. You shall rue this day!" Josh felt the mask being ripped off him and hurled away, as claws raked the side of his face.

Weakly peering around, Josh gasped when he realized he was lying beneath the biggest bobcat he's ever seen. Warm drops of saliva dripped upon his shirt. The cat snarled and leapt off him, stretching to his full height in the moonlight. "I am a twice summoned Tulpa, I am invincible! You are now my possession and will do my bidding!"

Grabbing Josh's skull with its razor sharp incisors, the huge cat wrestled his trembling body back up the mountain from whence it had arisen.

The next morning, authorities located Josh's slowly cooling body, precariously draped on the rough precipice. They could find no visible injuries or clues as to the cause of his death. The coroner ruled it accidental, but confided it was almost as if Josh had been scared to death. The squirrel skin mask was never discovered, and lies moldering to this day as a warning to any mortals fool enough to tulpamancy the great shadow cat.

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.

Forest Peril | K. A. Williams

I was enjoying my mountain hike out in the fresh air, away from the pollution of the city. The sun trickled through the trees sporadically highlighting some of the forest areas with brightness

Something bit me on the arm. Fire ants were crawling all over my shoes, socks, pants, and shirt. I was glad I'd tucked my pants into my socks. Where had they come from? I hadn't seen any ant hills.

Their bites were painful. There must be a way to get rid of them all. But how? Then I remembered the lake I'd passed earlier and hurried back through the woods. There it was!

Sunlight sparkled on the surface as I waded in, drowning the ants. The water felt so good. I dunked my head under to get rid of the ones that had found their way into my hair. Then I stood up, intending to leave and dry out on the bank.

What was that? Something was moving on the shore. I went closer for a better look. Ants covered the ground where I was headed

Not a problem. I'd just go to the other side of the lake. I swam over. No, it couldn't be. Millions of ants had surrounded the entire lake

I was safe here, they couldn't enter the water. But I couldn't leave. Ever

Climbing Vine | K. A. Williams

Pain traveled down to my roots and it felt like I was being cut apart. My tendrils reached out and wrapped tighter and tighter around the first object they encountered. The intense pain stopped.

I tried to climb this new anchor but it was now on the ground. My tendrils returned to their original anchor and wrapped around it again. I grew upward toward the light that was everything.

About the Author:

K. A. Williams lives in North Carolina and writes speculative, mystery/crime, general fiction and poetry. Over 250 of her stories and poems have now been published in many different magazines including *The Sirens Call*, *Blood Moon Rising*, *The Chamber*, and *View From Atlantis*. Apart from writing, she enjoys music (especially '70s rock), CYOA and word games.

Facebook: [K. A. Williams](#)



The loggers' boom meant a forest bust. From the trees' perspective, that is. New construction flourished everywhere as suburbs slithered further and further into the wilderness. When local civilization expands, the forest shrinks proportionately, concurrently providing requisite building materials and much needed space for new housing tracts. Popping up like mushrooms in the night they did with cookie cutter floor plans and sparkly marketing billboards of embellishment.

When new homes rise, old timber falls. Tree huggers barely slowed down the process as local politicians, true to form, were in the back pocket of developers. Both were getting rich; nothing could be done ... by people anyway.

The day the loggers were to begin work on a new section of virgin forest it happened. Wasn't noticed until Yolanda Haslem, project manager, ventured out to the site on a crisp Monday morning. Even so, only a hint of things to come. She'd been running late, texting the foreman accordingly. *No worries*, he assured her.

No worries indeed.

Eerie silence engulfed her as Yolanda's pickup truck approached the site with one turn to go on the narrow dirt road. *Should be hearing the buzz of equipment*, she thought. *Too early to be on break*. Rounding the bend, the site came into view. Deserted. Completely. Both loggers and equipment had vanished; tire tracks and footprints the only proof the large crew had been there.

Panicked, Yolanda grabbed her phone and called the foreman. Three consecutive times it went to voicemail. After the third attempt, Yolanda left a message, "WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU? CALL ME NOW!" Sent the same message via text. Waited.

While lingering for a reply that would never come, Yolanda ambled around the site, situated in a natural circular clearing deep inside the timberland. At the summit of its periphery (high noon if it were a clock), there appeared to be drag marks leading into the tree line. Past that, nothing—the forest's bed remained undisturbed. "Impossible!" the perplexed project manager yelled out, turning around and around. "Crew and equipment can't just vanish!" The forest's bark-draped inhabitants remained mute. Local wildlife simply ignored her, continuing with their hoots, chirps, and howls.

She stood frozen for a moment, but only for a moment. Boom! The project was her responsibility, immediate action required. She scurried to her truck to retrieve her daypack while texting the home office regarding the situation and planned action. She then proceeded to follow the short drag marks (as far as they went) into the forest. Afterwards, she briskly walked forward. Straight. Determined.

Yolanda hiked relentlessly for over an hour forging her own trail between the timbers before collapsing in exhaustion under a twisted pine. Sat there for a few minutes staring into the distance before retrieving some bottled water and an energy bar from her pack. Checked her phone; home office instructed her to return to the site and meet post haste with the local authorities who were advised of the matter.

Screw them, thought Yolanda. *Everything known was already provided to the office. I'll take a brief doze and head on; phones are normally useless this far out anyway—the corporate assholes will be none the wiser*. She'd follow her gut instincts, something that had served the young woman well in the past.

Her doze evolved into a very elongated nap. By the time she awoke from slumber, the twilight had rolled its dark carpet out, smothering the remains of the day. *Shit!* Yolanda jumped up, grabbed her pack, and continued on in double time.

Twenty minutes into her scramble, she heard echoes in the distance. The faint, but undeniable sounds of logging. Breaking into a jog, she hurried toward the familiar clatter. Her gut shrieked that the enigma would finally unravel, the follow-up message from deep inside her belly ignored. *Turn around and run like hell!*

Within fifty yards of this mysterious site, the noise stopped. Abruptly. Yolanda continued on, her jog morphing into a sprint, a thousand thoughts swirling around in her head. And then she came to the small clearing fronted by a large sign. White, with fresh scarlet lettering, it read: **NEW CONSTRUCTION**.

It wasn't until she gazed past the sign did her scream commence. Her loudest ever would be her last. Before crumpling under the weight of unconsciousness, Yolanda's eyes recorded the horror. A model home built log cabin style—not with fallen timber, but with the bloodied torsos of her crew.

Tall timbers can only take so much. And this was just the beginning. The forest had endured enough. Payback time. The best way to combat new construction was with a bit of its own.

About the Author:

Charles Sartorius has one foot in the business world and the other tiptoeing into the literary one. An admitted project crunching MBA workaholic, he does make time to write both short stories and music lyrics. *The Missing Case of the Missing Case* has recently been published in the *Murder! Mystery! Mayhem!* anthology. Several of his songs like *Sideswiped* can be found on conventional venues such as Amazon and Apple Music.

Jules and I met working in a dive bar on Breaker Street. Night shifts. I was slinging drinks, paying off student loans. She was a server—a real spitfire, energized by shadows. Our connection was immediate. Effortless. She popped by my place most evenings, and we'd share late night suppers before shift. The fact she kept coming back proved she enjoyed my company, too. Yet, we never grew as close as I would've liked.

I yearned to hold her hand and step into the daylight with her.

We nearly kissed once. She'd just pummelled a drunk that got handsy at the bar one night. "He won't be back," she promised. I didn't doubt it, either. Jules was insanely strong. She'd snatched him by the collar and shoved him out the door as if he were a slobbery rag doll. One minute he was grabbing a nice handful and the next, tossed on his ass. The guy hadn't known what hit him.

Almost felt sorry for him... *almost*.

I caught up with Jules in the staff room after. "You don't deserve that," I'd said, gently brushing hair from her face. Jules was definitely the toughest woman I'd ever met—I loved her grit—but sometimes I just wished she'd let someone take care of *her* for once. I leaned in, drawn like a magnet. My lips hovered a caress away. Heat sizzled between us; the need undeniable.

Then Jules pulled back, blurting, "This can't happen." She'd left abruptly, and I didn't see her again for three agonizing days.

I kicked a pebble down the sidewalk, the skipping sounds bringing me back to reality. The moon was nearly full overhead and its cratered luminescence painted the world with silvery light as I strolled home from the bar. Passing by Littleton Park, I slowed to a stop before a familiar statue. Sculpted to appear soft and doughy, the cherubic creation held a bow cocked with a heart-shaped arrow. Though it looked normal, it was steeped in local lore. Folks believed it radiated Cupid's essence—sussed out soulmates. Supposedly, any couple that stood before it would be drawn into a kiss if it was true love. I stared up at it, contemplating.

My tongue clicked against the roof of my mouth. *Should I give it a try?*

"I mean, if it helps Jules realize we should be together, what could it hurt?"

On the way home, I checked my calendar, seeking a rare day we both didn't work.

Bingo. Thursday night, next week.

I set it up.

The park was silent at 2:00am. A misty fog wafted, frosting the crisp night air.

I covered Jules's eyes and led her over. As expected, she'd refused to come during the day, giving her usual spiel about sleep cycles and night shifts. She had no idea what I *really* had planned. I'd promised a surprise—one that involved a brand-new piece of graffiti art. Of course, that captured her interest instantly. As a serious art lover, Jules had a dedicated appreciation for the kind of masterpieces that appeared beneath bridges and other forgotten places.

"Seriously, where are you taking me?" Jules asked, a grin audible in her voice.

I chuckled, angling her toward our target. "You'll see. It's a surprise, so stop asking." Spotlights illuminated the golden statue up ahead, which gave the sculpture a hazy, almost magical silhouette. If the lore was legit, we'd share our first kiss tonight. At least, I hoped that's how it would play out. I fought to keep my anticipation—and excitement—in check.

"Fine." She smirked, letting out a huff. "Any day now..."

Gently pulling on her shoulders, we stopped in front of the statue. I moved to stand beside her, took a deep breath, and removed her blindfold. "Okay, open them!"

"Finally." Jules' eyes popped open, but winced immediately. Her smile withered as she looked at me, mouth twisting in anger. "Why did you bring me here?"

Not quite the reaction I was hoping for.

Stuffing my hands in my pockets, I shrugged. "I don't know—it seemed romantic, I guess."

Her eyes darkened; hands clenching. "*Romantic?* This statue has *real* power, Dane!" Jules turned her back on the Cupid, blinking furiously, as if her eyes had been burned. "I already told you we can't be together. Why did you do this?"

Anger flared. "Because I'm in love with you!" With nothing left to lose, I grasped her hands. "We're great together, Jules. I want to be your guy."

Violet veins bulged in her trembling arms. "Please don't make me," she whimpered, ignoring me as she glared at the lifeless statue. It sat immobile—entirely unremarkable—yet she spoke to it like it were a real person. Her fingers clutched mine, nails digging into my skin.

I tried to pull away, but couldn't. "Jules?" I pulled again, but when she moved closer, her intoxicating perfume silenced any warning bells.

"I want you too, Dane, but—you don't understand." Her words sounded as thick as honey through clenched teeth. Tears glistened as Jules pressed her body against mine. "I tried to protect you." Her lower lip quivered—vulnerable in a way I'd never seen before.

"Protect me from what?" I cupped her pained face, still reeling from her admission. *She wants me too.* Jules' eyes locked with mine, their emerald depths infinite and brimming with mysteries I longed to discover.

Our mouths crashed together.

Time stopped as we gave into desire. A whimper escaped the back of her throat while I melted in her arms. Hands explored. Hot breath mingled as tongues teased. I couldn't believe this was finally happening. Breathless, Jules shuddered and pulled back. A sob wrenched free from her throat as that beautiful mouth opened to reveal razor-like teeth framed by inch-long fangs.

A tear slipped down her cheek. "From this."

I gasped, trying to push away, but her grip was like iron. Trembling violently, she placed a row of gentle kisses along my neck and shoulder before sinking her teeth into my flesh. Pain exploded everywhere all at once, infiltrating every part of me. I screamed, helpless.

Jules moaned and lowered me to the ground. "You wanted my love..." She bit into her wrist and shared a bloody kiss. "Now you have it."

About the Author:

R.A. Clarke is a former police officer turned stay-at-home mom living in Manitoba, Canada. Besides chasing after her children and stealing the remote back from her sport-aholic husband, R.A.'s time is spent plotting fantastical fiction. She's been named a Futurescapes Award finalist, a Dark Sire Award finalist, has won the Writer's Games and Writers Weekly international competitions, and her work has been featured within various publications.

Author Website: [Rachael Clarke](#)

Twitter: [@raclarkewrites](#)

Poison Ivy | Kristin Lennox Mill

The pergola, a brilliant tangle of clematis and cascading honeysuckle, was Chloe's crowning achievement.

As she sipped iced tea in its fragrant shade, she finally realized how much she bad-mouthed her husband here, how often she practiced telling him off as she pruned and weeded. Digging in the dirt was her therapy, her meditation, her refuge from a disastrous marriage.

Lashed to the wrought iron chair, Hank sat in verdant silence, vines tightening around his throat, eyes and tongue bulging.

A small tendril reached out to caress Chloe's cheek. She traced its leaf.

"Have I told you about my mother-in-law...?"

About the Author:

Kristin Lennox Mill lives in the house she grew up in that her dad designed. She is a voice actor, and when she's not talking to herself in her padded room (home studio), she tries to get the voices out of her head and onto the page. She's currently a little obsessed with drabbles, some of which have found a home with Black Hare Press.

I had never gotten tipsy off half a glass of Champagne before, but the charged atmosphere between us must have left me giddy as he took me hiking along the Querida Trail. When the pine cones lying on the dark, rain soaked ground blurred, I leaned my head against his shoulder and shut my eyes. I caught a hint of bitterness hiding on my palate that I had never associated with Dom Pérignon. The fresh scent of pine struggled to revitalize me. The marsh wrens called out to me in a rapid series of buzzy trills. The wind hissed warnings between tree leaves and needles, while simultaneously slapping my cheeks with goodbye kisses. It's fascinating how when one sense becomes deprived, all the others come alive. But their messages were lost on me—love is blind.

He had a unique charm that drew people to him, but he singled me out with his pretty words and grand gestures. He made me feel different from everyone else, like I was exceptional. There were moments when I sensed his emotions were tightly reined in, as if he was holding something back. He was a puzzle that I wanted to solve. I was desperate to see the part of him that he hid from the rest of the world.

A doe grazed along the woodland edge closest to me. Although she appeared hazy, I noticed her head snap up, stare at my sweetheart and pinpoint him as a threat before she ran away with astonishing speed and agility. Her quick movements made me nauseous, and I increasingly had to rely on him to steady myself as I stumbled over my feet.

The path stretched unbroken and it became more uneven as we went along. Sometimes he had to lift me over the knotted tree roots. The trees created canopies that let no light filter through—nothing to shine a light on any amorous moments... or any maniacal ones. The ground grew softer and gave way to a swamp with tall reeds and cattails. The stillness of the air sucked the sound of my footfalls into the soil. My nostrils filled with the smell of stagnant water and I heard frogs croaking their cautions.

He led me into a dance while my heart played our love song, and we swayed to the rhythm of it until he didn't want to hear it beat anymore. Our feet writhed together on the wetland floor. My breaths came out in ragged shallow gasps and my screams echoed throughout an empty forest for no one to hear until it became saturated by a heavy silence. He twirled me under the stars with my arms and legs at awkward angles, and I stared blankly up at a sky I couldn't see.

He discarded me in the murky water that hid everything from view. Time dissolved with the bursts of air bubbles that broke the surface of my liquid tomb. But nature comforted me by hugging me with open arms into her black soil and I merged with elements, becoming part of the thick maze of the forest. I was at peace, and one with the wet, cool earth.

Until I wasn't.

My false lover found another to mistake his thin replica of love for the real thing while hiding behind his well-cultivated mask. His unnatural presence made the ground tremble with ire. The wind blew in a fit of anger that threatened to break the limbs from the trees while the standing pool of green-colored water quivered with rage. He blended in like a cold-blooded chameleon. But he was an animal, a specific breed of cunning a bloodthirsty predator.

Black flies and mosquitoes herded him while the arms of pine trees pushed him toward me. He was close enough that before he could lead her into her final dance; I could reach my bony arm from the murky water, grasp one of his black boots, and pull him under with preternatural strength. The fear that he had become the prey paralyzed his thoughts. I held him tightly in my decaying arms, so he could suffocate under my embrace. His lungs filled with briny, cool water and his ribs snapped like twigs in a beautiful symphony of destruction.

Then I let him go.

And Mother Nature discarded him, so his abandoned shell could be picked apart by predators greater than he.

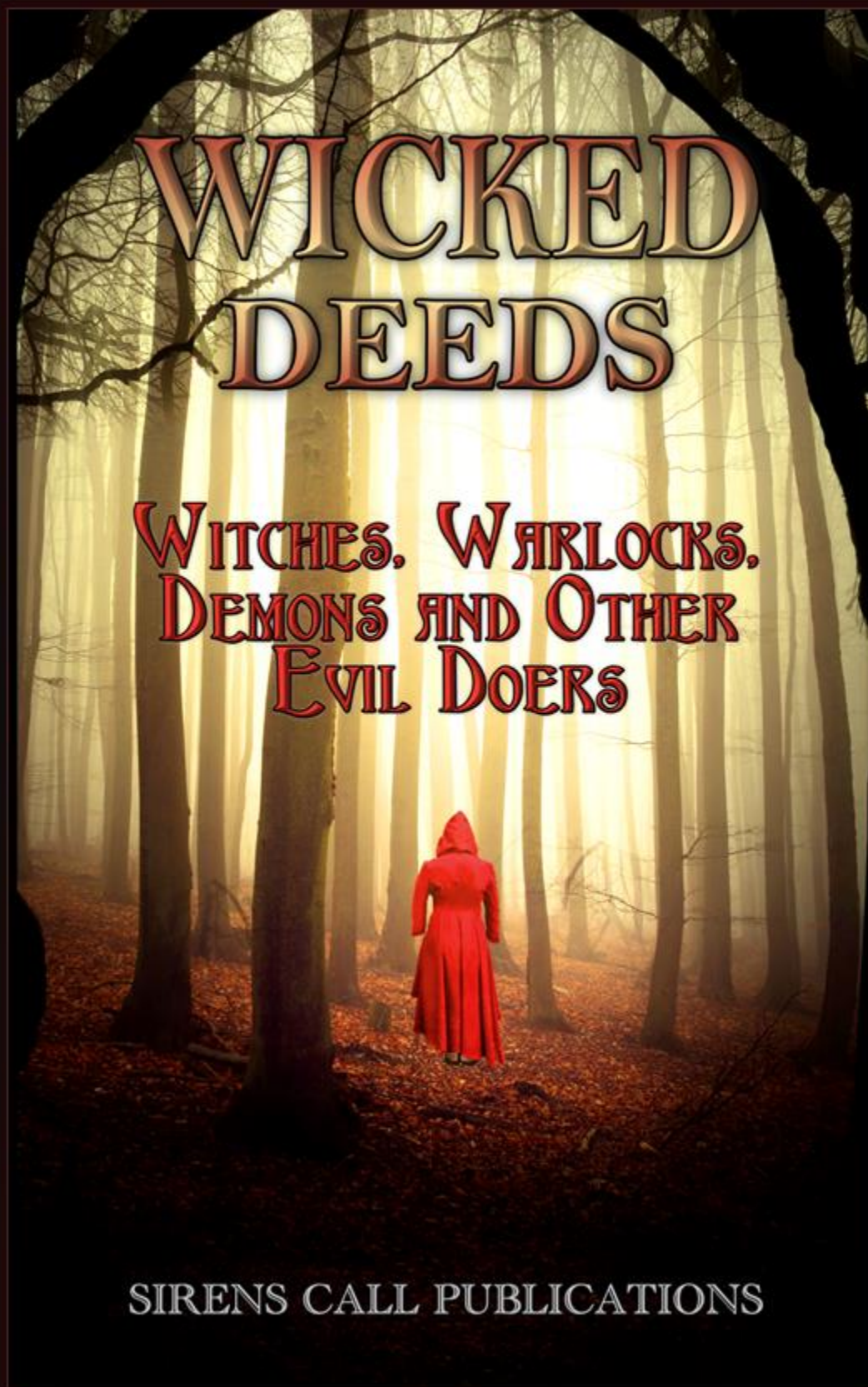
About the Author:

Renee Cronley is a writer and nurse from Southern Manitoba. She enjoys long walks in the cemetery and hates when people chew with their mouths open. Her work has appeared in *PRISM international*, *Love Letters to Poe*, *Dark Dispatch*, *Black Hare Press*, *Off Topic* and several other anthologies and literary magazines.

Facebook: [Renee's Writing Page](#)

Twitter: [@reneecronley](#)

Sometimes wicked people do wicked things...



Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble,
Kobo, and iTunes

Mom was dead. That was the first thing. But almost before that fact could really sink in, there were all of these other things that had to be dealt with. Grown-up stuff that Deanie wished someone else could handle. But there was just her. And Conor.

Conor had almost stayed home. Conor had said the right things when the news came, but he didn't really seem to understand. She wondered, not for the first time, if there was something a little wrong with him. He has a mother, and sure she's a hot mess, but Deanie was pretty sure he loved her, would be sad when she died, would require comforting through his grief. But he didn't seem to quite know how to go about providing such comfort. If anything, he became more distant. Almost cold.

And then they learned that they'd have to deal with her house, and he'd actually gotten angry. Conor seemed to see it as an affront. Like her mom was striking out from beyond the grave.

But in the end, he'd agreed to go along. Mostly, Deanie thought, because it would make him look like a certifiable asshole if he didn't. So they'd driven three hours up the coast in near silence.

Deanie's mom had been neat to the point of fastidiousness, maybe to the point of being pathological, so it wasn't *that* kind of worry. It would be an easy cleanup. It was the emotional labor that Deanie was dreading as they pulled up to the little single-level house, under the dark shade of the walnut trees.

"Saint Joes will pick up most of the stuff tomorrow morning," Deanie said. "We just need to get it ready. Probably throw a lot of stuff out. I don't think there's much stuff to save."

"Alright," Conor said, and he was out of the car, slamming the door and wandering up into the yard.

Deanie took a breath, gathered herself, and followed.

The path up to the front door was strewn with dusky fruit from the walnut trees, soft and shriveled, like little mummified scrotums. They'd been sitting a while, the flesh gone soft and pungent. A sweet and dusty smell.

Deanie opened the door with her key, and the smell hit them before they even got inside. If asked, Deanie would have sworn that her mother had to still be inside that house, bloated and rotting, her fluids gone sour and rank. But of course, her mother was not in the house. She was at Briar Valley Funeral Home at that very moment. Still, the house smelled of death and nothing else.

It didn't take long to see why. She'd died sitting on the couch, and it had been anywhere from five to six days before she'd been found. One half of the couch was just a greenish black stain, glistening and already beginning to bloom with tufts of fine white mold.

"Oh, Christ," Conor gagged, and he moved to open up the nearest window.

"How could they leave it like this?" Deanie said, standing just inside the door, staring at the couch.

"What do you want them to do, burn it with her?" Conor went into the dining room to open the windows there.

Deanie's vision blurred as the tears came up. She'd hoped she could do this without breaking down. She really thought she'd got it all out back home. But that stupid couch was like a—well—like a stain on the house. It was wrong. Mom would never allow something like that to just sit there. She wiped at her eyes with the palms of her hands, straightened her back, and willed herself into action.

"Let's get it outside," she said.

"What?" Conor called from the back of the house.

"The couch. Let's put it outside. We can't be in here with this smell."

"You want to touch it?" he said, poking his head around the doorway leading to the kitchen. "Let's just do this and get out."

"I want it out," she said. "It shouldn't be in here." Even if she tried to explain, she knew he wouldn't understand. Conor thought he was pragmatic. A realist. But more and more, Deanie wondered if he wasn't just an asshole.

Conor disappeared back into the kitchen. "I'm not touching that thing."

She dropped her bag to the floor just inside the doorway and marched into the kitchen. Under the sink, right where she knew they'd be, was a bucket and a pair of yellow rubber gloves. She could picture her mom wearing those gloves. Every Saturday morning, the house was made spotless.

She pulled the bucket out, and in the oval space where it had stood, a mass of white insects writhed. She gave a little cry and dropped the plastic bucket to the floor, and almost immediately the bugs scattered to the back of the cupboard behind the can of Comet and the bottle of bleach.

Could it really happen so fast? Two weeks since her death, and already the place was being taken over. Taken back, she supposed. Leave the place empty for a couple of years and the bugs and the squirrels and the ivy would

reclaim the whole place. Maybe that's all we were doing, finally: a lifetime of beating back the natural world, keeping it just at bay. But it always won in the end.

She put on the gloves, pulling them up almost to her elbows. They were cold and felt oddly damp. She could hear Conor shoving things around in the back room. What was he looking for?

Back in the living room, she grabbed the couch by the end furthest from the stain and pulled it out from the wall, all the way around until her back was to the door. Then she started the slow walk backward, dragging the heavy piece of furniture along with her. She wasn't thinking of her mother right then. She was thinking of Conor. Connor, who acted as if every one of her needs was some kind of millstone he had to drag around with him. Well, here was her own. Their relationship writ large: Connor was the death couch she had to drag out the door. Heavy and unwieldy, rancid and brimming with the kinds of tiny life that fed on everything, the living and the dead. She hadn't even made it to the doorway before she'd come to a conclusion about Conor. It was done. He just wasn't worth it. He'd proved it again and again, and today was the final proof. She'd move out tomorrow.

She set the couch down to get a better grip, and that's when she saw the carpet. Right where the couch had stood was a brown stain, maybe two feet across, and it too swarmed with the white insects. She saw them better this time. Each one maybe a half inch long, milky white, with translucent limbs and long sweeping antennae. There had to be a couple hundred of them fleeing toward the baseboards and scurrying up the wall.

She gave a bitter laugh. Connor was the death couch, and if you looked below, it was even worse. A stain of blood and piss and bugs.

She hefted the couch to pull it over the jamb, but it was too wide. She'd have to tip it onto its back and pull it through that way. Luckily, she didn't have to worry about damaging the couch, but it was heavy as shit. She pushed it back into the room and went around behind it.

Careful not to touch any of the stained portions, she tipped the couch backward. There was a sound like a bag of rice spilling across a tile floor, and she looked down. Bugs. They were pouring out of the bottom of the couch, scurrying across the wooden floor, over each other, blue-green iridescent wings flashing. Thousands of them. A wave of insects pouring out into the room.

She screamed.

She screamed and she ran outside, and she batted at her hair with her gloved hands even though she didn't think any of the bugs had come close to her. It didn't matter. At that moment, all she could imagine was the sensation of a thousand insects scurrying over her arms, tangling in her hair.

Finally she stopped, hands on her knees, standing in the grass, eyes squeezed shut.

"What are you doing?" Conor said from the doorway.

She straightened, twisted at the waist until her spine cracked. "Nothing."

"Quit messing with that nasty couch. All the stuff is in back."

She gave a loose salute with her yellow-gloved hand. "Yes, sir."

He gave her one of his wounded looks, like she'd hurt his feelings, but she wasn't really interested in playing that game today.

"I'm going to look in the basement," he said. "See if there's anything worth keeping."

He wanted her to be grateful, to tell him he was a big help. To acknowledge his service in her time of need.

"Okay," she said.

He disappeared into the house.

Okay, forget the couch. It can stay right where it is. She went back in, giving the couch a wide berth, and passed through the kitchen, where she dropped the gloves on the counter.

In Mom's bedroom, she found a mess. Her first thought was that someone had broken in. Things were pulled down off their hangers, drawers were standing open, and there were jewelry boxes and envelopes scattered across the bedspread. And then it clicked. It wasn't burglars; it was Conor. He'd tossed the bedroom, looking for the good stuff. She wondered briefly what he'd found.

She opened the wooden jewelry box and fingered the fine gold chains, grandma's pearl earrings. Nothing particularly valuable. He must have been so disappointed. In the bottom drawer was a small stack of wallet-sized photos: Deanie in grade school: a gap-toothed first grader, slightly older with severe bangs, on and on. Deanie's life in miniature, right there in her hands.

She placed the pictures back in the jewelry box and slid the drawer shut carefully.

And then there was a crash from below. Conor in the basement.

She moved out of the room and down the hall. Mom's sewing room looked mostly untouched. Must not have been much to interest Conor in there.

The basement door was standing open a few inches, and the sounds were almost panicked. She opened the door and peered down the stairs. She could see a rectangle of concrete floor and a broom at the bottom.

"Conor?"

"Down here," he said.

She moved about halfway down the steps, and then she could see the whole scene. It was a long, narrow space, with rough concrete walls and a hanging bulb. Along one wall was an old wooden headboard and a metal frame, and stacked along the far end were cardboard boxes and plastic tubs. Deanie recognized some of those. Christmas decorations and family photos. She'd have to go through those. Take at least a few things.

Conor was shoving boxes aside, digging through the stack.

"I just remembered your mom's old vinyl. You think she sold it? She wouldn't have sold it, would she? She had some good stuff in there."

He was barely talking to her. Instead, he was roughly digging through her mother's life, Deanie's own childhood, a lifetime of old clothes and unread books, of photographs and fifth grade report cards. And he looked so ugly in that moment, almost crazed as he searched, that she didn't just want him gone, she wanted to actually hurt him. He wasn't human. He didn't recognize anyone's pain but his own, so she wanted to teach him. She wanted to pick up the cinder block laying beside the wall and crush his hands with it. She could keep him down in that basement and she could explain to him how people who experience love also experience pain, and then she would demonstrate by breaking his legs with a sledgehammer.

All of this flashed through her mind in a moment, but it made her laugh to herself, and he paused just long enough to glance back at her from his hunched position back amongst the boxes.

"What? What's funny?"

She shook her head. "Not a thing," she said.

"Here they are!" she cried.

He undid the box's flap and drew out a record.

"Hendrix. This could be a first pressing." He dropped it back into the box and began flipping through the others. "Lots of Beatles."

He lifted out another record and then she saw him freeze.

"Oh, shit." He examined the record closely, pulled out another, gave it the same exam. Another. "These are all water damaged. All of them. The basement must have flooded or something."

He tossed the small stack of records onto the box carelessly, a few spilling off onto the floor.

"Worthless," he said.

And then she hit him. It was just a wooden broom handle, not enough to do too much damage, she thought, but it broke clean in two with a sound like a gunshot as it connected with the side of his head. He pitched over, across the box of records, slipping down between some boxes, and lay there on his side, one arm pinned strangely beneath him.

Deanie stared, eyes wide, not even noticing the broken broom in her hand. She heard her own breathing—ragged and sharp. What had she done? Was he breathing?

Then he moved. Thank god. She looked at the broken broom in her hand. Oh, no.

But he wasn't rising. He was just kind of shifting around in the cramped space between the scattered boxes. And then she saw them. The insects. A few at first, moving through his sandy hair, seeking out the bright bloom of blood at his temple. And then there were more.

Deanie took a step backward as Conor's head was suddenly transformed into a writhing mass of white bodies. The sound was something like the rustling of tissue paper, but there was something else, something wet, underneath the sound.

She took another step back, and her ankles hit the bottom step.

She ran up three steps and looked back. From higher up she could see most of him, and the insects had claimed him. Thousands of them. Maybe millions. They swarmed over his body like a second skin, bristling with antennae, rustling and chirping and digging down under his clothes at his soft flesh. A writhing shroud.

She ran, and as she shut the basement door. She placed her forehead against the wood and concentrated on breathing. She counted to ten.

Then she straightened, twisted at her waist until her spine cracked, and smoothed down the front of her shirt with her hands.

Conor had been right, she thought.
There was nothing of value here after all.

About the Author:

Josh Hanson (He/Him) is the author of the novel, *King's Hill* (forthcoming from Wicked House). He lives in northern Wyoming where he teaches, writes, and makes up little songs. He is a graduate of the University of Montana MFA program, and his work has appeared or is forthcoming in Sinister Smile Press, BlackPetals, Dance Cry Dance Break, Fast Flesh, Stoneboat, and Diagram.

Author Website: [Josh Hanson](#)

Twitter: [@JHansonHorror](#)

Immune | *Patrick J. Wynn*

The light from his bedroom window slowly woke Jeffry up. With a giant yawn and stretch he rolled over and sat up wiping the sleep from his eyes. He crawled out of bed and began to take off his pajamas which he then placed in the hamper that sat in the corner of his room. After closing the lid he made his way to the hall bathroom, still naked, where he did his business and then brushed his teeth. When he felt he had done a good enough job on his teeth he went back to his room and began to get dressed. Today he decided on Batman underwear, SpongeBob socks, Spiderman shoes, green shorts and a Captain America T-shirt. Not a bad job for a four-year-old.

Jeffry went back out into the hall and stopped by his parent's bedroom door. He stood looking at the gold handle hoping today would be the day that his parents would be awake. He reached up and grabbed the handle with both of his little hands and turned. The door opened and Jeffry leaned in turning his head toward his parent's bed. He could see two shapes lying across the bed. His father was still on his stomach with purple colored feet hanging off the end of the bed. His mother was on her back with a discolored arm drooped out over the side. He couldn't see their faces but he could tell they were still asleep. Jeffry gagged a little as his parent's bedroom had started to smell funny and he pulled the door shut and walked down the hall toward the kitchen.

Once in the kitchen Jeffry pushed a chair up to the counter and climbed up and opened the cabinet. He stood for a few seconds deciding what kind of cereal he would have for breakfast. His choices today were pretty slim, there was only two of the small individual boxes of his cereal left, frosted flakes or fruit loops. He chose fruit loops and climbed down onto the chair then pulled open a drawer and pulled out a pair of scissors which he used to open the small box of cereal. He placed the scissors back in the drawer, he didn't want his parents to know he'd used the scissors without permission. He then grabbed the same bowl he used the previous morning and poured the cereal in. He didn't bother with a spoon because he used the last of the milk several days ago. He tossed the empty box next to the other empty boxes he'd tossed there since he started feeding himself. He carried his bowl out into the living room. He tried to turn the TV on again but with no luck. The TV and the lights had stopped working soon after Mommy and Daddy had gotten sick and went to bed. Jeffry sat on the couch and ate his cereal with his fingers staring at the dead TV wishing Mommy and Daddy would wake up.

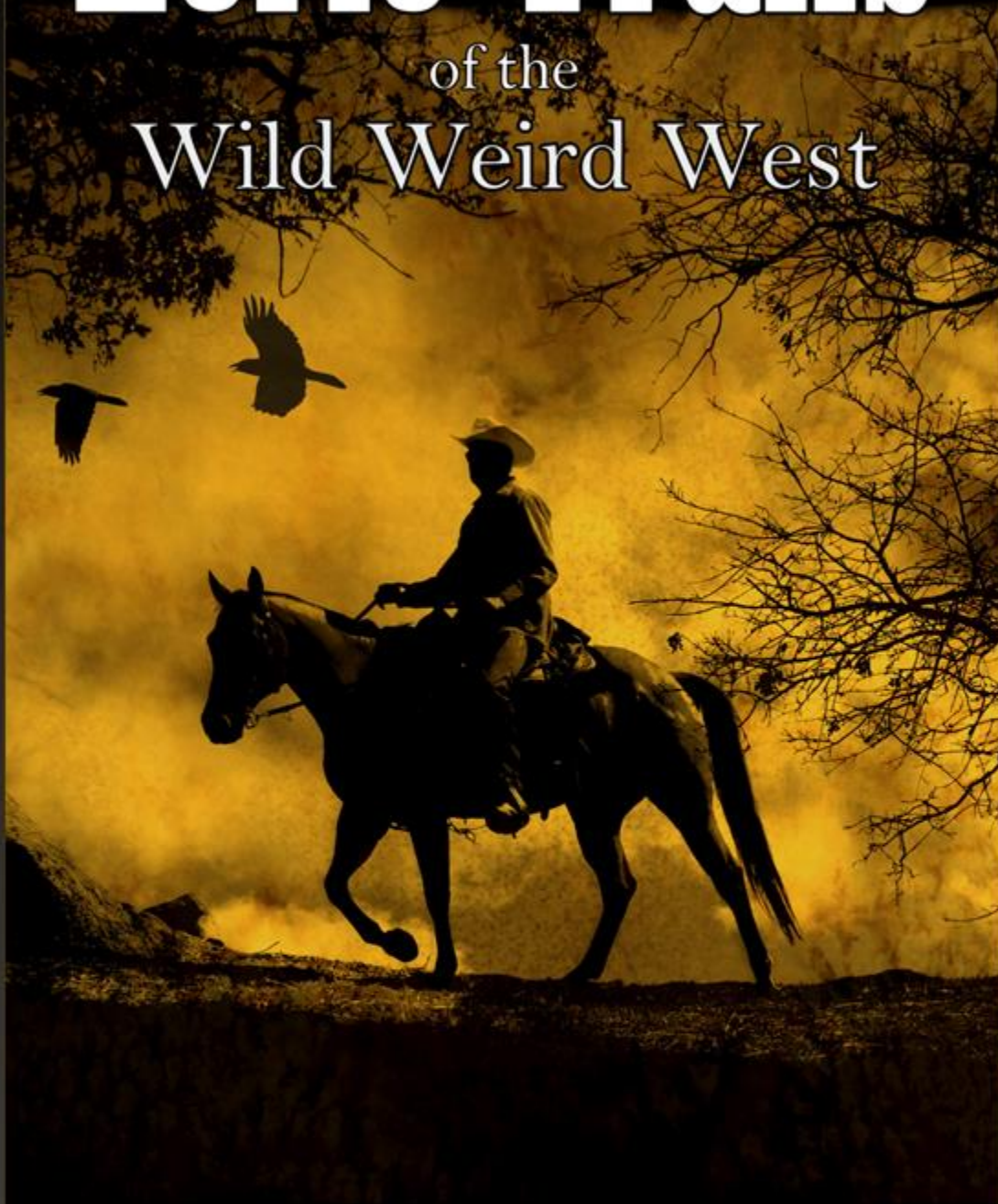
About the Author:

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



Eerie Trails

of the
Wild Weird West



MAYNARD BLACKOAK

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble,
Kobo, and iTunes

The Corpse Flower | Hillary Lyon

The murmuring crowd gathered around the zoo's latest exhibit.

"Ew, it stinks!" a sprout whined.

"It's supposed to," another sprout pontificated. "Teacher says that's how the process works."

"What process?" A mature onlooker, eavesdropping, asked.

"Decomposition! This 'flower' will rot into slimy chunks, fall to the ground, then enrich the earth." The sprout then sagely added, "To feed us all."

In the center of this curious crowd was a tall wooden pole. Secured to it with leafy vines, the body of a man sagged. His head lolled to one side, his mouth open, his tongue protruding like a fleshy stamen.

The Moss Garden | Hillary Lyon

In a corner of her backyard, on a chaotic pile of smooth river rocks, the green moss sprouted. It spread completely over that pile of forgotten stones when Chrissie finally noticed.

How beautiful, she mused, that these verdant pillows no longer resemble stones. She gently brushed her fingers over the moss. What an inviting texture! *I wonder how it feels to rest on this cool green bed.*

She lay down. *How delightful!* She thought. The moss concurred, expanding its territory. Soon Chrissie no longer resembled her former self, her green bones adding a distinctly *wabi-sabi* charm to the burgeoning garden.

Fred's War | Hillary Lyon

Every Spring, they pop up, randomly sprinkled like confetti across his lawn. Yellow flowers atop skinny stalks, ragged leaves with tiny spikes. Delicate white flowers rising on thin stems. Pretty, but noxious.

He pulls on old clothes to attack these invaders. He couldn't leave them—what would the neighbors think? Besides, his kid is allergic.

Like the gray hairs on his head, for each weed he uproots, two more sprout. Over time, his whole head will be white, his hands weak, and his yard full of weeds. He'll keel over, become mulch, then fertilizer.

Only then the battle will end.

The Pests | Hillary Lyon

"Mornin', Daisy," the proprietor of the local garden shop chirped. "What may I do for you on this lovely day?"

As if a warm breeze had wafted over her, Miss Daisy trembled with delight; Mister Oakley was such a handsome flirt. "I need something to get rid of the pests foraging in my garden."

"Oh" Oakley thrummed. "Ants? Beetles? Snails?"

"No, my problem is . . . *mammals*."

"Ah," he pondered. "Squirrels? Deer? Rabbits? Rats?"

"No, these pests are of the bipedal variety."

"Humans!" Reaching under his counter, he grabbed a bottle of poison with his twig-fingers. "I have just the thing."

About the Author:

For 20 years, Hillary Lyon served as senior editor for Subsynchronous Press. She's lived in France, Brazil, Canada, and several states in the U.S. In the last year, her stories have appeared in multiple print and online publications. When not writing, she creates illustrations for pulp and horror zines, often using family members as victims. She means models.

Me and Bobby flopped onto the back patio of my dad's house and opened the brown paper bag. Full of candy and rose buds. We'd spent the day knocking on doors and mowing lawns, always profitable in spring, and the money we earned didn't last long. Most people were glad to have us do the work for them. Most people except Ms. Minerva. She said she'd never trust her yard to a couple of kids and told us to leave her alone. So, after we bought half the candy aisle at Parker's General Store, we waited until it got a little darker and went back by Ms. Minerva's place. We stomped on some of her plants and pulled the buds off a few of the rose bushes then ran to my dad's house to enjoy our evening.

Bobby shoved three tootsie rolls into his mouth and pointed toward Banjo Lake where my dad's old wooden dock stretched into the dark water. "What's that?" He mumbled, brown spit coating his lips.

My dad added a light pole a few years ago, about halfway out, and a dim bulb provided enough light to make shadows, but not enough to see anything clearly. I leaned forward and tried to get my eyes to adjust. A mass of something squirmed in the darkness at the end of the dock, barely visible.

"C'mon," I said. "Let's check it out."

Bobby looked scared, he always looked scared. He crinkled another tootsie roll wrapper in his hand.

"Chicken?" I taunted.

"No," he answered. "I don't think it's a good idea to leave all this candy here though. What if someone comes and takes it?"

I stood up and looked at him. I didn't say anything and started walking toward the dock. He'd probably be too afraid to stay on the porch alone.

"Mikey, I don't want to..." Then I heard him sigh, that big sigh he does sometimes when he knows he's lost. "Okay, okay, wait up."

We walked down the slope of wet grass, careful not to slip, until the dock creaked under our feet and the water rippled with our footsteps. I squinted through the night. "I think they're frogs."

"Frogs?"

"Yeah," I said, "you can see 'em."

We crept closer, there had to be at least two-hundred swarming over the end of the dock. Green-grey flesh writhing and making sounds I'd never heard frogs make. Like termites gnawing through soggy wood.

"Shit, Mikey, do frogs have teeth?"

"No," I answered without a clue. "Of course not."

Bobby stepped forward, ignoring some broken planks, the two my dad always told me he'd fix. I grabbed his arm and we watched. Close enough to see their saliva coated tongues glinting in the moonlight.

Also close enough to see the human body they were eating.

Tongues lashed out, stuck, and ripped hunks of waterlogged skin from the body. I vaguely remembered the cops looking for a drowned kid about a week ago. It must have been softening up that whole time. I had no idea how it got to the end of my dad's dock with its pale, wrinkled skin. Kinda the way my toes get when me and Bobby spend the day wading in the shallows. One of the frog's wrestled with an eyelid, but the skin wouldn't tear. The frog's tongue tugged back and forth, the eyelid kept opening and shutting like the dead kid was winking at me.

Bobby puked, spraying half-digested candy everywhere.

"We gotta get out of here," I whispered and moved backward. Toward safety, without taking my eyes off the frogs. Bobby tried to run, stepped in his own vomit, and slipped onto his knees. His left shoe disappeared between those two planks, their jagged edges gripping his jeans just above his ankle. When he tried to pull free, the planks clenched, squeezing tighter. His eyes bugged out of his face, he yanked harder. The planks dug deeper and Bobby squealed.

"Miiiike. Oh, Jesus, Mikey, get me outta here."

I thought about running. Screw Bobby and those frogs and the dude getting eaten. I'd find my dad and he'd make everything okay.

Bobby tried to rise on his free leg. He grabbed my shirt and pulled. Maybe for leverage, or maybe he could see me thinking of leaving him. I caught his wrist, held tight, and leaned back as far as I could, but the harder we pulled the tighter the planks squeezed.

"Mikey, stop. STOP!" His wailing echoed off the water.

He twisted his arm, broke my hold and I stumbled backward. Right on my butt. My teeth snapped across the tip of my tongue and filled my mouth with blood.

"Get my foot, Mikey." Tears now.

I looked at my friend and then at the end of the dock. A frog crawled off the body and turned our direction. It froze.

"Mikey!" Bobby screamed again.

The frog twitched. Shifted its head to the right, just a little, hardly anything really, but enough for me to know it knew we were there. Interrupting its dinner. It flexed and then jumped, disappearing into the shadows before tumbling back out, landing awkwardly with a wet splat only eight planks away from Bobby's foot. Three more hops and the frog's flesh ripping tongue would be next to us.

"Mikey?" he tried to look over his shoulder at whatever I was gawking at. I don't think he wanted to know. "MIKEY?"

Fifteen, maybe twenty more slipped off the dead body and twitched. They leapt in our direction.

"Oh, god, Bobby," blood spattered as I spoke. "Shut your fucking mouth."

I scrambled over his back and pushed on the broken planks, trying to separate them enough to release his foot. From the corner of my eye, the first frog hopped again, disappeared into the shadows and then reappeared. Its soft body splatting even louder as it landed. Far closer than it should be.

The wood from the planks dug into me, my hands getting cut worse than my tongue. My fingers touched the top of Bobby's shoe. "Pull!" I hissed, not wanting to make more noise, trying to ignore the splats growing nearer.

The shoe slipped off and dropped into the lake. He pulled his foot free, his sock torn. "RUN!" I yelled as a frog landed six inches from my face. Its tongue flashed out and hit my cheek burning like a spark from the fireworks me and Bobby stole last Fourth of July. More frogs splatted on the pier, their tongues shooting toward me and I pushed myself up, the frog dangling from my face. It swung back and forth a couple of times before I could grab it. The tongue stuck to my face, the other frogs got closer. "Shit," I whispered, almost crying myself now, and I yanked the frog. My skin peeled, I felt it rip, but didn't care. I chunked the frog into the lake and ran.

Bobby was a few steps ahead of me, but I passed him before we reached the end of the dock. We didn't stop, kept going toward the house. Bobby's shoeless foot squished through the wet grass. At the patio we put our hands on our knees and huffed. Didn't speak, didn't look back at Banjo Lake or the dock, or whatever else might have been out there. Instead, we grabbed the rosebuds and ran. Onto Elm Street, down to the yellow house with the porch light on. Ms. Minerva's place. We threw the buds into the garden at the front edge of her yard.

I scanned the ground for the small sign I'd kicked over earlier, found it under a small bush with white blossoms, and shoved it back into the ground.

"Please, stop and smell," the sign read, "but do not pick the flowers..."

And somewhere behind us we heard a growing noise, like giant termites gnawing through soggy wood.

"...or a plague upon your house."

About the Author:

Jay Bechtol likes to write, so he does. Recent stories have appeared in *Uncharted*, *Penumbric*, and *The Dark Corner*. His debut novel, *The Great American Coward*, is available from Golden Storyline Books. He can be found in person in Homer, Alaska.

Twitter: [@bechtolJay](https://twitter.com/bechtolJay)
Author Website: [Jay Bechtol](http://JayBechtol.com)





Zarah had first taken them for Zombies, but a little while ago, it seemed to her that they had taken on a bizarre grace. It must have been scorching out there, the sun still hanging high, threatening to bake the world under its fierce gaze. She thought that if those people had heat stroke, if that explained how they were behaving, they would have died by now.

Four days baking in the sun, and they were red and cracked and full of energy. They did not shamle and moan, not after the first couple of days. Now they danced, they seemed almost to frolic in the perpetual noonday sun. Nor, she supposed, did she believe they were dead. Zombies were dead, it was what made them zombies. She began to feel too warm by the window. Her phone buzzed in her pocket.

"Hello?" Zarah asked.

"Hey Zar'," Ericka said. Ericka had seemed completely unfazed when the sun stopped over Thief Dam, but a little edge had crept into her voice. Zarah imagined it was because she wasn't able to sleep in her third floor apartment.

"What's up?" Zarah pulled the curtain shut. The coolness of the dark washed over her. The A/C was thrumming. It had been running more or less constantly since the day before.

"Well, I was just wondering if the people by you had changed at all," Ericka said.

"Changed how?"

"Well, before they were just walking around in the street, but the ones by me are singing, I think," she said.

"The ones by me are dancing."

"Are yours singing too, or just dancing? Mine are doing a bit of both," Ericka asked.

"I can't hear them over the A/C, to be honest," Zarah said. She stood right under the vent, letting the current play with her dark curls.

"Ugh, bitch," Ericka said, "All I have is this fan, it just blows the heat around."

"Well, if you can get across town, I mean, you're welcome here, I'd be happy for the company. If it's safe, of course."

"Car's got A/C, I'm parked right on the street, and these people don't seem too dangerous. Maybe I will. You're sure it's alright?"

"It's more than alright, it's great, I would love to have you!"

Ericka laughed. "Sorry, it's just like, we're having this conversation in the same tone as if you were inviting me for Christmas, or like, Eid in your case. It's odd how fast we got used to the sun not moving."

"I guess it is. Do you want to stay on the line while you drive over?"

"No, I have a podcast episode I want to finish on the way. I'm gonna come in kind of hot, though. Can I shower and change when I get there?"

"Of course," Zarah said.

They said their goodbyes. Zarah said a silent prayer for her friend when they hung up. She sat on the couch and tried to meditate. Under the sound of the A/C's dull whisper, she heard the sing song of voices, or thought she did. She tuned this out and listened to her breath.

Zarah looked at the clock. 8:01. She had spoken to Ericka about four hours ago. She thought about the time they had gone to San Francisco on a besties trip. Zarah had gotten to the airport in plenty of time to enjoy a little food, read a few chapters of her book, allow for any hiccups at security, which came with the territory of her name.

She had been on the plane, seated, when Ericka finally joined her. She had a hard time staying mad at her friend. All of her frustration and irritation gave way to immediate feelings of affection when she finally arrived. All was forgiven.

Irritation wormed its way into her now. Ericka was boiling alive in that sweaty apartment. She didn't have curtains, just those flimsy landlord special blinds, and she knew the apartment must be startling bright. That was what amazed her the most, not that Ericka had found something to distract her, but that even the heat and the bright light couldn't chase her out in a timely manner.

It was easier to be angry with Ericka for being flaky or flighty than to accept that even Ericka wouldn't be four hours late in a situation like this. It should only take five minutes for her to get to Zarah's place by car.

Zarah pushed some ziti around on her plate. She lifted one noodle to her mouth and nibbled it. She looked at the sliver of light in between her blackout shades. Every so often, something would pass in front of the window, making the light blink. Zarah shoved the whole plate into the fridge without covering it.

She stood in her little kitchen, hovering over the table she'd set for herself. The woodgrain on the little surface caught her eye, and she traced it up and down, until a loud sound from outside intruded on her, overcoming even the sound of the A/C.

She ran to the window and used the tip of her index finger to pull the curtains apart just a little more. She lowered an eye to the hot glass and held her breath.

Out in the street, a blue Jetta had crashed into the streetlight pole. The crash had been bad enough to deploy the airbags, but the man inside the car looked unhurt. It was a white man, with curly blond hair and a white T-shirt. He seemed dazed, but Zarah couldn't see any blood or obvious sign of injury inside the car. She thought about going outside to help, when she saw movement.

They had been dancing, and they had been singing, she was sure of that now. They sang even now, as they moved toward the car. The man inside noticed them and went wide-eyed, lifting a hand to ward them away. The people who gathered around the car had bright red skin, with great gray blisters climbing over the parts most exposed to the sun. Some of these had ruptured, leaving red and angry flesh beneath and long rags of white, floppy skin hanging from the wounds. The people didn't seem to care. They were naked, all of them, skin blistered and pink on the vast expanses of their backs, their breasts, even more than one bald head. She still couldn't understand what they sang as they gathered, and her chance at hearing the words was shattered with the sound of glass by the man's face. Sunburned and blistered fists flew through the window. She heard the glass shatter from here. She hoped that Ericka would arrive now, while they were distracted. She heard the man scream as raw and throbbing hands dragged him out, slicing him on the broken glass.

His bloody, screaming body was dragged into the street, where they smiled and sang, and danced again. A man with a horseshoe of brown hair around a glowing red scalp clasped him in his arm. The bald man's other hand glinted in the sun. A young woman, bearing the brownish glow of the tanning bed, a glow now undercut with a layer of sickly pink, came up on the other side and they held the man between them. They shuffled back and forth, and she swung her head on a loose pink neck, her blond hair whipping into his dazed and bloody face. The man tried to speak, and then tried to pull himself free.

This was when the bald man stopped dancing. He instead turned a smiling red face to the man and hit him in the stomach. Red began to pour onto the sidewalk before Zarah realized he had been holding a shard of glass from the window and had stabbed the man. She stopped watching when fake tan plunged a hand into the wound. She still heard the man's shrieks.

It was not much longer after that, maybe an hour, that Ericka called. Zarah had just been sitting in her living room, trying to listen to her breathing. The man had either died, or at least lost the strength to scream, about thirty minutes before. She stayed calm by focusing on her breath. She almost missed the sound of the phone buzzing loudly on her wood table.

"Girl, where are you?" Ericka asked.

"Where am I?" Zarah shot back, "Where are you? You were supposed to be here hours ago."

"Zarah, babe, it's too nice to be cooped up in that little house of yours. It was so hot in my apartment, but once I stepped outside, I realized there was a neat little breeze. Come out!"

"Ericka, it's really bad out there, the people outside my house, they killed someone!"

"Zar, I'm sure there's an explanation, just come out!" Her voice was cheerful, insistent, and terrible. She sounded hoarse, like she had been speaking for hours before calling Zarah. That was when she heard the sound in the background, a song she didn't know the words to. Ericka was among the crowd, out there. She was hoarse and breathless. "I'm actually by your place, now. I see the car, but the guy is fine, it's all fine."

"He is not fine," Zarah said through gritted teeth. "I saw them pull his guts out. Ericka, I'm not going out there, don't come here."

Ericka was silent but didn't hang up. She stayed on the line, that same song playing. Zarah focused on the A/C humming. "Ericka, are you there?"

The ikea lamp in the corner winked out and the A/C faded. Zarah stood in the inky dark of her blackout-curtained living room, the thin sliver of light the only thing illuminating it at all. She stared at it, able only to imagine the shapes that interrupted it.

"The power is out, Ericka. The transformer must have blown," she said. She didn't know why she was still saying this to her friend, Ericka was gone.

"Come out," was all the voice on the line said. There was a knock on the door. Zarah approached timidly. She slammed a shin into a table in the entryway and cursed. Coins rattled in a mug there and she waited for the sound of a quiet house disturbed to settle. She waited, rubbing her shin, until she could make out the voices outside again. She put a hand on the metal knob. It was still cool. She knew that wouldn't last long. If she could pull Ericka into the cool, she could help her regain herself. They could hunker down until the power came back. She pulled the door open and saw her friend, pink-faced, with brown hair plastered with sweat against her forehead, bearing a wide and vile grin. She was totally naked, and her shoulders and arms were just beginning to develop the sunburn that now engulfed the rest of the dancing, singing folk.

The words were clear now as the people in the street danced. Even the man with his guts being pulled out danced, the others leading him through the street:

"In the land of fadeless day
Lies the city four-square;
And it shall never pass away,
There is no night there"

It had the tone of a dirge, but they sang it lively and they danced to it, they lept and they danced. Ericka grabbed her wrist and pulled gently, and Zarah followed. She stepped off of her porch and into the harsh sunlight. The bright orb of the sun still hung in the noonday position. Shadows pooled beneath pink-skinned dancers. And on her cracked lips, Zarah felt a smile.

About the Author:

David E. Kruegger writes horror fiction about the Upper Midwest, which he believes is much spookier than many give it credit for. He lives in Minneapolis with his wife and their Roomba, Jenny. You can see his house when you land at the airport, but few know where to look.

Instagram: [@david.e.kruegger.author](https://www.instagram.com/david.e.kruegger.author)

Facebook: [David E. Kruegger](https://www.facebook.com/David.E.Kruegger)

The Greenhouse | *KC Anderson*

Back in my writing days, I used to come to this greenhouse every day to work on my books. I relished the silence along with the abundance and smell of the plants.

I walk the entire perimeter and still cannot find the door. I peer in through the glass and notice that every plant's leaves and branches are moving in subtle waves.

But wind cannot penetrate the enclosed space.

Suddenly my body becomes paralyzed.

A sea of green envelopes me and pulls me more towards the center where an impossibly large Venus flytrap is waiting with its mouth fully agape.

About the Author:

Although KC Anderson has a full-time career, he just can't help but work part-time in various fields such as a Sergeant in the Army Reserves, a security guard at the state fair in the summer, a cashier at the animal shelter, a substitute teacher for the local school district, etc. Writing horror is just one of the many avenues that Mr. Anderson enjoys doing.

"It's dead."

Chris twisted the key, the fob knocking against the steering column.

Jennifer batted his hand. "Will you let it go? It's dead. If you flood it, it's not going to start at all."

"It's not starting now," he said.

Air hissed through her teeth. "Fine, you win."

Outside, tangles of branches rustled. Trees surrounded the field of flattened grass where they were parked and thinned out closer to the smooth sandstone face of a hill.

A lock of hair, bled of color by moonlight, fell across Jennifer's eye. She was beautiful, and Chris wished he could be anywhere but in the car with her.

Their Hill Country excursion began late because of last-minute work calls: market fluctuations and last-minute stock acquisitions requiring attention. They argued, an all-consuming pastime, after they missed the first leg of Shadow Hills's cave tours. Araigne, a patron they met in the hotel bar, suggested this location. His sun-kissed skin highlighted a white undershirt and a webwork of tattoos across his wide shoulders and up his neck, beyond his thick long hair. Araigne's muscles writhed with each gesture, living things beneath brown flesh. Several in the bar, both men and women watched him with reverence and a tinge of lust, including Jennifer. Chris bit back jealousy.

As he spoke, he drew a crude map and scribbled precise directions on the back of a paper drink menu. Wide brown eyes gleamed over his thick mustache. "The pits near the area can be deep. Otherwise, it's pristine."

"Pristine" was more than they could say about their hotel room, with its dim lamps, and spiders as white porcelain. Chris never saw a web and was chilled by the creatures's bright red eyes and the scissoring silver chelicerae.

At sunrise they checked their equipment: helmets, backpacks, gloves, waist belts. During checkout Chris told the round young man seated at the Formica desk about the spiders. The kid shrugged. "Exterminators spray, but the spiders are durable. Besides, they eat the roaches." Chris and Jennifer shook their heads as they packed the car. "What eats the roaches?" she wondered. "The spiders or the exterminators?" Chris laughed as they drove away.

The goodwill evaporated the closer they got to their destination, their sniping rising as their smartphone reception faded to nonexistence but reappeared once they entered the cave itself. Inside, they spent hours exploring. Headlamps caught chalk-white stalagmites jutting from the slippery cave floors and flowstones rippling when exposed to the amber beam. Helictites curved into points, making Chris think of Venus flytraps caught in Medusa's gaze. The farther they explored, the smoother the cave walls became. Jennifer pointed out the broken tips of brown soda straws overhead and columns seemingly glazed with water.

Then they noticed the smell—not dank or musty but tinged with ammonia. Jennifer's headlamp scanned the floor but found no droppings.

Beneath the echoes of their breathing, something buzzed. They looked at each other, bright lamps mutually blinding them for a moment, and left the cave as swiftly as they could, bright spots dancing before their eyes.

But now they couldn't leave. Chris wondered if they had overreacted. And if she would blame him for leaving for nothing.

The battery. They'd been down there a long time and had left something on. He woke his phone to dial a tow truck, waved it in search of a signal. The signal strength icon was a flat line.

The passenger door clicked open, the dome light remaining dark. Definitely the battery.

"Where are you going?"

She plucked her phone from its dash-mounted charger. "Pop the hood. I'm checking the engine. Maybe one of the battery cables is loose." The latch thunked. She held her phone between her legs as she lifted the hood. Her phone's flashlight swished back and forth over the engine before bobbing back to the passenger side.

"We need to leave. Like now."

"What? Why?"

Jennifer grabbed her purse from beneath the seat and snatched the keys from the ignition. "It's torn up. All of it. Wires and hoses ripped out of where they should be."

He shook his head, dispelling this information. "How would that...?"

She huffed and squeezed the key's bow in her fist, the blade sticking like a claw between middle and third finger. "Because someone did it. Deliberately. That's why we need to go."

Chris fumbled with his seatbelt, grabbed the helmet lights, and followed her up the road. Hiking boots crunched gravel as bright beams illuminated too-white pine trunks and too-dark pits that reminded him of black cardboard paper cut into circles and tossed randomly onto reedy grass.

The buzzing followed them, even louder than what they heard in the cave. They moved faster up a hill, and pain radiated through Chris's chest, the result of urgent exercise after a lifetime of sedentary pursuits.

Light flickered at the top of the hill.

When Chris and Jennifer got there, they found a group of people dressed in hooded robes. Flames danced atop the wicks of the candles each person held in front of them. Each one hummed, a low stridulation.

The tallest of the robed figures approached.

Jennifer clutched Chris's hand.

The figure removed his hood. Araise studied them, his features chiseled in the moonlight, eyes almost devoid of whites.

"We welcome you," he purred. "And thank you, glorious offerings."

Jennifer squeezed Chris's hand even tighter.

Araise smiled, teeth sharp beneath his thick mustache. His eyes widened and his lips thinned as thick, chitinous chelicerae jutted from his mouth. He opened his robe and his chest split open, the thick, sticky pedipalps clawing their way out.

The humming grew louder, rose into a hiss.

Chris broke free of Jennifer's grasp and ran down the hill. She screamed as he reached the bottom, the stridulations louder as the others transformed and plunged fangs into her, then joined the bone-white, multi-legged creatures jumping from the pits and the cave to swarm around, and ultimately devour, their other prey.

About the Author:

Derek Austin Johnson has lived most of his life in the Lone Star State. His work has appeared in *The Horror Zine*, *Rayguns Over Texas!*, *Horror U.S.A.: Texas*, *Campfire Macabre*, *The Dread Machine*, *Midnight Tales*, *Camp Slasher Lake Vol. I*, and *Generation X-ed*. He lives in Central Texas.

Floral Everlast | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

I've gone round the perimeter of the great-house thrice, looking—its Georgian columns half-lit/half-dark in the lowering sun, mirroring my conflicting joy/sadness.

I am acutely aware of things—even the smallest of things—yet this experience has an unreal quality, like floating in some sort of former dream. Is it my dream, or someone else's?

Is this a homecoming? There is familiarity—hints of childhood, adolescence, perhaps young-adulthood.

I am...surely...somewhere...

Here! The evergreen-camellia—its aging flowers' loose symmetry suggesting disorder/decay. I look down at a flower—through the telescoped stem below—to find myself still rising, slowly, through the conjoining roots.

About the Author:

Will H. Blackwell Jr. is an emeritus professor (botany), Miami University, Ohio. He presently resides in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. His fiction has appeared in *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, *Disturbed Digest*, *Shelter of Daylight*, *Trembling with Fear*, and *365 Tomorrows*. He has poems in *Aphelion*, *Black Petals*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Illumen*, *Scifaikuest*, and *Star*Line*.





*Mike Lera's
novelette INK
featured in
'All Dark
Places 2'*

Some tattoos never let
you forget they're there!

INK

A novelette by
Mike Lera



Available in paperback and eBook on Amazon!

The bright September sun reflected silver off the still waters of Puget Sound as they stepped off of the small motorboat onto the island.

"Man, I'm glad to leave Seattle behind, get back to nature." Johnny held out a hand to steady Liz as she followed him ashore.

"This way," Wayne said, heading for the trees that showed the first touch of the Fall, Sarah trailing after him.

Liz wrinkled her nose. "I'm not sure... these woods are bound to be full of bugs." She shuddered. "It is Spider Season, after all."

Wayne glanced back and chuckled.

"You do know that's a misnomer, right?"

Liz stuck her tongue out at him.

"It is," he continued, ignoring her. "This time of year isn't the best time for spiders, it's just that orb weavers and house spiders reach their largest size about now; they're not any more common, just easier to see. In fact, there are more spiders around later in the Fall."

"Well, gee, thank you for the biology lesson," said Liz. "I feel so much better. Not *lots* of spiders, just *big* spiders. Great. Wonderful."

She slumped against a tree.

Wayne chuckled again. "Just keeping you informed. By the way, I wouldn't lean there... that's just the sort of tree spiders call home."

She jumped away and brushed at her shoulders.

"Talking of big spiders," said Johnny, using a stick to swat down a web that hung out into the path, earning him Liz's grateful smile.

"Hey, those take them a lot of effort to build," Wayne interrupted him. "They don't do you any harm."

Liz stuck out her tongue, again, and he shook his head at her immaturity.

Johnny shrugged. "As I was saying: Talking of big spiders, my dad said he saw a huge one out here on one of these islands, back when he was a kid."

Shuddering, Liz asked, "*How huge?*"

"*Huge.*" He spread his arms wide. "Like this. He said it was as big as a dog."

"No!"

Sarah snorted. "Rubbish. Spiders don't get any bigger than tarantulas—they don't have lungs. If they got much bigger, they'd suffocate, if their esso-thingsies —"

"Exoskeletons," supplied Wayne.

"Yeah, those—if they didn't collapse—there's a reason why big creatures have bones, instead, you see?"

"So? He exaggerated." Johnny shrugged. "Still must've been big to make an impression on him."

"If he saw it," she retorted. "He probably made it up. It's probably nothing more than a tall tale like those tree squids some website claims live on the Olympic Peninsula."

Glancing about at the undergrowth and branches, Liz said, "I don't care. All this talk about spiders is making me feel ill. I'd like to go back."

"Don't worry," said Wayne, "the tree squids have eaten them all, so you're safe. But, seriously, it's not far to the cabin, no need to turn back now."

"Just as long as it's not full of bugs..."

"We'll send Johnny in first to evict any."

Liz gave a sniff, clearly not entirely convinced, but said no more.

"Not far," Wayne repeated.

"I can't wait." Sarah gave him a hug.

"Nor me," he said, not looking at her.

The cabin, Wayne had told them, was at the centre of the island on a low hill that, before it became so overgrown, had given amazing views out over the Sound. It was a lie. They *were* headed to the approximate centre of the island, but there was no cabin.

"Eww!" Liz swatted at her hair—web was caught in it. "This place must be *crawling* with spiders... Eww! I want to go back. *Please*. We could be back in Seattle in no time, go clubbing."

A spider scuttled past her foot into the cover of denser foliage and she gave a shriek.

"I want to go, *now*."

"No, no. We're almost there—and, there are no more of those horrible little spiders, no more web, none of that. Scout's honour."

She gave him a doubtful look, but continued to follow him as she tugged at the web caught on her hair. They entered a clearing, well lit by the sun in comparison to the shady green of the woods they'd passed through. There were no webs at its fringes and, though she looked about nervously, Liz made no further complaints about creepy-crawlies.

Instead, she asked, "Where's the cabin?"

"There isn't one," Wayne said, stepping back into the shadow of the trees. He gave a low whistle.

They turned and looked at him.

"What the hell are you talking about?" asked Johnny.

"Honey?" said Sarah.

"There isn't a cabin. But," he gave the low whistle again, "there *is* something marvellous here."

A rustle made them turn and something large emerged from the dense undergrowth. There was the hint of long twitching limbs, a multitude of unblinking eyes, more movement.

For a moment, they stared, uncomprehending, then Liz screamed.

Strands of silk lassoed towards them, wrapping about them, sticking to struggling limbs, enveloping them.

Wayne turned and hurried away, back to the boat, unwilling to watch. He brought them sacrifices, but he had no desire to watch them feed.

It was true—Spider Season *was* a misnomer. But, it *was* when they reached their largest and the ones that lived on the island were the largest ones of all.

Scientists might say they couldn't exist, but they did, and that was all that mattered. He was no expert, he just knew what was needed to keep the creatures satisfied. Maybe things were just different out here in the Sound.

He started the boat's engine and began the return journey to Seattle, glad to get away.

Liz had been right to be afraid.

Dammit, but he needed a drink.

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).

Author Website: [DJ Tyrer](#)

Twitter: [@DJTyrer](#)

Blood on the Ground | *Gabriella Balcom*

Humberto chanted, performing satanic rites, and killed a chicken while his followers watched. He drained its blood into a chalice, accidentally dribbled some on the ground, and felt vibrations underneath his feet.

"It's working," he announced. Grinning widely, he poured more blood onto the sediment where the first had landed.

But Humberto fled when the earth split open, forming a gaping maw which swallowed several satanists.

Arms of dirt shot from the ground, tearing others apart, then merged, taking the shape of an enormous foot.

"*You will defile me no more*," the earth boomed, and the foot stomped Humberto flat.

About the Author:

Gabriella Balcom writes fantasy, sci-fi, horror, romance, and literary fiction. She loves forests, mountains, and back roads, has had 337 works accepted for publication, and was nominated for the Washington Science Fiction Association's Small Press Award. Gabriella's books, *On the Wings of Ideas* and *Worth Waiting For*, resulted from her winning publishing contracts. Her novella, *The Return*, is out also.

Facebook: [Gabriella Balcom](#)

I crouched inside the doorway of a crumbling brick building, listening to the hitching breaths of the people crowded behind me.

A plant-covered walkway laid between us and the passage into the concrete city of safety. Thick green stalks and thin vines criss-crossed one another in a sort of woven pattern. Wide green leaves poked up here and there, appearing to wave gently in the breeze. I knew better.

An occasional white, purple or orange flower nestled among the greenery like an asp, coiled up, waiting for its next victim. This flora had no name. Most of us just called it 'the monstrosity'.

We humans had done this to ourselves, though I used the term 'we' loosely. Certainly none of us who'd gotten this far had been responsible, nor were the others fighting their way through the jungles, hacking their way through curtains of monstrous greenery. Most of those responsible for this botanic attack were already nestled in safety in the city.

Many innocents had already died, and I knew there were going to be more before my group found protection. One step out of this building and the monstrosity would rise up to protect its territory. Sure, it *was* theirs and we humans had invaded it, but we should have respected it instead of tearing it down. The experiment that led to this might have gone much different if we had.

I searched for foot holes—spaces between the greenery. They were less likely to attack if we managed not to step on it. I can't say I blamed it.

Of course, there were none. This thing (yes it was a multitude of plants but it worked as a single organism) never gave us a break. If only it believed us when we tried to explain that not all humans were the same, if it even understood our language. Somehow, I thought it did.

Someone from the group crept up behind me and crouched down at my side. "Where did it even come from?" he asked. "That wasn't here last night."

The vacant building had only been a pit stop before we crossed the bridge to safety. We'd managed to outrun the thick vines and runners that chased us. This morning when we'd woke, it was here.

I shrugged. "Maybe it senses us. Maybe it just got lucky and found us."

My companion looked around, observing the lay of the structure. "It could easily come in here," he said. "Why does it not? Why does it only keep us prisoner?"

That I had an answer for. I rubbed my hand across the brick threshold. "It doesn't like things like concrete or brick. Metals. Even most plastics, though it seems it can adapt to that. Earth or wood, as you may have noticed, is what it likes." He nodded his agreement, then I added, "As a nice little bonus, it gets to imprison us. Eventually we die, our bodies rot and—"

I paused, letting him figure the rest out. The monstrosity didn't need to kill us to eat us. The juices of a putrefied body could satisfy its hunger just as well.

And none of our weapons would work on it. An 'error' in engineering had made it resistant. Slash at it with a knife, chop it with shears or shoot it with guns. They only made it come back bigger, stronger, as if it had some sort of pumped up sea star DNA for growing limbs back. Maybe it did for all I knew. We'd even tried different kinds of poison. But only parts of it got sick. The healthy parts gathered around giving of themselves to heal the ailing one.

I stood. I knew there was only one way to get these people to safety. Most of them anyway. Some might get taken down with me. "Save yourselves," I cried. "Get to the city bridge as fast as you can."

Then I stepped down on to the lounging vines, stems, leaves and petals. As one they rose up around me in a horrific ring of beauty. Lush greens, snow white petals with a tinge of pink around their centres. Tiny purple petals gave off a distinctly pleasant aroma, and the orange flowers looked like a beautiful but deadly sunset.

They wound themselves around me, much like a boa constrictor. I breathed deep, aware of the chaotic swirl of bodies running by me. Some of them—most of them—wanted to save me, despite knowing they couldn't.

A long green vine snaked around my ankle, ripped me off my feet then rose up to hang me upside down. From the corner of my eye I could see another member of my group lying on the ground, covered almost entirely in green. Though none of us knew one another, had met randomly on our journeys, we cared about each other. I didn't know his name, but my eyes began leaking.

This gave my attackers pause. Soft leaves probed my face, perhaps only seeking moisture, even if it was salty. But that didn't stop its attack. The pressure on my body intensified, pushing the air from my lungs. I gulped, gasped, instinctively seeking life-giving air.

Thin runners slid into my mouth, down my throat and out my nose. I tried to scream, tried to breathe. Another tendril slid around my neck. Smeary black spots appeared before my eyes.

Despite my pain I tried to search for the other victim. Had the flora taken any more? How many had made it? My lungs burned. My head felt like it was going to explode.
I yearned for death long before it overtook me.

About the Author:

Kellee Kranendonk has spent a life time writing. She remembers fondly her late grandfather claiming she was born with pen and paper in hand, and laughing gleefully at her stories. She believes he would be proud of her many accomplishments as an author. Kellee lives in Atlantic Canada with her husband, two of her children and various animals.

Facebook: [Kellee Kranendonk Author](#)

Instagram: [@k2j2t1](#)

Lifecycle | *Ken Poyner*

Quibble has the last batholore caged in his basement. He is not sure what to do with it. It followed Natalie home from the deep woods, declared it was the last of its kind, and asked if we had a script for such circumstances. Natalie remembered that Thole's Hardware sold pre-fab stock cages. The batholore is hidden in the living room, we load the largest cage we calculate we can fit in Quibble's basement, work as a team to set it up. Then Quibble walks the batholore in, with water and we suspect food. We watch. This is the script.

News of the batholore was certain to get out. The librarian wondered why Quibble searched 'batholore', and why Natalie sought mystic zoologists. Natalie shared with a few friends, I shared with a few friends, Quibble shared at the titty bar. Council is meeting to see what to do about the batholore. It is Quibble's batholore, not the town's. The beast looks pale and a bit thin and the thrill of the exotic is needling away. Novelty wanes. Even the last of its kind now is a title that has aged poorly. If only we knew now what we knew then.

The batholore appears dying. Quibble alters the food, offers it beer, changes the straw in its cage. More, the batholore talks of days when thousands like him wandered the woods. Natalie listens longer than most. It was she he followed home. Quibble decides that, before the inevitable, he should see if the town will reimburse him for the cage, for past provisions. Any chance to build a shed out back, with an admission booth, is gone. Now is the time to bring in the high school science club. Perhaps they can find someone to take the consequences off Quibble's hands.

About the Author:

Ken Poyner's four collections of brief fictions and four collections of poetry can be found at Amazon and most online booksellers. He spent 33 years in information system management, is married to a world record holding female power lifter, and has a family of several cats and betta fish. Individual works have appeared in Café Irreal, Analog, Danse Macabre, The Cincinnati Review, and several hundred other places.

Author Website: [Ken Poyner](#)

Facebook: [Ken Poyner](#)



Returning Home | *Patrick J. Wynn*

It had been some time since he'd been home, even though it was dark he remembered the way. Moving down the hallway he recalled the last time he'd been here. The yelling, the screaming, the slapping which escalated into the beatings. It wasn't the first time it had happened, but it definitely ended differently. He turned into his daughter's room and even in the darkness he could see the bright pink walls covered in yellow and orange flowers. Looking down at the tiny girl sprawled under the covers he giggled as she pulled the covers up tight against the cold. As he leaned down her eyes fluttered open. It took several seconds before her eyes focused in the darkness and when they did her screams filled the room. He grabbed her skinny leg under the covers and yanked hard, tossing her and the blankets across the room.

"MOMMY, MOMMY" She screamed.

Moving back into the darkness of the corner he waited. Footsteps running down the hall brought more giggles. His former wife sprinted into the room and knelt down next to her sobbing daughter.

"MOMMY, HE'S HERE" the little girl wailed.

"No baby, no. Daddy is not here. Remember he can't be. He's dead" Mommy whispered as she picked up her sobbing daughter. "It was just a bad dream honey. You want to sleep in Mommy's room tonight?"

The little girl nodded, and he watched as his former wife carried his former daughter out of the room and across the hall. His giggles turned to deep laughter, and he heard them scream in terror at the sound so familiar to them. He drifted out of the pink room and through the closed bedroom door where he'd done such horrid things to his wife. As he appeared their screams filled him with joyous ecstasy as he knew the night's fun was just beginning.

Swimming | *Patrick J. Wynn*

Chuck sat up in bed and yawned, stretching his arms high above his head but froze as the little voice at the end of the bed chimed in.

"Daddy, can we go swimming today?"

Chuck shivered with the coldness of the room and climbed out of bed. He shuffled to the bathroom and did his business then began to brush his teeth.

"Daddy, It's such a nice day. The swimming hole is just waiting for us."

Chuck tossed his toothbrush on the sink and left the bathroom. He thought about grabbing his robe but knew it would not help against the chills and he moved off down the hall toward the kitchen.

"Daddy, please I want to go swimming."

Chuck stood in the kitchen looking out the sliding glass door at the bright sunshine and the deep pond in the field behind the house.

"Daddy lets go swimming, let's go right now."

"NO, NO, NO, No SWIMMING" Chuck sobbed.

"But Daddy we love to swim and maybe today you won't let me drown."

Chuck fell to his knees wailing in despair and sadness. Then he felt the cold wet hand of his lost daughter on his shoulder. He reached up and rubbed the blue dead flesh.

"Okay, Ok honey. Let's go swimming" Chuck said as he rose from his knees.

"Okay Daddy. I'll wait for you at the bottom of the pond."

Chuck shuffled out the sliding glass door not bothering to close it behind him. He moved slowly through the grass and when he reached the edge of the pond, he took a deep breath then joined his daughter.

About the Author:

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



Andrew lumbered about the cowshed, spraying disinfectant onto its walls, floor and tanks. A local radio station streamed through the earphones inside the hood of his hazmat suit. He listened to a newsreader going over the headlines in the station's hourly news bulletin, though he was more interested in the weather update that'd come at the bulletin's end.

Not for the first time, he realised he was being absurd. Obsessing over the weather was an old farmer's habit that, despite the recent, seismic changes in agriculture, refused to die. He'd acquired the habit from his father, who'd run this farm until 20 years ago and had good reason to worry if it was going to rain or shine. But Andrew didn't need to worry. Nowadays, all the farm's operations took place indoors.

While he brandished the wand at the end of the hose and filled the shed with a mist of disinfectant, the newsreader said something about 'unexplained deaths'.

By the time this registered, and he paused in his work and listened more intently, the newsreader was concluding: "Hopefully we'll have more on that story in our next update." He moved onto the football results. Today was Saturday, so there were many of those.

Andrew shrugged. Waves of unexplained deaths weren't uncommon, and it usually wasn't long before someone found an explanation for them—a deadly new variant of the latest virus, for instance, or a life-threatening new side-effect of the changing climate.

Then came the weather forecast. Andrew smiled as he remembered his father in the farmhouse kitchen, hunched over the radio, an old-fashioned, self-contained radio set that had no truck with the Internet. Fondly, he recalled the old man grumping at the other members of the family to be quiet while he tried to glean what the sky would throw down at the farm—sunshine, rain, snow—during the next few days.

Now the weathergirl talked only about Heatwave Corine, which for the past week had gripped Europe, Scotland included. Andrew supposed the heatwave would eventually explain the deaths. It'd created high pollen counts, which'd given people serious allergic reactions, or something like that.

Though this was October. It wouldn't be pollen.

He finished spraying, programmed the shed's sprinklers to sluice away the disinfectant in 20 minutes' time, and ambled towards the door. As he passed between the rows of tanks, he peered into them. The beads of disinfectant clinging to the tanks' transparent, polycarbonate sides made their contents look dark and shapeless. Not that modern cows *had* much shape. There was little about them that his father would have considered cow-like. They were big, fleshy blocks floating and growing in fluid, as anonymous as the meat on a kebab shop's rotisserie. Tubes fed in oxygen, water and nutrients through the neck-stumps where real cows had heads. Other tubes attached to their back ends siphoned away waste products.

In the ante-room Andrew removed his hazmat suit and dropped it into the cleaning tub. As he often did, he mouthed a silent prayer of thanks that the old man hadn't lived to see these developments in farming. He'd have been horrified. He'd have thought them unspeakable.

But surely, Andrew reflected, keeping real cows captive, fattening and finally slaughtering them was more unspeakable. At least the blobs of beef in the tanks, headless and brainless, didn't *feel* anything.

He stepped out into the warmth of the October evening. The moonlight glinted on the solar panels covering the steading's rooftops. He walked past the poultry shed, where the chickens in the tanks were more recognisable as chickens—if only because they resembled the plucked chicken carcasses that used to be sold in shops. As with the cows next door, tubes were plugged into their neck-stumps and posteriors.

He arrived at the shed containing the woollies, donned another hazmat suit, and entered. He saw that Malkie Hulme had nearly finished shearing the final woollie. The 23 he'd done already stretched along their poles, thin, grey and slightly stubbled without the long coats they'd spent the last two months growing. Because of their coats, they couldn't be housed in protective tanks and fluids. This meant they frequently caught infections and died, if 'died' was the right word for it. On the trimmed woollies, Andrew was relieved to see none of the blue coagulant / disinfectant cream that got slathered over any cuts or nicks made by the shears.

Giant fans whirled at one end of the shed, creating a breeze that blew the cut fibres into the collection chamber at its other end. When Malkie completed the shearing, Andrew killed the fans. Using brooms, they swept any wisps lying on the floor into the chamber too. Then they slung on backpack-sprayers and doused the now-naked woollies in disinfectant.

“Aye,” Malkie drawled, “that’s them gid for haircuts till December. Ye’ll want me back tae smarten them up for Christmas?”

“I’d appreciate it, Malkie.” Andrew surveyed them one last time. Just spinal columns surrounded by tissue, they resembled giant, lumpen worms.

After dumping their hazmat suits in the tub in the ante-room, they left the shed for the shower-block. Andrew was drenched in sweat. As protection against the electrical charges crackling through the woollies’ coats, he wore a rubber under-suit that he called his ‘gimp costume’.

Andrew wished the soft, fine hairs growing from the woollies’ bodies had been made of the protein keratin, like those that’d formed old-fashioned sheep-fleeces. But the woollies’ fibres were genetically modified axons, Schwann cells and myelin tissue, part of a nervous system engineered to grow mostly *outside* their bodies. When these fibres were sheared, collected, cleaned, refined and woven together, they made the most popular material in the modern clothing industry.

The woollies were literally bundles of nerves. And every two months, they had their external nerves *cut*...

Andrew dismissed the idea. The woollies were as brainless as the engineered cows and chickens. They merely existed, thanks to the tubes feeding them nourishment and draining their wastes. How could they feel pain?

He noticed that Malkie was carrying a holdall. “What ye got in there?”

They passed a gap between two sheds. Through it, beyond the fields where Andrew’s father had once grazed livestock and grown crops, but where trees planted under the government’s carbon-sink programme now grew densely, a yellow glow could be seen staining the base of the night-sky. This was the lights of the town of Raeholm. Malkie gestured towards the glow. “There’s a dance in the Dunrig Hotel the night. I brought ma fancy gear with me, so I wouldnae waste time goin’ back hame tae change.” He thought of something. “Hey, Andy, why don’t ye come along?”

It amused Andrew that no matter how much musical and recreational fashions changed over the decades, a social gathering at the Dunrig Hotel was always called ‘a dance’. But he also felt embarrassed. “Me? I’m a bit auld for that carry-on, Malkie. I’m 44.”

“44? An’ ye’re still livin’ here on yer lonesome? Och, mair reason tae attend the dance, man. Find yerself some company. A nice lady—or fellah. Whatever floats yer boat!”

Andrew didn’t respond. The conversation was absurd. Who’d want to be company for *him*, owner of a ghoulish meat-farm like *this*?

Malkie turned on the speakers in the shower-block. The same station that’d streamed over Andrew’s earphones became audible, though now a DJ was playing chart hits. Malkie discarded the gimp costume and entered a cubicle, singing along to a tune, getting himself in the mood for the dance. Andrew showered too, used the cubicle’s blowers to dry himself, stepped out and put on a clean boiler-suit. By now the speakers were relaying another news bulletin. The newsreader said sombrely: “...not only have deaths been reported, but police say there have been disturbances in several cities and towns. While they bring the situation under control, they urge the public to abandon any plans for going out this evening and remain at home...”

Malkie emerged from his cubicle. “What wis that?”

“Trouble. The polis say it’s happenin’ in cities an’ touns all over. They’re advisin’ folk tae stay indoors even though it’s Saturday night.”

Malkie pulled clothes out of his holdall. “That’ll be Heatwave Corine. There’s always hassle durin’ a heatwave. Fights, riots... Folks lose their tempers in the heat and turn intae bampots.”

Malkie put on a T-shirt, slim-fitting pinstripe trousers and a matching single-breasted jacket. All were made of a shiny, grey-black material that looked smart and chic but also light enough to be comfortable on a warm evening like this. Andrew wondered if he saw, almost subliminally, something flickering through the material—probably an effect of its shininess. Like many inhabitants of Raeholm, Malkie worked nine-to-five in the local mill where the woollies’ fibres were converted into clothing. One perk of those mill jobs was that staff received free garments. Indeed, a recent newspaper feature had called Raeholm ‘the best-dressed town in Scotland’.

While Malkie tied his shoelaces, Andrew inquired, “After what the newsman said, ye don’t intend tae still go oot?”

Malkie laughed. “A riot in the toun? No much chance ay that. Ye ken the auld joke: ‘It’s as quiet as the grave... or Raeholm!’”

He went to a mirror and combed and moosed his hair. Then he turned to face Andrew again, no doubt to demand—peacock that he was— “How do I look?”

But Malkie didn’t ask that question. He opened his mouth, closed it again, and grimaced. He said instead, “Ow.”

"What's wrong?"

"These claites... They're tight."

"Maybe get them in a larger size?"

"No..." Malkie croaked. "*Tight!*"

They were silent for a time, Andrew puzzled by what was happening, Malkie seemingly having lost the power of speech. Then, as Andrew realised Malkie's face had turned blue and his eyes were goggling, Malkie toppled onto the floor. Andrew rushed over to him. Malkie's limbs flailed, his face bluer and eyes more bulbous than before, and—

Faint specks of light seemed to swarm across the grey-black fabric of his T-shirt, trousers and jacket.

Andrew heard things snapping, but only when he saw blood appear round Malkie's mouth and nostrils did he understand his ribs were breaking and becoming daggers of bone that were pushed deep into his lungs. Malkie stopped writhing. His legs and arms looked grotesquely thin, whereas his hands resembled fat, dark mittens thanks to the blood that'd been squeezed into them.

"Malkie? Malkie...?"

When Andrew accepted that Malkie's bulging eyes had no life in them, he stumbled to the comms panel on the wall and managed to tap the emergency-services number into the keyboard.

From the speakers, the weathergirl had been talking again about Heatwave Corine. Now she was replaced by a recorded message: "You have reached emergency services. All our operators are busy. Please be patient and somebody will speak to you as soon as possible."

Bland muzak started playing. Andrew shouted up at the speakers, "But this is an *emergency!* I cannae fuckin' wait!"

Then he realised he *could* wait, for Malkie was dead. To affirm that, he turned back towards the corpse. He was in time to see Malkie's right leg rise stiffly off the floor. Though the leg was straight, the foot flopped lifelessly at its end. Then an arm jerked upwards, the swollen hand dangling limply at its end too. And then all of Malkie's limbs, and his torso, began twitching, juddering, convulsing. He was like a marionette whose strings some novice puppeteer was trying to figure out how to operate.

Andrew started forward, thinking Malkie must still be alive. But then he saw Malkie's face, purple, goggle-eyed, bleeding from mouth and nose—still dead. His head rolled sideways, but only because the rest of his body disturbed it with its convulsions.

In fact, the parts of Malkie's body that were moving were the parts clad in clothes. Again, faintly, lights crossed the fabric like tiny meteor showers—

Malkie wriggled between him and the block's entrance. Suddenly terror-stricken, Andrew staggered backwards instead, into the nearest shower cubicle. He slammed the door and slumped against it, gasping for breath. He understood now. Those little lights were electrical impulses, travelling through nerves—

Over his rasping breath and thundering heartbeat, he made out the muzak from the speakers, which meant his call was still in the telephone queue. A long time later, he heard the muzak give way to a voice.

A tired-sounding woman spoke. "You have reached emergency services. Please state which type of emergency you wish to report so I can put you through to the appropriate service. Physical crime, hate crime, medical emergency, IOUV infection, fire, terrorist activity..."

When nobody replied, the woman became flustered and no longer concealed her accent. "Look, we're *really* busy the night. If ye willnae state the emergency, I'm gonnae hang up."

Andrew wrenched open the cubicle-door and bolted across the room to the comms panel. Halfway across, he collided with Malkie, who was on his feet. Malkie's hands immediately grasped at his throat.

Clearly, Malkie was still dead. His head hung off his shoulders, his eyes swivelling up in their sockets and showing only their whites. Andrew grabbed Malkie's wrists, feeling the smooth, somehow-tingling fabric of his jacket-sleeves, and prised the hands off him. He saw how the jacket's cuffs had become ragged and loose threads had crept across Malkie's hands and fingers, enclosing them like a pair of fishnet gloves. These meshes of threads were animating the lifeless hands. Glancing down, he saw that similar threads had lashed themselves around Malkie's shoes.

Andrew forgot about the emergency-services lady. Shrieking, he dodged past Malkie's upright corpse and blundered out of the shower-block.

He careered through the steading, past the various sheds, and then along the side of the farmhouse. He swerved around a corner, into the area between the front of the farmhouse and the edge of the carbon-sink-programme trees. This was where his Land Rover was parked. Also here was the end of the farm-lane, which gave access to the road and then the town.

The area was dark, but after Andrew ran another yard he triggered two motion-sensor security lights. Mounted on the farmhouse's roof-edge, they suddenly made everything bright.

Already three figures were between him and the Land Rover. Not that this made any difference, he realised then, for he'd left the vehicle-keys in the shower-block, in a pocket of the boiler-suit he'd worn previously. Meanwhile, the security lights let him see that more figures were shambling up the lane—from the road, from Raeholm, the best-dressed town in Scotland. An army of them might be making their way to his farm now.

Their heads flopped on their shoulders, sometimes showing purple faces, bulging eyes, blood leaking from mouths and nostrils. Their clothes glittered as shoals of light swam through them. And their arms were stretched out—towards him.

While they shuffled closer, Andrew realised that the woollies didn't just feel pain. They felt hatred too.

About the Author:

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

Author Website: [Blood and Porridge](#)

I Speak for the Trees | Donna J. W. Munro

On the hill that rose above Grickle Grove evergreens grew thick, brushing the clouds into wisps with needles pink and soft. Grickle Grove's men worked in lumber, and they had built the first log and daub cabin that sat in the crook of Grockle Creek. Two hundred souls made their home in the valley, taking only the trees they needed and replacing what they took.

The oldest resident, Unc, had built the road, carrying stones from the creek bed and from the rockslides that came off the craggy cliffside. He led without appointment, deciding where to cull the trees and how many replacements to plant.

Unc was the head for the prayers that wove through the humming song of Grockle Creek. His voice would sing, low and sweet, "I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues. The trees, the fish and the birds are our kin. I speak for this hill, our mother, from where we take what we need. We take no more."

The rest murmur along, grumbling beneath his song.

And they prospered.

Only Unc ever led the prayer, and only he climbed the cliff to bring the bundle of soft, pink needles to the cave where the Grickle lived. Only Unc ever went to Grickle and looked into his yellow eyes, but he told the others about the creature's long teeth and spindle-bone legs.

Unc promised that any night wanderer on the hill would feel those teeth in the soft flesh for their throat, and that those long claws were allowed to tear at their skin. This was for the peace of Grickle Grove, which was negotiated and renewed each year by Unc and the Grickle among all the needle offerings.

Unc could not live forever though, could he?

Jacob Barbelot, the fifth child of Unc's granddaughter Sara, didn't think so.

"Unc, how old are you?" Jacob asked as they gathered the apples from the trees, taking what was needed and leaving the rest to tumble to the ground by the tree roots. Those were for the birds, and for the Grickle.

"As old as the grove," Unc said, his hands full of apples. He turned his full attention to Jacob. "I speak for the trees, and they give me life. As long as these woods live, so shall I."

Jacob nodded, though inside he seethed. Why should Unc live forever, while the rest of the Barbelot family passed like dandelion seeds in a spring wind?

When the warrior woman stumbled into the village, Jacob's anger found a kindred soul.

He'd found her, Captain Oncer, with moss growing on the scales of her armor. She'd laid her sword down to greedily drink from Grickle Creek, scooping the sparkling water by handfuls. A warrior from the plain, the kind who Jacob's mother had depicted. Sara had wandered in her youth, returning with recollections of the fierce warriors. Of

course she sang out with disdain at the brutality she'd found, but Jacob had heard the words between. How exciting the battles were, how life and death were decided by the skill of your arm and the strength of your comrades.

He'd wanted to leave, to wander as his mother had, but Sara had forbidden it. The Barbelot family needed a male to sit in the circle next to her, one to give Unc their annual offerings, and Jacob was the only male. Maybe now, with the arrival of this warrior woman, things could change.

As Jacob approached the new arrival she spun on her boot heel, grabbing her sword and challenging him, "Back off!"

Jacob raised his hands, palms out. "Peace, sister. You look tired, and I can offer you food and rest."

The warrior didn't drop her guard, but her features grew quizzical. "For what in return?"

"Words. Just words, about the world outside of this place."

She stared at him, locked in the rigid stance of a soldier. Eventually she lowered her sword, cautiously following Jacob to his cabin. He maneuvered his pot of soup further onto the fireplace, stirring the banked peat lumps until the flames licked up the side. She sat at the table, sword next to her right hand.

The silence stretched, and Jacob's stirring didn't drown out the humming of Grickle Creek. He watched her out of the corner of his eye, her gaze shifting as she took in the cabin.

"Don't have much, eh boy?"

"Jacob."

"Jacob then." Captain Oncer grabbed a hunk of bread from the bowl and bit the rough dough, chewing slowly. "You live in the midst of plenty, yet you have this little hut and rough bread. How many days has that soup been simmering?"

He glanced around, ashamed, though it wasn't for the first time. He'd been raised in Grickle Grove's poverty, and had always struggled with the facts of it compared to what Sara had said of the outside world. Now, even with dirt and moss encrusting it, pieces of the woman's silver armor shone in the flickering light of the fireplace. It was worth more than all of his possessions combined.

Ladling a bowl full of the three-day-old soup he merely grunted in response, then set the meager fare in front of her.

"Even in camp, we soldiers eat meat with our meal." She stirred the apples in the spiced water. "You have fish and fowl, so why not eat those?"

"It isn't allowed."

"Allowed? If I were to go out and kill one of those fat birds in the trees would you really stop me?"

Jacob shook his head.

"Why do you burn peat, when you have so many trees?"

"We only take trees when we have to for winter, or when they fall and then we must replace –"

"Why?" She crushed the crusty bread in her clenched fist. "Who makes you?"

He shook his head. How could she understand?

"Unc is our leader. He keeps us safe, and we follow the rules." Jacob filled his own bowl, sitting next to her. As he spooned the thin soup into his mouth he shamefully noted that it had never tasted so bitter before.

"If my army had these trees, that clear water and those fat fish, we'd win our war. You fools don't even know what you have! This Unc, is he a strong man that he holds you with such dedication?"

Jacob shook his head. "He's the chosen one of Grickle. He speaks for the trees, because..."

She scoffed. "Trees are things to be used, Jacob. I'm going to lead my troops back here. There's money for you to make from the use of your resources –"

"I don't want money! I want to be a soldier, like you."

At his outburst she laughed, holding out a hand. Jacob grasped it happily. "Then I'll train you. Come Jacob, let us bring the army."

Two evenings later, as the sun sank behind the grove, the army crested the far hill. It made its way down to Grickle Creek, bands breaking off to chop down the pink pines or to spear the geese squawking fearfully between the fallen tree trunks. The residents of Grickle Creek didn't come to stop them, as Jacob had thought they would. In his shiny new armor, and standing next to Captain Oncer, he had hoped his mother Sara and his sisters could see how he'd changed.

He wanted them to see how much stronger he was under the army's care, but only Unc came out of his hut. He walked without pause to Captain Oncer, easily recognizing someone who held power. As he passed Jacob he spared him a sorrowful glance, but not a word.

His low, sweet voice rang out in the dusk. "I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues. The trees, the fish and the birds are our kin. I speak for this hill, our mother, from where we take what we need. We take no more, so you take what you have and leave before it is too late."

Captain Oncer dismounted from her horse, drawing her sword in a fluid motion. "Old fool! Get out of my way."

She shoved Unc, laughing at the old man, but—

He didn't fall.

The last of the daylight died in that moment, and Jacob's jaw tightened as he watched Unc stand like stone.

"I speak for the trees, who have no tongues." The words stretched in his throat and, strangely, so did Unc's body began to stretch. His eyes melted in his sockets, burned out by the bright-yellow light shining from deep within him. He grew upwards and out of his skin, stretching on bones tall and thin. The tips of his elongated claws scrambled in the dirt among the fallen, pink evergreens. His skull was now half buck and half wolf, with teeth longer than Captain Oncer's sword.

The soldiers stopped chopping and spearing. They were frozen in horror as they took in the sight of Unc, took in the sight of the Grickle, slobbering over their Captain.

"You will replace what you take," the Grickle rasped.

The warriors screamed as one. Their armor was ripping, metallic crunches filling the air as their bodies lengthened. All of them threw their heads back and stretched their arms out, branches breaking through their skin. Their flesh transformed from soft, pink skin into the ridged, hard skin of the pink evergreens. Metal scales sloughed off as their toes stretched into the earth, and the pink needles spiraled out from every branch and finger.

The Grickle raised its claws, clicking the tips, calling the tongues out from the mouths of the dying soldiers. The meaty organs snaked out from between lips, pink and shining wetly. Soldiers gurgled as their tongues ripped from them, the body parts flying to the Grickle. It popped the saliva-coated meat into its jaws, chewing it into mush that disappeared behind his gnashing teeth.

The Grickle repeated, "Trees have no tongues."

Without the screaming the humming of the creek filled the space between Jacob and the Grickle. Its lamp-like eyes shone in the dark, glinting off of Jacob's shiny new armor.

"Forgive me, Grandfather. I didn't know they would..."

The monster listened to the echoes of Jacob's lie bounce among the new stand of trees. It bent over the speared birds and pulled the death out of their wounds, releasing black clouds into the air.

"Jacob Barbelot, my little traitor..." The words rolled in the beast's bone windpipe. "You let them in, you led them back. I thought, maybe someday, you might—"

"Please Grandfather, I'm sorry!"

The Grickle crept forward on long spindle legs, teeth shining red in the brightness of the moon.

"I can't make you a tree, my child, because you didn't protect them. I can't make you into a fish or a bird, because you watched them die. No, I'll make you part of me. This way I'll know you'll never hurt them again."

Jacob opened his mouth to protest, but the Grickle caged him with its bony arms and long claws. It peeled Jacob's skin, spilling blood on the roots of the new, pink-needled trees. He dropped hunks of skin over the bird's wings, making them longer with each strip. The muscles and organs he tossed to the fish, who gobbled each piece up.

Jacob felt each injury, even once he was only bones.

And then the Grickle, humming with the creek, wove Jacob's bones in with his, latching them on as they clacked and melded together. It made itself stronger.

Then it breathed out life in a white cloud, which wove around the bones and pulled them together back into the shape of Unc. Jacob's bones ached to speak, but he had no breath. Unc laughed and patted his distended belly, Jacob's bones like a shield on the inside, and walked through the grickle grass toward town, breathing in the slow, sour scent of blood on the wind as he greeted the laughing crows.

About the Author:

Donna J. W. Munro's pieces are published in *Nothing's Sacred Magazine* IV and V, *Corvid Queen*, *Hazard Yet Forward* (2012), *Enter the Apocalypse* (2017), *Beautiful Lies, Painful Truths II* (2018), *Terror Politico* (2019), *It Calls from the Forest* (2020), *Gray Sisters Vol 1* (2020), *Pseudopod 752* (2021), and others. Check out her first novel, *Revelation: Poppet Cycle Book 1*.

Author Website: [Donna J. W. Munro](#)

Twitter: [@DonnaJWMunro](#)

It's time to let the monsters out!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

The dive should have only taken twenty minutes but after about forty five it was clear that a quick ascent would not be feasible. The depths were illuminated by only the light of our cameras and what was looming above could only be described as a frenzied haze of red flashes and ink swells...like clouds of liquid smoke cascading downward into a blackened abyss.

I floated in silence, each moment reminding me of an eon in purgatory. I still had about an hour in my scuba tank and so did my partner Madeline, but at this point that was the least of my concerns. The flashes of vibrant red that were penetrating the darkness were getting forever closer...and growing in numbers at an alarming rate. My thoughts began to race.

Man, we need to get the hell out of here!

I motioned to Madeline to point her camera's light to the sea floor in hopes that no jumbos would notice us. She quickly pointed the lens downward and did her best to cover the light with her left hand. I did the same. The light was still visible, but was now less of a beacon and more of a dim glow. But this brought yet another problem: The darkness was now even darker, and our surroundings became but a mere silhouette of dark green, black, and deafening silence. I began to gather my thoughts to think of a solution.

A Humboldt squid flashes like that when it is feeling aggressive. If we ascend to the surface now they will eat us alive. But if we stay here, we will run out of air. What the hell are we going to do? Shit, we really got ourselves in a god damned pickle. Hell...

Not able to think of a way to fix our problem I continued to float in despair. It seemed as if we were destined to be lunch meat for an army of red devils and the future was looking as bleak as it was ever going to be. That's when I saw Madeline freeze and go as rigid as a razorblade.

From a watery hell came a tentacle...and then another...and then another. Razor tipped whips began to embrace Madeline, and strangely enough it was done gently. But this would not fool us. If we made a single wrong movement we would be torn to shreds and they would find our mutilated carcasses adrift, or on a beach slowly decomposing in the sun. At first it was just Madeline, but then the jumbos started to inspect me too.

They did not come from above...they came from below. Any plans of an escape had been foiled, and it looked as if our shivering flesh would soon be fodder for a monster's beak...but we did not give up hope. We just kept as still as possible in the gentle current as the tentacles continued to probe us. Madeline slowly put her hand to her head in the form of a gun and made a *bang!* motion with her fingertips. She was usually quite fearless but I could tell she was shaking like a leaf caught in autumn's wind.

More jumbos came from the depths and soon we were surrounded by at least ten of the beasts. Their whips, like tendrils of the damned, began to swish and flick like worms caught on a hook...and within a brief moment I could sense that the Humboldt's hostility had been heightened. Just as we thought things couldn't get any worse the squid from above seemed to notice us and they too began to make the descent to check out the dim glow of our diving cameras. Feelings of intense peril began to seep into my heart...

Fuck...

Seconds seemed like hours as packs of ravenous cephalopods swarmed us, their grotesque appendages darting ominously closer...and closer...and closer. In a fraction of a second, one of the vile creatures grabbed me and started to shake me like a paint can at the hardware store. Through a bleary fog I could see Madeline being pulled in various directions, her limbs soon contorting like a scene from *The Exorcist*.

Just as I was about to accept my grisly fate, with rapid-fire quickness the squid that were holding us captive blasted downward. The squid from above followed in unison, and in less than half a minute Madeline and I were once again floating alone in the swells. My heart rate slowly decreased as I realized that we, at least for a moment, were out of harm's way. My thoughts were a confused daze.

What the hell just happened?

My only guess was that a school of fish passed by and the squid were lured away with promises of a hearty feast, a feast that did not include wet suits and the cold steel of our scuba tanks. I motioned to Madeline to stay still for another moment, but we soon made our way to the surface, and after a short swim we made it back to 'La Barracuda'...the small fishing boat we hired to take us on our not-so-pleasant seafaring adventure.

When I made my way on board the boat, I quickly took my mask off and choked in the pungent salt air and yelled to Madeline with delight.

"Holy fucking hell I never want to do that again!"

She just smiled as tears rolled down her cheeks. We were scared to death, but it appeared that the sea did not consume us...at least this time. Even though we planned to keep to the land for a while, we would make the journey downward into the abyss again. Sunken ships and salt water would forever be in our blood, but we hoped to only find ink in story books.

If the sea would allow us the privilege...oh God, we could only hope.

About the Author:

Devin J. Meaney is the beloved author of many reviews and shorts that nobody actually reads. Within the nine hundred years he has been on this planet, he has been a cart boy, a scrap metal dude, a traffic control technician, and was twice the world's coolest dishwasher. He also has a beautiful young daughter whom he loves very much!

Man's Best Friend | JB Corso

Muffy growled and snapped at Jacob panicked face, pushing its rancid breath at him. His rescue hound held him hostage against the wooden headboard. Angela's cooling blood plastered around the canine's mouth. His eyes darted between his gutted beloved and the twin set of crimson-stained teeth inches from his nose. A lingering groan quivered in Muffy's throat as she stared at him with disdain. His thoughts flashed back to falling in love with her sweet puppy kisses years ago. A time when he couldn't imagine praying for his life as his Angela's life bled out across the bedroom carpet.

House Plant | JB Corso

Helen fought her house plant's assault with the last of her waning strength. The thin vines tightened around her wrinkled neck, morphing her skin into stressed folds. She had often considered the likely ways that an eighty-three year old woman might die, but none of them included because of her beloved house plant. Her arthritic fingers struggled against its tightening grip. Her eyes bulged as burning lungs ached for the invaluable air trapped in her mouth. A vegetative cord swirled around her wrist, yanking it away. Her body grew still as aggressive vines extended towards her husband's peaceful snoring.

Molding Decisions | JB Corso

Invasive orange mold blankets most of our community. We can't even walk outside without a gas mask anymore. Jinni tried to go without one. The spores infested her lungs within an hour. She coughed up bloody chunks of her lungs. We abandoned her shriveled up corpse on the grass. The orange death is crawling up Connie's window. We can't stay in the apartment any longer. There aren't enough spare mask filters for us all to run for the Federal Safe Zone. I should grab Connie and snag the suitcase of unused canisters when the rest of them are asleep.

Candle Flame | JB Corso

The basement's darkness closed in more like a tomb to Linda with every new candle that hosted a humble flame. Her home's power had disappeared days ago, just like her last scraps of food. The fungi had spread everywhere throughout her neighborhood like a paint job. She watched their white-blue caps pulsating atop Danielle's exposed skin outside the window. Tiny spinning tendrils poked under the basement door, searching for inky darkness to expand into. The final candle accepted a flame from its deeply melted sibling.

About the Author:

JB Corso is a health care professional who has worked with the mentally ill and geriatric populations for the last 20 years. He appreciates time with his children, writing, and pondering existential dread. He's a combat arms veteran who deployed as an international peacekeeper. He lives with his significant other and enjoys afternoon drives listening to music.

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

Thea turned over the thorn in her bare hands, careful to mind the wicked hooks that lined the seams and the horn. The thorn was black as onyx, smooth as glass and the size of a human heart. She looked over her glasses at Louise, Bob and Gill who were standing around the post office counter. The post office was the heart of their little town in the middle of the Lepya Wastelands. They were the founders of Cisne Well, one of the largest outposts in the Wastes—with a grand total of 12 citizens. Louise and Bob, their two littles and Louise's parents and Thea's own two kids with Gill and his parents.

It was hard to survive in the wastes, but not impossible. It was also lucrative if you could hack it. Even as technology advanced, if you wanted to visit loved ones in different cities you had to rely on outposts for shelter as you made the trek across Lepya and many still relied on it for mail and packages. You could send yourself or loved ones packages that waited for them at different outposts, this way travelers could travel light and fast through the toxic, blighted red sands of the Wastes. They had put up a huge totem in the center of town to beckon travelers to Cisne Well. The buildings around the post formed a square, and they were all hewn from the same pale wood Bob and Gill had salvaged 10 years ago. Now, it was stained with streaks of red from the sands and burnt in some places by the relentless sun. There was the post office, a convenience store stocked with sundries, a medical center where Gill was able to ply his trade and a small apartment complex. The apartments came in handy when travelers came to stay, but most of the time half of the complex was empty and the littles were able to run through the halls shrieking to their heart's delight. They also kept a cadre of motorbikes and dune buggies chained up around the square. Most travelers were grateful to come across Cisne Well, so the chains were less to protect the vehicles from theft and more to hold them in place until someone needed them.

Thea had never been this rich before. Thea had never been this close to death before. The thorns were popping up everywhere. The vine was growing, its tendrils moving through the soft sand and pushing up thorns in the most inconvenient of places. They found thorns in their flour sacks, in the vulnerable sandy corners of the post office; one had even made its way into the ground floor of the apartment building; where it had gotten caught in Bob's foot. Gill had removed it, but he had to open up Bob's entire foot to make sure all the hooks were out. And still, he had missed. Long skinny vines pushed through Bob's flesh like hardened veins. Every week Gill clipped them out, but they were growing faster and thicker. Her nightmare was that the thorns would catch one of the kids. She shuddered to think of those long black tendrils unfurling beneath her child's skin—pushing on their soft veins and feeding on their new flesh. And it would be her fault. Their fault. They had fed the vine.

The four of them had found it when they were scouting a location for their outpost, before they had brought the kids and grandparents from Artax. It was the only other living thing they had encountered in the Waste. The only thing that could draw the toxic moisture from the air and the sands and live instead of wither. Maybe the living cells in them had felt a kinship with the pulsing mitochondria. To Thea, the vine felt like a pet, filling the hole a dog or shop cat would have if they were in a city. She didn't know how the others felt about the vine, she had never asked. But they must have been as attached to it as she, to do the things that they did. They fed it, it had grown, and now it wanted more than they could give.

She set the thorn on the countertop. "The vine is out of control. We need help." Louise shook her head, "If they found out what we did, they could shut down our outpost. The last 10 years would have been for nothing."

"Nothing?" Gill plopped into one of the stools behind the counter. "We're rich. We could go back to Artax, live in high-rises and send our kids to private schools. We wouldn't be covered from head to toe in sand every day. We wouldn't be risking our lives just to stay alive every goddamn day." Thea froze, she knew Gill was sick of this place. But this was the first time he sounded serious about leaving.

They were interrupted by a loud buzz from their satwatches. Thea jumped, that was the emergency SOS signal. "Oh god," Louise trembled. "It's the kids." A few minutes later, they were racing across the sands to the vine's cave. The grandparents and the littles had all gone to feed it. They thought there was safety in numbers, but now they were trapped inside the cave.

"It throws those thorns at us if we try to get back to the tunnel." Grandpa Jeb's voice sounded even more frail through the satwatch and it was seeped in fear. "Maci already got one through the leg. We're afraid to move."

"I'm going in," said Bob. "I'm already fucked. What's one more thorn?" Thea decided to let him take the risk, while Louise and Gill made weak protestations. In the end, Bob had entered and 10 minutes later came

running out again, a thorn stuck in his shoulder. Gill shook his head as he pulled the thorn out of Bob. "If we have found our ruin here, it's because we cultivated it. Maybe we should be left to our fate."

"It's not the kids fault. Should they suffer for our bad decisions?" Thea shot back.

"I'm calling for help." Louise said, "Making a mistake shouldn't sentence us all to death." Gill and Thea exchanged a look. Could multiple murders be called a mistake?

An hour later, a sleek dark blue motorbike pulled up next to them. Two women, one in a white sand suit and one in a blue that matched the bike hopped off. "I'm Feather," said the muscled woman in blue, "This is Lila, the botanist you need."

The smaller woman didn't move, "Charmed."

"She's not big on shaking hands," said Feather, holding out her own. Louise grasped it and introduced the group. Louise explained that their families were trapped inside. Gill handed the botanist one of the thorns he had taken out of Bob to inspect. "How could anything grow out here?" Lila mused. This time, all four of them exchanged looks. Lila squinted her eyes, "You are keeping something from me. If you are hiding vital information, I can't help you and we might as well leave. We were in the middle of something when you called anyway. Feather, I want to get back on the bike, we are leaving."

Feather put her arm around the smaller woman, "Aw, c'mon Li, there's kids stuck in there. We can't just walk away."

"I suppose the children are innocent. If you tell me everything, and I mean everything, I will stay and help. If I think you are bullshitting me, I am leaving."

"When we found the vine, it was small. We didn't understand how it could grow here either." Louise stumbled and looked at Thea. Thea placed a hand on her back. "We wanted to help it, it was the only other living thing out here. We felt...a kinship with it. There's not much to feed anything out here. But we came across...well...a corpse of another traveler. We mulched it with our compost and used it to fertilize the vine." Thea could see the corner of Lila's mouth twitch.

"It grew, but then it stopped. It needed more, you see. So sometimes, if we had travelers who were sick or too weak to keep going..." Louise trailed off.

"You can't save everyone," said Gill. "I'm a doctor, I try. But you can't save everyone."

"The Wastes will have their due," Bob chimed in. Thea had heard the rationalizations before, but hearing them in the harsh light of day, in front of complete strangers. "They must think we're mad."

"I do. I do think you're mad." Lila looked at her companion. "Do you still want to help? They're murderers."

"Helping is always the right thing to do." Feather said resolutely, "We would want someone to help us if they were trying to feed us to plants." Lila rolled her eyes. "Fine. But we need supplies." Louise and Bob took the strangers back to the town to stock up on supplies while Thea and Gill stood watch outside the cave. "Do you think this is the end?" He asked.

"It feels like it. We had a good run though, didn't we? Ten years in the Wastes? It's almost unheard of. With kids and old people and all."

"I don't want the kids to die in there." They were silent until the strangers returned.

"Do you think fire will work against it?" Louise asked. "I have no idea." Lila answered. "Here's the plan," Feather turned to look at the group, "I go in first, Lila stays as close behind me as possible. Thea, you lead up the rear. Bob and Louise, you flank Gill."

Feather switched on a headlight at her belt and led the group into the cave. A few paces in and they heard sobbing. A white headed woman was crouched against the wall, blood seeping through her clothing. "Margy!" Bob yelled, the woman looked up.

"The kids," she stammered.

"Bob, get her out of the cave" Feather barked. Bob retreated with Margy while the rest of them ventured further in, "We got a body up here," Feather called, "It's probably one of your loved ones, so if you can't handle that, now is the time to turn back." It was callous, but a kindness. Louise stopped in her tracks.

"I think it's a child." The body was contorted and pierced through the face, the shoulder and the abdomen with black thorns. Louise cried out and ran towards the small body. "Don't," Feather called, but it was too late, there was a snap like a whip cracking. The vine itself didn't get close to Louise, but it did release a thorn that buried

itself neatly into the back of the woman's head. They watched in silence as the dying woman crawled her way over to the small body and wrapped herself around it. She stopped moving.

"Okay, nobody else do that." Feather said. "Why is it whipping thorns at people?"

"I think it's trying to propagate itself. What we are calling 'thorns' might actually be seedpods. Once the thorns hook in, they release seeds into the host body, effectively replanting itself." Thea forced herself to look at the bodies of her closest friends, wondering how long it would take to sprout. Living in the wastelands was hard, wasteland people had to be harder. Thea knew her luck would run out someday, today seemed to be the day.

"The cave is going to open up soon, into the main chamber. That's where the plant grows." Thea called from the back of the rapidly shortening line. The tunnel blossomed into a large leaky cavern. Toxic water dripped from the stalagmites. On the far wall, the vine stretched and curled her tendrils. At the base of the plant laid her bloody mulch—a nutrient-rich feast of the unlucky. It smelled of decay and blood. Three adults and three children huddled together over a waning flashlight on the far side of the cave.

"Hello there," Feather called. The figures across the cave looked up. "Do not move. I'm Feather, this is Lila. We have your family with us. They came to get you. On the count of three, we are going to blast this sucker with flame throwers. When that happens, I want you to run along the wall of the cave over to us, as fast as you possibly can. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes," one of the adults called out.

"Perfect. One...two...three," Feather and Thea ran towards the vine, flamethrowers at full blast. Thea could swear she heard the plant shrieking in pain, or maybe she was the one who was shrieking. From the corner of her eye, she could see her children running towards their father. The vine was distracted enough to stop throwing thorns, but she could see that it wasn't catching fire. Lila picked up one of the kids and wrapped one of the older men's arms over her shoulders and started navigating back through the tunnels as fast as she could. Gill carried the other two children in his arms. They disappeared from Thea's view. The flamethrower was getting weaker. Thea set fire to the mulch, as Lila had directed. The vine reared. The flamethrowers sputtered out. Thea squinted as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. Feather took a water skin from her belt and sprayed it on the mulch. "The uncontaminated water might kill it." Lila had explained before the rescue mission. "When we got your distress signal I was pulling clean water from the Cisne River, I've been working on a purification project." Lila had strapped the clean water skins to Feather's belt. Thea noticed that Lila's hands had lingered on the other woman's hips for a beat longer than they needed to and that the strict scientist had flushed.

Feather took a second water skin and sprayed the cave wall. The vine seemed to try to shrink back into the cave wall. "Cmon, let's get out of here." Feather grabbed Thea and pushed her in front of her. They ran. A dead vine fell from the cave ceiling and hit her hard, in the face. She tried not to lose her footing. Black thorns and clods of dirt and stone as large as apples started to fall alongside the vines. After what felt like an eternity, Thea saw the light of the cave entrance. A thorn hit her shoulder, hard, but rolled off without hooking in. She saw Gill, could see his mouth working out sounds of encouragement. She fell out of the cave and into the soft red sand. She rolled onto her back. The kids piled on top of her and Gill laid down next to her on the sand. They would burn the totem and abandon the outpost tomorrow. But for tonight, they could look into the starry night sky and know that for a brief period of time, they had won.

About the Author:

Natasia Langfelder is a born and bred Brooklynite. By day, she's a mild-mannered content marketer and by night...she's a mild-mannered fiction writer. Natasia's work has been published in Wicked Shadow Press, Gay-eMagazine, Brokelyn, LezGetReal and more. When she's not working or writing, you can find her hanging out with her partner and their teacup yorkie.



The Wall | *Paul Lonardo*

On their way home through the woods, two brothers encountered a new boy climbing the rock wall.

"What's on the other side?" the boy asked.

"Hell," Paulie declared.

"My daddy says hell is a make-believe place invented to scare people." The boy paused half-way up. "What's that smell?"

"It's flesh burning in a lake of fire," Lenny informed him.

The boy laughed as he ascended to the top. "See, nothing to be afraid of." Waving, he disappeared over the edge of the wall.

The brothers were almost home when they heard the screams. They looked at each other and smiled.

The Autopsy Table | *Paul Lonardo*

He got undressed and hopped up onto the table. He was on his belly under the covers when the masseuse came in. As his neck was being worked on, pain radiated down his left arm, his chest tightening.

Suddenly, he felt no discomfort, no physical sensation, but knew he was lying on his back.

He opened his eyes and saw a blurry figure holding a scalpel. As the blade cut through cold flesh, it made a soft crackling sound. When the skin was pulled back, it was red inside, though blood did not flow. He screamed, but made no sound.

The Box | *Paul Lonardo*

On his death bed, the retired NASA Administrator told his son that he must never tamper with the box under the stairs. Months later, while cleaning out his father's house, the son discovered a seamless, metallic box. Although agreeing to honor his father's final wishes, he wondered if it contained secrets about the existence of alien life and smashed the mysterious object with a sledgehammer to see what was inside. As sparks sizzled from tiny cracks and an alarm chirped, directly overhead the skies glowed with brilliant points of light and the contrails of interstellar missiles descending at hypersonic speed.

Wormhole | *Paul Lonardo*

You're unsure what woke you, the roaring sound like a freight train tearing through your bedroom or the sensation of falling.

Time slows as you plunge through the earth.

Then, like emerging from a dream, everything is silent and still. It is not until you open your eyes that you realize you're still alive.

You dig yourself out from an interment of loose dirt and emerge from a shallow crater. You're in an empty wasteland, but you're not alone. The hominids surrounding you hold primitive tools that they use to strip the meat from the bones of their prey.

You.

About the Author:

Paul Lonardo has authored numerous books, both fiction and nonfiction, in a variety of genres. This fall, Solstice Publishing will release his horror novella, *THE DOG MAN OF DENNY-BLAINE*. This past spring, *THE LEGEND OF LAKE INCUNABULA*, a collection of dark fantasy stories, was published. Paul is a member of HWA. Paul has a passion for baseball. He studied filmmaking and has worked as an embalmer.

LinkedIn: [Paul Lonardo](#)

Twitter: [@PaulLonardo](#)

The Blood Lights are the last thing you'll see...

The BLOOD LIGHTS

ELAINE PASCALE

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

The first time it happens, I am in my room. The ticking of my wall clock echoes through the house, reminding me that it's almost time to go. It is four AM. The light fixture feels blindingly bright this early. An array of cosmetics sits before me. I face the mirror and lift a mascara brush up to my eyelashes. As I look into the eyes of my reflection, it happens.

I don't know what it is, but my reflection changes. Some intangible quality shifts, creating an unidentifiable and unmistakable difference in the image. The brush falls from my hand, streaking black down my cheek. When did my hands get so sweaty?

I go to the bathroom. I need some soap and water. The bathroom light flickers when I turn it on. I wet a cloth and wipe away the mascara. A spot of mascara still sticks to my face. Or is that just a spot on the mirror? I wipe the spot off the glass, and it happens again. My reflection changes. It still looks like me, but she isn't me.

I wave my hand in front of the mirror, and she waves back. I wink, and she winks. We move in sync, but we are not the same. I study her face, her movement, her expressions, but I fear she may be watching me just as closely. The alarm on my phone goes off, reminding me that I have to go. I shake my head, trying to wake myself up. I must be so tired that I'm seeing things.

I've always hated driving in the dark and this particular drive is thirty minutes long. This client just had to do a golden hour shoot in a secluded nature park. This is why I prefer landscape photography. Landscapes are less demanding. Unfortunately, landscape photography doesn't earn enough to pay the bills, so I have to work with people too.

My mother keeps telling me to get a *real* job. She says it is a disgrace to be a starving artist, and even worse to be a *soul-stealing photographer*. Mother has always been a superstitious and stubborn woman. Although I've tried to explain to her that cameras don't steal your soul, she refuses to listen. She says I'm too young to know anything, even though I've been a professional photographer for eight years now.

Mother always wanted me to go into law, but the one class she pressured me into taking was mind numbing. Also, I'm not starving. I just don't make a six-figure salary. But I'm happy. I enjoy my work. I can support myself. I've just learned to live with the fact that I'll never be good enough for my mother's approval.

Shadows shift across the car as I turn a corner. Another car is approaching, one with those bright LED headlights. I have to squint to keep from driving off the road, and once the offending vehicle has passed, there is still a blank spot in my vision. Those headlights should be illegal. Honestly, how have they never caused a wreck? The spot in my vision seems to be shifting from a circle to wavy oblong shape. It almost looks like the silhouette of a person, but that would be ridiculous, right?

Yep. I really hate driving in the dark. And these back roads aren't helping. They're just plain creepy. Usually, I bring someone else with me on these trips. But my assistant is out sick and my boyfriend, Steven, has to work today. If Steven were with me, he would have driven. I tell myself I'll make him drive to dinner tonight.

My assistant always has playlists for these awful drives. Maybe she's onto something with that. Maybe some music will help calm me down. I reach across my dashboard and turn the radio on. The music is helpful, at least for a song. Then the radio cuts out, replaced by static. It must just be because I'm driving out in the country. Sometimes, radios lose signal out here. I try changing the station, but every station is that same static. It sounds like a chorus of voices all screaming from a distance, but that must be my nerves and these dark roads.

I eventually make it to the park, just as the sun is beginning to peek over the horizon. There is one other car in this empty parking lot. My client is already waiting for me. From the way our previous conversations on the phone had gone, I was expecting an influencer type. Instead, I see a woman in her late thirties, with permed blonde hair and a cheap spray tan. Next to her stands a little girl who couldn't be older than ten. The girl is sleepy. She is leaning on her mother, with her eyes closed. Layers of makeup are caked on her face, and her curly blonde hair is fully styled. How long has this poor child been up?

I wave to the woman, and she nods in recognition. We exchange the usual introductions, and she seems pleasant enough. Then, she turns her attention to the child.

The mother snaps, "Wake up, Mallory," and the girl jumps to attention. "There's a gorgeous cliffside over this way. We need to get pictures over there."

I can't tell if the woman is speaking to me or her daughter, but I nod anyway. "Lead the way."

A few minutes later we are at the cliffside. The woman is right; the view here is gorgeous. The rising sun streaks orange and pink across the sky and reflects off the trees around us. Little Mallory is wearing a dress the same color pink as the sky. Her mother clearly had this planned out well ahead of time.

I turn to the woman. "How about we start with some pictures over here, so we can use that sunrise for a backdrop?"

"Yes. That's what I was thinking." The woman grabs her daughter by the wrist and walks her to the place I had pointed out. "Stand here. Now put your hand on your hip and pop that hip out. And point your toes to the left." Normally, I suggest poses for my clients, but this lady seems to know what she wants. I watch as she micromanages every detail of the girl's position.

The girl obeys her mother although she doesn't seem happy about it. She squirms and asks her mother if she can try a different pose.

"Don't whine, Mallory. It's unbecoming."

"I'm sorry, Mama."

"Now, smile big. You have to smile if you want to be pretty. After all, we didn't bleach your teeth last night for nothing. And suck in your tummy. You don't want to look fat in the pictures." The woman steps back to assess her daughter's pose. "Very good. Hold it there." She looks to me. "You can take the pictures now."

I lift my camera and take several photos. Then, I move to another angle and take several more. The girl's smile is wavering, and I can tell she is uncomfortable. I lower my camera. "That's a good start. Let's take a quick break while I review these photos. Then we can decide on some other poses to try."

The girl relaxes, and the woman examines the lighting in several different spots. I click back through the last several photos. The golden hour has done its job, highlighting little Mallory in a yellow glow. I stop on a picture that seems darker than the rest. There is no colorful sunrise in this photo, nor is there a meticulously posed child. The photo is a dim blur, an unfocused mess. I delete the photo and look back up.

The woman says she is ready for more pictures to be taken. The girl is now posed with one hand in the air and a huge smile on her face. Little Mallory has been coached on looking happy, but I can tell her smile is forced. She faces me, but her eyes are out of focus. What is that child thinking about? I hope she is somewhere happier in her mind.

I hope her disconnection won't be so obvious in the pictures.

Eventually, I make it to my studio. I set my equipment down and place my camera on my desk before going to the restroom. I need to wash off that woman's attitude, with her need for control and relentless desire for perfection. I can still remember all those years I spent looking in the mirror, focusing on every flaw and failure my mother pointed out. Will Mallory grow up with this same insecurity?

I examine my appearance in the mirror now, thankful to have finally developed some confidence in myself. But something is wrong. It's that same feeling from this morning—a disconnection between my reflection and me. What is happening? That's my reflection in the mirror, but that is not me. I stare at her. Maybe if I look close enough, I will find the problem. We have the same brown hair, same green eyes, same furrowed brow. But we are not the same. It's like one of those spot the difference games, and my failure to pinpoint the change makes my stomach drop. I feel clammy and nauseous. Could I be coming down with something?

That sick feeling stays with me all day, up until Steven picks me up for dinner. I get into his car and rub my eyes, tired from the long day. Steven drives to the restaurant. The roads are empty. He works the second shift, so we go out late. The car hums down the street. Shadows flicker under the streetlights. In the side mirror, I catch a glimpse of my reflection. She smiles at me, but I'm not smiling.

I turn away from the mirror.

I look down and see Steven's hand in mine, but I can't feel his touch. I don't even remember him reaching over to hold my hand. Maybe I was just preoccupied with my reflection.

The restaurant is quiet. A few people sit at a table in the corner, their dying chatter echoing through the room. A waiter in a black suit leads us to our table and takes our drink orders. I excuse myself to go to restroom.

A mirror hangs on the restroom wall. My reflection is already waiting to greet me. "Who are you?" I ask.

She points at me, and the gesture feels more like a threat than an answer.

"What do you want?"

Again, she points at me.

"No, just leave me alone." I slam my hand against the mirror. The glass shatters, cutting my palm as it breaks. I pull my hand back to look at the wound, and she grabs my hand.

"It'll be okay," she says, no longer in the mirror. She is in the world with me. She steps forward, steps into me. She is *inside* of me! I can't fight her. I can't escape. Can't even move. She has control of my body, of me. I have lost myself and she has taken my place.

She checks her—or is it my—appearance in one of the broken mirror shards. She tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear. She takes my red lipstick out of my purse and puts it on my lips. She smiles as she returns to the table.

"Are you alright?" Steven asks.

Does he notice something? *Please*, I want to shout, *notice the difference!* I want to scream for help. Want to tell him that something is wrong. That the woman he is with is not me. But she has my voice now.

"Perfect," she says, clutching my bleeding hand under the table.

About the Author:

Allison Raymond is an Ozarks-based writer and writing tutor, as well as a full-time, overly stressed college student. She will graduate with her BSEd in Secondary English Education in May of 2023. She can often be found plotting her next story on a walk through town or reading a book with her cat Stormageddon.

Author Website: [To the Write](#)

Instagram: [@tothewriteblog](#)

The Garden | *Stephen Lang*

Bishop drove across another scarred landscape. The lack of greenery always made it feel so much colder. He passed a line of thin dead trees before he saw the house. It sat on ample grounds, which would make his job harder.

Although it was still out of season, it would be months, possibly years, before the property reopened to the public. And if it did, the scenery would stay forever ruined. But that was how it had to be.

Bishop parked next to a Land Rover on the forecourt. He struck a match and lit a cigarette. He felt guilty smoking, but it helped to calm his nerves, as he never quite knew what he might find.

An anonymous tip-off. It always happened that way. Many turned into false leads, but he had to check them all. Sometimes he found a garden in full bloom, which was the greatest threat of all.

The figure stood with a rake in his hands like he was guarding the property. He was as good as giving himself up.

Bishop left it a minute before unfastening his seat belt and getting out of the car.

The man was in his middle fifties—grey-haired and bespectacled, but it still didn't make him innocent looking. He wore an olive twill jacket and wellington boots, dressed for outdoor work.

"What do you want?"

Bishop threw the end of his cigarette on the ground.

"What do I want? That's not very friendly, is it?"

Dead leaves clung to the rusty tines of the rake. The handle began to twitch as the man gripped it tighter, showing his nervousness.

"Just doing my job, mate. I'm the caretaker. Mick Anderson."

"I know who you are," said Bishop. "Been busy, have you?"

At least Anderson hadn't attempted to hide. It looked too big a house to have to play that game.

The garden was at the front with a lawn of sorry patches of white and brown, although the dead grass looked neatly trimmed. At the border were the beginnings of daffodils and a hydrangea shrub.

"I only just noticed them this morning," said Anderson. "I was going to call. You know, report it."

"It would have been the right thing to do," said Bishop.

There were stalks of green in the brown patches of grass. It felt damp when he bent down to touch it, newly watered. It wouldn't take long to restore it to life.

Bishop spent a long time pacing, head down, counting the steps from one side of the lawn to the other. Ten both ways, making a perfect square. He raised his head, lips pursed.

"Who else has been here?"

"Nobody," said Anderson. "Only me and my—only my family."

"For Christ's sake."

Anderson bowed his head. Bishop's raised voice had shamed him.

"What else have you planted? Where the hell did you find the bulbs?"

"I swear I haven't touched anything."

Bishop wiped the side of his boot on the grass. The soil looked rich and fertile.

"You're lying."

Anderson twisted the rake in his hands.

"I told you," he said. "I haven't touched anything."

"It's illegal. You know that, don't you? And you know what the penalty is, yes?"

He was sure that Anderson knew because everyone knew by now. Bishop waited. It was at this point that people usually caved in and confessed.

"There isn't a problem," said Anderson. "We kept daylight hours, even for Halloween. We were quiet. Careful."

"What?"

Anderson dropped the rake and sprinted towards the Land Rover. He staggered as he felt in his trouser pocket, fumbling as a set of keys fell on the ground. Bishop had seen it all before. None of them were any good at running away.

Bishop caught him up and pushed him to the ground. He gripped his hands around Anderson's throat.

"What did you do?"

Anderson's eyes rolled. They looked like they were about to pop out of his head. Bishop let go of him, realising he was already starting to choke. Anderson gasped and crossed his arms over his face. His voice cracked like he was about to burst into tears.

"Nothing! Nothing! I raked up the leaves and fished a few slimy handfuls of muck from the pond. That's all. I promise. I promise you! What's the crime in that?"

"Show me."

The pond was on the far side of the forecourt. There were no signs of plant life in the shallow water. It wouldn't take much effort to drown Anderson.

"Why?" asked Bishop. "What's the point? Why do that? Why risk it?"

"I wanted to look after the garden."

"And? What other clever things did you do?"

Bishop enjoyed this part of the routine. He thought of it as an interrogation but knew it was closer to intimidation.

"I wanted to protect the flowers," said Anderson. "The new shoots."

"I bet you can't name any of them. You can't tell the flowers from the weeds. Can you?"

"Yes, I can, and it feels good. It's what we're born to do. Isn't it? We're slaves to the sun. To the seasons. We are, aren't we? And spring is the best time of the year. When it all starts again."

Bishop laughed.

"You've been so, so, lucky."

Anderson looked in the direction of his car. It was only a few feet away, but Bishop knew he was smart enough to know he didn't stand a chance. Anderson spoke in a whisper.

"What are you going to do?"

Bishop picked up Anderson's keys. He hooked the ring over his index finger.

"There's only one way to tend to a garden," he said. "And that's my job."

Bishop pulled an orange shape from the top of the compost. The rotting pumpkin rolled down to face him. Most of the mouth was missing, and a single tooth drooped idiotically. Anderson and his family had attracted attention using the empty house and its grounds. Halloween parties. Bonfires. Even a report of fireworks.

He fetched the petrol can from his car. He poured a rough line on the four sides of the lawn and tipped more on the patches of grass, taking care not to cover any of the green shoots. He sat cross-legged to wait as the sun began to set.

They started to come. Feeling. Sniffing. One at a time. Three of them. They were larger than Bishop had seen before, about the size of a human hand. Their scales had adapted to a fawn colour.

Bishop had seen so many now that he was beginning to tell them apart. The sizes of the head varied. Some had different features than others, but it made sense because the whole point had been to hatch them so they'd evolve. He'd recently noticed a proficiency of wider mouths. They allowed for more teeth.

The creatures ate, scooping up the daffodil shoots with their claws. They tore at the grass, picking out the good parts. Anything green was tasty for them. Bishop liked how they paused to pick their teeth and swallow during their assault on the hydrangeas, not missing anything.

Bishop let them finish their meal before he lit the match.

The flames swallowed them whole.

An hour later, he raked over the hot grey ash.

Burning was the best solution if you could catch them. Bishop liked to call it pruning.

The human race had surpassed itself in stupidity, creating a far bigger problem than the one they'd set out to solve. They developed living pesticides to lie dormant during the day and eat at night. They soon ran rampant, developing a taste for the flora they were supposed to protect.

Living pesticides became the worst pests of all. The only consolation was they hadn't tasted enough human flesh to develop a preference for it. At least not yet.

Bishop felt responsible as a scientist. His colleagues had laughed at him for his fitness regimes, the expensive gym membership and the obsessional workouts.

But he was at the top of the tree now. The world needed tough guys.

Keeping the numbers down during the spring and destroying all traces of blooming gardens offered a slim chance of survival. The coming summer would prove the ultimate test.

Bishop opened the Land Rover door and handed the keys to Anderson. He'd told him what he'd do to his beloved garden and let him watch from the car.

"Now get out of here," he said. "And don't come back."

He knew he shouldn't let Anderson go. But the caretaker was too terrified to pose a threat. He drove away, broken.

Bishop fastened his seat belt. There were many more leads to follow. He enjoyed his work. Gardening, all the seasonal tasks, was what he was born to do.

About the Author:

Stephen Lang has dabbled in horror for as long as he can remember. Previous publications appear in *The BHF Book of Horror Stories* and *Step into the Light* (Bag of Bones Press). He lives in Bristol in South West England with his family and an elderly black cat.

Instagram: [@LangWriting](#)

Twitter: [@LangWriting](#)

Intentions | *Nina D'Arcangela*

In your eyes, I watch a universe ignite, I see the molten glow; I feel its blaze encompass all. I watch the birth of a new awareness, the awakening of cruel indulgence; one in which brutality, suffering, and eventual indifference will serve far better than kind gentility. Your veneer smooth, your tone unblemished; your surface nearly opalescent, yet I know the fierceness that rages below rends innumerable fractures that will reveal fissures of choice not circumstance. A tragedy that will split the world in two.

Guttering now, the light surrenders. I stare into a vast emptiness as your eyes cool.

About the Author:

Nina D'Arcangela is a quirky horror writer who likes to spin soul rending snippets of despair. Nina is a co-owner of Sirens Call Publications, a co-founding member of the horror writer's group Pen of the Damned, the founder of The Ladies of Horror Picture-prompt Writing Challenge that has been running for 8 years, and the owner and resident anarchist of Dark Angel Photography.

Author Blog: [Spreading The Writer's Word](#)

Instagram: [@DarcNina](#)



Marianna paced, stomping a few steps forward and back. She halted, raising her eyes then looking down, touching the hardened aerial roots that circled and clutched the marble roman columns supporting her terrace pergola. "Oscar," she yelled. "Oscar, come here!"

There was no answer. She walked to the center edge of the patio, which stopped short at a hedge and stone fence along the rear of her property. It was here that the roots had first fractured the brushed-marble pavers, breaking through from below. She and Oscar had paid to have the invading vegetation removed, but here it was again, crawling in all directions, snaking and flowing shiny rich brown along the patio and terrace floors, spiraling up supporting structures and walls.

Marianna kicked at one of the biggest—a ten-inch diameter chunk like an elephant trunk that looked like it had emerged first. "Oscar!" she shouted once more. Dogs barked at the sound of her voice. She felt too angry to be unnerved. Her husband still did not respond.

The middle-aged woman, in peach and yellow shorts and a matching floral blouse, stalked back to the terrace, glancing up once again at the roots squeezing and gripping the pergola beams. She walked rapidly through the white French doors, into the huge family room. "Oscar, the tree's growing again," she called. "It came right back! We just cut it last week and it's already almost to the house." She found her phone on a credenza by the door to the formal dining room. She punched in a number. While she waited for an answer, Marianna swept her gaze around the room nervously. She could hear and feel the pumping rhythms of *Timba* coming from her next-door neighbors' poolside stereo system.

"Hello, yeah, this is Marianna Fuentes. Can I speak with Daniel please." She was once again put on hold, allowing her frustration to build before the landscaper picked up. "Daniel, hi, this is Marianna from Key Biscayne. The Mediterranean on Redwood Lane. That tree is back ... no, don't tell me it's not possible ... those roots are back ... yeah, the banyan, the upside down aerials ... shattered my new pavers ... I know it's been only a week...." She listened impatiently to Daniel Coelho explain that banyan trees take decades to grow but he promised to stop by the next day; make time in the afternoon ... "Even though it's way out of my way to drive out to the Key." She ended the call, her fury rising. "Maybe I should take pictures," she said to herself. "Oscar, where the hell are you?"

Marianna walked briskly into the large, cherry and granite kitchen, her sandals flip-flopping on the terrazzo floor. As long as she stayed inside, and kept the spacious and luxurious interiors of the home in view, she felt better. Once she glimpsed the chaos outside the many French doors and arched windows, her irritation boiled into anger. This house had cost them over three million, located as it was in one of the most exclusive communities of South Florida. It was a three-story, gold and white Mediterranean mansion with a terra-cotta tile roof, five bedrooms and bathrooms, built of the finest materials, but it was squeezed into the original Mackle lot of seventy-five-hundred square feet. There was no yard on the sides or back—the place bulged in the midst of the surrounding property like an obese middle-aged woman trying to fit into her teenage jeans.

She decided to call the realtor again. She stood in the kitchen at the black-granite counter and turned her back to the kitchen window. She leaned against the counter edge while she waited for her agent to pick up. Eventually she got a garbled "Lisa Drury, can I help you?" Marianna nearly shouted, her words racing, "The tree roots are back. Aerial roots coming from the ground. What the hell is this? You didn't tell us about this when we bought the house!"

"Hi Mrs. Fuentes, I'm with a client at the moment, can I call you back?" was the response, but it sounded cheery and reassuring.

"Listen, you said there was a house here before this one. An original Mackle house that they tore down. Why did they tear it down? Was there a banyan tree in the back of the house before? How old was that tree?"

"I'll call you ... let me get back to my office."

"Forget it," Marianna said, and ended the call. She threw the phone onto the counter; it clattered and slid a foot. "Oscar, where are you, what the hell are you doing?" she yelled. Her husband was twenty years older than she was, in his seventies. He was supposed to be in his office on the second floor, from which location he ran his international import-export business.

A sudden cracking, ripping noise startled her; the kitchen seemed to vibrate and tremble. Marianna spun and reflexively peered out the window over the sink. She ran back the way she'd come, into the dining, then family room. The pergola was half down, two of the white-painted beams dangling, one torn in two and on the terrace floor, tendrils of brown root wrapped tightly around the pieces. "Oh my god!" she whispered. "Oh my god, oh my god...." And she dashed for the wide marble staircase with the elaborate wrought-iron balusters and handrail near the front entrance of the house.

"Oscar, Oscar!" she shouted as she pulled herself up, panting with the effort to move quickly. "Oscar, call the police!" At the landing, which was an open terrazzo hallway that fronted all five rooms in a row, she stopped. "Oscar," she pleaded, "answer me, please!"

She approached her husband's office, which was at the opposite end from the master bedroom. She crept another couple of feet. The door was open. She thought she could see something fibrous, something dark and pointed marring the maple-wood frame of the threshold. "It can't be," she said out loud. She moved closer, and paused. She leaned into the doorway. She could see roots of all sizes, tips of roots, long streamers of roots, tangles of weaving and sinuous roots everywhere. They filled Oscar's office, pouring in through the three large, plate glass windows on the opposite wall, windows that once provided a spectacular view of Biscayne Bay. She couldn't see his desk or chair, or the couch that rested against the wall on the right. She couldn't see Oscar.

She gingerly stepped over thick bundles of roots as she entered the room. "Hun? Sweetie?" she called, her voice breaking. The sound of creaking and cracking startled her; she jumped backward and turned to run but before she could make it out, the maple-paneled home office door swung hard and shut with a bang. She grabbed the knob, twisted and tugged it, her chest heaving with sobs. She didn't want to see, tried closing her eyes to a squint as she heard slithering above and below, all around her. The wood floor beneath her feet began to crunch and splinter. She shook and yanked the door knob with all her strength. "HELP, HELP ME, LET ME OUT OF HERE!" she screamed as fingers of root worming through the casing and coiling around the hinges curled and waved and extended in her direction.

About the Author:

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

Facebook: [Rivka Jacobs](#)

Twitter: [@RivkaJacobs](#)

Historic Find | *Evan Baughfman*

Dr. Pemberton photographs a rock painting. "This pre-dates that Kimberley kangaroo piece by millennia!"

Her assistant, Noah, illuminates the artwork with his flashlight. "You're sure?"

The anthropologist nods to crimson stick figures. "They're fighting massive lizards, see? Our paleo friends say *Varanus priscus* went extinct 40,000 years ago."

"Then, this also proves that Megalania lived alongside ancient peoples! Only..."

"Yes, Noah?"

"The paint looks... new."

"Impossible. Just well-preserved in this undiscovered cave system."

A reptilian titan explodes from the shadows, chewing on Pemberton, severing her at the waist.

Sightless eyes—dripping fangs!—find Noah next, spraying fresh color across the walls.

About the Author:

Evan Baughfman is a middle school teacher and author. Much of his writing success has been as a playwright. He's had many different plays produced across the globe. Evan also writes horror fiction. His collection of short stories, *The Emaciated Man and Other Terrifying Tales from Poe Middle School*, is published by Thurston Howl Publications. More information is available at his author page on Amazon and his website.

Facebook: [Evan Baughfman](#)

Instagram: [@Agent00evan_716](#)

Everyday Horror: The Existential Terror of Daily Living

Life isn't easy. Most of us can probably agree with that. It's a hard job being human, having to make it through each week existing on this earth. Traffic jams, mean bosses, doctor appointments, overdue bills, mortgages, rent payments, retirement plans (or the lack thereof). And those are just the typical traumas we have to endure. Add in political upheavals, social struggles, and climate woes, and you've got a recipe for some serious existential misery.

When someone finds out what I do for a living and they ultimately ask "Why horror?" all I can ever think is "Why not?" Horror is everywhere, seeping into each corner of our lives. It's on the news in the evening, the headlines at breakfast, the diagnosis from a doctor, the heartbreak of losing a loved one. It's everywhere, and it's all the time. Horror doesn't take a holiday.

Paradoxically, though, horror is also a genre that's centered on courage and even optimism. Because even for the most pessimistic among us, we all like to believe that our lives can be better than our worst moments. Horror reflects that. Victims flee the slasher killer because those victims want to survive. They're desperate to make it to a moment when they don't have to run anymore. No matter what subgenre of horror you love—from body horror to ghost stories, possession tales to old-time monster yarns—the characters are always pushing forward, trying their best to make it to the other side of their current ordeal.

In this way, horror gives us a roadmap, a way to deal with our omnipresent terror. If Laurie Strode and Sidney Prescott can escape Michael Myers and Ghostface again and again over the course of decades, then maybe we can make it through this week at work. If Regan can survive a brutal possession and exorcism, perhaps we can get through our next doctor appointment or surgery or mammogram. We can keep going. We can keep hoping. And at the end of the day, there's almost nothing as powerful as that.

Although most of us wish we lived in a happier world, the truth is that horror is real. It's all around us. Of course, some people don't want to face that. There are those out there who don't want to deal with how utterly petrifying each and every day can be. But that's one thing I've always noticed about horror writers and horror fans: we recognize the terror. We see it clearly, and we don't turn away from it. We acknowledge how difficult it is to be human, both for ourselves and for other people. And something else I've noticed: horror writers and fans have a unique kind of empathy because of that.

For us, horror is a pressure valve. It gives us a release from these daily terrors, a way to express what we're feeling in a safe environment. Unlike the various dread we all regularly face, there's usually a clear beginning, middle, and ending to a horror story. We know it won't last forever, and that allows us to process our fear, to see that we can survive it.

Horror also gives us space to hope. It provides a way forward and maybe even a way out. Ghosts can be vanquished, monsters dispatched, order restored. Everyday life is rarely so straightforward, but it's a comfort to know that we're not alone. Horror reminds us of that: how being human is hard, but it's also worth fighting for.

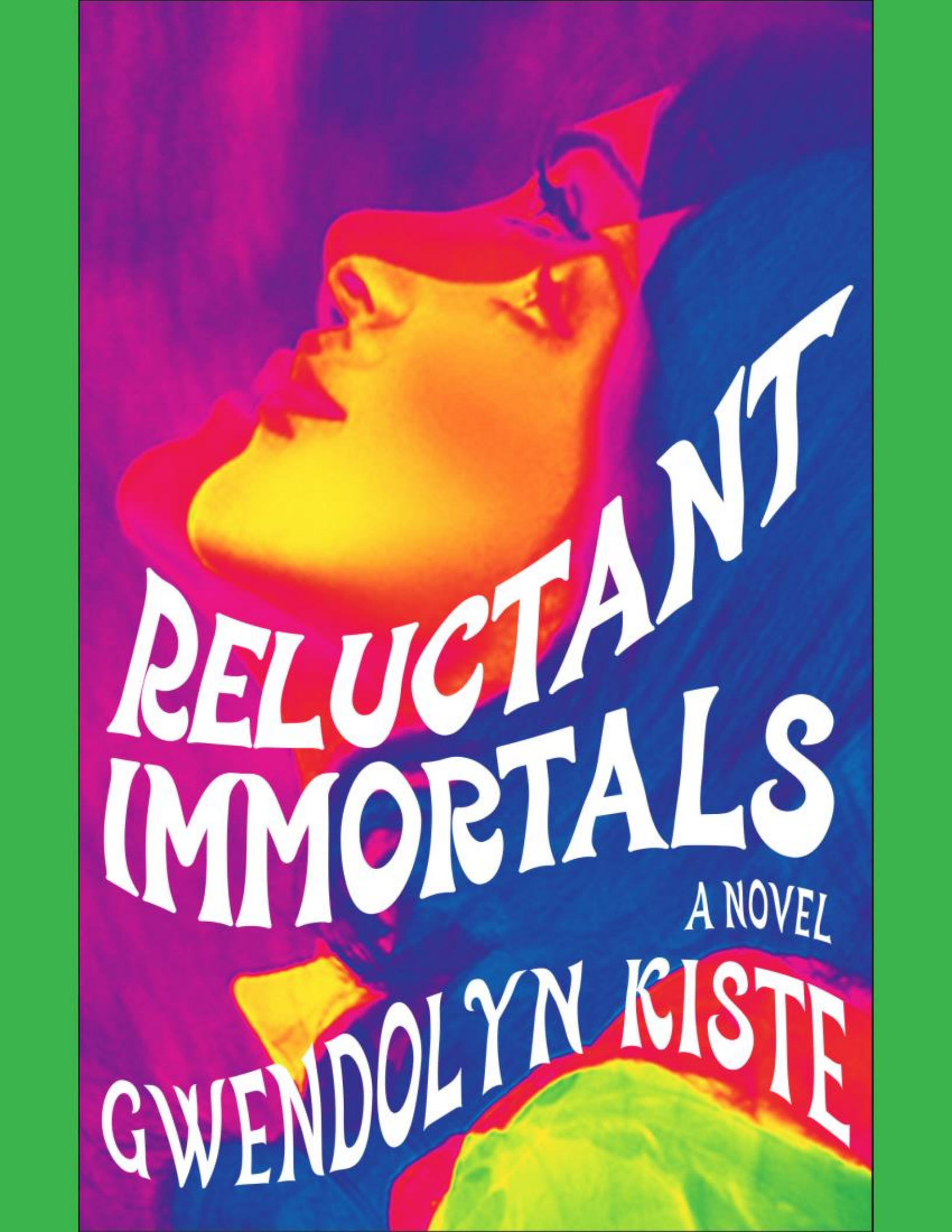
So the next time someone crinkles up their nose, sneers at the genre we love, and asks "Why horror?" you can just smile back and think—or even say aloud—"Why not?" Because more than any other genre, horror doesn't flinch away from the truth. And it doesn't give up easily either. Horror gives us power. It gives us a chance. It gives us the belief in something better, something transcendent.

And sometimes, that's all you need to make it through a day.



About the Author:

Gwendolyn Kiste is the three-time Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *The Rust Maidens*, *Reluctant Immortals*, *Boneset & Feathers*, *And Her Smile Will Untether the Universe*, *Pretty Marys All in a Row*, and *The Invention of Ghosts*. Her short fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Nightmare Magazine*, *Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy*, *Lit Hub*, *Vastarien*, *Tor Nightfire*, *Titan Books*, *Black Static*, *The Dark*, and *LampLight*, among others. Originally from Ohio, she now resides on an abandoned horse farm outside of Pittsburgh with her husband, their excitable calico cat, and not nearly enough ghosts. Find her online at gwendolynkiste.com



RELUCTANT IMMORTALS

A NOVEL

GWENDOLYN KISTE

CHAPTER ONE

It's almost sundown in Los Angeles, and Dracula's ashes won't shut up.

He's been at it since yesterday, calling out for me, calling out for anyone, his voice strained and distant, so soft I can never quite make out the words, so unforgiving I can never escape him. I cover my ears and recite a prayer I no longer believe, but it's not enough to blot out the sound of him.

I have to try something else. I have to bury him. Again.

So now here I am, standing in the shadow of the Hollywood sign, a shovel in one hand, an urn of his ashes in the other. Up here on Mount Lee is as good a place as any to lay him to rest. It's remote and hard to get to, and at the very least, I won't forget where I put him.

The last bits of daylight have dissolved across the horizon, and I move through the overgrown weeds, picking a spot between the letters Y and W where the earth is soft and malleable.

Then I start digging.

Below me, the city buzzes pleasantly like a swarm of locusts. It's the middle of June, the heat creeping in, and this isn't how I wanted to spend my evening. Of course, I never want to spend my nights with him, but what I want doesn't count for much.

As I work, the urn quivers on the earth next to me. The color of midnight, it's not much bigger than a man's fist. This isn't the only urn of Dracula's ashes, but right now, it's the only one that matters. It's the loudest of the bunch, that's for sure. The others back at the house are usually content to keep quiet, murmuring no louder than common sleepwalkers, but not this one. It's made up its mind to make my life hell. And I've made up my mind to do the same to him.

Another whisper from the urn, and I nudge it with my heel.

"Stop," I say, my feet sinking in the mud. I hiked all the way here in my pilgrim pumps and satin dress, up the Santa Monica Mountains, even snagging my hem on a low-lying shrub. Dracula doesn't care. He just keeps at it. He's never been very good at keeping his mouth shut. Not that he's really got a mouth, not now, not after I buried that stake in his cold, dead heart.

Anybody who knows the story—and let's face it: these days, who doesn't know the story?—will always wonder the same thing. He's dead, right? Turned to dust decades ago? Shouldn't everyone be safe now?

Please. As if men like him are ever that easy to vanquish. They always figure out the best way around the rules, bending the world in their favor. For most of us, death is the undeniable end. For him, it's only a minor inconvenience.

A sharp breeze cuts through the dusk, rattling the letters in the sign like restless bones. The air harsh and sweet, I close my eyes, the buzz of the city fading away. That's when I hear them. All the sweet heartbeats in Los Angeles, thrumming inside me at once. They waft up from the valley like steam, and my skin hums, my teeth sharpening, reminding me of what I am, what he's done to me.

The sound of Dracula rises again, almost singing now, and even though I still can't hear him clearly, I can guess what he's saying.

"Take what belongs to you, Lucy," he used to tell me. "Take anything you want."

I do my best not to listen. My hands blistered, I keep digging, promising myself the same thing as always: that I won't end up like him. I won't become a monster. I'd rather waste away, which is exactly what I'm doing, hunger gnawing at me night after night, my stomach aching and cavernous and raw. It turns out a vampire can live a very long time without taking a drink. It just hurts like hell to do it.

I grimace, eager to get this over with, as a shadow passes over my face.

"Are you all right?" A voice materializing, thin as mist, next to me. I turn and see her, moving like a phantom in the twilight, so quiet I never heard her coming.

I smile. "Hello, Bee."

She grins back. "Hello yourself."

The melody of the city fades to static, and it's just me and her and these ashes that won't ever rest. Her head down, Bee huddles close to me, and the hollowness, the silence within her, reminds me of how we're connected. There's no heartbeat inside either of us. We're at once alive and dead, even though we aren't the same. Bee's no vampire like me. She died and came back a different way, a way she doesn't like talking about.

That means Dracula's not her problem, he's mine, so I try to keep her out of this. When I left, she was waiting in the car, back where I parked it on the street, in a quaint little neighborhood where the only boogeyman they know is rising inflation.

"You didn't have to come all the way up here," I say, digging a little faster now.

"Figured you could use the company." Bee fidgets in the dirt next to me. "Besides, I'd rather not be alone."

An uneasy silence twists between us. I'm not the only one with secrets.

The Hollywood sign looms over us, the rusted sheet metal trembling in the breeze. For a lonesome town, this might be its most lonesome landmark. At the far end, the H rocks back and forth, the same letter actress Peg Entwistle chose when she took a swan dive off the sign back in '32. That was thirty-five years ago, ancient history in this town, and by now, everyone's mostly forgotten her. That's how it goes here. This is a glittering city haunted by the ghosts of dead girls and dead dreams. In that way, Bee and I fit right in.

The shovel hits sandstone, and this is it, the best I can do. My hands shaking, I deposit the urn of Dracula into the dark. There are no words of prayer and no curses, either. Just a flick of the wrist, and he's nestled in the ground. I fill the hole back in, almost frenzied, my fingernails limned with darkness, my pumps pounding on the earth, packing down the soil.

Bee helps too, kicking some dirt into the grave. "How long do you think he'll stay put?"

I shake my head. "Not long."

Beneath our feet, I already feel him, restless as always. He'll work his way back up, bit by bit, crawling like an earwig, the urn writhing in the earth on his command.

I grind my heel into the ground one last time. "Goodbye," I say, but he and I both know it's a lie. I'll come back at the end of the week. It isn't safe to leave him alone for long. At least this way, though, I get a few days' reprieve from his complaining.

It's darker now, and Bee and I trek back to the car. Halfway down the hill, she takes off her shoes, lemon-yellow Mary Janes we picked up last year at the Salvation Army.

"Easier than hiking in heels," she says, and I laugh and do the same, the two of us barefoot in the trail dust, sneaking through the Santa Monica Mountains, dragging the shovel behind us. There are snakes in these parts, but they slither beneath the sagebrush when they see us coming.

We emerge at last under a streetlight, and parked on Mulholland is our Buick LeSabre, rust on the bumper, one taillight cracked.

Bee tosses me the keys, and we both slide in, the torn leather seats spewing yellow foam. It takes two stalled starts before the engine roars to life. The car's already seven years past its prime, but who's counting? Not us, not when we have less than a hundred dollars in cash to our names and can't afford a new ride. This is the only thing we've got, so we make the best of it. With the canvas top pulled down, we rocket toward the state highway, the California evening settling around us like a false promise.

As the oleander trees rush past, Bee twists the chrome dial on the radio, and we sit back, listening in. It's the same news as always. The death toll in Vietnam. The people in power pretending to care. Nothing good ever happens here. Cape Canaveral launched Mariner 5 at Venus this morning, which makes sense, because the only way things might ever improve is to give up on this planet altogether.

"Do you think we could survive on Venus?" Bee asks.

I shrug. "I hear it's made of fire."

She exhales a laugh. "Aren't we?"

Bee tips her head back, the wind rustling through her long, dark hair. The night's cooling off already, and the canopy of trees draws us closer into its embrace. I wish we were safe here, but we're not alone. We're never alone, not really. Something's always whispering after us, lingering on the breeze, hiding in the static of the radio. I press the gas pedal harder, ready to rev it so fast nothing could ever catch us, but that's when I see it. The marquee emerging around the bend, the cornflower-blue neon flashing like a beacon.

Munroe's Drive-In. Double screens, open seven days a week. Chockful of loud music, louder explosions, and images so bright they nearly blind us. This is exactly what Bee and I need. It's the only way we've found to escape ourselves, to escape the past, if only for a few hours.

The engine turns over as we idle up to the ticket booth, its faded paint flecking off like chunks of dirty snow. Inside, hunched over in a folded chair is Walter, the purveyor of the place, his hair fright white, thick whiskers coming out both his ears. He squints into the convertible and brightens when he sees it's us.

"Hello, girls," he says, flashing us a toothy grin, oblivious as always. Bee and I have been coming here for ten years, neither one of us ever aging a day, but he doesn't seem to notice. He's just happy to have the patrons.

We pay our five dollars and rumble slowly into the lot over chunky gravel, pulling into the last spot in the front row. This speaker's the best one in the place. Never been broken, not that we know of, and you can crank the volume high enough to drown out almost anything.

The first movie starts a minute later, barely long enough for us to turn off the engine. Walter must have been waiting for us. He knows we're here every night, rain or shine.

Our eyes fixed on the screen, the trailers flash by, as Bee sits cross-legged in the passenger seat, her dusty pumps on the floor, her feet bare again. All around us, the scent of Pic permeates the air, everybody with a mosquito coil lit on their dashboards except for us. Bee and I don't have to worry. We're in the only car the bugs never bother. They know there are no signs of life here.

But there are signs of life elsewhere. Windows fogged up, heavy panting, the whole nine yards. Young couples necking in the back seats of their parents' borrowed cars, their guards down, their pulses thrumming faster. My fingers clench tight on the steering wheel, the soundtrack of the movie fading out, everything fading, until all I hear are those rhapsodic heartbeats.

These eager lovers are easy pickings. Too easy. They'd never expect me, what I'd do to them. I could stroll right up to their cars and climb on in, and they wouldn't even have time to open their mouths and scream before I'd open my mouth and make sure they never screamed again. Sometimes, I think I like coming here just to test myself, to prove I'm not a monster. I can sit right in the middle of a smorgasbord, and I won't do a single thing about it.

I look across the mountains in the dark, and there it is, hanging over me in the distance like the blade of a guillotine. The Hollywood sign. You can see it from all over town, peeking between buildings, shining through the smog. That means I can see him, too, the place where I've hidden him.

Seventy years, and what he did to me still feels as fresh as yesterday, every detail branded into my mind. The scent of roses, the scent of him, sweet and inviting, like a home I'd never known. The night it happened, there was no black cape or black bat or blood clotting Technicolor red across a crisp white blouse. It was far duller than that. Just me and him on an iron park bench at midnight. My broken curfew, his broken promise. A man who takes what he wants, and a girl who has to pay the price. That's the way these stories always go.

The first movie ends, and the floodlights come up for intermission. The couples in the other cars climb out and stretch their legs, their bodies glistening with sweat, fresh hickeys on their necks. I watch them, thinking how quick it would be, how simple. One pointed glance from me, and they'd be under my sway, mine for the taking. Dracula's voice ripples through me again.

Take what belongs to you, Lucy.

As though on his command, I fling open the car door, my whole body quivering.

Bee's head snaps toward me, her dark eyes wide. "What's wrong?" she asks, and under the weight of her stare, shame washes over me.

"Nothing," I say. "I'm going to the concession stand. You want anything?"

"The usual," she says, and hesitates. "You sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," I say, and stumble out of the car and across the lot, past the flushed couples, past everything, not looking back, not even when I'm sure I hear something in the hills laughing at me.

When I get inside, the lobby's empty: no heartbeats, no danger. Narrow and cramped, it's not much more than a shack, fingerprints smearing the walls, half the overhead light fixtures burned out. A red velvet rope, matted and stained, snakes around from door to counter, even though there probably hasn't been a line long enough to fill the place since Clark Gable was a matinee idol.

I follow the rope around and lean up against the counter, waiting until the side door creaks open and Walter hustles in, his breath rasping. He does it all around here—takes the admission, roasts the hot dogs, runs the projector. That's because there's nobody left to help him. He's a widower from way back, his life a domino game of losses. His youth, his wife, his peace of mind. By the look of this place, it might be the next to go.

Still, he never stops grinning. "What can I do for you, Lucy?"

What I want isn't on the menu, so I settle for ordering two medium Cokes and a popcorn, extra butter. Bee and I don't need to eat—we don't need much of anything—but going to the movies is all about make-believe, right?

His gnarled hands trembling, Walter fills two waxed cups with ice. "Glad you could make it out tonight," he says. "Wednesdays are always slow around here. You know, just last week—"

And with that, he starts into his latest yarn about the patron who bought three boxes of Milk Duds and paid in pennies. I quiet my face, trying my best not to roll my eyes. Small talk. Why do people always make small talk? Sometimes it's about the weather, sometimes a singer or television actor I've never heard of. Not that that means much. Perry Como is still modern to me.

As Walter chatters on, scooping yellow leavings from the bottom of the popcorn machine, I turn away, gazing out the smudged window in the lobby. Across the lot, Bee's watching me from the Buick. She waves when she sees me looking, and I wave back, smiling.

Bee won't come in here. She doesn't like confined spaces, doesn't like feeling trapped.

"Oh, did I tell you?" Walter nearly bursts toward me with excitement, his pulse surging. "My grandson Michael's coming to visit. You remember, the one that just finished his tour overseas."

I hesitate, something settling deep in my guts. "Of course," I say. How could I not remember? Walter hasn't stopped talking about his grandson ever since the draft notice landed in the mailbox like a grenade, shattering their lives into bits. This is the one bit of small talk I'd never deny him.

"He'll be here tomorrow," Walter continues, as I fork over a dollar, and he makes change, one careful nickel at a time. "I'll be sure to introduce you to him."

"If that's what you want," I say, even though I should tell him no. His grandson's been at war, an ugly war, even uglier than most. He's seen more death in two years than I've seen in two lifetimes. He doesn't need to meet me, too.

Walter doesn't understand that. When he looks at me, he sees what everyone else does: a perfectly fine young lady, red curls in her hair, red rouge on her cheeks. Never mind the dirt beneath her fingernails and the teeth that sharpen if you catch her on a bad night. He never seems to notice those things. Nobody does. That's why I can hide in plain sight. Everything about me is a disguise.

The drinks and popcorn gathered up in my arms, I get back to the car just in time for the next film to start. A beach movie I never heard of called *Don't Make Waves*. Bee and I clutch our drinks, downing them in a minute, barely tasting anything.

The movie drags on, Tony Curtis's character pestering a pretty blonde who isn't given much to do besides bounce around in a bikini. Sighing, I glance in the rearview mirror. Behind us on the other screen, it's the latest James Bond film. *You Only Live Twice*. We'll probably see that one tomorrow night. We see every movie that plays here. Anything to escape what's waiting at home.

Or what's waiting for us here. A change in the wind, and we're suddenly not alone.

Bertha, a man's voice calls out, sharp and cold as a fistful of straight pins.

It isn't Dracula this time, and it isn't for me. It's for Bee. She seizes up in the passenger seat. No matter how many times this happens, she's always caught off guard.

He comes at her again, louder and more determined. *Where have you gone, Bertha?*

She won't look at me. She won't look at anyone. Bee with her own secrets and a name she never uses anymore.

Bertha Antoinetta Mason. The so-called madwoman in the attic. The first wife of one Edward Fairfax Rochester. A man with a sprawling estate and a sprawling ego and a temper that could set the whole world on fire. She married him young, married foolishly, and when she wouldn't bend to his will, pliable as clay in his calloused hands, he locked her away in an upstairs room before he went searching for someone else, a woman to replace her.

That was over a century ago, thousands of days separating her from him. He shouldn't even remember her now. But men like him are never eager to lose what they consider theirs.

His cruel laughter lilts on the wind, and I fumble with the speaker, cranking up the volume, desperate to drown him out. This is one of his favorite tricks: calling her from afar, throwing his voice across the miles like a wicked ventriloquist. We have no idea where he is, but he can somehow always find us.

Bertha, he whispers again, and Bee grabs my hand, the two of us holding tight to each other. I look to the other cars, the couples in back seats blissfully unaware. Like always, nobody can hear him but us.

"Do you want to leave?" I ask, but Bee shakes her head.

"It won't do any good," she says, and she's right. Nowhere is safe for us.

Bee and I wait, barely moving, until what's left of his voice dissolves into the night. This is how it always goes—he never sticks around—but the damage is already done. For the rest of the film, she and I stare blankly at the screen, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, thinking only of the two men who won't ever let us escape.

There are tales about Rochester and Dracula, books and movies, ones where Bee and I have been mostly written out, deleted from our own story, our own lives. Every time I turn around, it seems there's another version of Dracula, another casting call for nubile young women, corseted and blushing and breathless for him. He's become an unlikely

hero, a bloodsucking James Bond, and I've become less than a footnote. The disposable victim who should have known better.

Bee's fared even worse. In all the movies about her life, she's no more than an extra locked away in a flimsy attic. She gets a few meager frames of screen time before a fire gobbles her up in the third act. She's ash; she's nothing; she's an obstacle to overcome. She has to die so Rochester and his new wife can live. Bee and I are the same in this regard: the only way that others can have their happy ending is if we don't get ours.

The end credits roll on the second film, all beachy sunsets and lovers united, and the floodlights come up again, for good this time, garish and accusing and spiriting us on our way. Walter waves goodbye from the ticket booth, and Bee and I drive home, midnight brimming all around us. The sky crackles, the heavy clouds threatening rain, but we don't bother to put up the top for the convertible. Too claustrophobic for Bee. Besides, we both like the fresh air. We might not need to breathe anymore, but on cool summer nights like this, it's nice to pretend.

We turn down Wilshire Boulevard, storybook houses whizzing past us in the dark. My entire body tenses. We're almost there now, the one place I've been dreading all night.

Bee gazes at me, the glow of the passing streetlights flickering on her face. "We don't have to go back yet," she says. "Norm's might still be open. We could hang out and drink coffee until tomorrow."

She's trying to buy us time. Buy *me* time. She knows what's waiting for me.

"It's okay," I whisper.

Bee didn't hide from her nightmare tonight. I shouldn't hide from mine.

The car slows, and we reach a stone house veiled thick in shadows, dead ivy clinging to the facade. I pull into the long driveway, desiccated weeds sprouting up through the cracks in the cement, the empty swimming pool silent and gaping as an open grave.

Welcome home.

The engine cuts out, and Bee and I climb out of the car. On the cracked cobblestone path, we walk together, past the former garden, gray and thorny and crying out silently for help, everything fading here.

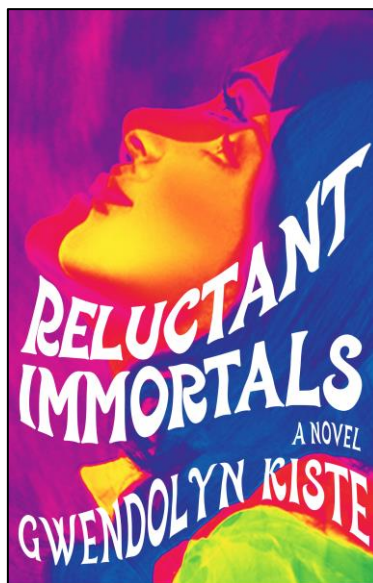
When we get to the front step, the air turns heavy and fetid, and once again, I want to run. I want to be anywhere but here.

Bee studies my face, her eyes shining and calm. "Are you sure?" she asks.

"Yes," I say, and with a steady hand, I turn the key in the lock.

We open the door, and the rest of Dracula is waiting to greet us.

Excerpted from *RELUCTANT IMMORTALS* by Gwendolyn Kiste. Copyright © 2022 by Gwendolyn Kiste. Reprinted by permission of Saga Press, a Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.



***Reluctant Immortals*, by Gwendolyn Kiste**
[Available on Amazon!](#)

Credits & Copyrights

Authors and Poets

Shannon Acrey
Edward Ahern
KC Anderson
R. F. Anding
Miracle Austin
Gabiella Balcom
Greta T. Bates
Evan Baughfman
Evan Baughfman
Jay Bechtol
Nico Bell
T.C. Bennett
Will H. Blackwell, Jr.
Gloria Bobrowicz
Maggie D Brace
Dan Burgess
Gillian Church
R.A. Clarke
J. Rocky Colavito
Marcus Cook
JB Corso
Tinamarie Cox
Linda M. Crate
Renee Cronley
Donna Cuttress
Nina D'Arcangela
Tom Duke
Tony Earnshaw
Lee Andrew Forman
Martin P. Fuller
Beth Gaydon
Sharmon Gazaway
Elana Gomel

Alex Grehy
J. Grell
John Grey
George Lee Grimsley
Josh Hanson
Doug Hawley
G Clark Hellery
Christopher Hivner
Ruben Horn
Rivka Jacobs
Mathias Jansson
Derek Austin Johnson
K.A. Johnson
Kieran Judge
Naching T. Kassa
Ian Klink
Kellee Kranendonk
Shane Kroetsch
David E. Kruegger
Stephen Lang
Natasia Langfelder
Aaron E. Lee
Suzie Lockhart
Paul Lonardo
Lori R. Lopez
Soter Lucio
Hillary Lyon
Devin J. Meaney
RJ Meldrum
Melissa R. Mendelson
Kristin Lennox Mill
Milkana N. Mingles
Kenya Moss-Dyme
Jim Mountfield

Donna J. W. Munro
Nicole L. Nevel-Steighner
Ngo Binh Anh Khoa
Antonella Nicolino
Michael O'Brien
B. T. Petro
Ken Poyner
Evan Purcell
McKenzie Rae
Allison Raymond
Dominic Rivron
Armand Rosamilia
Rie Sheridan Rose
Brian Rosenberger
Christopher Sartin
Charles Sartorius
E. F. Schraeder
Angela Yuriko Smith
Meg Smith
Gregory L. Steighner
L. Stephenson
Nadine Stewart
Sonora Taylor
Terry Trobridge
Mike Turner
DJ Tyrer
Cat Voleur
K. J. Watson
Lynn White
K. A. Williams
Eric Wright
Patrick J. Wynn
Amy Zoellers

Featured Column

Mike Lera's Corridor of Horror

Featured Artist

Ksenya Lumitar Drozd

Featured Project

What A Scream Podcast

Featured Author

Gwendolyn Kiste

Featured Book

Reluctant Immortals

Copyright © 2023 Sirens Call Publications. All Rights Reserved.

All stories, prose and poetry contained within this eZine are the intellectual property and copyright of their respective authors. Sirens Call Publications has been granted explicit permission by the author to publish their work(s) in issue #61 of *The Sirens Call*. All characters and events appearing in these works are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead is purely coincidental. All featured artwork and photography are the sole property and copyright of the noted artist. Sirens Call Publications has been granted explicit permission to display their work(s) in issue #61 of *The Sirens Call*.

License Notes:

This eZine is licensed for personal use only. It may be shared freely in its current form for no monetary gain; attribution is appreciated, but not required. This eZine may not be sold, reproduced, or reprinted in any format for monetary gain. If you do not hold the copyright to an individual work contained within the eZine, you may not reproduce the content in question in any form without specific permission from the author or artist who holds the copyright. Advertisements are considered artwork and fall under the purview of the creator's copyright.

Thank you for respecting the hard work of the contributing authors, poets, and artists in this eZine!