# The Sirens Call



A Dark Fiction

L Horror Zine!

Short Stories, Flash Fiction, Poetry, and Artwork

Mike Lera's Corridor of Horror: So Bad Its Good!

Featured Artist: The Flash Nites

Featured Project: Paper Cuts Live

Featured Author: Brent Abell

Featured Books:
'Dragonflies' &
'Small Town Terrors'

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### Great Sin Through a Small Door | Joshua Skye

Folklore fascinated petite Aeron Faughn, especially the original tales that haven't been sanitized by time and pop culture. From the darker origins of Santa Claus to the even darker roots of his shadow entity, Krampus, from the Pagan derivation of the Easter Bunny to the bloody observations practiced on Nos Galan Gaeaf long before it became known as Hallow'een or appropriated by the perverse greed of capitalism. He loved it all, respected it all, and heeded all its dire warnings... as much as an impoverished thirteen-year-old Appalachian boy could considering all his limitations.

His family lived in the depths of a northwestern Pennsylvania valley so obscure it bore no official name and wasn't even on any modern map, a cavernous misty hollow that despite the steady churn of a world few dreamt of ever leaving to join, remained much like it was a hundred years ago. Poverty was as much a reality in America as it was in Wales, and an old saying became new again, cartref yw cartref, er tloted y bo... home is home, however poor it is. And poor it remained in that lowly sunken vale, the women toiled with the business of raising the children and keeping the homes while the men worked their fingers to the bones in the coal mines for pennies and brewed moonshine in a vain attempt at making ends meet. Most of the booze, however, went down the gullets of those that brewed it.

At a lucid one-hundred-twenty-five, his grandmother frequently reminisced about a great many things, nights without artificial lights during a childhood devoid of electricity, of roaming free across the hills and woodlands until sundown, and the stories of all those things that went bump in the night requiring that dusky retreat, especially Aeron's very favorite frightful boogeyman, the Yr Hwch Ddu Gwta, also known as the Cutty Black Sow. Grandmother insisted that it had followed her grandparents and others from the old world to haunt those that sought better lives beyond the dearth and degradations of North Wales.

Their homeland ancestors celebrated Nos Galan Gaeaf with fearful and reverent sacraments and sacrifices that culminated in great bonfires lit across the hilltops, lofty crackling fires tended until the wee hours. In them were thrown stones adorned with the names of all and as long as they stayed buried in the cinders the people were safe from the Yr Hwch Ddu Gwta, but when the fires turned to smoldering embers, the final formality took place. With a unified and thunderous shriek, "Before the Cutty Sow seizes your hindmost," the people would run to be safe in their beds before their names were exposed. If the Yr Hwch Ddu Gwta could read a name, she could chase after that person and if caught, she could steal their very soul.

"She keeps them in a ghostly garden among gnarled gourds that she nourishes with her own filth," Grandmother said ominously every October 31<sup>st</sup> as far back as Aeron could remember. And every time he would listen intently, fascinated by her ominous cadence as much as the tale itself. "It lies in a hallow deeper than ours, secreted by the very trees that surround it, hidden more by a thick mist that never dissipates. Some say it has its own thoughts all its own – that mist, and whispers insanities to beguile all those who venture nearby." As if anticipating his question, she would add, "But listen well, my young sir, don't you dare go seeking it. Gall pechod mawr ddyfod trwy ddrws bychan. Best believe it." He knew what she'd warned, 'a great sin can enter through a small door'. There was wisdom in it to be certain, but he wasn't quite sure how it applied to his curiosities, particularly this one.

Somewhere along the long line of years, the old Nos Galan Gaeaf traditions diminished out of necessity, for the sake of simplicity, or out of sheer laziness. Some amalgamated and others disappeared entirely, but Grandmother kept one close, however truncated it was. Instead of grand fires along the crests of the hills, she picked the largest pumpkin she could find among the season's offerings, carved it into a portentous grimace, and placed inside the stones with each family member's name upon them. Candles replaced the bonfires and she would tend them studiously throughout the night as she sat in her rocking chair on the porch, making sure everyone was safe inside, snuggled beneath their covers.

When her eyesight was taken by the cloud of cataracts, Aeron took to sitting at her side, wrapped in the patchwork blanket she'd made for him when he was a baby, and listened to the memories of her own childhood Hallow'eens. As he stared out into the dark, foggy woods or up to the often-bloated moon, he'd let his imagination conjure them as his own in vivid detail, especially the towering hilltop fires and all his ancestors dancing in silhouette around them and then running away when the flames died down low. Aeron was usually the one to fall asleep, leaning against her leg, cheek resting in her lap as she ran her thin fingers through his dusty-blond hair, but on the night of her one-hundred-twenty-fifth year, she was snoring long before he'd grown groggy. She hadn't even finished her romantically recounted remanences. Aeron smiled and vowed to keep vigil all by himself, keeping the family safe in the interim.

It wasn't until the windows went dark and all sounds from inside ceased that he even had a slightly mischievous thought, one he had many times before. Visions of roaring flames twisted and churned into wisps of thick mist concealing a dell within where a devilish black sow tended her ghostly garden of stolen souls. His mind farther wandered into wonderings, trying to imagine where such a place could be. He knew the forest like the back of his own hand, he'd frolicked through them since he was a wee lad barely able to grab a donkey's tail. From the desolate highway to the north down into West Virginia, he'd been everywhere. Where could such a place be? There wasn't a dreary basin he could even suspect of being the home of the Yr Hwch Ddu Gwta. Indeed, he knew the gloomiest of hollows, and...

No. Wait. There was Old Man Dafydd's Swamp. He hadn't gone in there, let alone explored its cold, wet pits, just such a hellish place would certainly be in there. He'd have to be careful, there were bottomless places where the water swallowed men whole and soils equally as hungry. And where else would the Cutty Black Sow live then among the monsters Grandmother told him nested there? He'd have to be cautious, not just of those frights, but of outlaws rumored to live there too and their stills they guarded with traps and rifles, yet he could do it, he could traverse the pitfalls and find the object of his lifelong Nos Galan Gaeaf fascination. The silver moon was full and bright, he wouldn't even need to sneak one of his father's lanterns. All he would need to do was bundle himself warm and tight, it was always colder among the trees, and hurry upon his way. And that is exactly what Aeron did.

The night was filled with the phantom tremolos and cooings of melancholy loons, the distressing calls of lonesome owls, the songs of despondent crickets and katydids, and mysterious shufflings of many creatures and critters in the underbrush. His father could tell what made each sound, so savvy of his surroundings he was, but Aeron was not yet so educated. He could give it a good guess though and be right some of the time. Careless lumbering noises were surely the workings of a bear. Even the largest of deer were far more wary in their nighttime travels. He hoped to encounter neither, or give them wide berths if he did, because both were dangerous, especially in the dark.

It wasn't a quiet trek into the night, far from what he'd desired. Autumn's fallen leaves were soggy underfoot, the boy's booted feet sunk into them with a perverse sloppy kiss sound and then into the mud beneath only to be pulled out with a loud sucking. He imagined some animals might be curious, but most would hurry away, and he was just fine with that. He, of course, had taken a pocketknife for some bit of protection, but it would hardly compete with a grumpy bear's bloodthirsty claws or a rogue deer's angry kicks. It had the potential to cause enough damage for a distraction long enough for him to get away. Best not to think of the dire possibilities and focus on his goal, getting to the foggy marshlands. He'd come to a small clearing soon, where he'd once seen members of feuding families having a clandestine tryst. There was a rushing creek just beyond that where an old stone bridge allowed dry crossing, for the bravest adventurer that is.

Bridges held their own otherworldly secrets, often being telltale indicators of entrances to tunnels leading to Hell, homes to terrible trolls, and hideouts for human and nonhuman criminals to ambush their unsuspecting victims. But Aeron had crossed it many times in his various explorations and had experienced nothing untoward at this particular crossing. It was simply a moss-covered stone structure offering an easy way over the roiling water. But when he arrived, there was something different about it. He hadn't seen it at night before, let alone in the hoary glow of the moon. It was beautiful, like a colorless drawing in a storybook or from an enchanting dream. The stones were wet and surely quite slippery. The creek had risen, the peaks of its rushing waves lapped at the underside of the highest point of its arch. And for some reason, Aeron felt his very first tickling sensation, the beginnings of regretful trepidation.

A slight prickling rose over his arms and down the back of his neck sending a shiver throughout his lean pubescent body. Although his mind conjured a myriad of whys and wherefores sufficient enough to warrant a quick trek back home, he continued onward, crossing the bridge slowly, carefully, and successfully. Apprehension giving way to grinning pride of bravery and reawakened anticipation, the boy did a momentary jig of jubilance before he ran off into the shadow shrouded woods. It wouldn't be long before he was there, at the edge of the swamplands, where he knew his fears would return, perhaps in an even more profound way, eliciting goosebumps over the whole of his body and shivers reaching down into his bones.

The deeper into the valley he went, the farther into the woods, the colder it got. His teeth were chattering loudly, louder than his footsteps even. He hurried by a still that had been poorly disguised by uprooted undergrowth. There was only time for a curious but dismissive sideways glance at a rusted old jalopy that was halfway in the ground. A tree had grown up through it, reaching into the dark canopy above. Long-tattered by some act of violence, a tent he'd never seen before gave him pause, but there was no doubt the occupant was equally long gone. He dared not try to imagine the circumstances surrounding the situation. When the forest floor gave way to the sucking mud, he knew he'd crossed into the swamp. He was now farther than he'd ever ventured before. At the icy touch of a startling fog, new rushes of goosebumps and shivers hit him as suddenly and ferociously as a drunken beating from his father. Steps slowed, his surroundings were darker, and there was an eerie whispering all around that just wasn't natural in the hollow even in the middle of the night. But those murmurings didn't terrify him nearly as much as when the swamp went solemnly silent. Was something predatory nearby?

Sheepishly, he wandered onward, wide eyes cautiously looking around, searching the murk and mire for any nefarious signs to be wary of and especially for clues to the whereabouts of the mythical Yr Hwch Ddu Gwta. The longer he walked, the more his fears settled, replaced by questions and condemnations of his imprudent and inconsiderate actions. Why had he left home, leaving his grandmother to sleep alone on the porch, leaving the stones unattended? "You're a stupid boy, Aeron. A stupid boy with stupid ideas leading to stupid things like coming here," he whispered harshly to himself. As his whirlwind of emotions, apprehension to self-criticism, faded into a repeating visit from remorse, he realized how exhausted he was, physically and emotionally. It had been a long journey, hours perhaps, and the daunting task of doing it again to get back home, all for naught, brought frustrated tears to his eyes. But just as he was about to give up and let himself fall into the muck, he smelled it, the unmistakable stench of a pigsty carried on the frosty breeze. Had he fortuitously stumbled upon it, the home of the Yr Hwch Ddu Gwta?

With renewed vigor, Aeron straightened his posture and peered in every direction until he saw, just over a small hill and through the cloudy haze, a flickering glow. It was a fire not too far away, but whether the Cutty Black Sow or some human criminal, he'd have to be careful no matter who had lit it. He crouched down as much as his aching and tired muscles would let him, and made his way toward the fire. At the knoll, he took to crawling, doing all he could to keep out of sight. There was a surprising relief to his weary agony in crawling. Over the easy top of the slope he peered, eyes wider than ever before. There it was, the ramshackle encampment of the pig-monster aglow in the waltzing flames of a bonfire. The boy inadvertently gasped.

Aeron could barely believe what his own eyes were seeing. There was no doubt it was the ancient creature he'd sought; its porcine qualities were unmistakable – twitchy ears, beady eyes, ever sniffing snout, yet mixed with human attributes it was a nightmarish thing. Gnarled and old, the sow stood upon its stubby and crooked back legs. Clearly arthritic, it struggled to haul its bulbous rear end in the mud, curly tail flickering madly at a swarm of flies gathered there. Its back was swayed and shoulders hunched, the beast's chest and belly hung with fourteen bloated and oozing breasts, the bottom six, like its ass, dragged upon the ground. The arms were more human than swine, knotted and grotesquely emaciated in a stark juxtaposition to the rest of its obscenely obese body, they trembled as it fought through pain to walk utilizing a worn-warped wooden cane. It left a trail of milky shit and piss in its worm-wriggling wake.

Suddenly, a dirty, callused hand covered the boy's mouth, fingers sinking into his flesh to hold back any other vocalization that might draw the creature's attention. Nails were long and jagged, the force behind them threatened to draw blood. Fingers smelled of the swamp and piss. A full, powerful arm wrapped around him, held tight, a distinctly masculine embrace, and yanked him back into a brick wall of a body before pulling him down the side of the hill out of the Cutty Black Sow's field of vision. Aeron struggled and fumbled for his pocketknife. He had the blade out and was just about to stick his attacker when...

"What are you doing here?" a deep, familiar tone asked in barely a whisper.

The boy immediately recognized his father's voice, stopped fighting back, and accidentally dropped his weapon. Had the older man followed him throughout his trek? Had he only pretended to go to bed earlier and instead had snuck out to tend that poorly hidden still not far back? The latter seemed the most likely scenario because the burning stench of 'shine was on his breath. Getting drunk in the deep, nighttime isolation of the woods was a sad thing, a lonely thing.

"Answer me, boy."

Aeron tried, but his tongue refused to work. He stuttered over his words, unable to form them. It didn't matter though, because his father's attention was drawn upward. The young man painfully craned his neck to follow his father's gaze. At the top of the knoll was the silhouette of the Cutty Black Sow, the fog eddying around her in a sensuous ballet as it began to whisper again, voices like phantom children at play, some exuberant, others miserable.

Aeron was yanked to his feet as his father stood and then shoved behind him where he tripped over his own feet and fell into the muck. "Go! Run! Get home as fast as you can."

"It's too late," the pig-woman grumbled with a quivering and creaking voice. "The pumpkin has long become ash, every stone is exposed, every member of your family is a sapling for my garden, including the two of you, but I look forward to adding a grandmother to my collection most of all, yours especially, child. I've had my sights set upon her from a time when she was younger than you and she'd come to find me to sate her own curiosity. Gall pechod mawr ddyfod trwy ddrws bychan." And then she laughed, a low guttural bellowing sound that echoed through the swamp. With a precise wave of her cane and an incantation muttered in a language the men didn't understand, she commanded the sentient fog to do her bidding, swarm her latest shrieking scions, grasping them, tightening around them, dragging them up and over the hill and into her garden of souls. From far, far away, beyond the swamp, the woods, and the bridge, Aeron heard his grandmother scream.

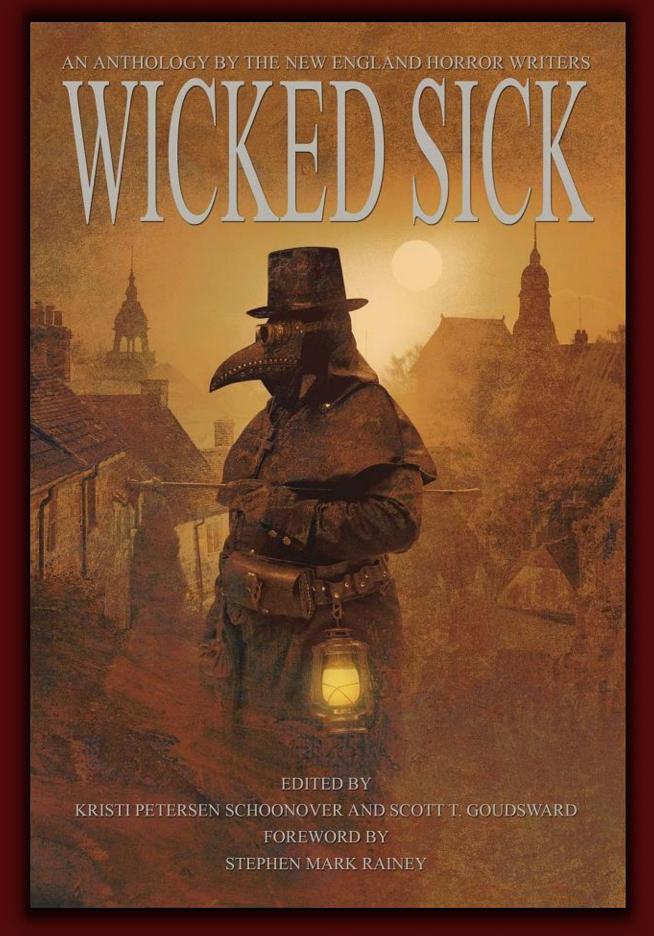
### **About the Author:**

Joshua Skye is the author of The Angels of Autum and Cradle, several of his short stories have appeared in The Sirens Call. He resides in Texas with his husband Ray and their son Syrian.

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Beneath the plague mask is the face in the mirror.



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

### First, Last and Deposit | Naching T. Kassa

I think I'm going crazy. At least, I hope I am. It's far better than the alternative.

Do you see that tree over there? Look at the shadow beneath. Do you see what I see? Yes, it's the shadow of a woman. The dark reflection of a body which doesn't exist.

You see it too, don't you? Oh, God, it's worse than I thought. If you see it, then I'm not crazy. It's real. It's all real!

Come over here. No, keep your voice down. We have to pretend she's not there. If she thinks we've seen her, she'll kill us both.

Let's stand here, there aren't any shadows here. She won't follow us. She doesn't like the light, especially sunlight. I'm taking a risk telling you about this, but I have to tell someone. No one else will believe me.

It all started three weeks ago, after Mrs. Kline passed away. Yes, that's right, the old lady in 2C. The one with the great apartment.

Yes, I'm the one who got the apartment. You've been wondering how, haven't you? Well, unlike the others, I actually had first, last and deposit. That's why the board chose me. I moved in last week.

The first three days were wonderful. And then, on the fourth day, all hell broke loose.

Shh! Did you hear that? You didn't? Someone just called my name. Just a second. Stay here and I'll be right back.

Sorry it took me so long. I was wrong. There aren't any shadows here in this part of the park.

Where was I? Oh, yeah. The fourth day.

I woke up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom. My new apartment had two bedrooms and when I passed the second, I saw something in the doorway. There were no lights on in that room, it was completely dark, but I thought I could see a figure. A shape which seemed blacker than the darkness of the room.

Now, I'm not psychic, I don't even believe in that stupid shit. But, I swear, that shape hated me. I don't think I've ever felt such malevolence. That thing wanted to ambush me—I know it! It wanted to draw me into that bedroom, and once it had me there, it would cheerfully tear me to pieces.

I ran by that room, just as fast as I could, and took shelter in the well-lit bathroom. There I stayed until morning. The shadow vanished with the first light of day.

I know it was the old woman. It had to be. That was the bedroom where she was murdered.

No, it wasn't natural causes. Didn't I tell you that? I didn't? I'm surprised you haven't heard. It was in all the papers. The police said she was strangled with a silk scarf while she slept.

Of course, they said that. It was in all the papers! Why would I make something like that up?

Please! Don't go! I'm sorry. I just haven't slept very well. The old woman keeps coming to me at night. She can't get to me with the lights on, so she stands outside my room and whispers my name. She does it every time I close my eyes and drift off

Uh-oh. The sun's moved again. We have to go with it, get away from the shadows. She uses them to travel. Let's head for the park benches over there.

Yes, she moves using the shadows. Anywhere there's darkness, she can appear. One time, she showed up in a movie theater, a few seats away from me. I could feel her watching me the whole time, waiting for me to head for the aisle. I waited until the lights came on before I ventured out.

No, you're the first person I've told. I don't dare mention it to anyone else. I'm not stupid enough to think they'd believe me. You, on the other hand, you wanted the apartment too. I'm pretty sure you'll understand.

Tell me something. When did you first see the old lady's ghost? You went as white as a sheet the minute you saw her shadow. You didn't even argue with me about seeing her. Was it after you put the application in for the apartment? You withdrew it pretty quick.

Look! She's out there among the trees. See! Right over there. You can just make out her face. She looks hungry, doesn't she?

I saw you that night, you know. Saw you leaving her apartment. You left the door open, so I went inside. She wasn't dead. You started the job, but you didn't finish it. Funny thing is, I don't think she knows which one of us killed her.

No, I don't want to blackmail you. I just want to be left alone. And there's only one way I can do that. *Click!* 

There! Handcuffed you to the bench. Yeah, yeah, scream all you want.

It won't matter after dark.

### **About the Author:**

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

Naching is a member of the Horror Writers Association, Mystery Writers of America, The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association, The Sound of the Baskervilles, The ACD Society, The Crew of the Barque Lone Star, The Beacon Society, The Sherlock Holmes Society of London and The John H. Watson Society. She works in Talent Relations at Crystal Lake Publishing and was a recipient of the 2022 HWA Diversity Grant.

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Author Website: <a href="mailto:Frighten Me!">Frighten Me!</a>

### Jump Start | Louise Worthington

I was sitting upright, divested of silk blouse and bra for the electrodes, when David's fate was written in electrical impulses. It was a pity for David that my heart didn't shout with the voltage, but the voice of my heart has been getting quieter all this time.

Soon after Beth flew the nest five years ago, I felt chest pains, a heaviness and tightness like wearing a tight belt around my breasts. My arteries had hardened, the blood and oxygen flow gradually getting cut off with every passing day.

I am forty-nine with an old spinster's heart. Don't pity me. I hate pity as much as Pep Bismol.

The electrocardiogram confirms the irregularities of my heartbeat. It is not a flat line, but on its way to horizontal. That will surely stand up in a court of law.

I am pleased the nurse sticks to science, for it is the evidence I might need in a case of self-defence. Brokenheart syndrome has made part of my heart larger, so my tick is out of step with its tock.

The diagnosis cannot convey longing or the absence of awe, the absence of wonder, the chasm of a shapeless loss. The only thing living inside me is loneliness and a quiet anxiety about when the lovelessness will end – the charade of my marriage and the pain of what might have been.

There is no love from David to feed my heart: this life, this slow turning off of a life-support machine. I want to live.

An autopsy on me would surely prove my innocence.

After dinner at the kitchen table, I am fortified when David hears my diagnosis with the scepticism I expect. Melodramatic, he says, as he dabs his mouth with a linen napkin. Sensitive would be better, but the truth exists in the shadow of my emptiness, and I am beyond caring about the harsh torchlight he shines into my eyes because any minute now he will retire upstairs, take his bath.

His electrocution will jump-start my heart. His will stop. A fair trade.

As he climbs the stairs with a tumbler of whiskey in one hand and the other on the wooden banister, I imagine a lightning storm on its way to the bathroom, cracking and whipping through his veins. Will there be sparks? Static?

He is a little fat around the middle because I am an excellent cook, so it will take a little longer to fry him. Still, a 120-volt hairdryer will send him twitching and gyrating to cardiac arrest until he is sizzling flesh served without garnish.

Upstairs, I decide to put on classical music to add to the atmosphere. From behind the bathroom door, I hear the splash of his white flesh slop into the warm water. His dinner of salmon and new potatoes barely digested. I shall have my strawberries and ice cream later.

I wonder how his face will look when he is electrocuted. I feel the ticking of my heart, and touch my chest to love myself.

Images flash through my mind, a macabre photo album of David's face – only with less skin. The last picture will be my favourite.

### **About the Author:**

Louise lives on a farm in Shropshire UK where she runs writing retreats. She is the author of several novels and poetry collections.

**Author Website: Louise Worthington** 

### The Bunny Man | Jeffrey Durkin

"Cameron, where are you?"

Cameron Archer sighed. He had just gotten a cup of coffee – no milk, no sugar – and parked his police cruiser in the deserted lot of a Whole Foods. Cameron had been put on the night-shift only a month ago and was still trying to adjust. But, he was on duty.

He took a drink of the scalding coffee and grabbed the radio microphone.

"This is two-six, over."

"Hey Cameron, this is Emma. We got a call over near Fountainhead. There's a report of a scream and lights in the park. You want to check it out?"

No I want to finish my coffee and sit here for the rest of the night.

"Sure, I'll roll over there. Any idea of where I should look? Fountainhead's a big place."

There was a moment of silence. Cameron imagined the perpetually disorganized Emma looking through the flurry of post-its that covered her desk. "Yeah, the call came in from Thomlar Drive."

"10-4. Two-six out."

"Kay. Bye."

Cameron placed his cup in a holder and pulled out of the parking lot. The road the call came in from wasn't far. It ran along the northwest edge of the park, which, in turn, followed the course of the Occoquan River for miles. Its thick stands of trees were a reminder of the wilderness that once dominated Northern Virginia.

The road came to a dead end at the edge of the park. Cameron parked the cruiser on a patch of gravel and scanned the dark line of trees. There was a visible footpath, but that was it. No lights and no movement. He thought about writing it off as a false alarm.

It's a nice night. Might as well get a walk in.

He grabbed a flashlight from the glove compartment and exited the cruiser. The sky was clear, the Moon a silver crescent. Although it was late June, the air was crisp and clean. That was a welcome change from the hot, wet atmosphere of the last few weeks. He clicked on the flashlight and headed for the footpath.

After a few steps, he could no longer see the cul-de-sac or car. In front of him, the trail ended in darkness. To either side, the trees crowded in, creating a black corridor that seemed cut off from the rest of the world. Cameron – who considered himself an outdoorsman – felt an unfamiliar surge of anxiety. He had hiked in more remote places in worse conditions without a problem. But something about the stillness and surrounding void made him uneasy. His hand drifted to his gun. He didn't pull it out – the feel of the cool metal, however, was reassuring.

Cameron pressed on. After a few minutes, the trail took a final twist and opened up into a clearing. After the darkness of the trail, even the pale light of Moon and star was welcome. In the center of the clearing was the smoldering remains of a bonfire.

Well, that's where the reports of lights came from. Probably just kids burning shit and getting high.

As he approached the pile of glowing, smoking embers, his flashlight picked up a body on the other side. Cameron shook his head, assuming this was the culprit and that he – or she – was drunk, stoned and unconscious.

I don't want to have to make a hospital run with some junkie vomiting in the back seat.

He walked over to the face down person. It was a man, without a shirt, but wearing jeans and tennis shoes. Cameron nudged his side with the toe of his shoe. "Hey, dude, wake up. You need to go home."

There was no movement.

Come on.

He nudged him firmly. There was still no response.

Fine.

"Dude, I am going to put you in cuffs for this shit." He squatted next to the man and rolled him over. "Oh, fuck me," he said, when he saw the state of the body.

The skin on the face was gone. It had been removed carefully, peeled off so that the underlying muscle was undamaged. There was a stab wound directly over the heart and the man's torso was red with blood. Cameron stood up and toggled on his radio's mic.

"This is unit two-six, 10-33, 10-33, I need assistance."

There was no reply, only the hiss of static.

"I say again, this is unit two-six, I need assistance, do you copy?" More static. "God dammit, Emma, I need backup and an EMT."

A shout snapped his attention to the trees. "Help!"

It was off to his left, deeper in the park. The voice sounded faint, far away. But Cameron knew the forest had a muffling effect. He pulled out his pistol and walked at a steady, but careful pace towards the voice.

There wasn't a trail and the undergrowth was thick. While this slowed his progress, it gave him an edge. Anyone not carefully making their way through this part of the forest would make a lot of noise. Every few minutes, he would stop and listen. On the fifth pause, he heard the crunch and crash of a person running nearby. "This is the police! Approach with your hands up," Cameron shouted.

Silence. Other than the narrow beam of light from his flashlight, he couldn't see anything. He crept forward, pistol up and at the ready.

A voice came from his right.

"God...help me."

Cameron pivoted. A man was leaning against a twisted oak. He was shirtless. Chest gleamed wet and red. Blood was welling from a deep cut in his left shoulder. The moment the light fixed him, he sank to his knees.

"Oh shit," Cameron said, before rushing over to the man. He holstered his gun, snapped on latex gloves and pressed his hand against the injury. The man weakly groaned. "It's okay, sir. EMTs are on the way."

The man looked up. His face was pale, lips turning blue-gray. His eyes were unfocused. Cameron knew what this meant, he was bleeding out and going into shock. The man shook his head. "Not okay. They're coming."

"Who's coming?"

"B...b...bunnymen."

In spite of the circumstances, Cameron laughed. "What?" This dude's seeing things.

"They brought me here. Made me run. Hunted me. Bunnymen."

Cameron was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "Wait, you mean, like that guy in a bunny costume from the 70s? That's not real, okay. It's just a story."

"Real," the man's head clopped to his chest. Cameron heard his final words, a wet whisper, "Real as it gets."

"Sir? Sir?" Cameron lifted the man's head by the chin. His eyes were fixed and glassy. A thin line of blood ran from the corner of his mouth. "Come on dude, don't fucking die." He knew it was too late. He gently lowered the head.

There was a sudden crash to his left. He jerked the flashlight around. A man was rushing at him. A man in a blood white robe and matted rabbit head mask. The head of the ax he was holding above his head gleamed silver in the harsh light.

"Oh shit!"

Cameron scrambled away from the onrushing man. He lost his grip on the flashlight. The beam spun and tumbled. The silver gleam came downwards, passing through the space he had occupied an instant before, causing a red spray of blood as it crashed through the dead man's ribcage.

Cameron jerked his pistol out of the holster and emptied the magazine in the direction of the bunnyman. He was rewarded with a sharp cry. That didn't stop him from dry clicking the empty gun for a few seconds before the adrenaline burned away his surprise. He reloaded his weapon, snapped up the flashlight and trained it on his assailant. Although it was hard to tell due to the existing blood, he noted two holes in the robe over the chest and a fresh red spreading stain.

"Yeah! Got you motherfucker!"

How the hell do I write this one up? Responded to a 10-14, found a psychopath wearing a rabbit mask? Then, something occurred to him. Wait, that dude said 'bunnymen'.

Then, an ax handle smashed into the back of his head and everything went black.

When he came to, the pain was searing, a raw burn that started at the back of his skull and radiated through his torso. He reflexively tried to rub his injury. His arms wouldn't move. He slowly opened his eyes. He was on his back and bound to a picnic table. Above him, the crescent Moon hung like a silver blade.

"You're awake." Cameron turned his head to the sound of the voice. The movement sent a new burst of pain through his body. He closed his eyes and his face screwed up in agony. "Be careful. You don't want to hurt yourself."

After the pain lessened he opened his eyes. There was a woman standing next to him. She wore a pristine white robe and a rabbit mask of vibrant white fur. He realized he was back in the clearing. Behind her the bonfire was burning again. A dozen men in blood and dirt caked robes and tattered rabbit masks stood in a circle around the fire.

"What the fuck is going on?"

The woman's voice was thick and low, soothing, but distorted by the mask. "It is summer solstice. The Goddess demands sacrifice. She gives us prosperity and plenty. We give her blood." The woman ran her hand over Cameron's chest. "And the blood of warriors is prized above all others. Except virgins," she leaned close to Cameron. In spite of how everything she wore looked clean, there was an unpleasant coppery stench coming from the mask. "And those are almost impossible to find these days."

The men began to chant in a language Cameron didn't understand.

"Brothers," the woman said, "it is time. Rhiannon awaits our final sacrifice. We have given her the mask of Man," the woman took off her rabbit head. Cameron threw up when he saw she was wearing the skinned man's face, stretched tightly over her own. "We have given her the hunt of the beast. And now, we give her, the warren, the place of safety until the next sacrifice."

One of the men detached from the circle and picked up a cage, covered in black cloth. On top was a knife with a curved silver blade. He brought both to the woman, handing her the knife and placing the cage on the table next to Cameron.

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name..." Cameron sputtered, while spitting out the last bits of vomit.

The woman picked up the knife, held it up to the Moon. The blade was a crescent of silver. "Rhiannon, accept this home for your own." She brought the knife down in a languid, fluid slash. Cameron screamed as the razor-sharp edge sliced into the flesh of his abdomen.

Between gasps of pain, he continued praying, the only one he knew. "...thy kingdom come, they will be done..."

The woman lifted up the cage, held it up to the Moon.

"...on Earth, as it is in Heaven..."

She pulled off the cloth.

"...give us this day, our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses..."

Inside, a gaunt, starving rabbit shivered in the corner.

"As we forgive those who trespass against us..."

She placed the cage over Cameron's slashed stomach.

"...and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

She slid open the bottom of the cage. The rabbit bolted for the opening and began digging into Cameron's abdomen.

Cameron's prayer was lost in his screams. He screamed until his voice was a wet gobble and then just the bubbling of blood in his mouth. Before his final breath, the woman leaned over him.

"Amen."

### **About the Author:**

Jeffrey Durkin is a writer living in Arlington, Virginia. He has published short stories in the science fiction and horror genres. He published his first novel, The Age of the Jackal, in 2015 and is currently working on two new series, Broken and Coven.

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### As Rumors Go | Ken Poyner

Rumor is there is a coven of witches that meets near the abandoned McClellan barn. Speculating about them is the local hobby. Who are members, what do they do? How many evils, personal and public, can be credited to them? The talk is not taken seriously. You are likely to be asked what you know about 'dem witches' as a friendly greeting. It keeps people amused. Quibble's wife every second Tuesday evening of the month goes out for a grand hike looking for them. Probably cover for a girl's night out. Quibble does not see her again until Wednesday morning.

### Dairy Economics | Ken Poyner

The hard part is training your dragon to eat your neighbors' cattle, and not your neighbors. Once your neighbors start disappearing, the authorities become restive. A missing cow or three or seven is something a community can live with ignorantly. But it is not possible to teach the dragon to select between people no one would miss and those others might notice. Distinguishing between cattle and people is much easier to teach. By keeping your cattle in during the dragon's foraging, you create the most profitable dairy operation within this range. Franchise, and you might snare the entire diary market.

### On Time | Ken Poyner

It has been said Quibble would be late for his own funeral. He isn't. Lying there, he seems surpassingly unhurried. Something about him in a suit for the first time in years makes it appear he is ready for this, prepared well in advance, knows his place and his schedule, and is comfortably sliding into the intersection of the two. His wife focuses about the arrangements, guesses at priorities she had not the courage earlier to ask Quibble about. Now, she is the one late. Quibble is on cue. He has been working towards this the whole of his life.

### Rise of the Lawn | Ken Poyner

The grass knows its calendar: it has been waiting all night. Just a simple lawn, it wants nothing more than to grow tall enough to test gravity. The long years of ceaseless manicure has numbed its purpose into mere desire: to be like the growth two lots over, high and tangled, a mixture of breeds and fetishes. The talk of the block. Tussled and unkempt. Pariah or idol. Perhaps with this cutting the lawn will not lie down. It will end as the beast prepares his shears, we weave a mission about its ankles and bring this foil fearlessly down.

### **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 powerlifter, 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: <u>Ken Poyner</u> Facebook: <u>Ken Poyner</u>



### The Tin Can Alarm | Donna Cuttress

I don't think I ever saw Dora without leaves in her hair or dirt under her fingernails. The last we met was during the heatwave. The town was baked dry. Everywhere was sun scorched, except for Dora's garden. It was a luminous oasis on the deserted road. I stopped my car to stare. I saw Dora struggling to carry a long string with rusted tin cans threaded onto it. They kept wrapping around her feet, threatening to trip her. Her arms flailed, causing the cans to clank noisily. I was reluctant to get out of the car with its air conditioning, but I had to help.

I wished her "Good Morning." She stopped suddenly, dropping the cans. The noise made a racket. She was covered head to toe in netting like a beekeeper. Her hat tilted backward, exposing her face. She looked flustered, but smiled and we began chatting, obviously about the weather.

"Where has all the rain gone?" she asked, her arms held aloft, consulting the heavens. We both agreed that there should be a break in the heat soon.

"We need a good biblical thunderstorm to clear our minds," I said. I commented on the garden. It looked overly verdant, and was difficult to see through the vegetation. The air was heavily perfumed from roses and honeysuckle that intertwined along the fence. I couldn't help but be consumed by it. So many varieties and species were blooming simultaneously, the colours were kaleidoscopic. Dora reluctantly admitted that the heat had been good for her chillies in the greenhouse. I asked about Joe, her husband.

"Joe? He's in the garden ... I think."

I had to ask, "Dora, what are the tin cans for?"

She looked around as though checking for eavesdroppers. I knew she had hoped I hadn't noticed them, even though they were wrapped around her feet. She let out a long sigh, "I'm trying to make an alarm." She looked at me conspiratorially, not scared but wary, and whispered, "Something is trying to get me."

I thought I had misheard her. "Don't you mean, 'someone'?"

She quickly glanced into her garden, "Nope. Something."

I paused, "An animal?"

"No. Something botanical."

Dora stared at me, daring me to continue with the questioning. She tipped her hat forward, and pulled her veil back over her face. I picked up one end of the tin can necklace and asked, "Would you like me to help you hang this?"

The hat nodded as she picked up the other end. Together, we noisily carried it into the garden. We tied it so it straddled the porch steps. They would rattle if anyone approached the house. I was worried for her, and told her she needed to call the police if someone was trying to burgle the property. She lifted her veil, then put a finger to her lips, and whispered,

"Can I trust you?"

"Of course you can, Dora. You've known me since I was a child."

I suddenly felt terrified for her. We went inside. I was relieved to be out of the sun, but the inside of the house didn't feel any cooler. She took out a pitcher of lemonade from the refrigerator and two glasses from the drainer. Her hands shook. The veil on her hat floated behind her as she moved. I pulled out a chair for each of us at the kitchen table. It was then I noticed the humming sound, a muttering, like someone keeping their voice low in a conversation. It came from beneath the house.

"What's that noise? Is there a wasp nest in the walls?"

She nearly dropped one of the glasses. "You can hear it?"

I nodded. She stumbled, then sat down and poured us both a glass.

"I'm sorry. It's just the relief of someone hearing the garden. It's not just me!"

I took a small sip of lemonade. It was warm. "Hearing the garden?" I asked.

The chattering stopped, like an interrupted conversation. I glanced at the windows, each one was covered by plants choking the view. They, the plants, seemed to be *listening*. The room darkened as the sunlight was blocked. We were being watched.

"Sorry about the warm lemonade. The electricity was switched off."

"Did you forget to pay the bill? Do you want me to call the electricity company and get them to turn it back on?"

"It wasn't the electricity company that turned it off."

She dropped her hat on a spare chair then tapped her dirty fingernails on the table.

"The reason my garden is so lush is in the *ground*. The roots have swollen, and become stronger somehow. The plants know they need water and food, but they're not going to wait for me to give it. *They're going to take it!* I think the garden will take over the house eventually. Then maybe they'll carry on to the next house and the next, then the town ..."

She never finished the sentence. Something moved around us. I don't think it was an animal, I didn't see any. It was *under* the house, something crawled fast and deliberately. Dora banged her foot on the floor.

"Stop it! Behave yourself!"

The movement stopped, then the tin cans rattled outside.

We never moved or spoke, just waited for that nasty clanking sound to stop. Eventually, I finished my lemonade, the glass rattling on my teeth as my own hands shook. The house seemed to be breathing, creaking as the timbers swelled in the heat. It was bizarre.

"We need to leave, Dora."

The plants had receded, the glass of the windows too hot for them. Sunlight strobed onto the linoleum. The tin cans lazily swayed outside. Dora nodded, but dejectedly placed her hat back on her head.

"I can't leave my Joe, and to be honest, the garden won't let me. As soon as I try to get past the gate it gets *angry*." Something moved again against the window, I thought it was a bird but there were none about.

"Ok, I'll go and get some help then."

Dora nodded, "Be careful."

I closed the door as quietly as I could behind me, and tip-toed between the tin can alarm. I felt like I couldn't breathe.

"Joe?" I whispered, "Joe? Are you out here?"

There was no reply. I wondered who I should go to first, the police or the neighbours? As I turned, I heard a weak voice,

"Help me. I'm down here."

I could barely hear it. It came from under the house. I dropped to my knees to get a better look. There were no bird skeletons or rat carcasses, just half of Joe's face sticking out of the ground. I could see a couple of his fingers and one of his boots. He looked like he was in quicksand. I tried to dig away at the dirt around his face with my bare hands. He twisted his neck to help me, but something came out of the soil. I couldn't see clearly, but it was like a snake. It wrapped around my wrist and yanked my arm until I banged my head against the side of the house. I pulled away feeling blood run down my cheek. Joe let out a pitiful moan as his mouth began to fill with soil. I fell back and watched his face sink into the dirt. There was a choking sound as his last gasp was suffocated.

Bright green seedlings began to shoot up in the disturbed earth and reach out toward me. I was surrounded by the buzzing and chattering of the flowers and plants around me, they seemed agitated by the disturbance. Their stems thickened and leaves widened. I crawled toward the gate as they tried to wrap themselves around my legs and grab my wrists. Something tried to take a choke hold on me but I forced it off. Eventually I had to climb over a gnarly dog rose with its sharpened thorns that had entwined itself around the gate, making it too difficult to open. As I got in my car, I could hear Dora screaming and the tin can alarm rattling away.

Dora and Joe were declared missing. A neighbour had complained about the noise from their house. The clanking and banging of the tin cans all night made their dogs howl and bark. Someone said the police found Dora's battered hat and a pair of newly sharpened shears on the ground. The garden had been attacked. Someone had been hacking away at it in a frenzy! I can't tell anyone what I saw, in case they think it was me who made them disappear. The neighbours should be careful. Could be them next.

### **About the Author:**

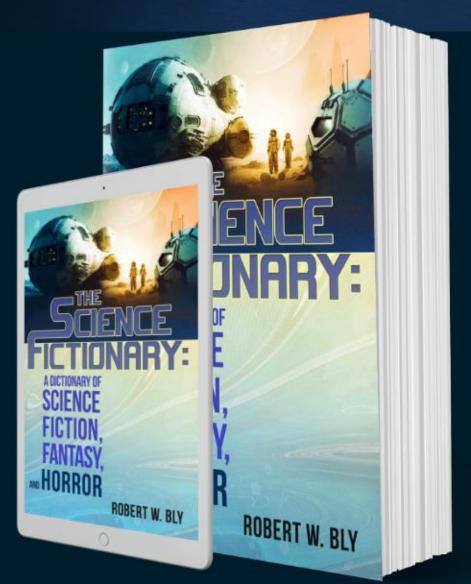
Donna Cuttress is from Liverpool, U.K. Previous works have been published by The Sirens Call, Celestial Press, Firbolg, Flame Tree, Nocturnal Sirens, Black Hare and Darkstroke's Dark Anthology series. Her work for The Patchwork Raven is available as an artbook. She has been a speaker at the London Book Fair. Her work with Red Cape publishing is now available on Audible.

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# SCIENCE SCIENC

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### **Blood Perfect** | *Stephen Howard*

Crouched in the corner of an abandoned stone cottage, Will tossed aside his last rat. Lines of dimming sunlight stretched across the dust-smeared floorboards. They receded as evening became night to a serenade of hooting owls and his intermittent whimpering.

A hinge screeched in pain as the door swung in.

"I'd have knocked but... Well, aren't you dressed sharp as Sinatra? You smell fresh. Just turned?"

Will rose to his feet, clinging to his corner despite the absence of sunlight.

"I don't know what happened. I was getting married on the 27<sup>th</sup>, but... outside the church, something attacked me. I woke up in a field, itchy, burning. Found this place to hide."

The woman in the doorway stepped further into the cottage. She wore jeans and hiking boots and a waterproof raincoat, totally prepared for the rough terrain. Will glanced down at his brown brogues and royal blue suit with dirt crust trimming.

"So less than a week old. Good. Rats, eh? You've been feeding, at least. My name is Roberta and I work with a group that supports newly-sired vampires. If you come with me, the organisation owns a halfway house on the edge of town."

"Vampires?" Will recoiled deeper into his dank corner, hands sliding through thick hair, detaching strays from his scalp.

"Allergic to sunlight? Sucking rats dry? You know what that means, and it's too late not to believe. What's your name?

Roberta stepped closer once again, holding out her hand. She looked completely human to Will, attractive even. And what had he left to lose?

\*\*\*

Roberta drove an old Land Rover and zipped down the country lanes at speeds more at home on a racetrack. "You were getting married?" Roberta asked, eyes fixed on the road, mouth curling up at the corner.

Will sank, head flopping into his hands. "Couldn't do it, couldn't go through with it. Poor Beth."

"And you've had all this time alone to dwell on it. That's rough. But that life is behind you now, there's no going back, no more Beth. The organisation can help... transform your perspective."

Scenery raced past as a blur, from green to grey as buildings sprouted with greater frequency, until with a single jarring swing they screeched into a car park and pulled up. A stumpy grey block of a building, a factory maybe, stood before them. Vampires probably hide in plain sight, Will figured, avoid drawing attention to themselves.

Through the front door, up a flight of stairs, their footsteps echoed, a lone clapping disturbance. They passed through another door, stepping out into a vast room of bronze and silver vats interconnected by a complex system of pipes. Vents criss-crossed the ceiling.

"Is this an out-of-use distillery or something?" Will placed his hands on the railing of the platform, which circled the main floor, overlooking the equipment. Yeast and iron rose like fog.

A key turning—scratch, click—and the simple, disturbing thought that Will didn't know this person, didn't know this place, didn't know this world, fizzed out from the fog and settled in his mind. And an urge to run, to get away: Will's default setting.

"How fresh, Roberta?" someone called. Emerging from an office at the far end of the platform was a well-dressed, tall, older man. Two heavies, vampire security guards, flanked him.

Roberta licked her lips, two sinister white flashes of fang taunting Will. "Under a week, Mr Ingle, ripe. One I turned myself. Thought I'd lost him for a day or two... Hank should be here with the other shortly."

"I don't understand?" Will spluttered, glancing from Roberta to the older man and his hulking guards.

"Vampires feed on blood, of course. But you know what vampires pay good money for, the thing that, once they've had a taste, they can never stop craving? The blood of our own. The younger the better."

"So you turned me just to what, drink from me?" Will's back touched the railings, felt cold. It was a long drop.

"Nearly, my boy, nearly," said Mr Ingle, blood red irises staring through Will, unblinking. "Our little distillery helps mass produce our vampire-infused elixir. It keeps us in a lifestyle we've become accustomed to, helps pay off the right authorities to overlook our existence. For us, it's the perfect drug. The vampire hierarchy remains intact and the underlings are controlled, as is the population."

A too-white smile glared at Will. The heavies stepped past Mr Ingle, meant to grab their secret ingredient. It wasn't such a long drop. Will flipped over the railing and fell. Not knowing what strength ran through his vampire form, it was risky, but the alternative was worse.

The concrete floor cracked and spat dust and debris.

"Fuck," he gasped. Pain, for sure, but nothing broken.

Panicked shouts from above spurred Will into action. Rising, he made straight for the nearest window, felt little need to get lost in the building's corridors.

Glass spluttered around him as he rolled away. He darted for the trees, glancing back as the car park came into view. Another Land Rover pulled in. A thick-set man appeared at the passenger door and dragged a blonde-haired woman out, crying, swearing, fighting.

Wearing a wedding dress.

Will stopped behind a tree and glared, a visceral nausea hitting like a stake to the heart. One foot, tentative and brave, edged toward the car park. A bang as the door burst open, Roberta and the old man's heavies sniffing the air like the hunter's they were, one of them running to grab the struggling woman and haul her indoors.

Everything in his life had fallen apart from the moment he'd run from their wedding. Running is what he did best, what came naturally. Will slunk back into the shadow of the trees, drifted away from Roberta, the old man, from Beth, and ran.

### **About the Author:**

Stephen Howard is an English novelist and short story writer from Manchester, now living in Cheshire with his fiancée, Rachel, and their daughter, Flo. An English Literature and Creative Writing graduate from the Open University, his work has been published by Lost Boys Press, The No Sleep Podcast, and Dark Recesses Press, among others. He's also published one novel, a comic fantasy titled Beyond Misty Mountain, and one short story collection titled Condemned To Be.

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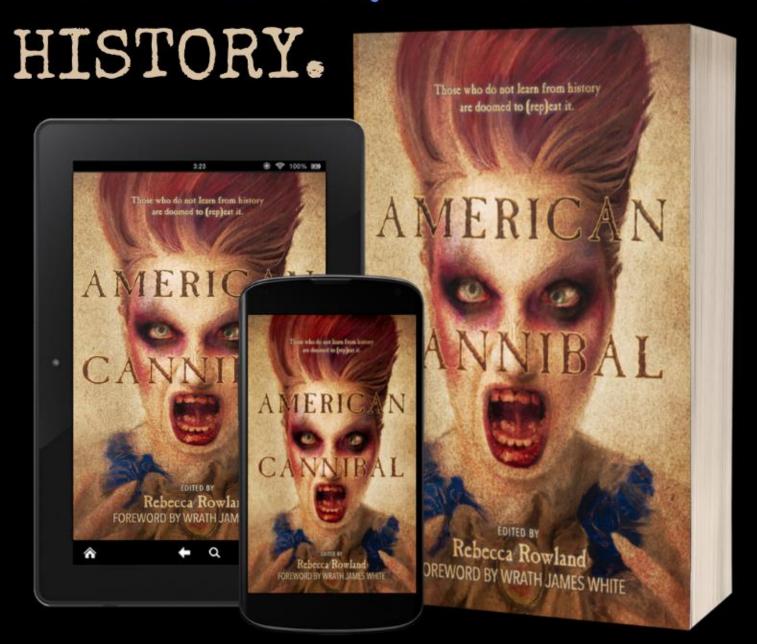
### The Season of the Wretch | Judson Michael Agla

I stumbled out of that shithole with my bag of angry rats slung over my shoulder carrying what was left of my right foot in my hand. Things got a little rough during the cock fight the night before. I ended up face down in the middle of the ring fighting off two doped up chickens with an insatiable drug-fueled bloodlust and razor blades duct taped to their feet. I didn't stand a chance in hell. I had to be dragged out by my hair, but not before bets were placed on how long I'd last. I was on every drug I could get a hold of. I was crippled and beaten staggering towards death's door. My rats were in a state of furious withdrawal; running out of P.C.P was a serious oversight so I gave them the severed piece of foot I was carrying to tie them over until I could replenish my drug stores. I certainly wasn't ever going to use it. Things were only going to get worse from here with the human sacrifices, cannibalism, gun fights and the Karaoke Macabre Murder Massacre still to come. It was a 'Dead Dog' kind of feeling in your gut, a feeling that dread and darkness were close and hungry. What a bloody mess! And it was only the beginning of the 'Season of the Wretch'.

### **About the Author:**

Judson is primarily a visual artist who has studied and practiced in the fine arts, classical animation, and illustration. Always drawn towards dark imagery and obscure commentary in his visual work, it wasn't surprising when he found a fondness for dark comedy, and now has a collection of published works in poetry and flash fiction, as well as the raw beginnings of a novella still in progress.

# Everything you learned about the Land of Liberty is about to be



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### The Goatman of Marcy | Kerry E.B Black

Tatum knew the only reason she'd been invited to join the group's nocturnal activities. And it had nothing to do with her own quirky personality. Indeed, the only reason for her inclusion was her cousin, Bobby. Bob to this group of soon-to-be high school freshmen. But they hadn't helped him learn to ride a bike or nursed him after he'd disturbed a fire ant colony. Tatum had. She'd sewed his ripped teddy bear and played catch with him. In fact, Bob and Tatum had spent every summer together since his mother had died when he was four.

Since then, Bob had been obsessed with the supernatural. He gravitated toward spooky stories at the library Book Faire and watched every creepy television show and movie, especially if it featured ghosts. He knew the best way to touch 'the other side'. Include Tatum. Her natural oddity stemmed from her abilities. Tatum spoke with ghosts all the time, so regularly, in fact, she often couldn't differentiate between the dead and the living. Hence, her reputation as a 'wacky'.

She didn't dress the part. She wore straight cut jeans and plain t-shirts. Nothing flashy. She didn't like to stand out. In fact, she allowed her hair to dangle in her face and obscure her features, as though she could thereby disappear. Tatum liked nothing better than to linger along the periphery of society and watch, because when people noticed her, they teased. Or worse. And when spirits noticed her, they refused to leave her alone.

Still, like Bob and the rest of his 'Urban Explorer' buddies, she shimmied through a gate around the abandoned Marcy Asylum intended, with its posted 'no trespassing' signs, to keep people out. The crisp, spring night air and the sense of rule breaking invigorated them. Besides Bob and Tatum, the group included Tom, Brian, and Nikki. All bore backpacks with ghost hunting gear. All jumpy and giggly, but none, they proudly proclaimed, afraid. Indeed, all eyes glistened with mischief. Hushed voices picked up pace, and they hopped like rabbits from hiding places to reach their destination. The back entrance to the main building.

The broken metal door's groan grew in pitch until it screamed an announcement of their passage. They giggled as they shushed each other. Except Tatum. No longer caught up in the artificial camaraderie, Tatum blinked solemn eyes as the oppressive environment settled over her like a shroud. As the group jostled one another, removing cameras and audio recording devices, she stepped, quiet as an inmate attempting escape, deeper into the building, eyes on the ceiling where she suspected trouble lurked.

Bob shone his phone's flashlight on a print out of the floorplan. The others gathered around to confirm their plan. Bob ran a finger along the map. "Nikki, Brian, and Tom, you go through those doors to the first floor and set up an EVP session." He pointed to the actual double doors beyond the stairwell in which they stood.

Tom's cheeks flushed. "What's an EVP session again?"

"Come on!" The other boys groaned, pushing Tom's shoulder and head, but Nikki remained patient. "Electronic Voice Phenomenon. Come on. We went over this. We ask questions and hope we record messages from things we can't see."

"I remember now." Tom ran his hand along the back of his bare, reddened neck.

"Tatum and I will go upstairs to the lockdown ward and see if we can get inside."

"So cool!" Brian bumped shoulders with Bob. "I wonder if they had electroshock treatments here."

"Or lobotomies." Nikki shuddered.

Tears welled in Tatum's eyes. She nodded silently, certain. She felt the confusion and pain radiating from the walls. She swallowed around a lump collecting in her throat. Shivers raced up her spine.

Like a spider whose web alerted it to prey, the asylum roused its spirits when the interlopers gathered. They huddled together, whispering, pointing, considering how best to greet these new, living people in their midst.

Tom glanced over his shoulder, eyes wide. "My sister said after this place was closed in the 80s, people used it for Satanic shit."

Nikki nodded. "I heard that, too."

Graffiti and litter pronounced the many previous trespassers' uses. Pentagrams and candle nubs. '666' and the lingering stench of burned sage. Used condoms, alcohol bottles, and cigarette butts. Brian filmed it without commentary, allowing Nikki and Tom's dialogue to provide the sound.

"I hope we see the Goatman." A wicked grin crossed Nikki's face, a swath of dark lipstick highlighting her straight, white teeth.

At the mention of the name Goatman, the spirits of the asylum stilled, as though by so doing, the use of the name wouldn't summon the emissary. The irregular thump of its feet told of its approach.

"Yeah," Tom bounced over, an equally goofy smile on his face. "What do you think it is?"

"Well," Nikki pointed to a circle painted with red paint at the bottom of a metal stairwell. "Obviously, something was summoned."

Brian peeked from behind his camera, pushing his glasses back to the bridge of his nose. "Nah, man, I heard it was an experiment gone wrong."

Tom bounced on the balls of his feet, unable to contain his enthusiasm. The action had the unfortunate effect of accentuating his untoned tummy. "Dude, my sister said the Goatman's been here since before the asylum was built, back when the pilgrims just started their pioneer, log cabin building crap."

"You mean like kicking my people off of their land?" Nikki scowled. "No." She glared. "I don't think it's a native spirit. I think Goatman's all yours."

Brian pointed the camera at Bob, who stood beside Tatum. "What do you think, oh illustrious leader?"

Bob disguised his serious expression when he turned to the others. "I say let's find out! If we can get some good footage, who knows? Maybe we'll prove the existence of the spirit realm."

Tom swooped into the frame. "Maybe we'll go viral and become millionaires!"

Nikki smirked. "Yeah, like that's gonna happen. More likely we'll be eaten by the Goatman, and he'll bury our bones in an unmarked grave with the rest of its victims."

The emissary approached, intent on convincing the interlopers of all the terror this location collected. With a shuffling step, it traveled a laborious pathway to the interlopers.

"Let's get started." Bob patted the enthusiastic Tom on his back. "You got this?"

"Yeah, man! Let's go!"

Tatum trembled as she watched the approach of the entity sometimes called the Emissary, sometimes the Goatman. He thumped down the stairs to their gathering place, wearing the stench of rot like cologne. He locked insanely rolling eyes on Tatum, the girl who glowed bright as a beacon to those like him. The girl easily overlooked by her fellow living classmates. He hulked, upright yet hunched, arms locked in place, restraining sleeves dangling along its front. Crippled legs propelled him along with an uneven gate. A diseased mind compelled him. His necrotic flesh purpled with past abuses. Head partly shaved and scarred, partly host to straggly hair.

"Tat, you okay?" Bob touched Tatum's shoulder and followed her gaze. "Oh my..."

"Holy—!" Tom noticed it, too. An apparition from nightmares. Goat faced. Slit-pupiled in rolling eyes. Approaching with an ominous shuffle step.

With wordless efficiency, Brian raised the camera as his weapon.

Nikki's mouth hung open in awe or disbelief. "It's real." Tom grabbed Nikki's arm. "It's real!"

The Goatman opened his mouth, ready to bite, to fight, to force this glowing girl and the others to understand the cruelty inflicted upon it and in fact upon most everyone housed within these oppressive walls. Prepared to claw out of restraints. Head rolling, tongue lolling, an insane, incomprehensible image of bestiality mingled with man's fractured intellect.

"What should we do?" Tom stepped in front of Nikki, though his whole body warned him to run. Brian lost his battle with courage and darted for the exit, befouling the captured images with his hasty retreat. "Let's get out of here!" Nikki tugged on Tom's shirt.

Tom needed little further encouragement. His insides threatened to leak out of every available orifice. Still, he stood his ground. "What about Bob? And his cousin?" Tom yelled, "Bob, let's get the hell out of here!"

Nikki followed Brian, the exit door a gong as she slammed it against the outside wall.

As the apparition closed on her, Tatum stumbled back, a scream strangling in her throat, hyperventilating to a faint. Before she lost consciousness, she registered Bob catching her.

Once they were safe in Bob's gameroom, their courage returned. "Can you believe that?" "Tell me you got that on film!" "Check the footage."

Tatum's head throbbed and her ears rang as she struggled toward consciousness. She whispered to her cousin, "Did you carry me the whole way?"

"Of course." He caught a lock of her sweat-soaked hair and tugged. "You've put on weight since the last time I had to deadlift you."

She winced at his word choice but settled into the obscuring, lumpy couch in the corner, where she could again seek the comfort of anonymity.

The others bemoaned the shaking footage. "You can still see it a little. See, there's its goaty front legs hanging down to its belly." "It was bigger than I thought it would be." "Yeah, probably almost six feet tall!" Brian broke out his

camera and rolled, capturing their again exuberant descriptions. "That thing had mad horns." "And did you see how it walked! It looked like an upright goat." "I've never seen anything like that in my life!"

After their rhapsodic discourse calmed, they took inventory. They'd lost two recording devices and a light box designed to alert them to spectral presences.

Tatum curled into a protective ball, a more reliable but easier overlooked indicator of ghosts than the hokey equipment. But at least they'd survived their encounter with the Goatman.

### **About the Author:**

Kerry E.B. Black authored two YA novels and three collections of short stories, and many of her short works have crept into anthologies, magazines, and online journals. When not writing, Kerry sings songs with seniors, advocates for the disabled, and reads (and reviews) everything she can. She's a member of the HWA, Wily Writers, Nomadic Wordsters, and is a Rough Writer at Carrot Ranch.

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### Gold | Kathleen McCluskey

James could hear the wind howling as his tent rattled violently from the gusts. He sat back and listened intently. He tried to block out the sounds of the night and focus on a different vibration coming from the desolate, frozen wasteland. His captors, long gone, thought that the cold would be the beginning of his demise. Little did they know that his kind could survive in the most extreme climate, including here in this icy realm.

He twisted his wrists, trying in vain to remove the golden cuffs. His captors were smarter than he had anticipated and captured him with the only metal on the planet that could contain him: gold. His capture was quite pedestrian and he was disappointed in himself that he was so easily incarcerated. The moment that he knew that they were planning an arctic expulsion for him, he smiled inwardly. His kind would find him.

James closed his eyes and began to hum, a song that would only be heard by his brethren. His purring became louder and louder until cutting through the howling wind a response was heard. James popped open his eyes and began to howl. A reassuring howl responded. His family was close, he threw his head back and inhaled deeply though his nose. He could smell his clan. He searched frantically for something, anything to release himself from the golden constraints.

James could hear soft sniffing as a large, white nose pushed through the door of the tent. It pushed a key, the key to his freedom, into the tent. Unlocking the handcuffs and exiting the tent James began to transform. He was elated to finally be free of this human form. His body convulsed as his true being began to emerge. Large talons cracked the ice and long white fur replaced his vulnerable human skin. He was once again part of the abominable snowman tribe. Howling the song of the Yeti, he embraced his female and the troop fled back into their frozen domain.

### **About the Author:**

Kathleen McCluskey is the novelist of THE LONG FALL series. She enjoys her time swimming, reading and of course, writing. Being a native of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania she is an avid Steelers and Penguins fan. Kathleen is the mother of two and relishes in the time she can spend with her adult children.

Author Webpage: <u>Kathleen McCluskey</u> Instagram: <u>@AuthorKatMcC</u>



### Benny | Rie Sheridan Rose

Benny stared out over the city below him. From his perch here on the edge of the roof, he could see it laid out like a sparkling, gem-laden buffet. Lights in all colors of the rainbow twinkled and shone along the ribbons of streets meandering everywhere and nowhere.

He saw it all, but it no longer excited him. Nothing did. Some days he felt like just stepping forward off the roof and free-falling to the pavement. It would be an adventure—even if the ending was inevitable.

But he stayed put. Doing what he was tasked to do—watching over the city and waiting for the call. The call to what, from whom, he no longer remembered or cared. If he could only hear the call—even for an instant—maybe life would be worth living again.

A scraping sound to his right made him sit up and swivel his head to look. No one ever came here. It might be the call at last!

No, just a thin girl in torn leggings lifting herself onto the wall surrounding the roof. That wasn't good. It wasn't safe. The building was old, and the mortar crumbling. She had to be careful or she might—

—No, not good at all. She was climbing to her feet atop the narrow wall, and now Benny could see the tracks of tears glittering in the moonlight.

"Hey!" he growled. "What do you think you are doing?"

The girl started and almost lost her balance.

Benny sprang up from his crouch instinctively, wings unfurling from his back.

The girl gave a little squeak and fell backwards. Luckily, onto the rooftop.

Deciding he might as well go for broke now that he'd revealed himself, Benny swept downward with his wings and rose to hover just above the roof. "You okay?"

She gasped, backing away from him in an awkward crab crawl. "Who—what—are you?"

"I am Benigna Vigilator—that's 'Kindly Watcher' in American—but you can call me Benny. I was set to watch *this* place. It's my job to watch out for it and all who come near it. Deadly dull it is, too. Been waiting for new instructions so long I've forgotten what to listen for."

She blinked, as if the answer surprised her. "B-but you are—"

"Made of stone," Benny sighed. "I know. I've been sitting up here for more than a century and no one the wiser ... but I couldn't let you do what it looked like you were about to do, Miss. Not on my watch."

"Gracie. My name is Gracie. And ... why do you care?"

"I told you. I watch this place. Make sure nothing bad happens to it. Or to anyone in it. Why did you want to do what you were about to do?"

Gracie hung her head. "You wouldn't understand."

"What, you think just because I'm made of stone I don't have feelings? That I don't understand emotions and stuff?" That made him just a bit angry. Just because he was a gargoyle. Why he oughta—what?

Eat her whispered a tiny voice in the back of his mind. He shook it off. He didn't eat. Especially people.

"How could you? Especially if you've been sitting on this building for the last hundred years?"

"I listen. I pay attention. Old Joe in 710 likes to watch the soaps and reality shows, and he's deaf as a post, so I can hear every word through the window. In the summer, he leaves the window up, so it's even easier to hear. Tisha in 306 likes to sit on the stoop with her radio blasting, and I've learned a lot from song lyrics too. All about heartache and loneliness and stuff—not that I needed much by way of instruction on that last one."

Gracie gave a halfhearted laugh. "You get lonely?"

"Didn't I just say I have feelings and a brain? Of course, I get lonely. Now, what got you standing tip-toe on top of a ten-story building?"

Her face grew still, and Benny's sharp eyes detected a change in the shade of her skin, even in the darkness. "It's been a double-whammy kinda day, Benny. My boyfriend decided I wasn't good enough for him, and so did the art school I'd applied for. Took every dime I had to pay their application fees, and then I find out it's a scam. Pete was so pissed that 'I told you so' wasn't enough for him. Tossed me out on my ear. He wouldn't even loan me money for a hotel room after five years of living together. Threw me out in the middle of the night with the clothes on my back. Wouldn't even let me grab a bag.

"Taking a long walk on this short wall looked pretty good to me."

"Hey, girl, I know what you mean. Plenty of times I've thought about doing that same thing myself. Just before you got here, for instance.

"But in the end, you'd be dead. Pete would move on. The school would scam another thousand people. Nothing will change except you won't be around to make a difference. Look at it this way—you're free now. Free to be whoever and whatever you want to be. Free to show Pete how accomplished you are without him. And to show the world that school isn't worth a hill of beans."

"I suppose you're right. And, with my luck, I'd survive the fall as a quadriplegic and have no one to take care of me."

Maybe he should eat her ... for her own good ... nah.

A crazy idea sprang into Benny's head. "Hey, Gracie—I got an idea. You need to prove yourself as an artist, right?"

"Yeah ..."

"What do you think people would pay to see your interpretation of a modern gargoyle? You get a space, I'll fly down and pose—maybe wear a hat sometimes—and we'll make you some money."

"That sounds well and good, Benny, but I just told you—I haven't got a dime. And a gallery would want more than one piece for an exhibition. I'd need supplies, and time, and—"

"Well, what about we set up on a corner for now? Until we get you a stake. I can look ferocious one day, and pensive the next. I don't eat, so my share of the profits can go straight into the bank if you want."

It wasn't as if he couldn't eat, but he usually didn't waste the energy on hunting. She'll be handy if you do get hungry ... whispered the little voice again. What the hell was that anyway? It couldn't be the call he'd been waiting for ... could it?

"People will start coming back to see what new creation you've set up. You'll be the new 'it' thing. I think I know just the spot. At night, you can curl up against the wall and I'll stand in front of you and hide you from danger. Just till you get on your feet."

"Won't people notice the gargoyle is gone from this building?"

"Nah, no one looks up any more. Too busy staring at their devices. What do you say?"

"What's in it for you, Benny?"

"I'm bored out of my freaking mind up here. It would be nice to get a change of scenery for a while. Be someone else for a change ... I can do a pretty mean 'Thinker' impersonation." He proceeded to show her, screwing his face up in a comical grimace.

Gracie giggled, sounding younger and more together than she had since they met.

"Whaddya say? Might even make me less likely to walk off the building myself."

"All right. What do I have to lose? Pete's probably changed the locks on the door by now, the rat bastard."

"There's an old blanket they use to cover the plants in the winter over there behind that planter. Grab it to sleep on tonight and I'll take you over to the corner. We can figure out a way to get some of your stuff tomorrow."

"Take ... me ...?"

"You ever wanted to fly, Gracie?" Benny felt younger and stronger than he had in a very long time.

Eyes shining like stars, she ran across the roof and retrieved the blanket.

When she returned, Benny crouched down on the roof. "Put the blanket between you and my back to carry it—and provide a little padding. Climb up, and put your arms around my neck."

She did as she was told.

"Ready?"

"Ready!"

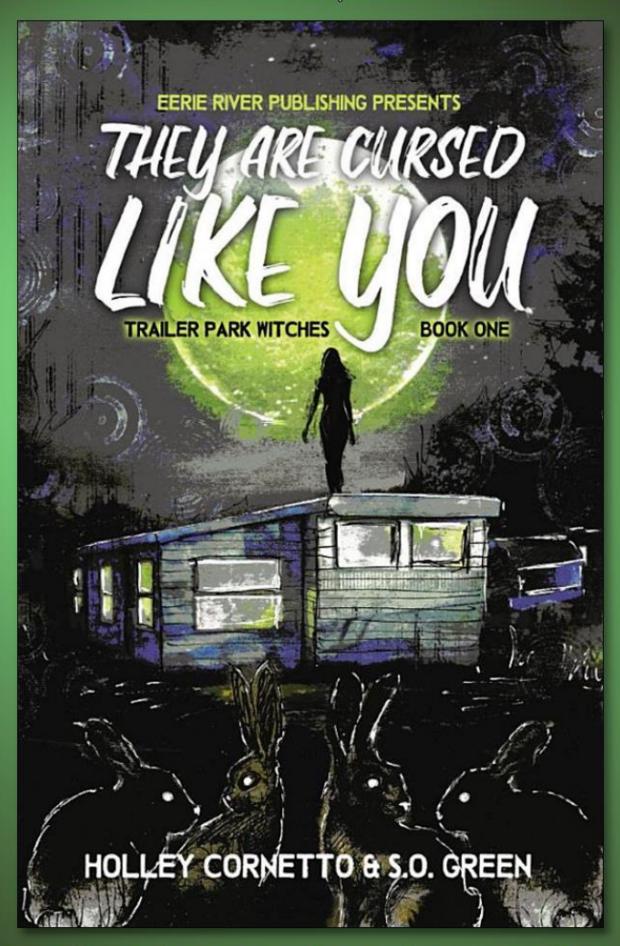
Benny leapt into the air, wings beating in powerful strokes as he rose above the city. For the first time in a long time, he felt like he was living up to his name. And if it didn't work out—he could always eat her.

### **About the Author:**

Rie Sheridan Rose is a herder of cats, collector of crows, and sometimes published author. She lives deep in the heart of Texas, creating webs of words and knocking down the real ones.

Instagram: @riesheridanrose
Twitter: @riesheridanrose

The Wolf is owed four rabbits, and he's come to collect.



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

### Where Memories Flow | Alex Grehy

"Remember Tryweryn!" Glyn shouted, waving his worn protest placard at the drought-depleted lake. Water still sparkled in the deepest part of the reservoir, but here, amidst the cracked mud, the bones of Capel Celyn village were borne to the sun.

"Remember Tryweryn!" he repeated. "They drowned our community, for greed!"

He looked around. A few curious sheep stopped their grazing to stare at him.

"Shoo!" he said, "you'll get stuck in the mud."

The sheep wandered off.

He sat down on a low wall jutting out of the mud and stared at the placard. Beneath the words 'Cofiwch Tryweryn' there was a black and white print, enlarged into graininess. Yet the image was sharp in his memory – the cosy farmhouse kitchen, a woman in a wrap-around apron holding a large teapot. Her husband, wearing the flannel garb of a farm worker, sitting at the table while his son, ten-year-old Glyn, sat on the floor, playing with two border collies.

"I remember!" he said to the pair of red kites wheeling idly in a thermal rising from the valley floor. Glyn shook his head, beautiful as the birds were, they were new to the landscape, having been snatched from the brink of extinction by a conservation programme. Some things could be saved, but not Capel Celyn village. There were few left to share Glyn's memories and he'd made this year's pilgrimage alone.

He got up and walked around the ruins of his childhood home, still recognisable, despite its sixty-year submersion in the reservoir.

"I remember!" he told the dry wind whispering among the old buildings. As the water had receded during that year's heatwave, the memories had come flooding back. Of being ordered to leave their homes so their valley could be turned into a reservoir. Of helping his father to load a cart with their possessions. For the first few miles of the migration he'd run with his friends along the one narrow road that led from the valley. Then they were gone, their ways parted as their families were dispersed to a dozen different towns.

Glyn reached for his backpack. *Typical*, he thought as he noticed that the bottle of mineral water he'd brought with him was leaking. He watched the tiny stream of water flow into a gutter that ran under the ruins. He thought everything had been plugged with puddle clay when they built the reservoir, but shrinkage caused by the drought had exposed many forgotten things. Not that Glyn ever forgot – when he was a boy, he'd fancied the gutter led to an underground land populated with fabulous monsters in need of slaying. He shook the bottle – just a sip left.

"Would you like some of my water?"

Glyn turned quickly. A woman stood not three feet away from him.

"Where did you come from?" he asked.

The woman laughed, her face as crinkled as the cracked mud beneath her feet.

"I was over there," she waved vaguely, "I heard you shouting," she said.

"Ah, yes, sorry about the noise, it's just..." he waved aimlessly.

"I know." she looked out across the barren valley. "Hard to believe this was once a green and vibrant community."

"It was cruel. My mother never recovered, torn from her roots. There are whole generations of our family buried here. They offered to move the bodies, but she refused to disturb their rest just for her comfort. Broke her heart." Glyn looked over to the mud-crusted concrete slab they'd laid to seal the old graveyard.

"Broke yours too, by the sounds of it."

"In a way, I guess. I come here on her birthday every year, to remember. But you can't turn the clock back. Though I've never seen the water so low before – it's like the village is being reborn."

"Is that what you'd like?" the woman asked.

"Yes. But it's an old man's dream."

"It's old men that make the future, look at the government." She grinned.

"If I knew of a way to bring a new community here, would you be interested?" she asked, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. Glyn stared over the valley for a moment then turned.

"I'm sorry, where are my manners, I'm Glyn Morris." He reached out and they shook hands. Her hands were pale, soft and slightly wrinkled, as if she'd spent too long washing dishes.

"Hello, I'm Cafan."

"That's an unusual name."

"So, where did you say you'd left your manners?" Cafan said, smiling.

Glyn's face reddened. "I meant unusual in a good way, beautiful, like you," he stuttered.

She laughed again. "I'm teasing, it is an unusual name, but I'll take the compliment."

Cafan extended an elbow in invitation. Glyn caught himself staring, she must have been in her seventies, like him, but she was vibrant, her energy shimmering like the heat haze over the valley. He linked his arm with hers, his eyes fixed on her fascinating face.

"Would you like a drink, Glyn?" she asked.

"Oh thanks, but I've got a sip of water left."

"I wasn't thinking of water, let's go to the pub and talk about that future."

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"Come on, Glyn, it'll be dark soon and we need to set the charges."

He watched her, lithe and lovely, striding along the path to the reservoir. His eyes filled with tears. He'd never imagined he'd find love at his age, but that chance meeting with Cafan a year ago had transformed his life. From the time he'd set eyes on her he'd been entranced.

He shivered; the setting sun spread a golden dusk across the lake; but a brightening moon cast sinister shadows across the landscape.

"I'm sorry, love, I'm not as fit as you," he puffed.

Cafan walked back and hugged him tightly. "It's ok, I'm just excited, we've worked hard on this and I don't want us to fail. It's your dream." She strode back to her backpacks and shouldered them easily.

It had been another summer of record-breaking temperatures and once again the village was exposed. He'd heard talk of the reservoir being sold. Apparently the owners were disheartened by successive droughts, and the infrastructure, designed to be underwater, was too costly to maintain. Glyn's hopes had soared, developers might take an interest, rebuild a new community there.

"Come on! Stop daydreaming," Cafan hissed.

Glyn hurried to catch up. She was right, he was an old man caught up in his past. But every time he looked into her eyes, he saw a future; he saw hope. She was the driving force in his life.

Nonetheless, she didn't have the skill to set the charges that would breach the reservoir's clay lining once and for all. His mind wandered again. He should have been a farmer, like his forefathers, but instead he'd become a miner, the only source of work in the dreary town they'd been relocated to. Every day he worked underground had been a little death, buried out of reach of daylight and clean air; but now the skills he'd learnt would be the making of him.

He shook his head. He'd been hijacked by his memories again, as he had been his whole life. He looked up. Cafan was in place, silhouetted by the moon. By gods, she was lovely, surrounded by a shimmering silver aura.

He rushed forward, his gaze focused on the uneven ground as he bowed under the weight of his backpack. The shadows around him coalesced into a monstrous form, unnaturally tall with broad claws and a fang-lined muzzle. He looked up, alarmed, but there were no beasts, only Cafan, stretching in the moonlight.

Over the last few months, they'd widened the entrance to the gutter that ran below the village. Cafan's eyes shone as Glyn put on his old miner's helmet and turned the head torch on. He peered into the hole, which had expanded again as the clay shrank. In the dim light, he was surprised to see the gutter open into what looked like a large cavern. He crawled in, headfirst then turned carefully and balanced his feet on a wide ledge of stone – probably the village's deep foundation stones. The cavern was vast, he couldn't see the far end of it, though the roof was low. A few feet beneath him dark water rippled. He'd never guessed there was an underground lake here, but he shrugged it off. Being inundated by a reservoir for half a century must have affected the area's geology.

"Are you ready to set the charges?" Cafan's voice echoed round the chamber.

"Come on down, love, see what I've found."

He felt Cafan slither into the cavern. He held his hand out to steady her, but she slipped and fell into the water with a mighty splash.

"CAFAN!" he yelled, shining his torch around. Then her head popped above the surface, laughing.

"Come and have a swim before we blow this place, the water's lovely." She swam gracefully around the circle of light from his torch.

"Lovely?" he said, shivering from the frigid water that had drenched him when she fell. "Aren't you freezing? Come on, let me give you a hand. We need to talk; I wasn't expecting this."

Cafan launched herself out of the water and sat on a foundation stone next to Glyn. She shook her head, droplets creating rainbows in the torchlight. When Glyn looked over, her hair looked as dry as if she'd stepped out of the hairdresser's.

"I'm not sure about this," he said, as they crawled out of the cavern.

"Look at me," she said, and Glyn once again found himself mesmerized. She had never disguised her age, yet she made him feel like a teenager.

"I bet that lake's just a remnant of the reservoir," she said, "it's not that deep, I should know."

She elbowed him playfully. "Let's set the charges, without all this imported clay, the water will drain away, and you'll have your valley back."

Glyn gathered the backpacks and started preparing the charges. They used modern explosives in the mines nowadays, but the old timers he'd worked with had taught him how to make gunpowder from a few simple ingredients. 'Just a bit of fun', they'd told him, 'a few firecrackers for the kids'. Oh yes, thought Glyn, just a bit of fun. He recalled a boyhood memory of a gang of locals trying to save the valley, unsuccessfully, by blowing the dam as it was being built.

Despite the baking heat, the clay of the reservoir bed was soft enough for them to push the charges into the ground. He felt a pang at destroying the remnants of the village, but a new community would need new houses, not these old ruins. Demolition was inevitable.

He ran the fuse wires back to their mustering point – a little hillock overlooking the reservoir. Cafan had already prepared the detonating switch. He threaded the wires through and by 11:30pm they were ready. They'd decided to detonate at midnight, the hour of bards and legends.

Glyn took a thermos of hot tea from his backpack and poured her a cup. She grinned at him. His heart leapt; she was gorgeous – her classic oval face, soft cheekbones and almond eyes; her cheeks not so much wrinkled as written with the rich story of her life. He reached out and hugged her tight as they sat sipping tea and watching the reflection of the crescent moon in what little water was left in the parched reservoir.

Midnight arrived.

She reached for his hand and put it on the controller. Any doubts he had were washed away by her thrilling voice, which resonated with love and hope.

"On the count of three, let's make our dreams come true," she said.

"Yes!" he breathed.

An instant later, the valley reverberated as the charges exploded. It sounded like thunder to Glyn, and he hoped that anyone awake in distant towns would assume it was a summer storm.

When the last charge had gone off, he put the thermos in his backpack and got ready to leave. It would be up to the engineers to discover the damage and conclude that the reservoir was no longer fit for purpose.

"Cafan! Time to go," he called.

She was standing on a nearby boulder, poised on her toes, arms outstretched like a diver, head tilted as if listening.

"Shhhhh!" she replied, "it's coming."

He peered into the darkness. Then he heard it, the gurgling roar of water rushing down the valley. He looked down on the remains of the village. Water was rising rapidly, the inexorable force of the flow pushing stones along the valley floor. The concrete cap over the graveyard bulged upwards then cracked with a deafening retort.

"What have we done?" Glyn shouted. "Where is this water coming from?"

Cafan stood, eyes closed, her arms moving gracefully, like a music conductor, orchestrating the performance as the water rose impossibly fast.

"Cafan?" he shouted.

"Afanc," she said. "My name is Afanc. I was imprisoned in the cavern, but the water from your leaky bottle made a channel for my escape. Fate, I reckon."

Glyn recoiled, confused. He was the dreamer, but here was his clear-sighted lover claiming to be the Afanc, savage water demon of Welsh legend.

She stepped down from the boulder and held out her hand. "I was trapped underground. You know how that feels, don't you? You know what it is to crave the light. We are soulmates, Glyn, of a sort."

When she grasped his hand, he fancied her skin felt scaly, harsh, but he did not pull away. He was captivated by her eyes, her now round eyes, deep green, with a narrow vertical slit for a pupil. She hugged him, her once tender embrace now crushing. She grinned, showing fearsome white teeth, too many teeth, in a long, reptilian face.

"My love, let me wash away your sorrows," she said.

He felt the water rise to cover his feet, then his ankles. She held him close. The water crept up to his waist. It was impossible, the reservoir had never risen this high, even at its peak. "How?" he croaked.

"I am Afanc, and by the power of your love, I am calling the waters here, all the waters. I will be free to roam the earth again."

"No!" Glyn squirmed in her grasp, horrified, desperate to escape. She was all monster now, exultant in her element. The water was up to his neck.

"Glyn, my love, it's time, come swim with me and let your memories dissolve in the cleansing deep."

Glyn felt the Afanc lean forward. The water flowed into his mouth and nose as she pushed him deeper. Through his panic he heard her whisper.

"Those who wronged you will pay, my love. Water they wanted, and water they shall have. With one flick of my tail they will be inundated, drowned. Sleep now, my love."

### About the Author:

Alex Grehy (she/her) is a regular contributor to *Sirens Call. Her* vivid prose and thought-provoking poetry has featured in a wide range publications including *Aphotic Realm* and Luna Station Quarterly and anthologies by Water Dragon and Red Penguin. She has also published essays on her experiences as a Lady of Horror. Her sweet life is filled with narrowboating, rescue greyhounds, singing and chocolate.

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### The Quick Ghost | Maggie D. Brace

Traipsing through the verdant fields of Western Maryland late one evening, I came face to face with the strangest of creatures. I had just emerged from the woods, drawn by the lowing sounds of a small herd of cattle, when the air was rent by the leathery creaks and flaps of wings echoing off the walls of the nearby barn. A sudden gust of wind blew, which set my teeth on edge. A prickling sensation coursed across my scalp as I slowly turned toward the commotion. The most hideous creature I've ever seen clomped towards me on tree trunk-like legs. It's long tapering tail alternately coiled and uncoiled rhythmically. I found myself entranced by the movement until it stepped closer and I glimpsed its hideous maw. It sported squid-like tentacles surrounding a metallic beak with razor sharp fangs. Viscous droplets congealed on its tentacles, occasionally dripping to the ground or spraying out like aerosol propelled by its reeking, hot breath. As if seeing me for the first time, its beady eyes focused on me like a laser beam, step by step approaching nearer. I shrank with my back against the barn trying to make myself appear small and insignificant. As if stopped by a force field, the creature reared up, quickly gyrated its girth around, and with one wing flap took off with surprising agility. It swooped down toward the herd of grazing cows, seized a startled heifer in its glinting talons, and disappeared into the twilight sky.

As I stood gaping at the spectacle, the landowner approached with shotgun clutched in his hand. "Yep, you done stared a Snallygaster down and lived to tell about it!" he drawled. He invited me in for a shot or two to warm my bones and then delighted in divulging the local lore of the Quick Ghost, which had plagued these mountain farms for centuries. He contended the colorful seven-sided star emblazoned on the side of his barn had been the real reason for my rescue. In olden days, it became a symbol to ward off the evil creature. As you can imagine, I haven't set foot in them there hills without my own personal seven-sided star embroidered on my jacket, for nigh on fifty years.

### **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.

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### Pud-Wuk-Jie Crossing | Shawnna Deresch

Henry sat on the stoop of the First Evangelical Church of Madison County picking at the pieces of dead skin around his cuticles. He had already bitten his nails to the quick.

"Henry. Henry." His mother squawked at him from across the church's parking lot. The woman lifted her cane in the air fervently demanding Henry's undivided attention. "What are you doing over there just sitting around? Help me with these flowers."

Henry sighed. He didn't know how much more he could take of her. He had to get a job so he could move out from his mother's basement.

"I can help you, Mrs. Carter." The cemetery caretaker appeared behind Henry and limped over to help the woman remove flats of flowers from her trunk.

Henry begrudgingly joined them. His few moments of peace shattered.

"Thank you, Mr. Batten." She poked Henry's chest with her cane. "Henry, you should learn some manners from this man."

"Yes. Ma'am." He knew it was better to agree with her than risk getting the cane again later.

Several cars headed down the gravel road to the parking lot that the First Evangelical Church and cemetery shared. Clouds of dust followed the cars like a mist draping itself over the church and cemetery, cutting them off from the rest of the world. Henry's throat tightened up.

One by one the church ladies gathered by the entrance of the cemetery with flats full of flowers and garden supplies. The women had appointed themselves stewards of the cemetery's entrance garden, planting flowers they believed would protect them from the dead and help the deceased to rest in place. Henry shrugged off old wives' tales.

The jabbering church ladies were too much for him. He needed to escape these cackling hens. Mr. Batten must have read his mind.

"Henry, why don't you come help me get some shovels?" Mr. Batten slapped him on the back. Henry was grateful to escape.

"Sure thing, Mr. Batten."

His mother scowled at Henry so only he would see her irritation with him.

He followed the caretaker into the cemetery and to a gatehouse near the entrance. Shards of glass covered the ground around it and the smell of damp, rotted wood stung his nose.

"I just have to get the keys to the shed."

Henry walked up to a post next to the gatehouse. A sign hung on it.

Help Wanted-Assistance Caretaker. The Madison County First Evangelical Cemetery needs a full-time assistant caretaker. No experience needed. Will train a responsible person who is fit, able to run fast, duck and roll, needs to know how to play hide and seek. More hide than seek.

"Looking for a job?" Mr. Batten asked as Henry gawked at the sign.

"Yes, I'll take it."

The old man laughed. "Don't you want to know what the job duties are?"

"I don't care. I'll take it."

"We've had several caretakers quit in the last few weeks. No one really sticks around too much. You know, creepy cemeteries. The mind can play tricks on you when it's dark. Shadows come alive. You're out here on your own. Most of the time."

"Most of the time? Who else would be out here?"

"Teenagers out partying." The man hesitated, but Henry felt that he wanted to say more, but didn't. He didn't care. This was his way to freedom.

He followed behind as the man limped to the shed. "Here, put these on," he handed Henry a pair of steeled-toe boots and a walking stick.

"Why do I need a walking stick?" He asked the old man.

"You'll see. There's a little caretaker house down the path some. That comes with the job."

"You live there too?" He asked.

"Nope. I stay in town," he chuckled. Henry wanted to ask why, but it didn't matter. He was happy he'd have his own place.

"Your mother is known to be a little abrasive in the congregation."

"A little abrasive?" It slipped out of his mouth so fast that he had to turn away from Mr. Batten so he wouldn't see his cheeks flushed red with embarrassment.

Mr. Batten laughed. "It's fine, son. I had a mother once too."

They continued walking down the path, Mr. Batten pointing out certain statues and headstones that Henry would be responsible for the upkeep. He had never been to the back of the cemetery. The men walked side by side, Mr. Batten swiping the path in front of them to move away leaves and some debris to clear a path. It looked like no one came back this far.

A yellow crossing sign stood at the fork in the road. Beware of Puk-Wud-Jie.

"What's a Puk-Wud-Jie?" He asked the old man.

"They're called little wild men of the forests. When the indigenous Delaware tribe here in Indiana lived on this land, they were believed to be friendly. But eventually they turned on humans because they wanted to be left alone."

"What do they look like?"

"You'll find out soon enough. Just stay away from them. They're sneaky little shits. One minute they look like a porcupine and the next they look like a half-troll, half-human. Avoid them. And if you do see one, ignore it. They're tricksters most of the time and you had best be careful if one catches you. It'll glom on you forever."

"A shapeshifter?" Henry laughed. He couldn't believe this man was serious. Maybe he was hazing him since he was new. An initiation of sorts.

The man looked dead in Henry's eyes. "Do not mess with them. They like places that are haunted. And you know the First Evangelical Cemetery is the most haunted place in Madison County."

Mr. Batten pulled up one of his pant legs and pointed to the seven-inch-long scars that ran down the side of his calf. "The county had me move a gravesite. The little fuckers almost beat me to a pulp because I was messing with one of their own's gravesite. They have claws like a bear." He rolled the pant leg down. "This walking stick saved me. I fought several of them off me. Thought I was goner for a moment."

Henry was still in disbelief. He didn't believe in cryptids nor haunted cemeteries.

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Henry raked up the empty beer bottles and cigarette butts scattered around Mr. Caster's grave. If this was what he had to deal with, a bunch of rowdy teenagers messing the place up, he would take this over his mother yelling at him any time.

He bent over to pick up the debris. Leaves rustled near him. He looked up and saw a three-foot half-troll, half-human creature throw a beer bottle at him. It landed a few feet in front of him. He threw another and another in rapid fire, each coming closer to him.

Henry grabbed his walking stick and waved it at the creature.

"Hey, you little shit. Get out of here." This is what the old man had warned him about. These cryptid creatures really did exist. He had become a believer real quick.

The Puk-Wud-Jie scurried away. The walking stick kept it at bay.

\*\*\*

Saturday morning Henry walked over to the church to meet his mother and the ladies who would be there for their weekly cleanup of the entrance of the cemetery. Hopefully, the Puk-Wud-Jie would stay away while he helped the women.

His mother's Buick rumbled down the gravel road. She was the first one there.

Without a word to his mother, Henry emptied out her trunk full of garden supplies. He didn't want to give his mother any reason to use her cane on him.

Henry spied a Puk-Wud-Jie creeping behind her.

"Go away." He shooed it away with his walking stick. It skittered away. Another one crawled up Henry's leg and humped it like he was trying to mate with him. He shook his leg, and the Puk-Wud-Jie flew off into some shrubs.

"Who are you talking to, Henry?"

"No one. Just to myself."

"You shouldn't be living out here by yourself. It'll make you go crazy."

As if he wasn't already crazy, he mused.

His mother laid her folding garden kneeler on the ground and began pulling the wisteria off the cemetery sign. The vines, like tentacles wrapped around everything including the plants his mother and the ladies group planted last week. Henry pulled the vines furiously off the sign. He wanted his mother to leave before the Puk-Wud-Jies came back.

Too late. One of the little creatures snuck up behind his mother carrying wisteria from the pulled pile. It whipped a handful at her back.

"What the... Henry, why did you do that?" Her nose flared and she raised her cane to smack Henry.

Henry shielded himself with his arms. He flinched ready for the cane. Nothing.

Then a loud crack and thud.

Henry opened his eyes and saw his mother lying on the ground. Blood streaming from her forehead. A dozen or so Puk-Wud-Jies stood around his mother holding hands as if they were preparing for a ritual.

He pushed one of them out of the way, breaking the circle, and knelt on the ground next to his mother. He cradled her head in his arms.

"Ma, ma, wake up. I promise I'll be good." He nudged her head a little to get her to wake up, but she laid still. He needed to call for help. He gently put his mother's head on the ground and reached into his jean pockets to find his cell phone. His pockets were empty. No cell phone. He must have dropped it when he was pulling his mother's garden supplies out of the trunk.

The Puk-Wud-Jie who had humped his leg before appeared from behind a shrub and held Henry's cell phone in the air as if holding it hostage.

His walking stick. What did he do with it?

Before Henry could search for it, a Puk-Wud-Jie pounced on him from behind, his arms wrapped tightly around Henry's neck causing him to choke. Another crawled up his leg while two others tugged at his arms. Others tackled Henry from every direction. He finally succumbed to their attack and fell to the ground. Several Puk-Wud-Jies pulled his arms and legs until he was spread eagle. Others threw wisteria vines over him and fastened them in the ground with wooden spikes. He was trapped like Gulliver in Gulliver's Travels.

"Leave me alone." Henry cried out, struggling against the vines, but they were too strong, and he couldn't move.

"Leave me alone." They cried in unison, mocking him.

One of the trolls jumped onto his mother. The others gathered in a circle around Henry and his mother. Slowly, the Puk-Wud-Jies moved in with their walking sticks.

Henry, yelled angrily, "What are you doing? Get out of here."

The leader ignored him, perched himself high on Henry's mother's head. His crown of thorny hair stood on ends down its back. He raised Henry's walking stick in the air. A high-pitched shriek pierced the cemetery. A war cry. The sound pierced Henry's eardrums.

In one swoop, the leader brought Henry's walking stick down and stabbed his mother in one of her eyes. Blood spurted out in an arc and spilled onto Henry's face.

"Let me go you little bastards!" Henry screamed at the Puk-Wud-Jies. His cries roused the creatures even more.

Like a ravenous mob, they attacked Henry's mother's body with their walking sticks. Some impaling them in her organs while one bashed her head with its walking stick.

While the other Pud-Wud-Jies viciously tore the woman's flesh to shreds, the leader jumped over onto Henry's chest. He looked down, "Don't worry, Henry. We'll take care of you."

### **About the Author:**

Shawnna Deresch has been crafting scary stories since she could first talk. She travels extensively and splits her time between the Chicagoland area and the coast of South Carolina. Her short stories have appeared in Kandisha Press Women of Horror Anthology Volume 3 and D&T Publishing ABC's of Terror, Volume IV.

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### The Best Worst Shark Attack Films You've Never Seen

In addition to firing up the grill and heading to the beach or pool, nothing excites horror fans more than to sit down with a good monster *shark* movie during summertime. While aquatic horror films like *The Meg, The Shallows, Deep Blue Sea* and the classic *Jaws* are primary summer go-to's, equally enjoyable are the popular, in-your-face-stupid sharksploitation flicks, including *Sharktopus, Mega Shark vs. Giant Octopus* and, of course, *Sharknado* 1, 2, 3, 4 (and who knows how many others).

However, even *more* fun to watch are the campy, old school "meant-to-be-awesome-but-awful" shark attack films of the 1970's. Underwater indies that tried their absolute best to top their (then) recent predecessor *Jaws*, and yet only ended up as "minnows", floating off into obscurity and failing to achieve even cult status.

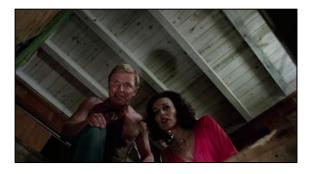
We've managed to reel in some of these so-badthey're-good shark-shock flicks for your summer leisure and, just as Brody and Hooper gutted the tiger shark in Jaws, perhaps find a few "amusing items" from the bowels of these films.

Mako: The Jaws of Death (1976)



Like wildfire, man vs nature films appeared by the score following Jaws, sea creature flicks especially, including Orca and Piranha. However, the "beast gone wild" forerunners to cash in on the commercial success of Jaws were, of course, killer shark movies, Mako: The Jaws of Death amongst the first of these (hence "Jaws" in its title).

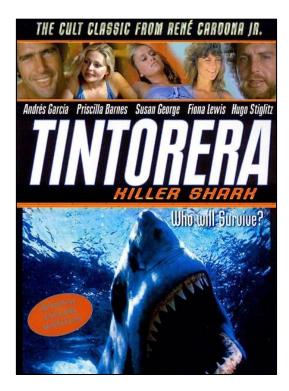
Vietnam veteran Sonny Stein possesses a deep fondness for sharks, makos in particular, befriending a circle of them and referring to each by name. Yet Sonny isn't just any shark lover. He has a peculiar "gift" that connects him with his finned friends - the power to communicate with sharks via a medallion necklace given to him by a Filipino shaman. He is not only protected against man-eating sharks, but is able to get them to do things for him (think *Beastmaster*, but with only sharks). With his extraordinary ability and a passionate distaste for all those who kill sharks for food and game, Sonny sets out to punish any shark hunter he finds, subduing them martial arts style and then tossing them into the water for shark meat.



In spite of bad acting, terrible dialogue and poor cinematography, the main concept and plot to *Mako* is actually quite unique and fascinating. I mean, aside from Marvel's *Namor*, what other antihero have we seen with an ability to communicate with and command sharks to destroy "bad people", as well as wrecking a little havoc on land themself? A perfect origin story of a super villain.

Remake, anyone?

### Tintorera (1977)



It wasn't long after Steven Spielberg's summer blockbuster that *foreign film markets*, too, smelled blood and took to the shores with their own Jaws knockoffs. Of the many, *Tintorera* was one of these.

Produced by a Mexican film company, *Tintorera* tells the tale of three lovers – Steven, Patricia and Miguel – who struggle to find romance because, well, both Steven and Miguel like Patricia and Patricia is into the both of them. Oh, and there's also a killer shark on the loose, gobbling up oblivious vacationers along a Mexican resort. It is then that Steven and Miguel must put their petty problems aside and team up to destroy this monstrous fish chomping up all their friends.

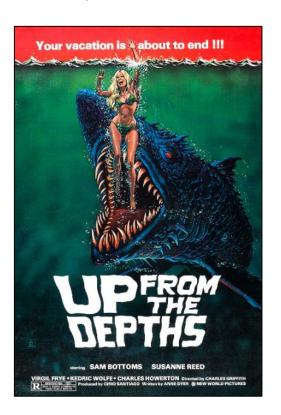
Off the bat, *Tintorera* is both in English and Spanish, with some scenes subtitled and some not (why this is, I haven't the foggiest), so unless you're considering brushing up on your Espanol, it's best to have an interpreter present when watching. Another annoyance is that a good 75 percent of the flick is mushy romance, and though the shark sequences we *do* get are quite menacing (though mostly pulled from stock footage with an overreliance on blood tossed in the mix), you'll likely find yourself fast forwarding to the cool stuff throughout. Fans of the 70's/80's sitcom "Three's Company" will be delighted to see a young

Priscilla Barnes (who played "Terri" on TC), yet like the shark scenes, appears minimally.



Whether it was intentional or not, fans of the novel version of Jaws will get a kick out of certain sequences in the film that mirror particular elements in the book. One is the love triangle between the three main characters, imitating the dangerous affair that Matt Hooper develops with Ellen Brody in the novel, causing a jealous Chief Brody to seek vengeance. Another sequence is of a young woman taking a swim in the ocean after sleeping with her boyfriend at their beach house, and after the girl becomes a delicious delicacy for the hungry shark, her boyfriend wakes up to find her missing, stepping onto the front porch and gazing out into the sea. The only shark film to capture the first few pages of Peter Benchley's best-selling novel.

### Up From The Depths (1979)



Waaay before *The Meg* and *Jurassic Shark*, the really cool "prehistoric shark" concept was first conceived in the ultra-low budgeted, totally wacky *Up From The Depths*.

Produced by B-movie mogul Roger Corman, *Up From* The Depths begins with a violent earthquake that cracks open the ocean floor of a Hawaiian island and unleashes a million-plus old shark-like creature (resembling a hippo with fins and large teeth). At first, it is spotted by only a few people - a marine biologist, a model and a fisherman (at least that's what I think their professions are) - who each witness a friend get eaten by the famished dino-fish. The three sort of move on with their lives after the tragedies, however, it isn't long before others witness the dauntless predator in the waters, and in spite of the island's hotel manager trying his best to keep things under wraps for the sake of his business, everyone on the island is thrown into a massive panic. Chaos everywhere, even though the monster is in the water. "Snap out of it – fish can't walk," a husband says to his frantic wife. "Everybody's running!" she replies. "Fish can't run either!" he retorts. They then laugh and hug each other.



Perhaps it was because of the array of terrible shark movies that had taken themselves too seriously by this point that the film's creators felt the compulsion to invite comedy into theirs. At any rate, *Depths* is an absurd unbalance of horror and humor (it honestly seems the writers/producers/director were totally confused as to what the film should be) and has all the markings of a backyard video shot by teens on a weekend while stoned, as the entire cast (and prob'ly crew) appear as though paid with lots of weed and alcohol. However, this water romp is not without a potential legacy: Just as other great-bad flicks such as The Room and Plan 9 From Outer Space wormed their way into the midnight movie circuit, there's no doubt Depths could do the same if re-released in theaters. After all - we have yet to see a "Rocky Horror Shark Show"!

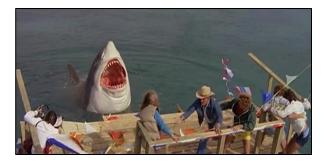
The Last Shark, aka Great White (1981)



Since Spielberg's marine masterpiece, there have been Jaws rip-offs... and there have been Jaws "clones". One such beast was the Italian-made *The Last Shark* (released in the U.S. as *Great White*).

The coastal resort town of Port Harbor has it all - lush scenery, crisp waters, a beautiful beach, and, oh yes a killer Great White shark! Ah, but not to fear - three brave men team up to destroy the monster - a horror novelist named Benton, the town mayor and a Scottish fisherman named Hamer who snarls through gritted teeth when he talks (sound familiar?). After a series of vicious killings by the terrifying 30-foot Great White (who seems to have a particular craving for wind surfers), the mayor decides taking matters into his own hands and hunts the shark down via helicopter, only to meet his doom by the unstoppable fish, a la helicopter scene in Jaws 2. It is then up to the novelist and fisherman-turned-shark hunter to save a group of tourists stranded on a makeshift raft who are being picked off one by one by the shark. Think "The Raft" segment in Creepshow 2 meets the "Wife's Roast" scene in Jaws.

We can B-movie bash this spaghetti shark flick for sure, buuut... it actually has a few good points. For one, the film can be viewed as an expansion of the life of Jaws' *Quint* we've always wanted to see, Hamer a super-obvious knock off of Robert Shaw's iconic character who only appeared in a little more than half of Jaws, whereas this Quint is more consistent throughout. A real bargain! The Last Shark is also a "What If Peter Benchley Hopped Into His Own Story" story, Benton (whose first name is "Peter") a striking similarity to the author of Jaws' novel version, Peter Benchley, who had a cameo in Jaws. Also, when not showing National Geographic-esque stock shark footage or ridiculous toy shark miniatures (the mechanical shark having broke down during filming), the production's "shark" surprisingly looks pretty convincing for its era and budget. Of course, we only see its head bobbing up and down in the water.



Awesome to see is the late great Vic Morrow, who justifiably plays Hamer (and whom I'll forever know as Coach Roy Turner in *The Bad News Bears*), though I'm curious as heck as to how he was convinced to be in this movie. Sadly, this was one of Morrow's last films before his tragic death a year later on the set of *Twilight Zone, The Movie*.



Catch Mike Lera's Horror Shorts streaming on Catch Cod!









#### **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

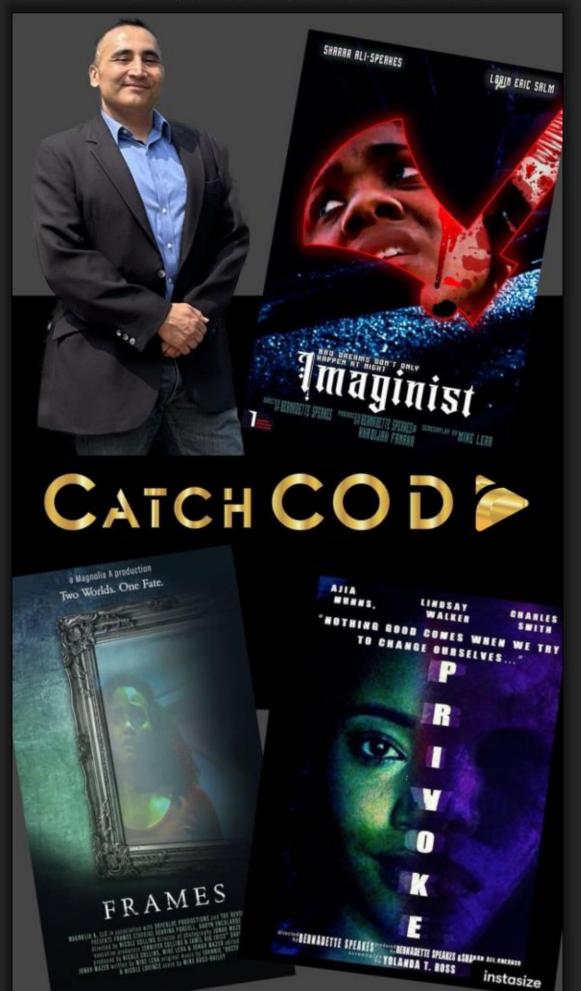
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# MIKE LERA'S HORROR SHORTS STREAMING ON CATCH COD!



#### The River at Night | Andy Martin

Mickey was wading out, the water ankle, then knee, then hip deep but he knew it leveled out, he *knew* that, it definitely did, so why was he so nervous?

The shadows had spilled across the river from the Pennsylvania side, spreading out from the tree tops and obscuring the river bottom like smoke.

The rocks and weeds on the river bottom that had been visible all afternoon were now just vague shapes. Anything could be down there. He stopped and looked around, a joint and most of a six pack in his sling bag.

Craig was up river by the weir. Max was down river, maybe fifty yards between them.

He thought for a second, what if he got into trouble?

Craig and Max had a lot more river time than he did, but hell, after today he felt experienced too. It had only taken him an hour or two to catch on, to spot the big rocks that held fish by the subtle V they left on the surface. And he'd caught fish too, maybe not as many as Craig or Bobby but he was probably pushing a dozen himself, and the last one had been the best, the smallmouth probably a foot long and it had taken him twenty yards down river before he'd chased it down and reeled it in.

That fish had been right as the sun first started slipping beneath the trees on the opposite bank, the river still mostly in light, not in shadow like it was now.

It was a little thing, this change in the light, but as he pushed his way through the current, a current that felt stronger, almost hungrier, it was a little thing that made all the difference.

They'd spent all day in the river, fishing, drinking, smoking, swimming, but now it seemed vaguely threatening, or at least wilder somehow.

Wait, was he scared?

Mickey thought he was.

Jesus. That was disappointing.

Mickey sinched the sling bag with the beer and the joint in it and kept going, working towards where Craig stood just downstream of the weir.

Mickey could see the seam in the river where the water coming out of the weir had cut a channel. They'd been pulling smallmouth out of that seam all day. Catch a few, then move down stream to a new set of boulders or wade back towards the bank in a big hook to give the fish a rest. Eventually, they'd found a couple of boulders that were high and dry and they'd lounged on them like seals, smoking and drinking and talking trash.

Mickey reached Craig, and despite the shadows, despite the deep dark that was spreading across the river and hiding the bottom Mickey felt better being within twenty feet of his buddy.

The river was still dark but he didn't feel so exposed now.

"Special delivery," Mickey said, and opened his sling bag.

"My man!" Craig said and slashed through the river toward him not caring about scaring the fish now. Behind him the river foamed and splashed through the weir and behind that Mickey saw that the tree tops had faded into a black green wall with the coming night.

In what light remained Mickey could still see the circle of camp chairs on the far shore's rocky beach. Behind them there were three pick-ups parked closer to the trees.

Mickey tossed Craig a beer and Craig caught it.

"Thanks man," Craig said and drained a third of it.

Mickey cracked his and drank. The dark was still coming, the river bottom getting grayer and grayer but this was alright.

"Cheers!" they said and knocked cans together, hip deep in the water.

"Don't drink em' all ok?" Max shouted from downstream.

"Move your ass then!" Craig shouted.

"One more cast," Max yelled back and then turned back to the water.

Craig took another pull on his beer.

"Where do you figure they are?" Mickey asked.

"Who?"

"Them," Mickey said, pointing at the far shore, towards where the pickup trucks and white plastic chairs were fading into shadow.

Craig looked across at them and frowned like he was just noticing them.

"Well," he looked down river towards Max, then up towards the weir and beyond.

"I don't know. Did you see them get here?"

Mikey shook his head. "Nah. They've been here all day. Like when I came down to start the fire for breakfast they already were here."

"When was that?"

"9-9:30?"

"So at least 10 hours? That's a lot."

Mickey looked at the trees on above the trucks and the chairs. The tops were shaking slightly, like in a light wind. Mickey didn't like it. Suddenly, even though he was just feet from Craig he felt alone, isolated, exposed in the river, like any second now he'd feel something fleshy and alive wrap around his ankles.

"Yo! Check it out!" Max shouted, holding his rod up high. It was bent in half and from 50 yards away they could hear line peeling out.

"Trout?" Craig yelled, stretching his neck up, like he was trying to look over Max's head and the fifty yards between them and see what was running downstream.

Above the trucks the tree tops shook. Mickey saw three huge shapes, some kind of giant birds like eagles or something, had to be, leap skyward from the tree tops and then dive towards the surface of the river.

"Craig, what's—" Mickey said.

The first of the three huge shapes folded its wings and dove straight at Max.

"Max!" Craig shouted and then the huge, hang glider sized bird that could not be a *bird* collided with Max and they heard an 'uck!' from Max. There was a sudden black spray from Max's shoulders and he spilled headless into the river.

The thing was flapping upward, gaining height and howling as it went. Mickey saw its body, huge and man-like, no way was this a bird, and Mickey remembered there were two more as Craig hit him at the waist and shoved him into the river. Screams split the air and there was a huge splash above Mickey and then the things were flapping away, screaming, but so was Craig.

"Help me Mick! Help—"

Mickey broke the surface and hot liquid poured into his eyes and he screamed and clawed at the sticky 'water' and looked up to see the flying things tear Craig in two.

Mickey dove and holding his breath, slashed against the current. Images filled his mind, the black things pulling Craig apart, bathing him in the hot rain of his friend's blood. The black thing diving and plucking Max's head from his shoulders like it was nothing, those huge wings beating as Max flopped in the river.

Mickey swam, not splashing, somehow knowing better, making big broad strokes and then he surfaced once, gulped air, heard screams from somewhere overhead and behind so he dove again, not surfacing till he was banging his elbows and knees on the river cobbles.

He was up and running, not looking back, the river quiet again except for the gurgling of its passage.

He stayed low, running, his body separate from the screaming panic in his head, keeping him on track for the bank, for the trees which might be thick enough to keep those things off him—a buzz from above, wind rippling across leathery hide.

Mickey dove, his elbows and knees exploding in pain as he slid across the cobbles, a patch of black deeper than the night sky slashing down just feet from where he'd been and he was slapped by the thing's wings as it half scrabbled, half leapt at him. He got up again, running low, the black thing screeching, and he heard the scrape of claws on the rocks and then he was pulling himself up the bank through the roots and the vines and the soft silt.

Behind him the thing howled and was answered with hoots from above while Mickey sprinted through the brush, always keeping the tree canopy above him.

There was a splash, then a second. Mickey was running but he could hear soft hoots and clicks from the river, then splashes, huge and repeated, the things taking off probably. He was running through the trees upriver, towards the RV, hoping maybe Craig left the keys on the dash. From above there were screeches and howls, then a huge crash in the tree tops, dropping beaches and leaves to the ground.

Nothing else came through.

The clearing loomed ahead, the RV's great rectangular shape a beacon in the dark.

There was another crash from behind him, a long splintering sound accompanied by peeling screeches, beating wings, one getting through this time.

Gasping he was out into the open, running for the front of the RV, hoping the big rectangle of metal and glass would give them pause and then he hooked around the front and was at the door. There were crashes from the trees where he'd just been, frustrated barks and yips as the thing tried to beat its way through. Mickey hit the door and yanked it open, half tripping, half jumping inside and then hauled it shut behind him.

He heard the latch clinch but knew it wouldn't hold.

He was at the dash, groping for the keys when the thing that had been chasing him loped into the clearing. It was man sized and upright, so brown it was black in the night. It had a short, boxy head like a baboon, and deep-set eyes. The thing was loping along, swinging its head back and forth.

Where were its wings?

Its arms were long, almost down to the ground. They swung as it moved and Mickey caught the head starting to turn in his direction so he ducked.

He'd seen this thing before.

How?

Mickey was crouched down, and could hear the thing panting outside. He looked at the door. It was still closed. The latch was tricky but maybe it had closed. The panting came closer to the RV's windshield. Mickey ducked all the way down, lying flat, then rolling quickly and quietly to his knees in case he had bolt for the door.

Where were the keys?

Where had he seen the thing before?

Then he had it.

He couldn't believe it.

He craned his head up over the dash and looked. The thing that had pursued him looked skyward and barked once. There was a great scrape of wings and flapping and then a second thing, bigger than the first landed in the clearing. It too walked upright but as Mickey watched its wing membranes folded tight to its arms and Mickey realized the arm had an extra joint, like a second elbow halfway down the forearm. The wings were not completely hidden, the 'arms' true length hidden but still long, ape-like, like—

Super 8mm footage from the '60s of Bigfoot crossing a creek in California.

The second thing hooted at the first and slung a wing-arm around the first thing's head, hooting and stroking it as it whined.

Mickey ducked down again.

Jesus Christ. This was Bigfoot? No one ever finding one dead or seeing one for more than a few seconds because they hardly spent any time on the ground?

His eyes went to the door.

Always to the door.

Was it really locked? He slid across the floor, his eyes on the door and moonlit floor ahead of him, waiting for the shadows that announce that the things had decided to go for the windshield.

His fingers hovered at the latch.

The door.

The latch.

It came back to him now.

Craig standing in the river when Mickey had offered to wade back for more beer.

"Leave that inner lock open my man. I don't want us getting locked out."

The keys were in here!

But he'd left the door cracked open, not shut like when he'd gotten here.

The stink hit him as he was starting to rise and then the third thing, the mother judging by the great swinging dugs, rushed silent out of the darkness of the rear of the RV.

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

Andy Martin is an archaeologist, metal musician, and writer living in South Philly with his partner and cat. His short fiction has appeared at the Horror Tree, Cultured Vultures, Horror Addicts.com, Midnight Tales, Siren's Call Halloween 2022 Ezine (thanks again for that!), and he was DandT Publishing's Emerge Author in December of 2022.

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#### Heartbreak Lake | Joe Giatras

Calvin bought the ring. He got Marilyn's father's blessing. Then he picked the perfect spot. At the edge of Joyce Park, a lake stretches for a hundred yards before it crashes against the muddy banks of the forest preserve. The lake was made for fishing, but all the fish they ever dumped in always went belly up. The water was sour, so the town found a more appropriate use for it. Everyone called it Heartbreak Lake, and the name became permanent when the original wooden sign bearing its birth name was hideously defaced with its more infamous alias.

Heartbreak Lake evolved into the type of legend kids whispered about as if they were born knowing, with a power that stretched far beyond Joyce Park. Most people never had to go near the lake's boggy shoreline to break up with their unwanted partners. All they had to say was, "I think we should visit Heartbreak Lake," and that was enough. Not everyone was that courageous though. Some people needed the lake, because they couldn't plunge without a facilitative shove. So they wandered there with their tethered partners, and let the lake sever their ties for them.

Calvin hated Heartbreak Lake, but proposing in its seething presence seemed too good to pass up. He and Marilyn had already done the impossible by uniting at Heartbreak Lake. Becoming engaged there felt like slamming a nail in the lake's coffin.

At the lake, a steady line of steel benches, coated in blue rubber that never felt warm, lined the grass just before the shoreline. On the night Calvin and Marilyn met, they were both abandoned on one of those cold benches. At first, Calvin thought he cried alone. He was watching the moonlight ripple within the lake's tiny waves when Marilyn tapped him on the shoulder. She said he looked like someone who shouldn't be alone, and if he wasn't, then she knew for sure she was. When she said that, Calvin felt an instant resonance that made him immediately less lonely. In her eyes, he saw a bitter and relentless pain, made even sharper by the reflection of his own eyes. They shared a bench, and the touch of her hand put the flames out like water on a campfire—the smell lingered, but the fire no longer burned. They talked until sunlight blanketed the water. Then they had breakfast, and wound up back at Calvin's home, where their pain vanished as suddenly as it appeared. Days accumulated into years, and the remnants of that pain faded behind a steady fog. It wasn't until Calvin bought the ring that he even thought about Heartbreak Lake again, dredging up memories of why he'd been there in the first place.

All of Calvin's relationships always made him feel like an animal crossing the freeway—constantly teased by the visible but unreachable safe haven on the other side. Things felt great until the traffic picked up, forcing him back like a rising tide. Sometimes he barely made it off the curb before a whizzing car brushed him back. Marilyn was going to change that though. With her, he felt like he was standing on the shoulder of the road, his hand out and Marilyn reaching to grab it from the other side. All he had to do was pop the big question, and she'd pull him to safety. He'd never have to cross the freeway again.

When they arrived at Heartbreak Lake, the sun had set hours before, and the only light came from the small lamps that lined the winding path around Joyce Park. It had rained all day, and the bench where they'd met was dripping wet. Calvin dried it with a towel, then draped a blanket over it to ensure Marilyn's dress stayed pure. He took her hand and lowered her to the seat like a gentleman. Her small nose crinkled and she said, "I forgot about this place." She watched the water carefully, and smoothed the hem of her dress over her knees.

Calvin sat down and put his arm around her. She nuzzled his neck and the vanilla scent of her hair was enough to mask the fishy sewage vapors rising from the lake. He felt her warm breath on his skin, and it relaxed the thick chords along his neck. Marilyn walked her fingers across his chest, and he snatched her hand just as she reached the box shaped lump beneath his suit jacket.

Marilyn lifted her head from his shoulder. "Are you alright?"

"I'm perfect," Calvin said, but even he didn't believe himself. Marilyn eyed him strangely, and Calvin figured he might as well jump into it before she became even more suspicious. He wanted the moment to be a complete surprise, because those were the kind of memories that lasted forever, and that was exactly what Calvin wanted from Marilyn.

Calvin slipped his hand inside his jacket and when it appeared again, he held a small powder blue box in his palm. Marilyn squealed the second her eyes fell on it. Calvin opened the box and the diamond sparkled even in the dim lamp light. Marilyn's jaw dropped and she slapped her hand over her mouth. Tears filled her eyes as Calvin got down on his knee. He held the diamond closer to her, and the way her eyes followed it made Calvin's heart swell with an insurgence of joy. He wanted to bask in the moment forever, but his words flew out of his mouth like dogs cooped up in the house for too long. He couldn't wait to reach the question at the end. When he did though, Marilyn's eyes had drifted away from the diamond. They were on the lake again, and as Calvin asked the ultimate question he

simultaneously followed her stare, where he found something standing in the shallow. The powder blue box fell from his grasp.

As if It had stolen the moon's reflection, the creature glowed like a gray ghost. Mucky sludge dripped from Its ashen body, plopping into the lake like steady raindrops. It bared its rotten candy corn teeth in a grotesquely taunt smile that wrapped around Its face. Two green marbles, set deep in their hollow sockets, beamed brighter than the moonlight. Those emeralds traveled on frozen ropes to Calvin and Marilyn, bathing them in an alien spotlight.

Calvin froze. He waited for Marilyn's scream to jolt him into action. It stayed very quiet though, and when Calvin finally mustered the courage to look at Marilyn, he found no trace of fear in her eyes. Awash in green light, her skin looked sickly, but the look on her face was anything but sick. Her lips bunched up on one side of her face, deepening the dimple in her cheek. Her pupils were small, zeroed in on the thing in the lake. Calvin felt a jolt then, and it was horrifyingly familiar.

Calvin grabbed Marilyn's shoulders and tried to pull her up with him, but his fingers slipped when he stood. She felt like a boulder set in place. "Marilyn, let's go!" Calvin shouted.

Marilyn swiveled her head from side to side, dismissing him with a sheepish smile. "No," she said simply. Then the creature reaffirmed her decision.

"No," It said. Calvin spun around and watched the creature raise one of Its elongated arms. Dirty water dripped from Its spidery fingertips as It extended Its hand toward them. "Take my hand," It coaxed.

Calvin turned back to Marilyn and grabbed both her hands. He shook them as if he were trying to wake her up from a bad dream. "Marilyn, look at me!"

Tiny green orbs glittered in the whites of Marilyn's eyes as she looked at him. "You can go."

"What?" Calvin cried.

Marilyn giggled like a teenager. "I'm staying." Even in the green light, roses blossomed prominently in her cheeks. She was giddy, and she snatched her hands away from Calvin's grasp, clapping them together against her chest. "Marilyn, no," Calvin whined.

"It's okay," Marilyn said, like a pit stop as her eyes moved beyond Calvin again. "You can go now."

Calvin started to respond, but he heard spongey steps creeping up behind them. Over his shoulder, he saw the creature happily gliding toward them, Its hand still outstretched like a panhandler. In a final act of desperation, Calvin dropped down to his knee again and searched the wet dirt with the urgency of someone trying to stop the bleeding. He found the little blue box and shoved it in Marilyn's face as if he were trying to get her to eat it. Even in the brightened green glow, the diamond caught none of the light, and when Marilyn finally glanced at it, she scowled.

"I love you!" Calvin shouted. "Marry me?"

Marilyn's face twisted into pity. Sadness filled her eyes, but it seemed to only stem from Calvin's reflection in them. With the gentle care of a funeral director, Marilyn said, "I'm sorry Calvin, but I'm not in love with you anymore." Calvin's heart sank like a ruptured ship. "Please, Marilyn."

Then the creature's hand covered the diamond. Gently, It snapped the box shut and nudged it away. Calvin's arms dangled, and the box dropped from his limp grasp, plopping onto the wet dirt with a splash. Calvin looked up and found the creature's face mirrored the pity in Marilyn's.

"It's over," the creature said. Its green eyes wavered like flames as It held Calvin's stare. "She doesn't love you anymore."

"That's right," Marilyn agreed. She sounded relieved. She raised her hand and the creature's claw clamped around it. It helped Marilyn up from the bench and like a pot boiling over, Marilyn blurted, "I love you!" The creature nodded as if It understood.

Hand in hand, the creature guided Marilyn to the lake. Calvin swiveled on both muddy knees to watch them go. Their feet splashed the edge of the water, then disappeared. They sank deeper as they moved, until only their heads were visible, like floating bobbers. A patch of green mist swirled in the water between them as they faced each other. Then Marilyn dipped slowly into the water, her eyes entranced by the creature until she was gone. The water bubbled over the spot where she sank for a moment, then stilled again.

Calvin pounded his fists into the mushy dirt. He beat the earth like a toddler throwing a fit, capturing the attention of the creature's luminescent glare. "No!" Calvin growled. The creature nodded, yes. "Not again!" Calvin sobbed. "I don't want to start again!"

"Then why do you keep coming back?" the creature asked.

"I don't know," Calvin croaked.

"I do," the creature said. It grinned, a tinge of pity in Its voice when it spoke again. "Loneliness." Then it sunk beneath the water to join Marilyn.

When every twinkling speck of emerald vanished, Calvin got up and sat on the bench again. Hunched over, he buried his face in his hands and cried. He sat that way for hours, until he had no more tears to give. Then he simply stared at the lake until the sun took the moon's spot in the water. He hoped someone else would come along. Someone to fill the gaping hole inside him. Then he could forget for a while, until it was time to feed the beast again and reopen the wound that burrowed deep within his perpetually broken heart.

#### About the Author:

Joe Giatras is the author of *The Ghost Writer*, published in the anthology Between the Cracks, as well as *Watching*, *The Nowhere Man* and *Play it Loud* from issues 39, 59 and 60 of the Sirens Call eZine. He lives in the suburbs of Chicago, Illinois with his wife, son, three dogs and two cats.

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#### Inside | Thomas Henry Newell

I see the church, beautiful in the summer rain. I see the mourners, grieving the loss of their father. I see them leaving you there in the dust. And I think, *finally*. I wait until the warm night.

This was my place, long before you came here. All I had then were the wet fens. And the things that sank into the earth.

And then you came to this place. You lived inside, preaching within the walls. You brought ceremony to my seasons, and meaning to my grounds. You buried things in those grounds. Things that I wanted.

The church was so beautiful, decorated in figures of holy beauty. And others. Figures that looked like me. But only on the outside. Those gnarly hunky punks gave me hope. I got bold, got closer.

The first time you saw me, you hesitated. That's why I'm here. Even though you wanted to keep me away. You said it was an ugly thing. Said that I was ugly.

And still you came to me. You said things to me you could never say to the congregation. Did things. Worshipped in the old ways, with things that rot. You wanted into my life. My long, long life.

The church is so beautiful at night, after the worshippers had gone. It made me want inside, even more. You bound me in spells and you saw my yearning for what you kept in the walls. "Do you like it?" you asked.

You never let me inside, though. You took, but you didn't give. It gets so lonely, though, outside looking in. You rejected me. After what you did, and you said I was ghoulish.

"Amen to that," I say, finishing my prayer. And then I open my hands and I look at what they hold.

The old urge is so strong. And why shouldn't I? He gave his flesh and blood, you always said.

I want you inside of me. "Corpus Christi," I say, as I move your heart closer. I bite into it. The blood has long clotted. I swallow you, satisfied.

"Do you like that?"

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

Thomas Henry Newell writes and translates. He grew up in Norfolk, England, but he now lives in Beijing. He writes shorts, drabbles and micros of horror fiction, with writing published in *The Black Poppy Review* and *Microfiction Monday Magazine*. He is working on a translation of Chinese tall tales from the Jin Dynasty, *Soushenji*.

Twitter: <a>@newell\_thomas</a>



What happens to those who engage evil?



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

#### Give Me Another Chance | JB Corso

"I'm so glad that you've started staying overnight with me. There's just one small detail that I've been holding off on telling you." Nancy shifted on her couch. She looked over at their takeout containers strewn atop the coffee table. "Maybe it's more of a stupid request."

Charlie took her hand in his. "Are you going to tell me that you swear worse than a sailor in your sleep? Because if that's the case, I'm already aware. Baby, whatever it is, I love you and we'll make it work." He squeezed with sincerity.

She met his gaze with a nervous smile. "Okay. Have you ever heard of a hoddal?"

Charlie cocked his head. "Is this like a sex thing or a medical condition? Is your foot going to spontaneously fall off?"

"Charlie, I'm trying to be serious." She focused on his face, gaining the courage to override her sped up heart. "We've already talked about my coven and what my beliefs are. This is different. I have a hoddal somewhere in the house."

"A hoddal? Like a pet or something?" He furrowed his eyebrows.

"Yes, and no. A hoddal is a 'spirit' creature that lives in a witch's home." Her expression hardened. "This could affect you."

"Affect me, how?"

"I'll get to that. Let me explain a little more. Hoddals are magical creatures that become attached to witches after they've performed spells for so long. They eventually release from their realities and follow us home. Then they sort of," she considered her words, "make a nest that bridges both realities. My friends, Linda, Fred, and Mary Ellen believe they have hoddals in their homes too."

Charlie watched the sincerity on her face. "Ok, what does it look like?"

"Our crone," Nancy read his confusion at the term. She coughed, "That is, our wise woman told us that its body is mostly translucent when it's fully in reality. It's gelatinous with spiky legs that end in sharp points. Though, there's some discussion that its 'feet' are suckers that close into points." She rubbed her hands to come back from the verbal rabbit-trail. "She says that hoddals can expand to about the size of a small horse and grow what we would consider beaks to attack when they feel threatened."

"How would you know if it felt threatened if its invisible?"

"Transparent. It's transparent when existing in our reality. It doesn't understand how our side of reality works all the time and they can become overwhelmed with things and activities that we consider 'normal'."

"Ok, how does this affect me?" His tone held a growing frustration at bay.

"Now that you've started living here, I need you to make a couple of simple accommodations."

"Accommodations?"

"Yeah, if you're home alone, please keep all electronics off in the bedroom from about 1 am to 3 am. Phone, tablet, television, laptop."

"Why the bedroom?"

"Linda believes that it's living in my," she cleared her throat, "that is, our, bedroom closet."

"You're telling me it's in there now?" His fingers tapped atop his pants.

"Yes," she ignored his nervous tell.

"So, why can't your coven get rid of it?"

"We could, sure, but another will just take its place."

"So it's allergic to electronics?"

"No, not so much the device. Glowing light attracts its attacks."

"So we couldn't ever have, like a nightlight?"

Nancy shook her head in disagreement. "That's static illumination. No big deal. The light into dark into light into dark triggers it." She fought through her embarrassment, slowly warming her cheeks. Nancy took a drink of wine to calm down.

"Back in olden times, witches used screens and other shields around their candles and fire pits to keep these things pacified after their dinner meal. Today, we need to put down our electronics during that time span. It's the reason I fought you so much about having a television in the bedroom."

Her eyeline lifted to a tabby cat photo on her bookshelf. "It killed Cheyenne about two years ago. You asked me how she died and I told you that a larger animal had been involved. What I neglected to mention was that the hoddal was responsible." She studied his face for clues about his thoughts.

"Nancy, this is really hard to believe. I love you, but I can only accept so much without proof."

"I'm sorry. I know that what I'm telling you seems tough to hear, and that's why it's been so bothersome for me to explain. Please, just be patient for a moment." Her eyes filled with tears. "I was out-of-town overnight. Cheyenne brought her toy mouse that sparkled light into the..." she held a deep breath, "... into the bedroom. She must have thought I was in there and wanted to play." Her words came out in jagged bursts. She swallowed several full gulps from her glass. "All I found were chunks of fur and guts on the carpet. The toy, what was left of it, um, was ripped to shreds. Faded blood smudges led up into the closet's corner. All the windows and doors were sealed. Nothing got in from the outside."

Charlie searched her face, finding honest sincerity. He looked over his mental map for any landmarks to navigate from. "You really believe this."

"I do," she nodded. Nancy wiped away the tears that broke free. "I wouldn't ever joke about Cheyenne's death. I just don't want to see anything like that happen to you."

He inhaled with deep patience. "Okay, if having electronics off from 1 to 3 in the morning means that much, I'll make sure to do so."

"One more minor detail." Nancy studied a piece of hanging thread, dangling off her house shorts. She looked up at him with begging eyes. "I'd prefer if you'd sleep with your phone facing down. I know your ex has a bad habit of texting you when she gets out to the club, and I'd feel better if the phone's screen was down when you're asleep."

\*\*\*

Charlie waded through a fog of confusion. He smiled and leaned in to hug her.

"Anything for you," he said with a smile. She bent forward and hugged him tight.

Charlie grumbled about having drank too many beers after dinner. Nancy sleep-mumbled out a line of profanities as he walked back to bed. He checked his phone to determine how much time remained before the morning alarm. He set it down with the screen facing up as he'd been used to doing.

His phone lit up the bedroom wall and ceiling.

2:21. U think I couldn't get around you blocking me?

2:21 I'm using Tina's phone asshat!!

2:22 Were out at the club. I don't need u.

His phone's black screen returned. A jellied form slunk out from its transparent hovel towards the illuminating disturbance. Its multiples of razor-thin eyes scanned into the bedroom from inside the exposed closet's back corner.

2:22 I'm gonna duck all the dudes here.

The hoddal crept over the sliding closet door rail, working to pinpoint the light source.

2:23. Ur a terrible lover and u have a small crock. Hee-hee.

The penny-sized creature suctioned along the wall towards the bed, expanding its body into a long cylinder of swirling gelatinous skin. Frustration bubbled across its exterior like waves of boiling soap. It paused over their heads, blending against the wall's darkness. A clear feeler expanded from its leg, wavering over Charlie's cheek scruff for a source of light.

The phone flashed against its face.

2:23. I faked every organism.

The hoddal jumped off the wall, landing on Charlie. Long, elastic barbs slammed down onto his curled body, puncturing his arm, shoulders, neck and cheek with burning needle pricks. He screamed. Blood ran out of his multiple wounds, soaking their covers. Nancy scrambled out of bed, falling against the window. She swung around. Her elbow shattered the pane. Glass poured over their porch like reflective rain. Several neighborhood dogs barked at the commotion. A thick breeze filled their room with cold air. Its hysterical skittering tore through their blanket, shredding holes in the rosy pattern. The room's darkness flooded with another text.

2:23 Btw, I ducked your brother when u were at work. His crock is much better than yours.

Charlie thrashed under the covers, attempting to rip away the blanket. The creature leaped onto his head, snapping several clear beaks into his cheek. Thick spikes bubbled from its eyes like mini waterfalls of foul-smelling mold. Each circular glob stuck to his face, burrowing into his skull. Charlie grabbed at his skin to relieve the pain.

Nancy stumbled toward her nightstand, making out the struggling shadows outlines of her boyfriend and the hoddal. She pulled out her 9mm pistol from atop a *Hunks, International* magazine. Charlie screamed as he raised his hands to cover his face.

2:24 I'm sorry, baby. I'm dunk. I love your clock. Call me so we can hookup, k?

The creature rushed to the phone. It expanded to the size of a large pig with a second beak spreading under its belly for an attack. Its whipping tail end upended the side table, knocking the glowing rectangle onto the floor. It thrashed around the bed, puncturing the mattress.

2:24 Charlie, I'll say yes if you propose again.

A shot rang out. The creature exploded into a burst of plasma, catching Nancy across her front. Her face, neck and stomach burned like the flames of Hades. She screamed, flailing her arms. Her firing finger contracted several times. *Bang, bang, bang.* A wayward bullet struck Charlie through the ribs, blowing fleshy chunks of wet lung and bone fragments out behind him. He slumped over onto his side. Blood slid down the wall as his labored wheezing drifted into silence.

The pistol fell from her grip, landing on her sweatpants. She stumbled toward their bathroom for fresh water to clear away the burning. Pain hijacked her ability to focus. The room spun. Nancy smacked headfirst into the door frame. She bounced inward, collapsing against the cool floor. Her face planted against the tile, snapping free her front teeth. A growing blood trail spread outward. Her final breaths choked out through her windpipe's deepening wound.

2:25 Tina wants her phone back, so I can't text anymore tonight. Give me another chance. xoxoxo.

#### Vacation Advice | JB Corso

Juanita read the courtesy pamphlet with alarm:

When you travel by air or cruise, make sure the suitcase you're about to open is actually your own. Its exterior may appear normal, but handling it alone could result in your death. When you get to your destination, put your luggage in the closet and close the door most of the way. Lather a wet washcloth with soap. Reach in and wipe the outside for a solid three seconds. If nothing happens within ten seconds, you're safe. If several barbed tongues lash out, shut the door. Immediately contact emergency services for assistance.

#### Paul Eats Worms | JB Corso

"Paul eats the worms until the worm eats Paul." He offers his sacred prayer to the slithering god towering over him. The manifest sentence bounces through the spacious tomb. He gathers another handful of slippery, live noodles and shoves them into his mouth. A single torch reflects off the grainy juices covering his chin. He believes they're his reward for finding the legendary deity. The beast leans in, opening its enormous jaws. The gaping hole reveals a shadowy twisted tunnel straight into its guts. "Paul eats the worms until—" The mammoth worm lunges forward. Paul disappears into his awaiting nirvana.

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

JB Corso is a mental health clinician who works with vulnerable populations. They enjoy spending time with their children, writing, and sifting through existential questions. Their writing motto is "Developing stories into masterpieces." They are a Horror Writer's Association member and a NaNoWriMo winner (2021, 2022). They're an international author with works published with Sirens Call Publications, Black Hare Press, and The Stygian Lepus.



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#### Gleamer | Meg Smith

The clear night skies were best, when the moon was edged toward fullness – pregnant with yellow light, and abundant, showing hints of great birth that lay in the nights ahead.

It was that time Marvet liked most, because it reminded her of when she grew fuller, riper, and ready, ready and proud, to produce life.

She held that feeling especially on nights like this, warm, dry, shimmering with sounds – crickets, tree frogs, and rhythmic scratching of insects she couldn't identify.

It didn't matter. They were there, and she was there. Then came another sound, the whispering of grass parting, a wave moving within it toward her.

And then, rising in a magnificent curve, glimmering, reflecting the moonlight on each pearly segment.

A head lifted, as if to brush the moon, with each tiny, reflected moon like a great strand of ivory pearls

Marvet's breath caught as it always did. "Oh, my sweetness," she sighed, clasping her hands, her soft voice falling among the other nightly sounds.

She sensed, rather than knew, that her words did not fall on anything like human hearing, and how her form and face might have appeared, she couldn't guess.

Did she cast a fragrance, a sound, a caring touch? She couldn't know that, either.

"You're...so...beautiful," she dithered, feeling slightly foolish at her giddiness. "Well, I can't help it. Why should I? Why should any mother? So, yes, you're so, so beautiful!"

As always, her joy was followed by an aching. If only she could cradle in her arms, at home, this treasure she had brought forth. She pushed back tears, and said aloud, as she always did. "This is your home. This is where you'll be healthy and strong. But, oh, my heart."

\*\*\*

It was 1976. To Besser, there was no escaping that fact. No one would let you. Every door of every classroom at the Cyril Vining Elementary School had a die-cut cardboard decoration, of fifes and drums, or '76 in red, white and blue.

And if you lived in a modest suburb north of Boston, near enough to Lexington and Concord and the reenactment of the Battle at North Bridge, you should feel some vague pride.

But her house and family and school and scuffy shoes and legs and arms bruised from kickball were too distant.

"Those sorry bastards," she'd overheard her father say. "Fighting and dying on that battle green. If they were alive now, they couldn't afford to live there!"

Her mother had hushed him, but Besser smiled, looking away quickly.

Summer vacation was coming, and with it, the end of fifth grade.

Besser's fifth-grade class were the oldest, tallest and most knowledgeable kids in the school.

That would all change, swiftly and savagely, with the coming of fall, and middle school.

But that was nearly three months away.

The Fourth of July was going to be a big deal. There were going to be band concerts at the rotting gazebo in the town center, and carnival games and little kids running around, weaponizing their sticky, ice cream-covered hands.

In the past few weeks, Besser had begun doodling with her pencil, on worksheets, on math homework assignments, even on construction paper. Her teachers hadn't appreciated it.

An expression of fear crossed the face of her homeroom teacher, Mr. Einborn.

It was unsettling when a grownup showed fear.

Like when her parents opened the bills, and started arguing. "You can blame Carter for that!" her father yelled. He pretty much blamed Carter for everything, even though he said Carter probably wouldn't win. Anyways, the election, Besser knew from her current events class, wouldn't take place for months.

Besser's problems were more immediate. Her parents were fighting all the time now, and not even joining the town's parade committee could distract them. It gave them one more thing to argue about.

Besser had just one ally, and she lived next door, across a scraggly field. Everyone called her The Hippy Lady. Her real name was Margie, or something like that.

Since Besser was outside all the time once the warm weather came, and was scolded if she spent too much time sheltering in the cool basement, she decided, the very first day of summer vacation, to make her break for it.

She stepped in high, leaping steps (her father had not cut the grass in a few days now,) to the house of the Hippy Lady.

It was slightly worn, but in a comfortable way, rather than a scary one. Red paint was flaking off the exterior. The side door was always open, and there were always snacks on the kitchen table, and 'Sesame Street' always seemed to be on the TV.

The Hippy Lady would sing along loudly to the songs, and even though Besser thought 'Sesame Street' was for babies, she would smile and hum along.

For a moment, standing in the kitchen, Besser felt an odd chill. The house seemed empty, and the TV was on, but the volume was down, as Ernie and Bert moved jerkily, a noiseless dance across the screen.

The Hippy Lady appeared, and Besser gasped. "You scared me!"

The Hippy Lady laughed. "She laughs too loud," a neighbor had said. "What's wrong with that?" Another neighbor had chided. "Haven't you heard of Women's Lib? Women can laugh as loud as they want!"

"Oh, Bessie, you are so cute!" The Hippy Lady bent down and touched Besser's hair. Besser stepped back. It was short, and curly, and she hated it; she wanted long, chestnut hair like The Hippy Lady.

"I'm glad you're okay, that's all," Besser acknowledged.

"Honey, I'm fine," The Hippy Lady said, but something in her tone reminded Besser of Mr. Einborn, upset at Besser's drawing.

"Well, school's done," Besser said practically.

"Well," the Hippy Lady repeated, hands on her slightly-wide hips. *Maybe this is why they called her Hippy Lady,* Besser thought suddenly.

"I bet you're glad about that."

"Yeah," Besser admitted. "I am. I kept getting in trouble for drawing."

"Drawing," the Hippy Lady repeated. "I'd think they'd be glad!"

Besser had a copy of her very last math worksheet, folded up, in her pocket. She'd folded it a million times, just to see how small she could make it by folding it. When she unfolded it, it was wrinkled, and almost impossible to read.

The Hippy Lady took the paper delicately from Besser's hands, and held it up to the light of the kitchen door. Her eyes were flecked with green and copper, and Besser thought the Hippy Lady was never so pretty, with her long hair and soft, slightly-wide hips.

"Hmmm," she said, and there was that trouble again in her voice. "Why did you draw this, Besser?"

In the kitchen door light, the drawing stood out. It was long, and wormish, but had segments, which Besser had a hard time getting right, despite all her practice. She'd written in block letters across its long, lumpy body: GLEAMER.

"Everyone knows it," Besser said. "I mean, you know, right? The west coast has Big Foot, and we've got Gleamer."

The Hippy Lady lowered the paper and handed it back to Besser. "Someone must have told you. How else would you know?"

Besser felt at a loss, and wished the Hippy Lady would go back to being the fun, slightly distracted, Sesame Street song-singing Hippy Lady.

"No one, I guess," Besser said, looking down and noticing strands of long, uncut grass stuck to her sneakers. "I just knew."

Gleamer lived in the marsh beyond Bogart Hill, where it was buggy and filled with mosquitoes and black flies and bull frogs. Not even the biggest, meanest teenagers would hang out there.

Every town had a creature that lived in such a place, the one last place not cut up with houses that looked like milk cartons, as her mother called them. The houses, Besser knew, would come right up to the edge of the place, but never go over.

Besser was starting to bristle with impatience, and a little worry. The Hippy Lady was the one adult she could actually talk to, and now that no longer seemed true.

Finally, Besser blurted: "Are you gonna help me, or not?" Then was taken aback and her own shouting, her own rudeness, because tears seemed to shine in the Hippy Lady's eyes.

But she only said, "Bessie, your voice," in a gentle, reproving way.

"I'm sorry," Besser said anxiously. "I just, I just thought you could help me. This thing I keep drawing, I know it's real. But I can't tell anyone. I could only tell you."

The Hippy Lady turned back toward the kitchen door. She was wearing a light, gauzy skirt, that fluttered slightly, as the softest of summer breezes flowed through the screen.

She turned back to Besser, and said in a voice that sounded far away: "Let's go."

They were walking. The Hippy Lady insisted that it was just a short walk, and this made Besser rethink her whole sense of geography about the town. They were supposed to be going someplace far away, on the farthest edge of the town, but they instead headed down a short road, with just a few houses on it, with a cul-de-sac.

Bordering along the cul-de-sac were scrubby-looking trees.

Besser began swatting at her ears. Mosquitoes. They seemed to descend in an unseen cloud, and their high, whiny sound was the worst.

The Hippy Lady, however, seemed unconcerned, and Besser wondered if she had some supernatural power to keep them away.

Once they passed through the trees, the mosquitoes seemed to lose interest. Mercifully, their darting and whiny sounds ceased.

They had come to a clearing, with tall grass, and here and there, the outline of a tree that Besser thought was probably dead. They had no leaves, just a few splintery branches. They stood starkly against a sky whose light was fading.

Time seemed to have fallen away, and Besser wondered how long they had actually been walking. If the streetlights were starting to come on, that was bad; she was supposed to be home by then.

They stood together, and Besser looked up to see an expression of determination she had never seen on the Hippy Lady's face before. It was as if she thought she was standing there, alone, and had forgotten Besser completely.

Her lips began to move, but no sound came out. And then at once, the entire thicket erupted in sounds; bullfrogs, crickets, a million other creatures. Besser shivered, and grabbed at the Hippy Lady's hand.

"What are you saying?" she hissed.

In an uncharacteristically stern tone, the Hippy Lady said, "Just listen."

But Besser said, "What's this have to do with Gleamer?"

"Bessie! Just listen, for once!"

Besser was stung with hurt. Her jaw clenched, but she said nothing.

An image came to her, of her mother and father, sitting at the kitchen table, with a notebook open and halfempty cups of coffee, shouting at each other over whether girls should be allowed to march with the parade fife and drums.

And she wanted to be there, with them. Maybe she could even get them to calm down.

"Bessie!" the Hippy Lady said, the hardness unrelenting in her voice. "Just look. Look!"

"I wanna go back!" Besser wailed.

The rustling came. Besser saw the outline of grass fall as if pinned down by something.

"I wanna go back!" she repeated, her voice louder.

The Hippy Lady made a throaty cry that scared Besser more than the apparition that struggled its way through the grass, lurching toward them.

"Gleamer," Besser uttered, but the word barely came out. It was dry, raspy, and broken, like the thing emerging in front of them.

Not far away, a harsh, barking sound, perhaps dogs, perhaps coyotes.

Here was a creature that only looked like the wreckage of Besser's drawings. As her eyes adjusted to the fading light, they filled with tears.

The Hippy Lady started wailing, a sickly, staccato sound, and then fell into the grass, reaching out a hand.

The Gleamer of Besser's drawings was gone. This creature thrashed pathetically, its form a shriveled husk. As it lurched closer to them, Besser saw in horror that it was actually cut in half, leaving part of itself behind.

It began to thrash, twisting in the grass. The Hippy Lady wailed again. Besser lowered herself beside her, putting her arms around her in an effort to pull her back, but she pushed Besser away.

She broke from her grief to turn viciously to Besser, grasping at her arm. "I hope you *never* know this feeling," she hissed, froth flying from her lips, hitting Besser's face.

Besser jerked away in revulsion. "Quit it!" Besser shrieked. "I didn't do anything!"

She stumbled to her feet, brushing dirt and grass from her clothes. The mosquitoes had found them, and she slapped at them furiously.

"I'm leaving," she announced. Then a surge of pity overtook her. She bent down, stroking the Hippy Lady's hair. "Maybe," she started. "Maybe you'll meet again. Someday."

"Someday," the Hippy Lady repeated in a sob. "Someday? Like, in heaven?"

Besser hesitated. "Um, yeah. I mean, maybe." All her years of attending CCD class, in which she found herself drawing Gleamer in the activity book where it said, "What makes you think of God's love?" had not prepared her for this moment.

"No," the Hippy Lady pronounced. "No. We won't." She reached out toward the diminished appendage, which no longer moved. Besser felt slightly sick as she wrapped her body around the now truly lifeless form.

Besser said softly, "I'm really sorry. I am. But I gotta go home."

It was nearly night for real; the sky was the darkest blue Besser had ever seen, and filled with stars too far away to offer useful light. The moon was a spindly fragment of a moon, almost as useless.

Besser realized she had only a vague idea where home was. She could make out the tops of utility poles, creepy forms which had always reminded her of rows of crucifixions, without bodies.

Somewhere, near the empty crosses, was something like home. She'd be yelled at, or walk into the middle of yelling; both were bad prospects.

"I just don't know," she said, and then she shouted it to the stars, the starved-looking moon, the mosquitoes, and the whining sound of dogs. The whimpering of the Hippy Lady, which was fading into sighs that were almost impossible to hear.

Somewhere, probably close by, a crackling, popping noise erupted. People already had firecrackers, and were setting them off. An acrid tang stung her nostrils.

Besser exhaled, and repeated herself, this time turning around, looking defiantly up to a night heaven where Gleamer, or Gleamer's soul, might have gone: "I just don't know! Don't ask me, 'cause I just, don't, know!"

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

Meg Smith is an author, journalist, dancer and events producer living in Lowell, Mass. In addition to *Sirens Call*, her poetry and fiction have appeared in *The Cafe Review, Muddy River Poetry Review, The Horror Zine, Dark Moon Digest,* and many more. Performing Middle Eastern dance and singing are two of her passions.

Author website: Meg Smith Writer
Facebook: Meg Smith

#### Wolves of the Sea | Evan Baughfman

The group of swimsuit models appeared out of nowhere to join the bachelor party's afternoon yacht excursion. The women had brought their own booze, too.

Guys got sufficiently wasted. Lost track of time.

Eventually, the models insisted on skinny-dipping under the full moon's light. Men didn't need much convincing. Once in the water, however, the partygoers lost sight of their companions.

Where had the beauties gone?

The men screamed as they soon discovered themselves surrounded by a group of killer whales.

Too late they realized: they'd been duped by a pack of hungry or canthropes, the legendary wolves of the sea.

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

Evan Baughfman is a published playwright and author. Evan has found a lot of success writing horror fiction, his work found recently in anthologies by No Bad Books Press and Grinning Skull Press. D&T Publishing released his novel, *Bad for Your Teeth*, in April 2023. Evan's other book with D&T is novella, *Vanishing of the 7<sup>th</sup> Grade*.

Amazon Author Page: Evan Baughfman Instagram: @agent00evan 716

#### The Lion Man | Andrew Kurtz

The Lion Man of New York is one of those dark secrets that the city tries to keep undercover.

Though half-eaten mutilated bodies turn up now and again, the authorities explain them as attacks by wild dogs, but no dog saliva has been found on the bodies and no packs of dogs have been seen. Yes, there are the occasional strays, but these animals are incapable of administering the carnage that the Lion Man leaves in his wake.

According to legend, one moonlit night a drunken woman somehow entered the lion's den at the zoo. She removed all her clothing and began to dance in front of the two lions. One would think that she would become the next meal, but the lions didn't attack. They jumped on top of her, fornicating the helpless victim.

Afterward, the lions fought each other to the death until all that remained was a pile of mutilated flesh. The woman escaped and ran into a dark alley, where she gave birth to this crypto abomination. This wasn't a natural birth because her belly had a tremendous hole in it as though something burst its way out, plus her internal organs were eaten. To this day, it is a mystery where her corpse is buried, if it was not immediately cremated.

Of course, there were witnesses who actually saw this creature, but you won't find any of them on the city streets. They are either deceased or are permanent residents in mental institutions.

The first known report of the creature was given in 1998 by a police officer who came upon the Lion Man as he was devouring the remains of a woman in a deserted alley at noon. Body parts littered the alley as the creature gnawed the flesh until only bone remained. He frantically described the horror before him on his police radio to the dispatcher. After giving a detailed description, screams of agony and the ripping of flesh were the final sounds coming from that radio.

The monstrosity had two lion heads, each with a thick mane of black fur. Both arms and legs were as thick as tree trunks and instead of hands and feet, sharply taloned paws. He was approximately ten - feet tall and had a whip-like tail that ended on a puffy black ball of fur.

In 2015, a businessman returning home after a long day of work, witnessed the creature in a nearby park feasting on the disemboweled flesh of a human infant and its mother. The infant's baby carriage was crushed as though it was a soda can, wheels popped off and frame crunched up into a large metallic ball. The entire infant's body was in the mouth of one of the heads, and swallowed in one swift gulp.

The other head was deeply buried in the mother's chest, voraciously dining on her intestines and heart.

When the monster laid its eyes on the businessman, a puddle of warm urine formed at his feet. The man silently said his prayers, expecting to enter the next world in mere moments. However, it seemed that the Lion Man had his fill and dashed off into the darkness, leaving a trail of gore.

The businessman man ran as though Satan was trailing him, to the nearest police precinct. Describing what he saw in meticulous detail, the police rushed to the scene. Since this occurred close to midnight and there were no witnesses, the police stuck to the wild dog theory. Furthermore, the man was committed to an insane asylum for not being able to separate reality from fantasy. This sounds very suspicious to me. Were the authorities worried that this man might go to the newspapers and cause a citywide panic?

In between that time many witnesses have claimed to encounter the creature, all giving the same exact description in vain. None of them will ever see the light of day again, being confined in the darkest recesses of asylums.

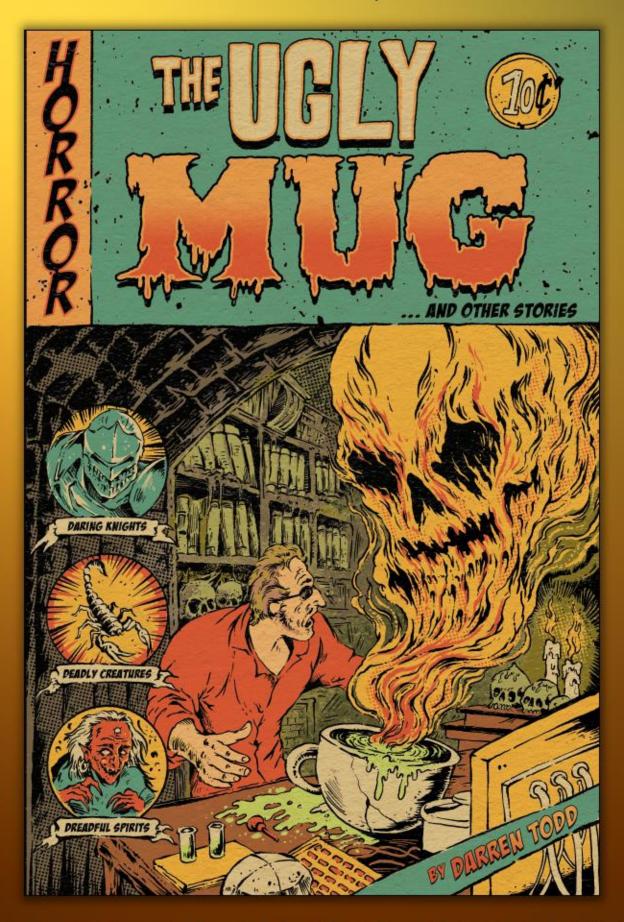
Can all these people be insane or have they truly seen a monster from their darkest nightmares? Is the fact that a Lion Man is terrorizing New York City, being swept under the rug? I am sure the answers to these questions exist, but have not been unearthed as of now and may never be.

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

Andrew Kurtz is an up-and-coming horror author who writes very graphic and violent short stories which have appeared in numerous horror anthologies. Since childhood, he has loved horror films and literature. His favorite authors are Stephen King, Clive Barker, H.G. Wells, Richard Matheson, Edgar Rice Boroughs, and Ian Fleming.



### When it comes to horror, bite-size is best.



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

#### Fin | Rose Blackthorn

fin: a membranous, wing-like or paddle-like organ attached to any of various parts of the body of fishes and certain other aquatic animals, used for propulsion, steering, or balancing.

fin: Latin word meaning 'end'

In the open Pacific, somewhere between Fiji and Hawaii, the Korean fishing vessel *Weibeu Daenseo* pulled in their second net of the day. The first haul had been large, and the captain might have called it a day, but he was not the owner of the boat. He would not head back for land until his fish holds were full.

Captain Seong ordered the crew to the deck. The winch began pulling in the nets, and all hands were available. Seong was lost in thought while he waited for the call that all the nets were in. As a child and then a young man, he had romanticized the idea of being a boat captain. However the open water was no longer an imagined wonderland. The reek of salt and the stench of blood and dead fish were no perfume to his nose. He grew tired of the crude, uneducated men he commanded and wished that he'd taken his father's advice and gone into business.

When cries of alarm from the deck registered on his wandering mind, he nearly fell out of his chair. Leaning forward to see what had caused the commotion, he could only stand and stare for several seconds. The nets had come in with only a few flopping fish in comparison to their earlier haul, but lying gasping on the deck amongst them was a woman.

Seong snapped an order, and his second in command Eun stepped up to take his place. Then, the captain hurried down to the main deck to find out what had happened.

"Daejang," one of the men called, his eyes wide with shock and something like fear, "She was in the net. We pulled her out like a fish."

"I can see that, Babo," Seong said. "Where did she come from?"

As the captain spoke with his crew, the woman watched them but did not respond to what was being said. When she had sufficiently caught her breath, she sat up.

Every man on deck took a step backward, except Seong.

"Who are you?" he asked in Korean. When she just shook her head, he tried heavily accented English. "Who are you?"

"You may call me Ka'ahu," she said, and coughed, covering her mouth with one hand.

"Water," Seong ordered, not looking to see which man jumped at his command.

Soon a crewman came back with a plastic bottle of water, which he handed to Seong. The captain twisted off the lid and knelt as he handed the bottle to the woman.

Her fair hair was long and tangled, her skin pale and smooth. Her eyes were dark, so dark he could not discern pupil from iris, and they seemed rather flat. She had nearly drowned, and was surely in a state of shock.

"How did you come to be here?" he asked slowly. It had been many months since he'd had reason to speak English, and he was sure she would be hard pressed to understand him.

"I fell," she replied after taking a long swallow from the bottle, "I've been in the water for a long time."

"You are safe," Seong assured her, touching her shoulder lightly.

She was wearing what appeared to be a body suit made of grey neoprene-like fabric that covered her from wrists to throat to ankles. It was dappled and striped with strange patterns that were familiar to him, although he couldn't place it.

"Come," he said to her, "you may rest in my cabin. If you're hungry, we will feed you. Then I will call the mainland for you."

He helped her up, letting her clutch his arm, while she freed her feet from the net. As he slowly escorted her across the deck, he gave clipped orders to reset the nets and prepare for another haul. Even in this instance, they could not return to the mainland if the holds were not full. Fishing was a cutthroat profession and there were plenty of men willing to take his place as the captain of the *Weibeu Daenseo*.

In his cabin, Seong immediately handed Ka'ahu a towel with which to dry herself. While she did so, he pulled a couple of blankets from a compartment to warm her.

She wrapped herself in one, not bothering to remove her damp clothing, and sat on the edge of his bed. Her face in the dim light of the cabin was very pale, almost iridescent, when she turned to look at him.

"What ship were you on, Ka'ahu?" he asked, sitting at the tiny desk at the end of the bed. He'd found a piece of paper, and waited to write down the name she gave him.

"A cruise ship, Sapphire Princess," she said, her dark eyes never leaving his face. She never blinked. "It passed by here. Two days ago, I think."

"You've been in the water for two days," he repeated, astonished that she'd survived. In the open ocean with no floatation device and completely alone, her survival was a miracle. "These waters are full of predators. You are lucky to be alive."

Slowly, she nodded. "Yes, I am lucky."

"Are you hungry?" he asked, getting to his feet again. He would need to contact the mainland to let them know about the castaway they'd found, and make arrangements for her safe return.

"No, thank you. I am tired." She continued to look directly at him in a way that made him uncomfortable. There was something about her level gaze that was almost predatory.

"Please, rest," he said politely. "I will check on you after I've talked to my superior. If you need anything, that button there," he pointed to the little intercom on the wall next to the bunk, "will connect you to the bridge. I am at your service."

She nodded, the barest smile curving her lips.

For a moment, the romance of the sea that he had imagined as a boy returned to him. A beautiful woman rescued from certain death, and who would most certainly fall in love with the dashing captain...

"Rest," he said again, feeling rather flushed. He quickly left the room, being sure the door was latched behind him.

A little more than three hours later, the intercom buzzed. "Captain?" Ka'ahu said, her soft voice sounding tinny through the speaker.

"Yes, what do you need?" he answered. The crew was preparing to pull in the nets from their third cast. Hopefully, it would contain more fish than the last one, and no more castaways.

"I'm feeling much better. I would like to come up onto the deck."

"We're about to bring in the nets, Ka'ahu. It would be better if you waited," he replied, not wanting to worry about a civilian when the carnage began.

"I understand," she replied, and said no more.

Seong had no time to continue the conversation as the nets appeared over the port side of the deck. He smiled and nodded to Eun when he saw the haul. Once the nets were cleared the holds would be full, and they could start back to the mainland. He hadn't had a reply about the woman pulled from the sea, but was sure there would be a response before they made port.

The crew, a degenerate group with no breeding and little education, was well trained in the task at hand. The faster they worked, the better the meat—the better the meat, the higher the price that would be split between them.

As usual, they separated the catch. Different types of fish were packed in the hold together and covered with ice. Though the real prize was sharks. Shark fin soup sold for 50,000 won per serving in Korea. The fins themselves sold from one hundred to five hundred dollars a pound in the international market, depending on the demand. Seong was pleased when he saw how many sharks had been caught in the nets.

As the crewmen who specialized in finning began their gruesome work, the strange castaway appeared on deck. Babo had just finished slicing the last fin from the shark before him. He turned to throw the animal back into the water, as was the custom, where it would slowly sink without fins to propel it until it drowned or was eaten by another predator. He didn't know the woman was behind him until something cold and sharp slid into his back. He couldn't even cry out, the pain was so intense.

Seong heard the yelling from panicking crewmen before he understood what was going on. The deck was a mess of dying fish and blood, half the crewmen still working over the sharks that thrashed as they fought to escape. One man was down, no two—and then the captain realized that the castaway was in the midst of it. He was so shocked to see her there it took a moment for him to understand that she was pushing the sharks back toward the edge of the deck.

"Stop her, grab her!" he yelled over the PA system. When they did nothing, he realized that the men were afraid to approach her. "Eun, take over," he barked at his second and raced out of the small bridge and down the steps to the deck.

When he reached the killing floor, all was pandemonium. Half the crewmen were down now, some struggling to regain their footing while others were still. The rest of the men were giving the castaway a wide berth as she shoved struggling sharks over the side and back into the water.

"Ka'ahu, stop what you are doing!" Seong ordered, putting every bit of authority into his voice. She was covered in blood, even her pale hair dyed in it. The expression on her face was cold fury.

"You must stop now or you'll be bound and confined," he added, coming close enough to touch her.

"You should be ashamed," she said, rounding on him. Two sharks, already deprived of their fins, had stopped struggling near her feet. Their mottled hides slicked with blood resembled the odd designs on the woman's clothing. The rest of the sharks had been returned to the sea. "You know this is wrong. No one should abuse the sea like this. Even the sharks only kill to survive. You kill and kill, wasting nearly all," she said, her voice grating. Her pain was so intense Seong expected to see tears on her face. But her dark, flat eyes simply stared at him, unblinking.

"This is not your concern," he said gently but firmly, hands held before him to show he was weaponless. "You are sick from being so long in the sea, alone –"

"Daejang," one of the men called, terror in his tone, "Look at Babo. Look at Yun!"

Seong glanced sideways, irritated that he should be interrupted. Of course, none of the men spoke English, so they had no idea what was being said. His eyes widened when he saw that not all of the blood on the deck came from the catch. Babo and Yun's arms had been removed, and were lying next to the opening into the hold.

"The killing, the waste will end. It is over," Ka'ahu said, raising the long bloody knife that she held. "Finished." She smiled slowly, revealing multiple rows of sharp, serrated teeth, like those of the shark.

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When the Korean fishing vessel *Weibeu Daenseo* was found several days later, it was drifting with the tide. No one was found on board, not the captain or his crew, nor the unknown castaway with the strange name who had been pulled miraculously from the sea. All that was found was a hold full of fish. In the back hidden section, where the prized shark fins were usually stored, there were fourteen pairs of human arms, carefully packed in ice.

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

Rose Blackthorn lives in the desert but longs for the sea. She is a writer, dog-mom, jewelry-maker, avowed coffee drinker, and photographer. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared online and in print with a varied list of anthologies and magazines including the collection *Beautiful*, *Broken Things*.

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#### The Devil's Glen | RJ Meldrum

The two men stood on the side of the road.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" asked Brian.

"Sure, why not?" replied Peter.

"Well, because of the disappearances. For once it isn't just hearsay or old wives' tales. They really happened."

"Well, it's definitely worth exploring. That's what we're here for, after all."

"True," answered Brian.

Brian and Peter were old friends and colleagues. They spent their summers investigating paranormal and supernatural occurrences. Their next target, the Devil's Glen, was a likely candidate. It was a heavily wooded, steep ravine on the edge of hill. Over a period of one hundred and twenty years, seventy-two people had disappeared whilst walking in the glen.

Brian and Peter had done their homework; they knew there were several conditions which had to be fulfilled for a disappearance to take place. Firstly, the person had to be on their own. No-one had ever disappeared when they had company. Secondly, it had to be between May and August. No-one had ever disappeared in any other month. Brian's theory was it this was because this was when the glen was at its greenest. The leaves made it hard to see into the glen from the road above. When the leaves dropped in fall, someone looking from the road above could easily see the path through the ravine to the road at the bottom. It's hard to disappear when someone is watching you. Thirdly, it helped if it was raining, but this wasn't a definite. Of the seventy-two missing people, fifty-three had disappeared on rainy days. For the others, it had been sunny.

And now Brian and Peter were here to investigate. It was July, it was overcast. They just needed to decide who would walk the path alone in the Devil's Glen.

"How about a good old fashioned coin toss?"

Peter nodded. Brian removed a quarter from his pocket and tossed it in the air. Catching it deftly, he placed it on the back of his hand.

"Heads or tails?"

"Tails."

Brian exposed the coin.

"Heads it is. You get to go."

Peter was required to hand over his cell phone before he embarked on his journey. He could only take a small notebook to record his impressions. This was something the two friends had agreed on years before. Their investigations had to be untainted by electronic devices. It was possible the phenomena they investigated were electrical in origin, so they didn't want any external electronic devices affecting their observations.

Peter walked to the edge of the path. He felt no premonition of doom. As he headed under the canopy of green leaves he smiled back at his friend, who was standing at the roadside. As he stepped onto the path, Peter was struck immediately by the change in light. At the roadside the sky had been overcast, but as soon he started on the path the dense foliage of the undergrowth made it hard to see even ten feet. Above him the trees grew so closely together there was barely a glimpse of the sky. The path was clearly an old stream bed and water still trickled down, making the going wet and slippery. Peter found himself looking down to ensure he did not slip and fall on the precipitous path. He hadn't realized just how steep it was going to be.

Brian stood at the top of the glen. He was unable to see very far down the path as it twisted and wound its way between the trees. Peter was soon lost to sight. Even standing on the edge of the path, Brian could feel the atmosphere of the place. It might have been due to the lack of sunlight or the drop in temperature or the humidity. It could even have been the slightly menacing appearance of the uncared for trees, covered in moss, or the ground covered in bushes, deadfalls and broken branches. But there was definitely something. He strained to see further down the path. Without realizing, his left foot slid a few inches off the roadside and onto the path. He had just entered the Devil's Glen.

Peter reached the bottom of the glen. Truth be told, he had slid most of the way, mainly on his rear-end. He now stood on a dirt road. He could see no houses. He pulled out his notebook and scratched a few thoughts. The Devil's Glen was steep, dark and damp. He had no inkling of supernatural forces on the way down. No tingles, nor neck hairs rising. Maybe it would be different on the way back up, although he suspected his thoughts would be mainly focused on not having a heart attack as he struggled up the steep incline. He hoped Brian was ready for a beer once he made it back to the car.

It took Peter forty-five minutes to reach the top. He was slightly disappointed. He hadn't disappeared or had even the tiniest supernatural encounter. Sadly, he was forced to conclude the Devil's Glen was not somewhere he would consider to be haunted. The disappeared people had simply strayed off the path, or had even fallen and ended up in the thick undergrowth.

As he reached the top of the glen, he had hoped to see Brian standing waiting for him, but he wasn't there. The Devil's Glen did have a real history of disappearances and he thought Brian just might have been worried enough to hang around the entrance, rather than just wandering off to look at the local flora or sit in the car.

Peter reached the roadside where the car was parked. It was empty. Blinking in the sunlight, he looked up and down the road. He saw no sign of his friend. He walked down the road for a short distance, then back to the car. He walked in the opposite direction, looking at the edges of the road to see if Brian was in the ditch for some reason.

After a frustrating few minutes he walked back to the start of the path into the Devils' Glen. Was it possible Brian had headed down the ravine himself? He looked down. He saw his footprints, leading down and then back up. The only other footprint was the front part of a boot, just at the edge of the pathway, a footprint with the distinctive track marks of the hiking boots Brian wore. Nothing else. The truth hit Peter. The Devil's Glen had just claimed another victim.

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

RJ Meldrum has been published by Culture Cult Press, Trembling with Fear, Black Hare Press, Smoking Pen Press, Breaking Rules Press, and James Ward Kirk. He's had stories in The Sirens Call eZine, the Horror Zine and Drabblez Magazine. His novellas "The Plague" and "Placid Point" were published by Demain Press in 2019 and 2021.

Facebook: Richard Meldrum



#### You Are What You Eat | Louie Sullivan

I'd bet good money that you don't think about where your food really comes from. I'm not trying to pull any of that PETA crap on you ('People for the Eating of Tasty Animals' is more my vibe than whatever it's actually supposed to stand for) but still, I bet it's something you've barely considered. When you look down at your triple double big bangin' burger deluxe, I'm willing to wager you don't give a single moment's consideration to what the hell is in it. Why should you? It's about instant gratification, baby, and it tastes *delicious*. And again, I'm all for it – *do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law* and all that – more power to you if you can stomach it. But I can't. Not anymore.

I used to be like you. Used to be able to chow down on whatever tasty treats came across my plate, grease dripping down the sides of my face as I carelessly devoured. Don't get me wrong – I can still hold my own at a buffet with the best of them. But I pay a little more attention to my meat these days. Try to make sure it's actually what it says it is on the label.

You're familiar with Chow Down Burger, right? The fast food joint, one on every highway? Good. I took you for a person who'd chowed down a few times, but I had to be sure. I figure it's safe to also assume then that you're familiar with the Rib Chow Sandwich, but it's been a few years since they discontinued it, so I'll jog your memory. The Rib Chow is — sorry, was — a specialty menu item that Chow Down Burger offered sporadically, and people lost their friggin' minds every time the place used to bring it back. Artificial scarcity, I guess (or actual scarcity, depending on who you ask.) It's never been officially stated why Chow Down wouldn't make the Rib Chow a permanent menu item. Some folks think it might've lost its appeal if it was always available, that people would've gotten sick of it. Others think there was some kind of poison in the sauce that'd kill you if you ate too much of it. The leading idea, though, is that it had to do with the price of pork — that it was only financially feasible for Chow Down to make the damned thing when the market was low and the meat was cheap enough for them to turn a profit. But the thing about every last one of these theories (and even some I won't bother to mention) have in common is that they're all completely wrong.

Let me take you back a few years, (I don't know, five? ten?) to the last summer that Chow Down Burger ever offered the Rib Chow. I was fresh outta college and felt like I was invincible. Working a crappy job, living in some shithole apartment near Pittsburgh with the worst roommate you could hope for, but I was free. And in this freedom I found my favorite food on earth: absolute junk. I tried all the cheapest fast food spots in town. They had the absolute best eats a dirt-poor chump like me could dine on, and even more important than that, I had a hookup. This chick Amy I used to fool around with senior year started working there right before graduation, and she kept the gig rolling through the summer. We stayed on good terms, which meant plenty of hot nights for her and plenty of free fries for me. She was cute and all, but I think you get what I mean when I say that without the fries I probably wouldn't have stuck around.

Anyway, I was eating Chow Down way more often than any human being ought to, and the best thing on the menu by far was the Rib Chow Sandwich. I must've had at least four or five of 'em a week, not really doing much else in the day but sleeping, playing video games, and taking the occasional cruise down to Chow Down for a bite. Thing is, I started to feel like absolute shit. Now, if you've seen that documentary *Super Size Me*, you probably think you know what's going on right about here: living on fast food alone is not exactly the healthiest lifestyle. But I don't think that was it – see, it was only after I started to eat the Rib Chow that I really got hit hard. I even tested it out. For a week or two solid, I switched to burgers. No sickness. Then when I went back to Rib Chows, immediately worse.

But I couldn't resist 'em. I was hooked, man. Addicted. I started putting on weight in weird spots, getting all flabby. I thought my acne came back, but then I looked closer and realized that they weren't pimples, they were warts. Freakin' all over, too – my face, my back, even some on my arms and legs. I felt disgusting. My sleep schedule got all screwed up too, and before I knew it I was staying up all night and sleeping off the days. It was a rough scene, and it was only getting worse. I got so sickened by myself that I could barely look in the mirror. But I didn't know how to break loose. The freedom I thought I'd had was a trap, and I couldn't get out – I was stuck doing the same shit day after day, and it was killing me.

I've got to break for a second here or I'm going to break down — you may be able to get some of the rest of this story but I *pray* you can't relate to this part, man, because it was the worst I've ever felt. Ever. So I need a breather. There's probably some context you need for the next bit anyway, the part where Amy literally saves my life. Have you ever heard of the Squonk? Dumb name, I know, but it fits, because this thing's *weird*. Like, I get why it's not up there with Sasquatch and the Jersey Devil as far as cryptids people know about. So this thing, the Squonk, it's apparently some kind of little pig-creature that lives in the woods around here. A northern Pennsylvania monster, just like me. Actually, more like me than I'd like to admit. It's fuckin' ugly, man. That's its key thing: just *foul* to look at. And it knows. It knows how gross it is, and can't stop crying over how unappealing and flat-out hideous it knows it looks. Its skin hangs off it,

covered in bumps and moles, and it sometimes can't even move because of how goddamned depressed it is. Sound familiar?

That's about how Amy found me when she came to my apartment and told me I was cut off. I was furious, threw her out before she could explain, but in hindsight it was for the best. She put my picture up at Chow Down, made up some bullshit that I was stealing from the store or something, and got me banned from there and every other fast food place in the area. I was beyond pissed. But it helped me clean up my act. It took some time, and some help (Amy kept trying, God bless her, and my shitty roommate did his part too), but eventually I got it together. And it's a good thing, too, because what Amy told me when we finally started talking again shook me hard.

See, I wasn't the only one who got caught in a loop that summer. From what she heard through the Chow Down Burger employee chatter (they're all over twitter), people across the country got addicted. Not enough to make news – no, Chow Down made sure they disappeared before it could get that far – but enough to make waves nonetheless. Urban legend started to spread, and it sounded a hell of a lot like what happened to me. Losers all over America getting hooked on the Rib Chow and tanking their already-nothing lives. Spiraling into depression, developing physical deformities, the whole lot. Except they didn't have the kind of friends that I did. And Amy in particular added one bit of info that I haven't seen anywhere on the internet since (believe me, I've looked.) She said she got bored at the restaurant one slow day and started poking around in the back office, accidentally found some shit on the computer about the Rib Chow. Turns out those sandwiches had an extra-special ingredient after all, and it made the meat scarcity (and later, the disappearances of the Rib Chow addicts) all make sense. I'm not going to straight out say it here because you never know who's listening, but I think you're smart enough to put it together, right? Let's just say, between us, it's like the old saying goes: you are what you eat.

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

Louie Sullivan is not a fan of ribs, though he does cook a mean burger (without cryptid meat, or so he claims.) He is a graduate of Fordham University and Saint Peter's University, reads about a hundred books a year, and goes to the movies as often as humanly possible. This is his first published short story (with many more to come!)

Goodreads Page: Louie Sullivan
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#### The Piano | KC Anderson

"Gene's Pianos. How can I help you?"

"Hey there. The name's Dave. I'm calling to ask for an estimate for fixing an antique piano that was left by the prior owners of this house I just purchased."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Well, it plays fine, but I can't seem to figure out how to turn off the self-playing feature. It'll just randomly play by itself at any given hour. Always the same song."

"What kind of piano is it?"

"It's a Jesse French and Sons. Not sure what year."

"...Um... Dave... Jesse French and Sons never made self-playing pianos...

"...Dave?"

#### About the Author:

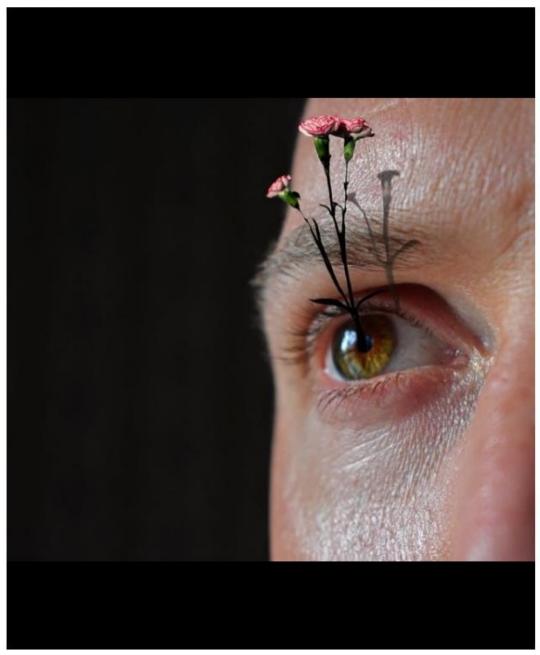
KC Anderson is the author of the *Living in Hell* trilogy, available on Amazon.

**Amazon Author Page: KC Anderson** 

## 34 ORCHARD

Darkness is just across the street.

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#### Become the Beast | Dan Allen

Trees, rocks, and mosquitos.

Paved roads turn to gravel, and not a house in sight.

Mitch drives through the night. Later, the black sky melts to grey, and a pale glow highlights the horizon. The GPS tells him to continue for another sixty miles. Finally, a hand-painted sign announces 'Pagwa Campground' and an arrow points down a narrow lane. Tree branches crowd in and scratch the sides of the RV. Olivia wakes up, followed by their son, Jimmy. An older woman, wearing a pink hockey helmet and several layers of clothing, slides between the trees and stands perilously close to the path of the motorhome. Mitch stops inches from her feet and rolls down his window.

"Hey, how's it going?"

"Hey yourself, mister." She smiles and looks him right in the eye. Her chubby lower lip hangs out further and curls over the top, giving her a bulldog face.

"Does this laneway take me to a campground?"

"Yes, sir, it does." She pauses between her words.

"Do they take RVs?"

"Yes, sir, they do."

"Is it a good campground?" Olivia calls out from the back.

"You'll have to see fer yourself." The woman takes two steps into the bush, and it swallows her from view.

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The lane ends in a large clearing.

"You have arrived at your destination." The GPS sounds far too cheery.

Mitch sinks back in his captain's chair. Most units are run-down trailer park homes with add-on decks. Many have been there so long that they've sunk into the ground. The grass has not been cut but is thin and grows in clumps out of the dusty soil. An old, rusted-out school bus, the wheels long gone, marks the entrance. A large bedsheet hangs off the side with random upper and lower-case letters scrawled in paint.

"All are welcome at Camp Pegwa," Olivia reads out loud, "Home of the Wendigo."

"What's a windy go?" Jimmy has come up from the back. "Do they have rides here, Dad?"

"I think it is a cultural thing." Mitch knows more, but he doesn't want to spook Jimmy.

The hockey helmet lady emerges from behind the bus holding a heavy pitchfork at waist level. She's comfortable like she has been carrying it around her entire life. Mitch lets the RV roll forward and watches her in his side mirror. Her pace is slow and deliberate, yet she is closer every time he glances back.

A 'Register Here' sign hangs from a single nail above a doorless entrance to a shack that could just as easily hold chickens than be the campground office. Mitch pulls to a stop and grabs his wallet off the dash. Two locals enter the shack ahead of him. They both have long, straggled hair and mountain-man-style beards. The taller of the two smacks his lips over his few remaining teeth. Mitch gets a glimpse of yellow and black spots and can't tell if it's tobacco stains or rot.

"Hey, fellas, what's up with the woman in the hockey helmet?"

"Why dat's Leona, she wears dat dare brain bucket 'cause she keeps falling down due to her leprosy," explains Toothless. His grin fills his face like he finds the idea of her spontaneously toppling over hilarious.

"It's not leprosy, you idjet. She has the epilepsy," says the sidekick. His breath smells like yesterday's cheap wine, and he has a wonky eye that bobbles around of its own free will.

"Don't matter no how to me. She's gotta wear it to keep her head from bustin' open if'n when she falls."

Mitch's back tingles, and he turns to see Leona standing in the doorway, clutching onto her weapon.

"So, we meet again. You must be Leona. I've heard a lot about you."

"I suppose you have." She talks slow and deliberately, choosing each word carefully.

"Well, Leona, what do you plan to do with that pitchfork?"

"Kill raccoons," she says.

"Dat's right, mister," chimes in Toothless, "she baits 'em with little piles of food, and when dey come closer, she jumps out and spears 'em. Holds the fork up over her head and runs 'round camp screaming like a witch on fire."

"You spear raccoons with that?" Mitch still isn't convinced. The idea is too strange for his mind to process.

"Yes, I do."

"And after you stab them, are they still alive?"

"Not for long." For the first time in the conversation, Leona makes eye contact, and she sparkles.

"Never mind her, mister, say you lookin' to stay for a while? It's thirty dollars a night." Toothless looks like he is holding his breath, waiting for the answer.

"You gotta fill this out." The sidekick slides over a photocopied page, a simple form with just boxes for a name and address. Sidekick's hands are filthy. Stained brown, and the undertips of his long fingernails are packed black with dirt.

"One night will be enough." Mitch fills out the form and puts thirty dollars on the table.

"Pick any spot you want. Our electricity isn't very 'liable, so you might wanna keep your generator runnin'," says Toothless.

"And ya might wanna smell the water 'fore drinking it. I think a few of them holdin' tanks are leakin'," adds Sidekick.

Toothless leads Mitch back outside, and Mitch is happy to get fresh air. The shack smelled sour, like sun-baked beer.

"Hey, mister, you got any young'uns in that camper of yours?" Sidekick's teeth are all right, but his one eye keeps turning towards his nose. "We sure don't get many of them 'round here."

A little alarm bell goes off in Mitch's head. He turns towards the RV, but Sidekick isn't finished and follows along. Mitch gets in, eager to tell Olivia about the odd characters running the place. Sidekick hustles over and steps up to Mitch's window.

"That's a mighty fine camper ya got here. You mind if I come in an' have a look-see? I ain't never been in no big rig like this, no siree, an' I sure would like ta meet yer wife an' li'l boy."

"To tell the truth, it's been a long day, and I want to get set up before dark."

"That's no problem. No problem at all. While you is settin' up, I'll take the boy for a walk, show him our playground. I'm good at takin' care of childlins. It'll be my pleasure. You don't gotta pay me or nothin'."

Olivia's fingernails dig into Mitch's arm, and he sees her shaking her head.

"Over my dead body." She says between gritted teeth, only loud enough for Mitch to hear.

"Holy Christ, Livie. As if I would let him."

Sidekick is pointing to a circle of four little iron horses. The old-fashioned ones that sit on top of a large metal spring and sway when ridden. These four are well-rusted and half buried in weeds. One has worked its way out of the ground and lays on its side with the spring's spiked end ready to rip open an unsuspecting leg. Mitch shakes his head. "Not now, pal."

Toothless saunters over to get in his two cents.

"You folks hungry? You otta get yerselves one of our chicken sandwiches. The barbecue will be going all evening. Only five bucks."

"Chicken sandwich, chicken sandwich," Jimmy chants his support of the idea.

A new Broil King barbecue sits, slightly smoking, insanely out of place amongst all the squalor. Behind it, a dozen raw chicken breasts hang from the shed, sweaty and yellowed from the hot sun. Flies swarm around them, and Mitch's stomach does a slow roll.

"Well, if you ain't hungry now, you folks should come to the Wendigo Fire Dance tonight. Admission is free, and it is all ya can eat for twenty bucks. Of course, there is no charge for yer munchkin, no siree, no charge at all."

Mitch rolls the RV over to a spot at the end of a half-empty row.

Olivia holds herself, and her arms quiver. "I don't want Jimmy playing outside. I'm keeping the door locked, and the blinds pulled down."

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Mitch takes a second to plug in his 30-amp line. The odor of the property engulfs him. It smells like the whole place is a giant outhouse, and a sharper smell is lying underneath, something putrid, like a dead animal.

\*\*\*

Olivia has the RV locked up and ready for the night. Jimmy keeps peeking out the window and giggling. Mitch takes a look and sees an old man, naked except for a pair of pee-stained tighty-whities. His long, pure white hair flows down the length of his back. He is circling the RV over and over again, jumping around like a dancing gecko. Mitch opens the window.

"Eat the feast, become the beast," yells the gecko.

"Buzz off," Mitch yells back.

The white-haired man runs right up to the RV. "Eat the feast, become the beast," he yells into the window. He has no eyebrows, and his veins bulge out of his neck and arms, almost on the wrong side of his skin.

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The sounds of a party wake Mitch from his sleep. He checks his watch, and it's a little past midnight. A large fire is burning at the back of the campground, and he can make out the silhouettes of a dozen or more people moving around. He slides the window open a little, so he can hear. They are drunk, yelling out songs and yelling at each other. He can also smell the sweet aroma of meat cooking. I'll be damned, they're having a pig roast, Mitch thinks to himself.

Mitch is up at the break of dawn and prepares to get on the road. He begins to disconnect the electrical cable and is distracted by the lingering smoke. He strolls through the sleeping grounds, making his way toward the bonfire. Leona steps out from the shadows and blocks his way.

"You best not go back there, mister," she says.

Mitch steps around her and continues. The grass clumps are wet with dew, and the morning haze smells of charred wood.

"You're not going to like what you see. You best just pack up and get outta here."

The low-lying smoky aftermath stings his eyes, and Mitch squints to see the bonfire has dwindled to a pile of small flickers. He sees five or six partiers passed out, their faces covered in grease. Some still have chunks of meat in their hands, burnt carcinogenic black on the outside but a bright fuchsia on the inside. Half-empty bottles of homemade hooch lay about, cluttering the ground. Mitch walks further into the remains of the party. There is a second fire, smaller and off to one side. A large rotisserie spit hangs over the smoldering coals, and a carving machete is stuck in the ground below the corpse. Enormous heat has burnt the flesh until it has cracked open in jigsaw-like squares. The bright pink visible through the cracks makes a disturbing contrast to the charred black external crust. It smells greasy and sickly sweet. A large teardrop of liquid rolls down the rose-colored crease and sizzles when it lands on the coals below.

Mitch focuses on a charred pair of legs, little blackened feet tied together and strapped to the pole. The head is missing, and most of the torso is hacked away, but at the far end of the pole, arms and small hands have escaped being burnt crispy. Five fingers and trimmed nails leave no doubt.

Mitch looks beyond the spit and sees the sleeping beast lying on a massive pile of sun-bleached bones. Its ribs press against pale, thin skin. Its body is emaciated and looks almost human except for the insanely long arms and fingers. It has the head of an animal, a decaying deer perhaps. Sharp teeth are exposed where the flesh on its cheek has rotted away. A large iron collar fits snuggling around its neck, and a heavy chain secures the creature.

"I warned you." Leona slides in beside Mitch and uses her fork to flip a stray ember back into the fire.

"They fed that animal all night, and it's still hungry. It never gets enough, always starving and wanting more and more. I feed it the raccoons, but that's not what they eat at their fire parties." She waits until Mitch turns her way. "Not me, mister. I won't eat with them. You eat your own kind, and you get the curse; everybody knows that. You turn into one of these things." She picks up a stone and throws it at the beast, hitting it in the ribs. It grunts but doesn't wake. "Take a good look at him, 'cause this is what will happen to the rest of these idiots. I'm not going to hang around to feed them. They can all go to hell."

Mitch runs to the RV. "Olivia, wake up. We got to leave, now!" He pulls back the curtains covering the windshield and fumbles for his keys. "Insane bush people." Mitch is spitting out his words. "My god, Olivia, they cooked somebody."

"What are you talking about, Mitch?"

"They chopped off pieces with a machete." He forgets to breathe, and his words come in gasps. "The thing in the chains, I don't think it's human. My god, it can't be human."

"Honey, what are you saying, and where is Jimmy? Didn't he go with you?"

Mitch's skin turns ice cold. Jimmy is not in his bed. Mitch bursts out the RV door and searches behind the bus. He runs towards the shack that serves as an office, and from there, he sees Jimmy, over by the broken horse in the weeds.

"Come on, Jimmy. We got to go."

"Where are the swings?"

"Not now, just get in the RV."

"But, Dad, the guy said they had a playground."

Toothless stumbles out of the office, still holding a jug. His chin is stained a rusty brown, and he growls, reaching for Jimmy with long gnarly fingers. Mitch hears a swoosh as something flies through the grey morning fog. Three prong tips break through the front of Toothless, and he starts to leak.

"You best be leavin' now." Leona puts a boot on Toothless for leverage and retrieves her weapon.

Mitch starts the camper and drives cross-country style through the campground. Dishes crash in the cupboards, and the fridge door flies open.

"Livie, call the cops, call 911."

Olivia holds her phone and looks up, shaking her head. No reception.

Mitch turns onto the main highway without slowing. The RV rocks and threatens to roll over.

"I think we have a problem; I gave them my name and address on the registration form."

"We've got a bigger problem than that." Olivia is looking at the rear camera images. She watches as one vehicle after another pull out of the campground. "They're coming after us."

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

Dan Allen seeks out diverse cultures and fascinating people. He enjoys sailing, dining, and exploring ancient civilizations. He has survived three expeditions to the Mayan ruins in Central America, explored the Canyons of the Ancients in Southern Colorado, and visited the Pueblo cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde. In addition, he recently returned from traversing the Inca trail from Cusco to Machu Pichu. Stonehenge is calling next.

Facebook: <u>Dan Allen</u>
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#### The Only Savior We Know | Amanda Worthington

My phone buzzes fiercely on the nightstand, making the wood tremble.

"Loralei – you gonna answer that?" a groggy voice demands in the pre-dawn dark of the bedroom.

That's when my eyes shoot open. Henry is the lightest sleeper I've ever known.

I guess this is what I signed up for when I married a cop.

"Hello?" I manage before a yawn takes me. I make my way into the hall and shut the door quietly behind me.

"Lori – oh, thank God. Finally. Look, I know it's late. I know that, ok, just listen."

"Justice? It's...3am."

"I know, I know," the frantic voice on the other end says again, right on cue.

I'm fairly confident at this point that Justice does not in fact know. She doesn't know a goddamned thing. She never does. That's why she calls me.

"My grandad died a couple days back and it was me that found him. And I took the genealogy stuff – all of it. Every last box. And it's all here. What he done, Lori; what they all done. It's gotta go in the library. So, everyone can see. I'll even bring it to ya...I."

"W-wait," I interrupt, my head starting to spin. "What he did? What do you mean? You're not making sense." "I'll bring it, tomorrow. A drive 'ould do me good."

"I really don't want Henry seeing you here. Not with those expired tags of yours. It ain't worth chancin'." I pause here. "Let's meet halfway. "How 'bout Cold Hard Cash?"

At this, Justice erupts into laughter. Finally finding her voice, she says, "Sure, Cash it is." And the line goes dead.

\*\*\*

Cash, Arkansas lies situated almost directly between Jonesboro and Newport on the Cache River. With a population of 342, it's barely important enough to have a name at all. They burn their dead with their trash here and no one asks any questions. And while winter is long gone, the place remains cold and hard in that way small places always do when you can see beneath the fading veneer of hospitality. I make my way to Elle's Diner, a dilapidated old eatery off the one road through town that isn't gravel. I'm early, so I order a cup of burnt coffee and rehearse what I'll say.

I go over my lines another 5 times before I call. It goes straight to voicemail and my stomach clenches against my will. I could blame the coffee, but old Elle ain't to blame and I know it. I feel like I'm suspended in a dense fog as I drive.

I know then without knowing how I know it that I'll never see Justice again.

\*\*\*

Justice Montgomery dies of an overdose of sleeping pills. At least that's what the Newport, Arkansas paper says. Everyone is whispering about the White River Monster and memes featuring Notorious Whitey begin to resurface. In a few days the talk will die down as it always does, but until Justice is in the ground...

"It's such a shame, and right after her granddad too," a woman sniffles beside me. "Whitey's back, I s'pose."

I say nothing as I stand unmoving, watch as the coffin is lowered into the hole they dug a little too quickly. I lived in this hell for 2 long decades and never saw anything. Besides, Newport doesn't need a monster to fear. Its streets are filled with them already.

\*\*\*

I open my car door and do a double take. In the passenger's seat is a parcel of some sort, wrapped in newspaper. It's the puzzle pages with the puzzles all done in Justice's neat script. There's a post-it attached. It just says: Justice wanted you to have this.

I call Henry just to let him know I'll be down here awhile longer and not to worry. I drive until I reach Elle's. There's a little Bed and Breakfast attached if memory serves.

\*\*\*

I tear the newspaper slowly, opening the package with something akin to reverence. And I see what I expected to see. Still, some part of me is caught off-guard. The journal is leather, crackedand worn, musty. I open it gingerly to find delicate pages yellowed with age.

I open to somewhere near the middle and start to read.

The names changed, I thought as I read, but the story was always the same, and so were the excuses.

She wandered off

Nobody's seen her

Probably out runnin' around

She had it comin'

She musta made him mad

She shoulda known better

Her husband hasn't even reported her missing. It was the neighbor lady that done that. She'll probably turn up in a few days. They always do.

\*\*\*

I think of Andy then and a knot of rage forms in my stomach. Where is he anyway? Dead girlfriend and her man nowhere to be found? It would be suspicious if it weren't Newport. Here, he can say she was running around on him and her lover musta done it and fled.

It is probably what he's saying.

I flip back to the beginning of the leather-bound volume.

#### October 10th, 1864

Our supplies are all lost. That our lives are not is a small mercy. It reared up beneath us and we rose with it, by the Great Lord's grace not capsizing. William and I vowed never to speak of it. Not to a soul. I am a man of my word and have spoken of it to no one. I fear the war is lost now though, and I write of it for some peace. Whatever there is to be had. I have shot men and knifed them. I have strangled them, had their women, and made them watch while I did what men do best. And I told them it was the price to be paid for daring to resist the ascendancy of a new America, one dominated by our southern enterprise.

I could not help but think of Melville that day, of Ahab and his great white foe. The difference is, I think, that the whale was of God, the same ilk that swallowed Jonah. This beast though, she were of the Devil surely. So crafty and enraged, so large and multi-faceted. And when we came ashore, I looked and could see no sign of her. It was like she blew in with the storm and out again at its passing. Or maybe she was the storm.

#### WM

Another entry followed this one.

#### November 8th, 1866

Williams came to my door the other day. He looked so old. So wasted. "I found a way," he kept saying. "A way to what? What are you on about?" I retorted.

"Have you not noticed the whores selling their wares less?"

I was troubled by this line. But damn me to hell if I hadn't noticed. If my walks had not been more peaceful.

And that's when he came right out with it.

"If we leave them for her, she'll leave us in peace. I have done it and this town's been safe."

And I know not whether it is worse to prey upon the innocent or allow a monster to do your work for you. I know only that I do not feel peace. I feel on the verge of madness.

If anyone ever reads this, will you think of me kindly? I did the best I could under the circumstances.

My name is Walter Montgomery.

\*\*\*

I throw the book down like it has teeth with which to bite me, like if I hold it for a moment longer, it will bore into my very soul.

\*\*\*

Joe's Bootytique isn't much of a tourist draw, but the locals are like flies on that sticky paper we hung when I was little. When I was young enough to still be filled with wonder, I'd marvel at the writhing bodies on the sticky amber strip, the slowly dying specimens drinking deep of the fatal sweetness, wriggling about drunkenly before finally going still. The men who frequent Joe's Bootytique are in various states of decomposition as they watch the sad girls dance, strip, pretend at seduction, the only power they know.

Andy sits at the bar chewing on a toothpick, a half-emptied glass of whiskey in front of him. He's watching a redhead who can't be more than 16. A few dollar bills slide into her ample bosom, and he nods approvingly.

"Andy."

He looks up at my voice. His face is a few shades too pale. It's almost like he's seen a ghost. He's well on his way to full-drunk, but not quite there and he finally connects the dots, standing to face this new threat.

"Aint you Justice's friend? You heard what happened I guess. Real tragic," he drawls. It feels rehearsed.

"You killed her Andy and we both know it," I counter. My eyes leave his face briefly to search his body for any bulge. Not between his legs; even a buxom little redhead can't raise his flag past half-mast when he's hitting the Jack. But Andy is the type to carry.

There, strapped to his left thigh. A blade. I doubt he has the coordination to reach for it let alone use it, but...

"Now that, is quite the accusation, Girl."

I realize then that he doesn't remember my name and that may be a blessing.

Blessing. That word echoes through my brain like a mantra.

Blessing, blessing, blessing.

And then there is only darkness.

It's the last I see of Joe's, and under any other circumstances that would be just fine with me. The trouble is my head is throbbing and there's hard earth beneath me and there is no transition. I'm just in this other place, awash in pain and confusion.

\*\*\*

"You really shouldn't have come asking questions. I didn't want this for her, truth be told. And I don't want it for you, neither. But this is how we bring in the tourists and keep this hellhole afloat."

My brain is a grappling hook as I feel myself falling away, and I cling desperately to the ledge of this semi-dark reality that is only slightly improved over Joe's.

"Mayor Whitman?" I fumble. "Where's that piece of shit, Andy?"

I see him then in one of those Carhartt mechanic jackets, finishing off a cigarette. He flicks it nonchalantly behind him and it falls into the water below. I blink my eyes in a last-ditch effort to wake up from this strange hellscape I've wandered into.

My back is against a post, hands bound. I watch as Andy unsheathes the blade slowly.

"This here is my cunting knife. You can guess where it goes in." He smiles, sensing the unspoken question in my eyes. "It takes longer than you might think."

"Andy." Mayor Whitman's unmistakable baritone. "Make it clean."

\*\*\*

I must be slipping away again, but for the briefest of moments I imagine that the dead eyes of my best friend stare lifelessly back at me from the gathering mist.

"Why?" I choke out as the rain redoubles its efforts to cleanse this place of its unrighteousness. Fear grips me hard then. Harder than his hands as he cuts through the denim of my shorts. Fear for what happens next. Fear of the thing he says he must appease. Fear of pain too; I won't deny it.

The air smells of ozone, that quaint scent of rage and renewal. A storm is coming.

He never answers my question. Because then the thing is there, taking up space, demanding to be noticed.

Andy raises the knife, cuts my bonds. I look on, dumbfounded. He turns away from me then, but before he does, I see that maniacal grin on his face. It is the madness so many have known at his hands. His eyes dart this way and that as if something is closing in on him but he's not sure where it's coming from. He drops to his knees then, seems to push the knife away from himself as he does.

"No, no, NO!," I hear him cry.

The vapor is alive. The river roils with vengeance. There is something alive in the way it moves. It is long and sinuous and all-encompassing. It feels like it wants to shield me from the sight of what happens next.

"No," I find myself whispering. "I want to see it done."

I'm not sure where the words come from. They are simply there.

I watch Andy lose his fight, stare transfixed as he thrusts the knife deep into his chest and twists, screaming as he does it. The fight goes out of him at last as blood pools around him, warm and thick and metallic as the blade that found a home in his flesh. The light goes out of his life finally. It takes longer than you might think. As he drowns in himself, something howls in triumph.

Aspirate on the shreds of your dignity, Fuckface, I think wryly. I'm pretty sure I read that in a poetry book somewhere.

\*\*\*

Darkness is rushing in, swallowing me whole. I really do dream then. I see how she has grown over the ages. I know that every Newport woman's legacy is preserved in her. I sense that she is like a wave, rising, rising, waiting for the perfect moment to come crashing down.

For a moment, I think I see Justice. When I look again, she's gone, but if I focus hard enough, she comes into view again. Alive and well in this ancient, abused thing, desperate to live.

And to her right, another figure smiles translucently. I can see through to the other side of her, and then she solidifies briefly and it's my mother. And she's holding the journal from Justice's granddad's place. I'm sure of it.

\*\*\*

The women of the town walk as if in a fog. They are like zombies being called not to the scent of flesh, but to the light of some distant shore. It must be every woman left in Newport. Young, old, white, Black, every single woman joins the mass of slowly departing bodies. I wonder where they're going. I wonder if it matters. I find myself rising as if from a fitful slumber, trying to get my bearings, joining them.

The monster's head breaks the water as we pass over the bridge. A knot of fear tightens in my chest, but I keep walking. We all keep walking. And the White River Monster lets us pass undisturbed. And we leave the men to their fate.

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

Amanda Worthington writes a different kind of horror. Her work often blurs the lines between terror and comedy, fear and obsession, reason and chaos. The one constant in her work is empowered women shifting the narrative. Amanda is the author of the Elgin-nominated novella-in-verse *No Quarter*. She also founded *Horror in the Heartland*, the Missouri/Kansas chapter of the HWA. She lives in Kansas City, Missouri.

Author Blog: <u>The Mandala Effect</u>
Author Website: <u>Horror in the Heartland</u>





#### The Den | Gregory L. Steighner

"I want to make living art."

Chris gave his petite cousin the side eye as he opened the trunk, "Ace, you're sure this dead town is the place to make it?"

Ace shouldered her digital camera with her dark green eyes staring at him, "It's a great location; an old, abandoned steel town, reclaimed by fifty years of nature. It will be a total contrast to our Waynesburg shoot."

"You'll finally get to use that special film with this sunlight," he said, retrieving the equipment bag from the hatch. "Not a gray cloud in that sky."

His cousin fumbled the film camera's strap around her leather collar. In the midmorning sunlight, Ace stood out with her spiked scarlet hair and gothic-punk ensemble. "I need to get the shot to complete my presentation. I'm not only facing off with my class, but with every college around Pittsburgh. I really want to beat Allegheny Art Academy."

"A four-year-old grudge isn't healthy. Besides, you are better off at Ravenswood." The hatch slammed shut and the car's locks chirped. "Where do you want to get started?"

They parked in the lot of a church overgrown with grass and fresh wildflowers. It long surrendered to the open elements, bristling with young trees that reached towards the bright blue sky. Looking at her phone, she said, "The map shows a graveyard across the road. We'll start there."

They crossed the road after a brief traffic check. Drivers traveling on the road would not notice them passing through Lewisburg as the young forest devoured most of it. Ace found a broken series of stone steps that took them into the cemetery. Chris felt uneasy entering the grounds. That rarely happened to him before. The unkempt graves were so different from the pristine graveyards they usually photographed.

Approaching the center, Ace pointed to a statue, "This is why we're here in this town, it's a hidden den with a mystery. After the final inhabitants of Lewisburg abandoned their town, statues began to happen. No one has ever seen the statues being installed. No artist has come forward to take credit. They just appeared over time and spread over this town. It is Western Pennsylvania's Coral Castle."

The sculpture stood among the markers, its nude ebony skin gleamed among the wildflower colors. Ace removed the light meter from the security of the case, placing it close to its figure. Then she took a reading of the surrounding foliage.

"She's pretty, but odd." Chris looked over the frozen girl. Her face tilted slightly skyward.

"Odd?" She asked while looking over her notes to adjust the shutter speed and aperture.

He set down the bag, "Nude statue of a girl in a church graveyard seems to be a bit out of place."

"Maybe it's a reminder that you can't take anything into the afterlife." Ace walked around it, analyzing the lighting and shadows.

Ace looked through the viewfinder and the camera clicked. She kept repositioning around the statue, capturing angles of light and shadow. Once Ace was satisfied, she swapped out the modern cameras for the antique. Her nimble fingers adjusted the settings of their great-grandfather's legacy, a camera without electronic parts that relied on lights and skill. Nearly a century old, the box camera rivaled its counterparts in seizing moments. Pleased, she turned towards the town's center where two main roads crossed.

"Come on, let's explore this corpse of a town."

\*\*

They searched the town, walking along the side streets of grass and wildflowers surrounded by the bare remains of townhouses and store buildings. The decay wasn't ugly because saplings grew out of cracks and windows providing new homes for wildlife. A small theater drew them closer.

Ace approached the front box office, the sidewalk crumbling with each step. The art deco frontage hailed from the golden age of vaudeville. Chris could envision the posters highlighting plays and movies within. His cousin ran toward statues posed on pedestals on the sidewalk in front of the vestibule. A man and a woman held up theater masks before their faces, comedy for the woman and the man held tragedy.

"This would make a great shot. Grab the tripod." She backed away sizing up the shot, almost backing into him.

Scattered sunlight broke through the shade, causing a freckled pattern on the theater. After attaching the camera to the tripod, Ace positioned it for a dramatic shot. She loved shifting perspectives, always trying to capture vivid imagery.

"A minute should do," Ace said, pressing the film camera's remote shutter cord.

She took five pictures and then switched over to digital. Getting in close she continued shooting. After several, Ace stopped and touched the arm of the male statue. She felt it down to the hand and upward onto the mask. "Weird."

Chris joined beside her, "What's weird?"

"The mask is fashioned from granite. The statue is not..."

"Not what?" He caressed the statue's polished back.

"Well, it's not any type of rock sculptors use. I can't tell what type of material it is. It feels like soapstone, but its polish reflects like travertine. Whoever did this really went into detail."

The male's delicate soulful eyes drew Chris' attention. For a moment, he thought that the eyes blinked. The artist created a skillful illusion of life using flickering shadows and light over the sculpture.

"Excuse me, explain why you're here."

The voice prevailed over nature's humming. Chris turned around with his cousin at the sight of a police officer dressed in a gray uniform with a white scarf. The woman stared at them with rigid eyes. Her hands were firmly on her belt with the right squarely on her gun.

Chris felt sweat beading on his forehead. They couldn't afford another bad encounter with a cop. Ace stepped forward, "We're students at Ravenswood College. We're doing a photoshoot of the town."

The officer relaxed her stance, walking up to Ace. "Let's see your driver's licenses and student IDs."

They retrieved their cards and handed them over to the cop. She examined them closely for a minute. "You came all the way from Pittsburgh just to take pictures of this empty town?"

"I wouldn't call it empty." Ace's tone rose. "I'm doing a series on abandoned locations. Also, all these statues are fascinating subjects."

Chris read her name tag, Lia Grai. An odd name, maybe it was Greek. Officer Grai cast her gray eyes at him. "Don't you have parks and statues in the city?"

His cousin casually pointed back at the theater statues. "Not like this. All the statues are nude here. It's getting harder to work with them."

The Officer gave Ace a cagy scowl, "You have a problem with statues?"

"No. No. Nudes."

"You go to an art school that doesn't allow for nudes?"

Ace breathed deeply before venting, "They do, but you wouldn't believe the trouble to do it. There are special consent forms. You have chaperons to oversee the shoot if you go on location. In addition, it costs a hundred dollars an hour. The college makes students pay for the service. We aren't going to comply."

Officer Grai got a strange smirk, "That's not fair."

Ace nodded, asking, "Are we in trouble for trespassing?"

"No, this town is public land now." She handed back their cards. "However, I recommend you keep your phones handy. There are hidden dangers all over this place, wells, and open foundations. Stay out of the buildings, the floors are rotten, and if you land in the basements, you might not get a signal out. Don't stay after dark, either. You don't want to be part of the legend. Good day."

As she turned to leave, Chris asked, "Do you know anything about this place? Any clue as to who the sculptors are?"

She smiled, "What I know is that no one outside of this town knows who the artist is. What the outside locals do know is that more statues appear over time and people like you come to explore the town. They love visitors spending their money. Have a good photoshoot."

The officer strolled off, leaving the cousins alone. They quickly gathered up their equipment to resume exploring. The wind kicked up causing the trees to sway accompanied by groaning from warped wood that followed them.

"Can you believe that fifty years ago this was a thriving town? After the collapse of steel, it slowly died," Ace said taking a picture of a young woman partly obscured in a grove of maple trees. The mysterious sculptor froze the effigy in a spin, yet there was energy released in spiraling hair.

"Maybe these statues were the people that lived here and the sculptor is trying to preserve the past?"

"Perhaps," Ace lowered her camera to review the set.

Curious about the girl, Chris entered the grove for a closer look. He caressed the torso, feeling the smooth curves of the figure. Under the rustle of leaves, there was a whisper of a sentence. For a second, her eyes shifted at him.

"Hey, are you okay?" Ace touched him.

He replied, "Her eyes moved to follow me."

She laughed, "A good illusion. Come on. The Sun is directly above. I want to finish this roll."

Outside of the shade, sunlight burned away the shadows to mere stubs. They discovered a path through the wild grass and flowers. Although rough, Chris noticed it looked maintained. It snaked through into a park, leading them to a pond.

"This is wonderful." Ace's voice rose. The pond was littered with the figures of kids, some in the water and others along the edges.

He got a sickening feeling. "Aren't you troubled that the artist sculpted them naked?"

"Don't be a prude. I've seen garden statues like these online for sale. It's symbolic of innocence. We skinny-dipped at that age." She changed the lens on the film camera. This shot required the telephoto lens. Walking by him Ace added, "We still do."

She began taking shots, moving around the pond to get the best images. The gleaming statues contrasted with the emerald green sheen of water. "Hey, why aren't the statues covered in vegetation?"

"I noticed that. I don't know. Oh, something is moving in the brush on the other side. Maybe it's a deer?" Ace brought the camera to her eye. The shutter snapped.

Chris didn't see anything. "What was it?"

Ace didn't answer. She kept focused on the shot. Chris approached her, "Did you get the shot?"

He began to sweat. Ace wasn't moving from her stance holding up the camera. He dashed to her side, yelling her name. She didn't respond even when he grabbed and shook her. The camera fell out of her hands, but he saved it from crashing on the ground. Ace's body was rigid, yet flexible when he moved her arm and wrist to feel for a pulse. It was racing. He looked directly into her frantic eyes.

"What happened to you?" He asked a futile question. "I'll get help."

He lifted her up when a soft voice behind him said, "Hello pretty."

Chris turned and was stunned at the monstrous beauty. A woman captivated him with the striking perfection of her features, and radiant deep blue eyes, and yet it was the slithering matt of snakes on her head that charmed him into stillness.

He couldn't flinch as she stroked his cheek. "Tasia! Clio! I have a wonderful pair to add to my installation."

Two attractive women entered his field of vision, wearing white blindfolds that flowed into their long hair. The first one with hazelnut-colored hair came up to the side of the woman, "Yes, Koralia."

"Clio, take the girl," said the creature as it handed off Ace into the arms of the dark woman, who carried her off easily. "Tasia, take their equipment to the studio and fetch the satchel. Bring it to the den."

The second woman nodded, her light blonde hair drifted in the slight breeze. She began with the film camera as they were carried away. Chris' field of vision faced the cloudless pale blue sky, yet he could eyeball its edge. The statues spoke in soft voices as they walked by.

"They will be an excellent display here." They settled them down on a garden patio.

The moments dragged as the beast studied them. "These cousins will be together here."

The other woman, Tasia appeared carrying a case. She rested on the ground and opened it. As Clio and Tasia retrieved scissors and bottles, Chris wondered how they could see blindfolded. He watched as the pair began with Ace.

They moved her like a mannequin to remove her boots and socks. Ace's clothes were cut off in strips and tossed casually into a plastic bag. It pained him as the pair scrubbed away his cousin's makeup.

"Leave her hair alone," it commanded.

It didn't take them long to repeat the procedure on him. They greased their bare skin with a strong sickly honey-scented oil. Chris saw terror in Ace's eyes.

What did they call the monster? Koralia? The name sounded Greek. It looked down at him. Her hand gingerly caressed his chest, slowly tapping downward until reaching the goal. Somehow, he gasped.

"He's still malleable." Her toxic smile was angelic.

Afterward, she posed him with Ace with the assistance of two women. They shaped Ace into his embrace as he into her. Did she feel the same horrifying pleasure? Did they share the shameful bliss? It didn't matter now as hands guided their faces together, locking their eyes forever with lips barely a breath apart.

"Let's leave them be. Lia should have secured their car by now." Koralia's voice purred.

He felt his body stiffen, getting harder as the day waned. How could they be alive? The whispers came along the surrounding darkness. In his peripheral vision, Chris saw the kids from the pond. They danced around them as wispy silhouettes.

Among them was the teen from the grove. She touched them both with warm hands. "The Gorgon and the Stygian Sisters can't imprison your spirits. After a few nights, your spirits can move as freely as ours. Nevertheless, you are part of her art now. We exist to please the senses of The Others. We are denied Heaven or Hell."

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

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

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#### Go Softly | Nicole L. Nevel-Steighner

Maura settled into the front seat of her new SUV, counting a wad of money in her hands. She had just impressed her friends by winning the pot they'd pulled together for axe tossing. Winning felt good. Some of the money could go towards the fifty-nine more payments on her sleek black ride.

The dashboard clock illuminated two-seventeen, a.m. The task of getting a coffee seemed herculean. Sheetz was her only choice.

After a brief stop, she settled back into the embrace of the leather seats, sitting her cup in the pristine holder. Sighing, she snapped her seatbelt and toyed with music selections, choosing Pure Nineties.

A gentle rain had intensified as she pulled out onto the winding Pennsylvania back roads. Maura only came to Butler now for special occasions. The convenience store coffee and music would help pass the time back to Millvale.

Her eyes felt heavy as she struggled to focus on the road. Fields filled with corn and goldenrod flew by her. It was autumn and the full moon gave a soft glow to all below it between the curtains of rain.

Swerving as a tree limb dropped down in front of her, she caught her breath, thankful for her reflexes.

Regrouping, she reached over to take a sip of the coffee.

"Hot," she mumbled, with a shiver, having missed a road sign.

Unfamiliar with this stretch of road, her GPS cut out on her.

"Unbelievable," Maura said under her breath looking around for a place to pull over.

Beep! Beep! A pair of angry headlights, flashing repetitiously from a light-colored truck came from behind.

Maura rolled her eyes. "Go around!"

The nonsense continued, as they finally passed her, nearly blowing her off the road.

"I hope you crash!" Coffee spilled over the new leather seats.

Sipping the brew gingerly, she moved her hand over the top of the steering wheel to turn up the volume.

She belted out the lyrics to "Linger", getting lost in the song. It took her back to a time before she met Curtis.

She had broken their engagement. There had been no particular reason; hinging mostly on her family's opinions.

They were too young. Curtis didn't have enough life experience. On...and...on and on.... It was just easier to go softly.

Group outings without him were still cutting. Seeing happy couples was the worst. She'd been tempted to call him.

A sudden movement in the cornfield caught her eye. It was as if a long rope was being pulled through the other end, creasing the stalks beneath them. The pelt of rain made it impossible to make out the form.

Dipping down over the crest of a hill, she gasped. Directly in front of her was the truck that passed her. Nose first in a ditch, smoke ebbed from beneath its hood.

Ignoring the eeriness of the night, she pulled off in a flat spot to investigate. Her velvet flats filled with water as she pattered across the road, her jeans and kimono top were soaked.

The passenger of the truck crawled out of the shattered back window and onto the ground. Her army crawled to reach her.

"Are you hurt? I don't think we have a signal out here to call anyone."

There were scratches all across his face, and his dark hair was filled with glass. A smattering of blood ran down his forehead. As he lifted his rain-slicked arms skyward, she attempted to hoist him up. Her grip was poor, as they toppled onto the grass.

"What's your name?" Maura yelled over the rain. "Can you focus?"

"Alex." He groaned and sank back further, losing consciousness.

There was rustle beside them and then a wrenching, otherworldly sound.

"Wake up!" She snapped, shaking his limp shoulder. "There's something out here!"

The sound erupted again, except this time it was over them. Glancing up, she noticed a snake-like creature with the outline of a human face and long dark hair hovering.

Her mouth went dry as it stared down at them, leaping yet another two feet into the air. This was like nothing she'd ever seen before. It was angry and it had to land somewhere.

As another set of truck headlights approached them, it burrowed down into the ground.

"I dang near hit you guys!" A young man exclaimed. "Wow!"

"That blue light on your truck means anything?" Maura stammered. "My phone lost reception."

"Sure thing, I'll get my buddies out here right away."

"Thank you." She exhaled, leaning against the side of his truck.

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Maura felt she should stay with him. Alex. She claimed to be his cousin. Sitting in the hospital waiting room, she finished the coffee that she'd bought at twelve-seventeen a.m. and pondered his prognosis. It was now late afternoon. Luckily, she had no set work schedule. Her jewelry could wait.

She had an idea for a new design of the bracelet, something reptilian. It had been a snake, right? What else could it have been?

She wasn't on his HIPPA. They weren't going to tell her anything. Yet, she paced the halls until circling back to the nurse's desk.

"Can you tell me what room Alex is in?"

The nurse looked annoyed and played around with some paperwork.

"He isn't your cousin, is he?"

"I'm a concerned party," Maura said. "I found him at the scene. I need to ask him something once he's conscious."

"That makes two of us." A paunchy, worn man in uniform smiled, flashing a badge. "Officer Mackenzie. Let's discuss Alex."

"He's not in trouble is he?" Maura asked.

"That depends," Mackenzie replied. "Where can we talk?"

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"I know it sounds trite, but feel free to call me Mac," the officer said, loading his coffee with two packs of sugar. "It sounds friendlier."

Starbucks wasn't her favorite, but it would do.

"Sure," she said, sipping some foam from her oat milk latte.

"You kids like those fancy drinks. Me, I prefer my sugar and milk, with a dash of coffee."

"I'm not a kid." Maura smiled, flipping her auburn hair over her shoulder.

"You're old enough to make decisions, yet young enough to have fun." Mac smiled. "Those were the good years. Speaking of fun, what can you tell me about Alex Kingsford?"

"Kingsford, that's his last name?"

"You should know. Aren't you his cousin?"

"I may have told a fib. The nurse wouldn't share details."

"Damn HIPPA!" Mac sneered. "The policy is troublesome, at best."

"Since I found him at the scene, I feel an obligation."

"Sure. Sure," Mac said. "Well, we will find out soon enough if he had any alcohol in his system. Honestly, I'm more concerned about the girl."

"What girl?" Maura asked, swirling her latte.

"There was a young girl found dead, in the ladies' room. Mr. Kingsford came out of the men's room directly before an employee stumbled across the gruesome scene. He was caught on videotape tearing out of the Sheetz parking lot around two twenty-five a.m. He's a person of interest."

"Exactly how did she die?"

"I can't disclose the details of an ongoing investigation," Mac said.

Maura leaned across the table and half whispered. "I'll tell you what I saw last night."

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Mac left Maura his card and said he'd be in touch. Had he believed what she'd witnessed?

Upon checking back at the hospital, Alex had been treated and discharged. Perhaps he'd caught a glimpse of the creature before blacking out.

Her concentration on the pair of earrings she was turning was futile. She snapped off the light over her workstation and reached for her phone to perform a search.

Two Alex Kingsfords from Pennsylvania popped up. One was from Philadelphia and the other was from the Seven Fields area. He was part owner of Kingsford Horse Farm. She quickly clicked on the photo gallery and there on top of a black steed sat Alex.

\*\*\*

Half an hour later, Maura sat in her car outside of Kingsford Farm. It didn't look like much was going on. There were no cars in the parking lot, save for a few work vehicles and horse trailers.

There was an off-side small red brick building that appeared to be a working office. As she approached, she wondered what she was going to say. "Hi, I'm Maura, the girl that got you an ambulance and by the way, did you happen to notice a snake-like creature floating in the air before you passed out?"

She'd had cranberry juice and lime that night to drink. Sober as could be, she hadn't imagined it. This was factual. Something extraordinary was with them that night.

Barely knocking, someone bellowed, "Come in."

"I'm here to see a guy about a horse," she said, noticing Alex behind the desk. His face was covered in scratches and a sling adorned his left arm.

"Mac told me I rescued a potential murderer."

He shook his head and rubbed his injured arm. "I've been cleared. Mac re-watched the tapes and I left minutes before that girl entered the restroom. Nurse Amy said you stayed awhile at the hospital. Thanks, cousin."

"Damn HIPPA. I tried." She smirked. "That was scary, right?"

"Take a seat." Alex motioned.

"Certainly." Sitting across from him, she soaked up his warm demeanor.

"Maura, you saved my life."

"Glad you weren't badly hurt. Nothing a few weeks or so won't heal."

"I'm thankful I didn't hurt you when I passed you on the road. I thought I could outrun her."

"Outrun who?" Maura shrugged.

"Oko," Alex replied, "My ex. She's deadly."

"Aren't most exes?" Maura teased.

Alex wasn't smiling, as he leaned across the desk.

"I was doing a deal on a horse in upstate New York when we met. She came here to the States on a work Visa and was visiting that horse farm with some friends for the weekend. Oko loved to ride. I found myself captivated by her beauty and intelligence. She's a museum curator of fine Japanese artifacts."

"She sounds lovely." Maura sighed. "However, I feel you're going to tell me that's not the case?"

"I soon found her to be jealous and possessive." I couldn't have any female friends. Even work associates were a threat to her. A girl from my favorite coffee shop suddenly went missing. About a week later, they found a pile of bones behind one of the dumpsters at the museum where Oko works. They were that of the girl."

"How could she be that decomposed already?" Maura asked.

"I believe she spat poison on her and swallowed her whole," Alex said calmly.

"I knew it!" Maura exclaimed, standing. "The night of your crash, I saw an abomination."

"That abomination was Oko," Alex admitted softly.

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As their conversation continued, Alex confessed that since Oko had seen her, she was in danger as well. Vengeance was second nature to her. She was a Child of the Hammer. A Tsuchinoko. The girl at the Sheetz had made the mistake of winking at Alex in the candy aisle. Oko had been following him.

"Relentless." Alex sighed, raking his hands through his dark hair. "The final divorce decree was mailed to her recently. I should have known that wouldn't be enough."

"Wouldn't be enough?" Maura asked, shrugging her shoulders.

"I need to rid myself of her for good. I need to destroy her."

"That sounds extreme." A voice came from the doorway behind them. Mac entered the office with a smirk.

"Guess you aren't the best party to explain this to?" Alex muttered, motioning to a second chair in front of his desk. "Do you like folk tales, Mac?"

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Mac didn't seem phased by Alex's telling of the story. In fact, he seemed resolute.

"I grew up on Tall Tales and Weird Happenings pulps," Mac said, popping a piece of gum. "I watched the footage from the Sheetz cameras from every angle. Inside the store, I noticed a young Asian girl roaming the aisles, also in the parking lot. Funny thing though, she didn't leave in a car or by foot. For my sanity, I watched the footage four times. She vanished into the sky."

"You believe me?" Alex asked, half laughing. He seemed relieved. "You're the first person that hasn't thought I was crazy. No more questions then?"

"Just one... How can I help?"

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As night enveloped the farm, they awaited her arrival. According to Alex's account, Maura would be next. She agreed to act as bait.

The horses nickered as she stirred among the straw. The sound of clicks and whistles that filled the night was upon them.

"Where is she?" Mac whispered, keeping his gun handy.

"You know what to do," Alex said softly to Maura, her heart pounding.

"Yes." She gulped. Waiting was the worst.

The barn doors slowly gaped, as the sound of something rustled beside them.

"Alex..." The voice wasn't human.

He motioned for Mac to step out from behind a stall.

"Oko. You're done! Come out where we can see you."

She burst out from beneath a pile of straw, knocking him backward. His gun went off and the horses whinnied and shrieked within their stalls. The lights flickered.

Alex's steed easily broke through the wood of his confines and stood before the creature as she met him at eye level. Her delicate features were blurred by scales, as she emoted an angry hiss.

"Romeo!" Alex cried out, as she turned her attention vehemently on him and the horse darted out of the barn.

Oko recoiled, launching further into the air over Alex.

Mac scrambled to his feet, getting off a shot on her, hitting her in what would be her torso. She squealed and wrapped her tail around one of the upper beams, facing him upside down.

"Oko!" Alex yelled, her dark eyes turning towards him as he ran out of the barn. She quickly released herself, slithering behind him halfway, and then took to the air again.

Alex weaved through the arena. The homestead was before them, a pile of logs, to the left. Mac and Maura trailed behind them.

"You're a horrible shot!" Maura yelled.

"I'm in retirement mode, ok?" Mac wheezed.

Alex stumbled and Oko lifted over him ready to strike.

Maura came upon the wood pile and grabbed an axe, poising to toss.

"Oko!" She screamed as the devil turned to face her.

She made contact with one lucky toss, hitting her between the eyes! Oko shrieked and shook, blood pouring from the gash.

Her twisted body tremored; expanding like a balloon animal until it ruptured, showering them all in gore. She was finished.

"You did it, Maura." Alex gasped, holding his arm. Romeo trotted back towards them.

"Whew!" Mac muttered and fell back onto the ground. "I need to call my wife."

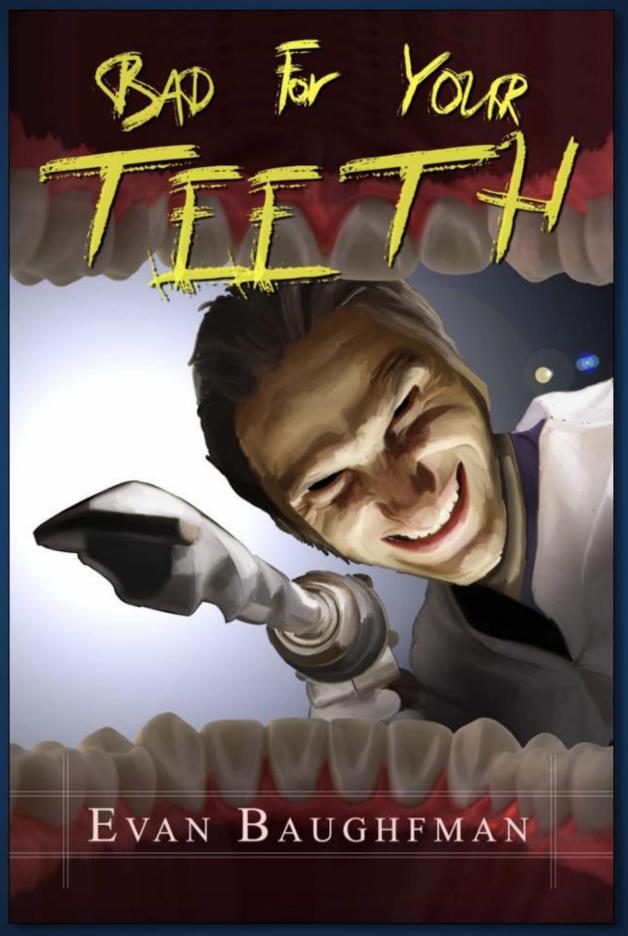
Maura waved her arms to swath off some goo. "I need to call Curtis."

# **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
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He smiles as you squirm and scream...



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### You Can't See Us | Kaos Emslie

The desert sun sent rays of gold and pink into the cloud-pocked sky as lightning flashed in the distance. The six young adults looked out over the valley stretching below. Kit, Desi, and Caine sat in a row, their shoulders touching and their feet kicking back and forth in the free air. Ash and Rhys stood behind them, their voices low and deep in conversation. Jez stood off to the side, a cigarette between his fingers—he took a long drag and let the smoke billow out of his nostrils absentmindedly.

They sat in silence, and in awe, of the beauty of their home, something they all often forgot in their little lives amongst the valley-dwellers. Up in the mountains, where they could be anyone, and do anything, they were reminded of just how magnificent the desert was. Without words, they stood from their seats and made their way back to the car parked at the campsite below. The sun was well behind the mountains now, and the stars were clear in the sky, though the storm in the east was coming upon them fast.

The crunch of rocks and twigs and leaves under their feet echoed in the forest around them. Jez went to drop the butt of his cigarette on the ground, but Caine focused their eyes on him and shook their head, their black hair bouncing with the motion. Embarrassed, Jez snuffed it out on the bottom of his shoe and stuffed it in his pocket. The group continued down the slope to the campsite and their waiting car. Kit slid into the driver's seat and the rest of the group piled in.

The sun had fully set behind the western mountains and all that was left was the towering trees against the purple-blue night sky above them. Desi and Jez rolled down the back windows and Rhys finished rolling a joint. He passed it to Kit first, who lit it and took a long drag before exhaling it in Rhys' face. The car erupted with laughter as she passed the joint back to Jez. It made its way around the group until nothing was left but the roach.

Caine leaned over Desi to lay their head out the window in the cool breeze. As the group giggled and laughed, Caine watched the trees.

"There's something out there," they said, looking up into Desi's face. Desi offered a smile then turned to look out where Caine was staring. She squinted her eyes to focus, but couldn't quite tell if what she was seeing was a tree or something else.

"It's just your imagination, there's nothing out there."

"No, I swear. They're looking at us," Caine whispered. They sat up and crawled onto Desi's lap and leaned out the window. Their eyes focused on the tall figure closest to them. "Hello? Can you hear me?" There was no answer, but the figure shifted slightly from one foot to the other and it made Caine jump. "See! There's something right there!"

Ash and Jez leaned over and followed Caine's arm right to where they were pointing, but all they saw was a tree. They both let out a laugh in unison.

"I don't think Caine needs any more smoke," Jez joked, patting them on the back. Caine shimmied back into the car and settled between Desi and Ash, their arms crossed in frustration. They couldn't help but look out the window, at whatever was standing in the shadows of the trees, watching them. As Caine scanned the forest, they noticed more and more figures, similar to the first, cloaked in shadow.

Come out here...

"Caine, did you just say something?" Rhys looked back at them from the front seat where he was rolling another joint. He lifted it to his mouth to close it off. Caine shook their head. "I could have sworn I just heard your voice." He turned back to the front and grabbed his lighter.

Come out here...

"No, you're fucking with me, that was totally you, Caine," Rhys said, turning back around. Desi, Ash, and Jez all confirmed that Caine hadn't spoken, but Rhys narrowed his eyes at the foursome.

"I'm not saying that, I swear." Caine turned to look out the window and the figure was closer. They ducked their head down and pointed toward the trees. "They're getting closer."

The whole group turned to look out the windows but Caine was the only one who saw the shadow creatures. Rhys lit the joint with a deep sigh and passed it straight back to Caine.

"Here, smoke." Caine took the joint and puffed on it for a few seconds, then handed it off to Desi. They leaned over and blew the smoke out the window. Through the cloud, they saw the creature move forward a few steps.

"It's coming closer. I'm not lying. It's right there," Caine whispered, their mouth against Desi's cheek. "We need to roll up the windows."

When everyone was finished smoking, Kit rolled up the windows and turned on the radio. As their friends joked and talked, Caine remained silent, watching the forest through the fogged-up glass. They could barely make out the

outline of the creature watching the car, but it was clear that it was moving toward them. Through the glass, Caine could make out the popping and grinding sound of bones breaking like twigs snapping underfoot as whatever it was moved closer. Caine watched with wide eyes and a racing heartbeat as it neared their door.

"Desi," Caine whispered, tapping her shoulder. "Desi, look now." They pointed at the window, but the creature dropped to the ground just as Desi turned to look at where they were pointing. "Fuck."

"What, I don't see anything," Desi pushed Caine out of the way and shoved her face against the glass. "There's nothing there, you're tripping."

Come out here...

Join us...

Caine's voice came in muffled through the closed windows and the whole group stopped and turned to look at the trees on the right side of the car.

Rhys rolled down his window and stuck his head out and called: "Hey, who's there?"

A cacophony of whispers came over the wind as it picked up through the trees and drove sticks and leaves toward the car. Desi pulled out her phone and rolled down the back window. She stuck the device out and started to record the forest sounds.

Join us...

"We need to roll up the windows now, guys!" Caine grabbed Desi's arms and dragged them back into the car, then rolled up the back window. They quietly urged Rhys with nudges until he relented and rolled his window up.

Desi adjusted her phone and held it out for everyone to hear:

Whispers filled the car, loud and staticky. Caine leaned as far forward as they could until their ear was against the phone speaker.

You can't see us...

The whole group froze. There was no movement in the car as Caine's voice echoed from Desi's phone. Desi cut off the recording and stuffed her phone in her pocket. Everyone but Caine stared straight ahead—Caine turned to look out the back window at the figure that was standing only a few feet from the car. It was cloaked in leaves and wore a steer's skull on its head, and it towered over the vehicle. Caine could hear the cracking of bones like twigs underfoot as it moved a few steps closer, reaching a long, thin arm from under its cloak. Its skin was black as pitch, black as a moonless night in the forest.

Kit turned the key in the ignition and slammed the car into reverse. She sped out of the camping spot and onto the mountain road, kicking up rocks and dirt in their wake. They made it fifty feet from the entrance to the camping spot when Caine let out a rumbling cry.

"What's wrong?" Ash grabbed Caine's arms as they tried to open the door, pulling them back away from the window. Through the dust surrounding the car, they could all see the reflective, animalistic eyes of the forest creature staring at them. Caine whimpered, reaching for the door, their fingers arched like claws. They needed out, they needed the fresh air—the car was too small, too confining for them.

"Please, let me go," Caine whispered, their eyes filled with tears. "I can't be here anymore." Ash and Desi kept their fingers wrapped around Caine's limbs, holding their friend still as they tried to grab at the door again. From beyond the car, the group could hear the creature's menacing whispers, practically begging them to join it. Kit continued to try and start the car, but the engine refused to turn over. The lights flickered on and off, and the radio only played a static buzzing sound—Rhys flipped it off out of annoyance and crossed his arms tight over his chest. Everyone but Caine refused to look out the right side windows.

"I need to go," Caine whispered as they finally unlocked the door and pushed it open. Desi and Ash grabbed at them, but they were already out of the car. They stood before the creature, eyes wide, mouth open in surprise. Whispers surrounded them and Caine could hear their friends urging them to get back in the car, but the monster before them was too compelling. They took a step closer and lifted an arm to reach out to the being. It pulled them into its arms and turned them, so they were facing the car.

Behold, your sacrifice...

Caine opened their mouth and let a guttural scream shake their throat as the creature dug its sharp fingers into their chest. They could feel the talon-like nails gripping their ribs as the monster burrowed deeper, pulling and poking until it held on tight to their bones. With a loud shriek, the creature pulled Caine's chest apart from the inside, sending blood flying at Desi and the car. Desi screamed as she slammed the door shut. Blood splattered the windows in thick globs, and the rest of the group screamed.

Kit turned the key in the ignition, hard, begging the car to start—the engine turned over and the front lights flooded the road ahead of them. With Desi, Ash, and Jez still screaming in the back seat, Kit slammed her foot on the gas and sped down the dirt road, taking the sharp switchback turns at forty miles per hour until they were safely at the bottom of the mountain.

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

Kaos Emslie lives in Southern Arizona with her two children and a growing number of cats. They are surrounded by pens, paper, and books constantly. They love all things horror and gore, gothic and spooky. They are never far from a caffeinated beverage. Their current long-term project is a horror series based on their experiences with mental illness.

Author Website: Nightmare Food Instagram: @nightmare.food

### Belle Lake | Doug Hawley

Duke rushed into his house at 10AM on Saturday. After he shut the door, he bent over gasping for air. When he finally could speak, he said "Shere, you won't believe what I just saw."

"Probably, but why don't you try me?"

"I was walking by the lake watching the Johnson boy Jeb waterskiing when something came out of the water grabbed him and dove back in the water."

"You're right, I don't believe you. Belle Lake is a fresh water lake that doesn't have anything larger than carp. I'm not buying a man eating carp."

"It most definitely wasn't a carp. I didn't get a close look, but it appeared to be about ten feet long with large scales and big teeth."

"You've been watching too many crazy movies. Despite movies like 'Puddle Sharks' there are no large and dangerous fish in the lake."

"OK, but I saw what I saw. You may change your mind when Mr. Johnson reports to the Belle police."

The next day after Mr. Johnson confirmed Duke's story, a scuba diver attempted to find the Johnson boy. The scuba diver disappeared.

Shere became a believer. Monday night at 3AM she woke up and couldn't get back to sleep. She logged into her computer and researched the lake.

Tuesday morning she told Duke that she had a theory. To ensure she could make herself clear, she documented her case:

Ex biology professor Chad Simon moved to a shack next to the lake five years ago after unethical genetics experiments got him dismissed from Obregon University. He had very little contact with the community and rumors pegged him as a typical movie mad scientist.

Four years ago Jerry Danz disappeared while visiting relatives in Belle. The last time he was seen, he was walking towards the lake with fishing gear.

A couple of months after that a toddler strayed from a family picnic next to the lake and was never seen again.

A couple of weeks before Jeb Johnson disappeared; a car was abandoned by the lake. It belonged to a man from Chicago who couldn't be found.

All of the disappearances occurred when the fishing at the lake was bad.

Those are the facts. Here's what I think that they mean. Simon made some monster with DNA experiments. Normally it eats fish, but when the fish supply is low, it is an opportunistic killer.

After Duke had absorbed all of that he said "I've got to admit, it all holds up. What's next?" "We tell the police."

When trying to convince the police failed to the extent of being pushed out of the police station, Shere sent her case to everyone in Belle with emails via 'Nextdoor Belle'.

Nothing happened for two days, but no one got close to the lake, or so it seemed. Then the town woke to the horrible smell of rotting fish and smoke from the Simons shack being burned to the ground. Simon either escaped alive or was burned to death, no one knew.

Two days later, Belle News reported that the lake had been poisoned by rotenone and strongly suggested that Shere's Nextdoor Belle email had spurred someone to burn the Simon's house and poison the lake.

Shere asked Duke "Did I really screw up?"

"If you got rid of the lake monster indirectly, maybe you are a lifesaver."

That night everyone in Belle on the disaster call list got a robo call 'Get out of town fast. The lake monster is amphibian and left the lake before being poisoned. It is killing anything that it can find.'

Shere told Duke "I'm grabbing one thing before we go."

Before they got into their car, they noticed all of the tires were ripped apart. Then they heard rustling in their hedge.

As Shere aimed the .45 automatic she had grabbed on the way out she said, "We aren't dead yet." The excellent marksman fired five bullets between two red glowing saucer shaped eyes a foot apart.

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

Doug Hawley is a former actuary who lives with editor Sharon and cat Kitzhaber in Oregon USA. In addition to writing, he volunteers, hikes, eats, sleeps, and drinks. He has around six hundred publications. The stories cover all of the usual fiction and non-fiction genres and appear in the England, USA, Canada, Iran, India, the Netherlands, Germany, Scotland, and Spain.

Author Blog: Doug Hawley
Author Website: Abberant Word

# When John Met Lori | K.A. Johnson

"When did life get so complicated?" John asked. "Back in high school, life seemed so carefree. You could get drunk, get high, fool around, and there were no real repercussions."

Lori stared back at John, anger in her eyes.

"Well, I could get drunk and high, no one wanted to fool around with me, but I assume it was the same for most of the loners. You though, I'm sure you didn't have a problem. You must have been a cheerleader."

Lori continued to glower at John.

"Back then, we'd never have been hanging out like this," John continued. "We'd have had our own tables in the cafeteria, you with the other cheerleaders and jocks and me with maybe the guy with zits and another in a black trench coat who doesn't speak. But you have to admit, those were the days."

Lori gave John a stare that said she would kill him if she could.

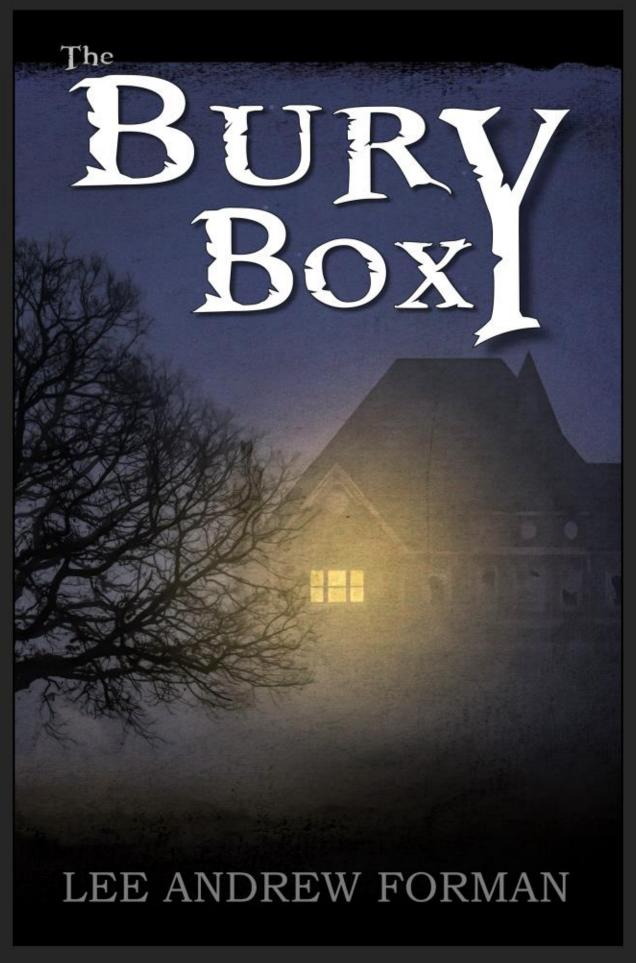
"Well, as much fun as it has been talking to you, it's time we get down to it, isn't it."

John lifted the knife, held it over Lori's tied-up and gagged body, and sliced through her neck. Lori became John's 41<sup>st</sup> victim. John lifted the knife, held it over Lori's tied-up and gagged body, and sliced through her neck. Lori became John's 41<sup>st</sup> victim.

## **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.

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Available on Amazon

### Rip Saw: The Revenge of Annie Crop | L. Stephenson

Amos Hilltown's Workshop. Three words scrawled in black ink on the remains of a burnt envelope. An envelope that hung from the loose fingertips of one Annie Crop as she stood across the street from the very building itself

With the patience of a huntress, she waited in the shade until the dust of the day's foot traffic had settled before she slipped into her oversized boots and marched over to the door.

A customer bell rang above her as footsteps fast approached. A handsome fella in an apron, bowtie and glasses appeared at her service.

"How can I help you, ma'am?" he asked with a wide, bright smile.

"I'm looking for Amos Hilltown," Annie told him.

"I'm awful sorry, ma'am, he's not here," the fella informed her. "I'm his apprentice. Assistant, more like. The name's Clayton. And you are?"

"Annie, Annie Crop."

"Nice to meet you, Annie."

"You got any idea when he'll be back?" she pouted, full-lipped. "It's important."

"Well, maybe I can help you," Clayton offered. "I know just about everything there is to know already. You might even say we have the same brain."

"What's that behind you?" Annie pointed over his shoulder.

"Oh that." Clayton returned his gaze to find Annie brushing some dust away from her bare thigh. "That's just the...back..."

The light was low, but the smell of sawdust was invigorating in the back room of the old workshop.

Clayton could barely breathe as the young woman hungrily mashed her lips against his, clawing her fingers through his thick, mousy-brown hair.

Annie Crop was a strong but frail looking blonde thing inside her ill-fitting prairie skirt.

"Where did you even come from?" the young man gasped as he gently forced her off by her shoulders and adjusted his spectacles. "I just met you. And you shouldn't even be back here."

Loosening the ties over her chest, Annie grinned back at him from the shadows as she guided him into the tool supply closet. With a seductive giggle, she reached for the wooden rack suspended behind Clayton's head.

"Tell me boy." The blonde's eyes melted into him. "Why is being in this room..." He froze as he watched her glide the wide blade of a rip saw between them. "...with all these nasty, sharp things...making you so nervous?"

He heard it slice the air as she flipped the blade teeth side up.

"I thought you boys were supposed to be all big and tough."

Annie held its jaws not even an inch from Clayton's neck, which was now thick with perspiration. She drew the tip of her tongue up the sweat of the young man's throat until she found his trembling lips.

"I'm tough," he tremored into her mouth.

The rip saw dropped down by Annie's side. Holding it end to end, she looped the blade over the head of the apprentice until it rested on the back of his shoulders. He squirmed as the saw's razor teeth tickled his skin through his shirt.

"You seem pretty at home with all these dangerous instruments."

"My father was a carpenter, same as old Amos."

"You don't say?"

"Uh-huh," she nodded slowly, edging closer. "He's dead now."

"My sympathies," Clayton hummed as he finished opening the ties across her chest and reached inside her blouse.

"No need," Annie said softly. "He was a bastard. My mama had the good sense to leave his sorry ass behind long before he passed."

"That was mighty brave of her," Clayton said. "For taking you away from him. He could have killed her for that."

"You like your women brave, boy?" Annie teased, placing the rip saw in the young man's hands. "Because my mama was not brave. No, sir. Not one bit."

"She didn't save you from him?" Clayton was powerless as the girl pulled him in closer.

"Save me? Oh no, I had to save myself." Annie breathed heavily as she rubbed the blade between her naked thighs. "The cruel wench abandoned me, you see."

Clayton heard the metal as it dragged across her skin before she leaned in and whispered, "But I'm the one who gave that sick old man what was coming to him."

And with those words, the young apprentice snatched the saw out from between the blonde stranger's legs and tossed it onto the workbench behind her.

"Forgive me, Annie, but you're crazier than a horse with heatstroke!"

Fixing his work apron, he left Annie Crop standing alone in that tool supply closet. And as she felt a single drop of blood trickling down her leg, she crumbled.

"Please, please, I'm sorry, I need your help," she pleaded as she burst from the back room, knocking Clayton forward. "I'm trying to find my missing mama. I think she is with the man who wrote this."

Steadying himself, Clayton grabbed the piece of envelope she held out to him and reluctantly gave it a glimpse.

"This handwriting doesn't belong to Amos," he told her.

Annie's eyes darkened. "You lyin' to me?"

"I've worked with the man for years," Clayton said firmly. "I think I would know his damn penmanship by now."

The blonde drew a small blade from her prairie skirt.

"It would be very stupid of you to treat me like I was just some dumb thing right now."

"Look, I swear to you." Clayton made his way over to the customer counter and tossed one of the shop's record books down at Annie's feet. "Take a look. You'll see."

Distracted, the girl didn't notice the noose slipping silently over her head until Clayton pulled it taut around her throat. Annie gagged and choked as the apprentice dragged her across the floor with the snare pole in his hands. Wrenching her to her feet, he drove her towards the entrance of the workshop.

"Get the fuck out of my shop, bitch!" he sneered at her as she repeatedly tried to knife him. But he had her.

As soon as she was through the door, he released the snare and punted her into the street. "Motherfucker..." Annie wheezed as she lay on her back in the dirt.

She took the customer bell clean off the wall with the force of her re-entry as she barged back into the store.

"You've got to be frickin' kidding me." Clayton prepared to catch her again, but his ass hit the floor when she caught him right between the eyes with his own bell.

Fetching a ball peen hammer from the supply closet, she aimed it at his face like a pistol before she punched him with the flat of its steel head, toppling him down onto the workbench.

"What are you going to do?"

"Shut up!" Annie growled, knuckling him in the jaw.

She drew her blade.

Clayton let out a single cry as she cut the hand that cradled his bruised face. She cut him again, just below the eye for good measure.

"Please, stop it," he whimpered.

"You tell me what I want to know and I will," she said as her eyes searched the space around them, wide and alive with excitement.

"I swear, I don't know whose handwriting that is." He tried to stop the bleeding with the back of his shirt sleeve. "Believe me, I wish I knew."

"Hands," his captor instructed.

He complied, allowing her to bind him to the bench without incident.

Annie then walked over to the corner and retrieved something from the floor. She giggled as she turned back to him with a big smile and a huge, thick sheet of black sandpaper.

"Because now would be the time to tell me before things get *real* messy." She winked at the young apprentice and then moved in on him.

"Wait, what are you doing?"

She ignored him as she enfolded his head in sandpaper and tied it down tightly with twine.

"Aw, you look like a sad little chimney," she chuckled as she paid no mind to his muffled protests.

Getting a good grip of the paper mask, Annie began to twist it. Back and forth, back and forth. Sometimes alternating with full rotations. Clayton's legs shook as he screamed through his teeth. He stomped his way through the pain as droplets of blood started to run down his neck.

"OKAY! THE HANDRWRITING WAS AMOS! IT WAS AMOS!"

Raking her blade down the snakes of twine, she split open Clayton's paper prison and burst into hysterics.

"Hahaha! Now you look like a strawberry jelly sandwich!" she cackled wickedly. "Where can I find him?"

Clayton bowed his slimy, skinned face. "I can't tell you that."

"And why not?"

"Because Mr. Hilltown's done so much for me," he answered truthfully. "And Mrs. Hilltown, she cooks me—

"Mrs. Hilltown?" The blade fell from Annie's grip. "You've met my mama?"

"She ain't your mama," Clayton said coldly. "I don't believe that anything as rotten as you came from an angel such as her."

Taking up her blade, she shrieked, "D'ya want me to peel the rest of your face off?"

That last threat had to be one too many for Clayton as his eyes rolled over until he was out colder than a January morning.

"Fuck."

Clayton had left the girl stumped until it occurred to her.

"If I had somethin' that I didn't want nobody else to find..." she spoke to herself as she searched Clayton's pockets. "...I would keep it close."

She discovered a folded piece of paper in his apron. It was jagged down the length of one side, like a page torn from a book. This had to be him. She opened it out and there he was.

"Amos Hilltown."

\*\*\*

Amos awoke to something landing on his face. Something wet and warm. Grunting as he winced, he dabbed at his skin. Perplexed, he reached for the lamp on his bedside cabinet and lit it.

As firelight filled the gloom, he saw the woman straddling him and started screaming.

"Hello, Amos." Annie waved.

She swung with clawed hammer. Thwacking left and right. Breaking bones. Shattering wrists. Snapping fingers. Goring soft flesh. And when the man's limbs dangled helplessly on either side of him like raw sausage meat, she took one final swing at his jaw.

There was a sickening *THUD!* as teeth flew out of his bloodied mouth. They made a sound like pennies in a jar as they bounced off the headboard of the bed. The left joint of his jaw protruded through his cheek. His eyes rolled as his body shook wildly in all the agony.

"Amos?" a voice from the hall. "I was just getting breakfast started when I swear I thought I heard you screaming up here."

Mary Hilltown appeared like a long lost ghost in the bedroom doorway, with long dark hair and a cotton shawl draped over her shoulders. She gasped at the sight of her husband.

"Oh Lord!" she cried, approaching the bed. "What have you done to him? Who do you think you are?"

"Why did you leave me?" Annie stood gravely still as she stared right at her.

"Leave you?" the woman uttered in confusion as she tried to reach for Amos. "I don't even know who you are."

"Why did you leave me, Mama?" Annie yelled.

"I'm not your ma –" Mary stopped cold as she finally gave the stranger in her home a good look. "Annie?"

"Why did you leave me with him, Mama?" Annie sobbed. "Why did you leave me with Daddy?"

"I wanted to take you with me, darlin'," Mary told her. She sat down on the edge of the bed. "I planned for us both to escape. You and me. But when the time came to leave, your father came home earlier than I thought he would. And because of that I couldn't get to you in time. If I didn't leave then I would never get out of there. So I took my chance to get out, and I got out. It killed me to leave you behind like that, but there was no other way for me. Back then, it was do or die."

"You didn't think to come back for me?"

"I could never go back." Mary shook her head firmly. "I suppose I hoped that he would be kinder to you than he was to me."

"You were wrong." Annie shed her mother's silver nightgown.

Mary cried out in horror.

From her chest down to her ankles, Annie Crop's body was a sea of scars. There were so many deep hard lines drawn into her flesh that it was as if some maniacal child had attempted to draw geometric art in the shape of a headless woman.

"Oh, Annie," Mary wept with guilt. "I'm so sorry."

Annie kneeled down on the bed next to Amos, brandishing the rip saw from his tool supply closet.

Eyes wide with disbelief, he looked at her and she looked back.

"This is for taking my mama away from me," she said emptily.

The carpenter's throat opened like a ruptured pipe.

"NO!" Mary squealed as she keeled over next to him. "AMOS!"

Blood overflowed the blade in torrents and sprayed the headboard in little gushes as Amos gargled for air. His eyes searched frantically for a reprieve that would never come. He was gone before the teeth of the rip saw could scrape his spine.

Annie looked up as Mary pulled herself out of the bed and backed away.

"Oh, my dear, what has he done to you!" she cried. "He's turned you into some kind of monster!"

"You and him, both," Annie said sadly. "We're all monsters in this family."

"I want no part of your family!" Mary yelled.

Annie fell silent. Leaving the saw inside Amos, she got to her feet, the dripping claw hammer ready in one hand. She bared a vile grin as she took a single step towards her mother.

Mary turned and ran screaming for the door.

"No, no, no, no!" she yelped as Annie stood still, hammer raised.

She sent it hurtling through the air. It caught Mary in the back of the head with a wet *THUNK!* noise before she could make it to the doorway. The woman grunted as the hammer's claw pierced her skull like an egg. Her entire body snapped up straight before tumbling forward across the hallway. The adjacent bathroom door crashed open as she burst through it like a battering ram. She smacked down on the tiled floor, dead as stone.

Dusting off her hands, Annie unscrewed the lamp on the bedside cabinet and began dousing the place with oil.

The flick of a match later, Annie crossed her arms and watched the flames as they crawled up the bedroom curtains.

"Goodbye, Mama." Annie Crop said, tossing the half piece of envelope that read Amos Hilltown's Workshop into the burning bedroom as she went.

"There she is, boys!" a bloody and bandaged Clayton exclaimed from the back of a horse and cart as a pack of men and their guns awaited her outside.

"Motherfucker..."

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

L. Stephenson's writing has been haunting anthologies and eZines since 2018, the best of which can be found in his collection, *Candles, Bullets, & Dead Skin*. Graduating university with a degree in Film & TV Screenwriting, Stephenson released his first novella, *The Goners* in 2021: the beginning of a trilogy that is now his debut novel, *The Boatmore Butcher*, due September 2023 through Dark Ink Books.

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### The Basement | Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

Little An clung to her father, trying to prevent him from going to the basement in their new home.

"Don't go down there!" she shrieked, sobbing and shivering. "The Monster will get you!"

Her father patted her head, "There's no monster down there, darling."

"There is! It got Mieu!"

He tried to convince her that the family's cat had simply run away, but Little An insisted that the basement-dwelling monster had devoured it. With one last dismissive chuckle, the man headed down the basement.

The piercing scream behind the door was the last time Little An ever heard from him.

#### After School | Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

When I arrived at the kindergarten to pick up Little Lan, the place was empty, and I was shocked to find her sitting alone outside the gate. Before I could reprimand her, she'd hopped onto the backseat of the car, "Hi dad! Let's go home! I'm starving!"

It'd been a tiring day. The reprimanding could wait, I decided and drove.

Ten minutes later, my phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Tran, when will you come to pick up Little Lan? She's in distress..."

The rest of the phone went unheard when a shrill, inhuman cackling from the backseat filled my ringing ears.

### Silhouette | Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

"Daddy?" my son shook me awake. With a grunt, I did, turning on the nightlight to study him. My eyebrows furrowed at the sight of his pale face. I touched his cheeks. They were cold.

"What's wrong?"

"There's a shadow in my room," he whispered, as if afraid to be overheard.

I exhaled. Another nightmare. "Just turn on the light."

"I did," he replied. "He didn't go away. He followed me in here!"

I opened my mouth, but then, I stared at the shadowed space beyond my opened door, where a silhouette stared back, amber eyes aglow, sharpened fangs agleam.

#### The Stalker | Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

A hobo's stalking me.

Every day, he stands outside my diner's window, staring at me. Whenever a customer arrives, he's gone. I try to ignore him, focusing on my work, but fear's a weighty shackle.

I'm working a late shift tonight, and he's outside again.

"Leave or I'll call the cops!" I shout and glare at him from behind the window.

A terrible smile then splits his face apart.

"You can really see me!" he shrieks maniacally and phases through the glass. The last thing I remember is his abysmal maw above my head as the darkness swallows me whole.

#### **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 and writing speculative poems, some of which have appeared in Penumbric, Star\*Line, Weirdbook, Spectral Realms, and other venues.

Facebook: Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

#### **Vèlè | Edwin Staples**

I walked a path following Guadalcanal's Hecha river next to a couple of islanders several times my strength. My flabby North American body was twice their size but lacked young Reggie's rugged feet or schoolmaster Matthew's acute knowledge of the narrow trails.

It was one of those ten-minute walks that took nearly an hour. "Manserre," the local term for white people, all come from places where everybody wears a watch, and every room has a clock on the wall. Guadalcanal people counted growing seasons, not minutes. Who was I to complain? I had applied for this, months earlier, and received it: a place where I couldn't see any light pollution at night or hear the clang of great ships unloading in a busy harbor.

It drizzled for a few minutes, then it cleared up and got sunny, clouded up and drizzled more, cleared up again, until the steam rose and mingled with my sweat, blinding my eyes. I was overdue for a haircut. My brain was superheated. Matthew was telling a familiar story about his son's death—the son my age. Whenever Matthew saw me, he was reminded of the boy and recounted the strange fishing accident that killed him.

"Do you think it was a Vélé?" I asked in my spooky-sounding voice.

"It's better if you don't mention bush devils when we're walking in the bush," Reggie smiled but his eyes were sober looking. The air chilled for a moment, then went back to regular Guadalcanal humid.

I mused at how careful they were to warn me about the dangers of being in the Bush alone. It was not a joke to any of them. I had seen them laugh about the Vélé while we were all together safe in the village. A Vélé was powerless inside the village, but as soon as you stepped out to the paths between villages or the way to gardens, he could use his power to take your life away. His strength was limitless and he hated humans.

Matthew said, "Vélé isn't gonna bother an American, no matter where he goes."

Reggie nodded, looked around, nodded again.

"Vélés don't follow canoes out onto the ocean. There might be some strange magic under the water that killed my cousin. Like a custom poison put on him by a girl who wanted him but didn't get him, or another boy who was jealous that he was so good at fishing," Reggie said, his Bush knife flicking away little bits of undergrowth that encroached on the path.

Matthew hummed in agreement.

The trail turned a corner and headed up a steep incline. My sandaled feet slipped once or twice before they got their grip. Reggie pointed with his lowered lip at my sandals.

"If you had tougher feet, you could go barefoot, and you wouldn't be slipping."

Abruptly the two men led me off the path into a grassy area next to a steep meadow, overgrown with creeping vines and young banana trees that fought creeping weeds for sunlight.

"Here it is," said Matthew. "The pineapple garden."

"I don't see any pineapples," I said.

"You will," said Reggie. "Uncle Matthew plants, and fruits come along as sure as mosquitoes."

Reggie cleared a spot by a fallen tree.

"Sit on the stump," he said. "But watch out for stinging ants. We'll clear out the pineapples and you can take a couple of photos before we pack them up to carry them home."

"Don't go wandering around," said Matthew. "Now that you've mentioned a Vélé, he might be curious about white men after all."

The humor had left Matthew's voice. He half-smiled.

"Oh—here comes one now," said Reggie, laughing. He turned, took up his bush knife to clear away the low vines.

Footsteps sounded a short way along the path. Old Willie, the most tired looking and somehow the quickest moving old person in the village, followed by two tall grandsons, both bearing long, uncut firewood logs from their garden upriver.

Willie slapped Matthew on the shoulder and said, "In-law, why are you bringing this manserre out here to work?" Everybody laughed.

"He's not working," said Matthew. "I'm not gonna let him do any work no matter what he says. He's the guest around here. But he does want to learn. I understand that Peace Corps volunteers must bring the culture back to America. Isn't that how you said it, Eddie?"

I didn't say it so clearly or succinctly, but I had said it.

Willie said, "I hope you're not out here talking about devils. You don't wanna call one up by accident."

He nodded at Matthew, and he might have winked, then he shouted to the boys to shoulder their firewood again and follow him.

He exited with a whistle and a few low-toned words of their language that I failed to understand.

A half hour later I was sitting on the log, scratching an ant bite and writing in my tiny journal while Matthew and Reggie cleared away the last of the vines around a beautiful collection of pineapples. The air was filled with the scent of the

fruits. I was surprised that the fruits could be so close to ripe even when they had been covered over almost completely by the vines around them.

Reggie cut a dozen large, broad leaves from a stout tree, then spread the leaves around for seating, an organic beachblanket. He poured water from a canteen over the blade of the knife and scrubbed vigorously with a rough leaf. He began carving the largest pineapple. Within a few minutes my fingers were covered with delightful, sticky juice and I was reinvigorated by the taste of the beautiful fruit.

These were the finest moments of being a Peace Corps volunteer. Moments of forgetfulness that anything else existed except for the moment right now the people right here and the thing that we enjoyed together.

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"All right. You rest a little more or write in your little book or whatever it is you wanna do," said Matthew. We're gonna go up the side of this hill and get five or six more pineapples, then we'll be back down to pack it all up and take it back to my house."

"And don't wander off?" I asked, chuckling.

I watched the two men work their way through the cleared area towards another tangle of vines where I was again surprised to see more fresh, beautiful pineapples ready to harvest.

I heard footsteps that sounded exactly like Willie and his grandsons coming back the direction they had gone. I wonder if they left an ax or something.

A second later, I was face-to-face with a small, wiry man. He had chalky, dust-colored skin, as if he had been dried in a kiln, with no pupils to salt-white eyes. He stood chest-high to me, but his body was lithe and muscular. My body became weak. He reached out his hand, I took hold, against my will. Something like a cold wind rushed over my body. I closed my eyes tightly and only opened them again when the wind fell quiet.

I was on my back. Something was poking into my skin, and the Vélé was over me, looking down with those blank eyes, smiling with teeth the color of dead coral reef, something between grey and gold. Above, the sky grew storm-dark.

I moved to brace my hands against the surface beneath me only to find them pressing into a pile of dry bones. Next to me, a skeleton was wrapped in fishing line.

"What do you want with me?"

The Vélé laughed and danced around me, always facing me, never blinking. I struggled to stand, He pursed his lips and blew at me as if he were a small boy blowing out a birthday candle. I fell back upon the pile of bones, drenched in sweat, shivering.

"Reggie!" I called out. "Matthew!"

The monster nodded. He spread his fingers apart and raised both palms to me in a gesture of agreement. He encouraged me to call the men's names again. Would I be dooming them to my fate? Was it true that the Vélé had no power over a white man? Yes, the eyes answered. He had the power to destroy them, using me.

As soon as I heard this thought in my head, one finger on the Vélé's hand pointed at my heart.

My breathing stopped.

I could hear Matthew's and Reggie's voices nearby. They did not sound concerned. From my position on the ground, I stared at the devil's eyes. He laughed and still I felt the energy sapped out of my body by his power. I opened my mouth, but no sound came out.

More footsteps sounded on the path, this time with desperate urgency. The Vélé's power seemed to decrease enough so that I could almost stand up.

Willie came screaming into the garden, eyes flashing, a bush knife in each hand. With the swiftness and focus of a hunting dog, he attacked. Two swipes of two blades missed the Vélé by centimeters. I did not see the devil run or fly away. I only felt a slight breeze and stared at the empty space where he had stood.

There were no more bones, and the sky brightened.

Willie handed a knife to each grandson and helped me to my feet. His chest heaved as he caught his breath. His eyes instantly returned to their usual half-awake appearance.

"Sit down, my friend," he said. "You're going to need to rest a minute."

Reggie and Matthew bounded down the hillside and grasped at Willie's arms, as if to check for any Vélé poison on his flesh. The three men exchanged a thousand words of local language in a half-minute. Then they fell silent and looked in my direction.

"A Vélé will go after an American after all," said Reggie.

My eyes met Matthew's. I could see relief there.

Reggie said, in a low voice, "Now you know you should listen to a man when he says not to speak of devils outside the village."

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

Edwin Staples is a returned Peace Corps Volunteer, an archivist, a librarian, and the son of two nurses. He resides in Seattle, Washington with his wife Rachel, and their cat, China. Edwin's fiction has appeared in The Siren's Call eZine, The Creativity Webzine, and Anti-Heroin Chic. His poetry has appeared in Lothlorien Poetry Journal. As a student he was the editor-in-chief of The Quill magazine.

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### The Sun Is Everything | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

She explained, her voice difficult to understand, "I was a solitary child, lonely at times. Yet, I always felt I had a companion—one larger than life—the sun!

I was 'cold-natured', disliking winter; but just thinking of the sun warmed me, even on the darkest, coldest days.

I became enthralled by the sun—this comforting presence lending beauty to the landscape—its continuing promise of return.

The sun was everything! The world was nothing without it, owing its very existence to the formative sun.

I loved the look of the sun—its magnificent, seemingly eternal blaze. Mother told me, 'Stop staring; it will damage your eyes'. But I would sneak glances through window-glass—trusting, foolishly perhaps, this transparent 'protection'.

Sometimes I saw small dark-spots afterwards. Were these images of sun-spots, or hints of a future darkness the sun embedded in my vision—clues to what might happen if the sun somehow disappeared? When I closed my eyes, however, these spots suddenly appeared bright; therefore, I reasoned, these little ocular splashes were, quite possibly, early gifts from the sun.

For a coming eclipse, mother made a 'pin-hole camera' so I could project the sun's shadow on the ground. 'Don't peer through the pin-hole, though' she warned. 'It's dangerous'.

But when the time came, I wanted to see more. I couldn't miss this opportunity! I not only looked through the pin-hole, I enlarged it. When one eye grew dim, I switched to the other. The dancing corona was so playful around the sun's dark edges—wondrous—irresistible!

When the sun's full radiance reappeared—camera now set aside—for a few moments I saw everything—the magic behind the solar system laid bare within my delighted, swelling eyeballs.

Then, I saw nothing—nothing at all!—only the hollow black of a world bereft of light—instantly forced to confront such a world. They said I was blind, condemned to a life of darkness—never to see anything again. But in a few days, I realized this was not exactly true.

Somehow, the sun, in its wisdom, had imprinted my solidifying retinas with all its coronal colors—the spectrum of its kaleidoscopic majesty.

Yes, my outer lenses were useless. But through these new rear-lenses—my hardened retinas, crystallized to clarity—I could now see back into the depths of my brain. My thoughts lit up like a thousand neon-signs—so many thoughts, reveling in the sun's transcendent glory.

When people spoke, it sparked small fires in my brain—whole new kinds of ideas and visions would manifest—imaginings never before dared.

After injuring my head in a blind-fall, my hearing steadily declined. Yet the brilliant, mental images kept increasing! I often felt radiant, acting-out my excitement!

I was never to be lonely again—even after my hearing failed. For by then it had become perpetual, antic summer in my mind's expanding space. And I'm 'told'—through finger-to-palm lettering—I've become famous! These days, travelers pay just to behold my 'special light'."

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

Will H. Blackwell Jr. is emeritus professor (botany), Miami University, Ohio, living in Tuscaloosa, Alabama where he is now retired as adjunct professor, The University of Alabama. He has fiction in: Brilliant Flash Fiction, Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, Disturbed Digest, FrostFire Worlds, Outposts of Beyond, Shelter of Daylight, Trembling with Fear, and 365 Tomorrows.

# Read where the end begins for White Creeek.



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

# The Sand Children | Amanda E. Phillips

The children built them in their image, scooping and shoving wet sand into bulging bodies, thin limbs spread like starfish. They poked holes for eyes with their fingers and gave them mouths to speak.

"This one looks like you."

"Shut up!" A small foot stomped happily through one hastily hand-crafted face. "Race me!" And so the children raced each other down to the bottom of the beach, their fleshy bodies splashing headlong into the waves.

The girl built of sand, her face an open crater, gawped stupidly up at the sky. The boy, left untouched, mourned silently for his twin, their sand-crafted hands just inches apart. So far and yet... and yet. He scoured the bright sky with his unblinking eyes and waited.

Time passed as time so often does. The sun's glare shifted one tentative degree and then another. Further down the beach, the waves lapped higher. A hefted surfboard blocked the sun as it passed. A flock of seagulls squawked, laughing at each other. A piece of driftwood sang through the air. A dog, all paws and fur, ran heedlessly through the children made of sand, scattering what was meant to be their ankles and feet.

The sun tilted. And then it titled some more.

Umbrellas shuttered. Chairs and towels folded. Bottles clinked. Someone yawned as they shoveled by, sandaled feet dragging through the sand.

Overhead, the sky shifted seamlessly into a syrupy barrage of yellow and orange. Long, red fingers crept in along the horizon. The day closed in on itself. The last seagull flew up from the shore, its belly full of white crabs.

Twilight blistered. A royal purple fervor shifted restlessly and then, tired and drawn, settled down into the night's indigo, calm and cool. Overhead, the summer triangle flickered wildly in the growing dark.

The sand child dragged his gaze from the stars. He shifted his poorly-made fingers and reached out for his sister. He grabbed hold and waited for the impossible. When she did not grab back, he struggled to sit.

He'd expected what he found: the moon's silver light filling the maw of his sister's face. What had briefly been a head was nothing more than a pit, empty and useless.

Despondent, he dug into his chest and filled the hole with sand. He would remake her, smoothing her head round again and poking two holes for eyes. A straight line for a mouth. A pinch of sand for a nose.

"Come back," he said in the scratching language of sand. Bending forward, happy in spite of the straight line of his mouth, he rebuilt the ankles and feet that had been so unwittingly trampled.

When he finished, they rose together beneath the silver glow of the moon and raced each other to the bottom of the beach, two sand children full of the pleasant kind of knowing that only comes at the very end.

Together, they dove headlong into the foamy sea, dispersing into the parts that had made them, uncountable grains of sand resurfacing the ocean floor.

# **About the Author:**

Amanda E. Phillips, previously published in Bending Genres, is an emerging writer specializing in weird fiction. With a degree in English and Creative Writing from UC Berkeley, she delves into the uncomfortable and the uncanny, crafting stories that push the boundaries of reality. When she's not conjuring the strange on paper, Amanda enjoys bringing her imagination to life with modeling clay.

Author Website: Amanda E. Phillips Instagram: @amanda e phillips



#### Netherwood, Hastings, 1947

**i. Magus.** Still they write, still they come, the curious and the adept, the hack and the hierophant. Some come to belong, to understand, to learn to *see beyond*. Others come to pit their magickal wits against mine. And then there are those who just want an experience, an anecdote, a Black Mass if you please! 'I touched the dying Satanic brow. *I was there*.'

Borrowed fame, second-hand fools! I dispense advice contrary or clairvoyant, according to mood. I misdirect the sincere; I initiate on a whim. And I extract pecuniary or fiduciary advantage from each of these ghosts at my bedside.

- **ii. Priestess.** In my end is my beginning. All things contain their opposite. I and not-I are one. And every afternoon after lunch, and at other times, my curiosity is *pricked*, and I prescribe myself a glimpse of the divine. Enough to kill a horse, my good doctor says. A small sleep before the great sleep, when I shall wake at last in the seedpod of infinite possibility.
- **iii. Lust.** The women they come and go; one actually even talks of Michelangelo. Though I smell of old age and ether, though I wheeze and shit blood, still they smile and simper. My stories transport them, dissolve the boundaries of boarding-house and infirmity. Oh for one last toot on the thelemic cock! Oh to be... *sixty-nine* again!
- **iv. Fortune.** I look upon my works but I despair not, for my Word is flesh and lives now among us. Time alone stands athwart its full realisation, time which is but a mortal no-thing. The only difference between me and my tobacconist is that I have never forgotten that I am God. Of my readers, I ask only that they ache for the impossible.
- v. Adjustment. There is a balance in all things. There is freedom in humiliation, mastery in subjugation, apotheosis in abjection. None has sunken lower than I; none will be raised higher. Like a martyr gorging on her leprous crusts, I have whispered blasphemy and depravity into the world's every orifice. Yea, though it take a universe of lifetimes to penetrate the paradoxes of mysticism, the first shall indeed be last and the last shall indeed be first. And then shall my will be thy will, and thy will... shall be mine.
- **vi. Art.** Visions assail and assuage the chamber of nightmares that is my cerebrum. I see Pan in a babbling brook. I writhe in the bottomless eyes of a scarlet vampire succubus. The cockerel lies down with the serpent. The lighthouse is destroyed by the deluge. I see the hounds of hell tearing at my entrails. I see millions burn me in effigy. Do what thou wilt, fiends; I have painted worse.
- vii. Æon. Tis unlikely garb for the prophet of a new age: scarlet blazer and purple slippers; games of chess and pipe tobacco; barley sugars, a tot of rum, and a boiled egg for lunch. The hair on my wizened pate forms little tufted horns. Meanwhile American asses write me of their imbecilic quest for a menstrual moonchild, my Scarlet Woman runs barren, my magical son eludes me. Anno domini and endless ennui! I pay for my rent with stale notoriety. Only a true magus could be so misunderstood, as the Nazarene knew.
- **Viii. Universe.** Abrahadabra! My soul trembles with proleptic titillation at the miseries that await my last hours. It is baffling, *to be* and then *not to be*. But I swell with lust for the abasements to come -- those wretched agonies of the body, those terrors of the soul, those banal humiliations of secretion and putrefaction. I have willed always to suck dry the teet of this life, to gorge on its every profferred charm. I have loved this world. But this world is only a world, while *I am who am*.

And now, as my emanations swarm upon the great inevitable and the veil readies to tear itself at last, my soul shall break like a mighty crashing wave upon the boundless realm of the ancient ones.

My runic rods divine: something wicked this way comes. Brace thyself, death; 'tis I.

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

Dan Brotzel is the author of a collection of short stories, *Hotel du Jack*, and a novel, *The Wolf in the Woods* (both from Sandstone Press), and co-author of a comic novel, *Work in Progress* (Unbound). His next book is *Awareness Daze* (Sandstone Press, out November 2023).

**Author Website: Dan Brotzel** 

### Silva | Casey Kelley

This old forest was a strange choice for a children's camp. The trees stretched taller than even I cared to climb and absorbed sounds. Especially those in search of help. Left undisturbed, it encouraged exceptional growth in all living things. Ideal for privacy and solitude but dangerous for little rodents with ball caps and backpacks. The lake was murky, riddled with unreliable drop offs and sunken spots. With little to no visibility, not the ideal spot to let loose a truckload of little gremlins to stir all manner of beasts, both in and out of water.

The owners of the land used to rent the space in the off season, but they cut that after a few unexplained phenomena. Claims of fanged things, weeping and whispering, some screamed, some mimicked, some appeared perfectly harmless but still raised the hair of the city folk and sent them sobbing back home.

But still, this was all considered inviting enough for the cackling mongrels each year. Not one person thought it borderline abusively reckless to invite in a troop of little runts into this strange waypoint of all things unwanted. They were asking for an accident.

Sure enough, one of the heathens broke a leg five days before end of the season. The one with his mousy face and gangly limbs, long arms that would have proven good for stretching into holes and dens. Could have provided quite a show if chomped off. It took the two tallest counselors to haul him back to camp without dragging the busted appendage along the trail behind them like a sack of shattered glass.

In all the commotion they didn't notice me, secured in the safety of the shadows. With all their campers accounted for, they wouldn't have any responsibility ponder a possible glimpse of something odd. They would have to be paying close attention and have a good set of eyes to notice a fraction of the interesting things around them. Even then, my vaguely humanoid shape provided enough camouflage that they would assume me a small bear or a large person from a distance, not whatever I had grown to be.

Usually, I wouldn't care to watch them, as their absence in the kitchen left me a potential feeding window if I was feeling desperate or lazy. The screams that inevitably accompanied their activities pierced through to my brain and always left me with a migraine.

But ever since I found the hand on the river path, I'd been keeping an eye on them.

Every season someone ended up battered in some accident or another, bloody noses and skinned knees mostly. One year the cook clipped his finger, but that had been more mess than massacre. They'd gone in to reattach it instead of tossing it into the woods.

If they had been the ones to find the hand they would have called in authorities and had the place swarming with their stinking, meat sacks. Bullhorns, badges and bullshit. We already managed one out of the two weeks without outside interference, The thought of extra bodies and lights made me sick to my stomach, worse than the strange mushrooms I ate on my first week here.

So, I decided to relocate the appendage. Then I shuffled the dirt and extras around to distort the appearance of blood trail. I could have done a better job but the silent child, May, had peeked out the window just then, or it could have been some time before. I fled as soon as I caught a look at her. Those piercing eyes sunken into a pale face. The remains of the mess would have to be cleared by the rain... the rain had not let me down yet.

Of course, then I was left trudging through the reliable shower with a relatively fresh chunk of anonymous meat.

With no better options I put it with the rest of the stuff I had found. Things dropped, lost, neglected or lifted. Once I was sure nothing had followed along behind me, I inspected my discovery.

None of the camp crew had gone missing in years, and this paw was much too large to belong to one of the little heathens. No one was stumbling around with a raw, bloody stump on one end anyway.

The size, the dark sheet of hair, and the caked dirt under its neglected nails suggested a large male. It was a left, if that made any difference. It had been sawn or hacked off raggedly. Maybe torn, if a beast with enough power had happened upon him. Though it had been mostly quiet in the weeks before. Admittedly I was no expert on amputated limbs, intentional or otherwise. But I had seen a few in my years.

I almost lost myself staring at the thing comparing it to my own, what is now a paw but once looked quite a bit similar. Before the nails hardened and the bones stretched. Those memories were lost in a fog. Occasionally I could recognize a bit in the mist but nothing significant enough to elicit the deep feelings. Those were likely lost forever, with such luxuries as haircuts and human speech. No longer necessary. I had a limited bit of time to investigate the area and the appendage. The night crept up in a way that was impossible to track. So did bigger, hungrier beasts than me.

Four days until the wailing goblins were retrieved by their responsible parties. If it was anything like years before the crew would depart hours later. They would have a cookout for the families, as a thanks for getting these little shits the fuck away. I would duck back further into the woods when the time came, treading lightly and quietly. The people could cost me my lifestyle, but the bigger beasts could take the whole life. Best to creep and remain as close to humanity as safely possible.

I likely could have sniffed out the source if the rain hadn't appeared quite so soon after. I had a hunch I would have just found myself deeper in the woods. Everything deeper in smells like blood and feels like death. It was hard to concentrate on my own tracking when distracted by the concern for my own safety.

I had four days to decide if one of them had removed and promptly misplaced a human hand. If not them, I would have the camp to myself to figure out who or what had been watching and waiting, other than me, of course.

I crept into camp while most were out on a hike and helped myself to a leg of chicken from the fridge. The camp itself was mediocre at best, I had stumbled on many in my years of hunting. It was just a cluster of buildings, really: three cabins, the girls, the boys, and the counselors, the kitchen, cafeteria, a recreation building more of a barn, really, and the main office with an apartment in the back for the boss. The cabins were true log style, at least that was right about the place.

The unspoken rule of these wilds was to keep it inconspicuous. I lingered in the place because the forest allowed for weirdness and most of the beasts kept to themselves. One of the dog things watched the sun rise with me once. Now more thing than dog, this one no longer ran with any of the other packs, we sat in a comfortable silence, then it lumbered away without a word. Not that I expected words, not any I could understand anyways.

I tore into the leg while I scurried from the kitchen to the big office and entered through one of the screenless windows no one ever cared enough to lock. They had left no blood trail or extra digits around. The place was a disorderly mess but nothing to raise red flags of danger. No smell of death, blood or fear. I did find a half empty bag of BBQ chips and commandeered them for my wasted time.

There was an early camp session of two weeks in the beginning of the summer and another set of two weeks at the end of the season. The first had passed without incident. The second was far superior; nights growing longer, leaves ready to fall, Autumn just beyond every breeze. The water beginning to chill served as a bit of a deterrent for the brats. But the water beasts were smarter than to drag down one of the little barbarians, these ones at least. Lost children led to dragged lakes. Or worse, the draining of them, and of course the repugnant publicities.

When I heard the faint grumblings of returning gremlins I left through the window and wriggled beneath the steps in a hole I had burrowed out long before. I dumped the bag on the ground and ate them out of the dirt as I waited, watched and listened. It took the gentlest of motions to open the thing up without shredding it unintentionally and then I had to chew painful slow so as not to draw attention with my crunching, although I'd probably have to crunch bones to get their attention. But the effort was worth it. I had no opportunity for chips since they'd once been thrown at me in self-defense.

Once the little shits retreated for the night, the counselors split a bottle in the boss's office above me. No one mentioned any missing digits in the initial ten minutes or so, the boss then returned without the broken child. And still no one mentioned any missing or found body parts or any people with said parts missing. I thought that would have been an important topic to hit first. So, I slipped out and away into the shadows.

Outside the girls cabin I stopped. The littlest beast, May, leaned over the ledge of the window staring out into the woods. They could not see me in the quickly advancing darkness. Except for maybe the gleam of my eyes, mostly dismissed as a raccoon or a wolf. Something understandable.

But this one looked right at me. Peering through the darkness.

I mostly avoided the invasive pests. I tried not to learn names and insignificant faces. A few inevitably stuck. Such as the tiny sprite of a child; tolerable for her silence and the way the others side-eyed her. All but the girl Marie, she smelled relative to May, but could pass among the rest.

This smaller one was interesting. Odd, even. She ate a toad on day three. Alive.

Part of me wanted to show my teeth or let out one of those inhuman howls that scatter the birds. It would have passed unnoticed.

On an early morning I found a deer standing beside the undisturbed glass of the lake. One moment the deer existed, perfectly content. The next, it was snatched below the surface too quickly to name a culprit.

Yet the forest continued without a thought to either beast. So, I travelled cautiously and drank from the river. Always on alert for a bigger monster around.

The wisest monsters never came around at all.

One of the others came up behind her and looked out, the rest chirping away on the bunks. From further in the cabin a voice warned against staring out into the dusk for too long.

"Things stare back. Everyone knows that."

For once, the parasite was correct.

Something massive flew over the trees, momentarily blanketing the immediate area in darkness. The other girl moved away but May remained, leaning dangerously far out the window, daring the other things to creep in. Yet she watched until I fully retreated into the warm blanket of darkness

At two days left I realized I may have miscalculated. After so long in the woods I'd laid eyes on many questionable things. Maybe I was losing sanity along with my humanity. But the girl needed to be watched.

I'd been known to mangle a person myself from time to time. I make no claim to be above the same type of behavior. But when the hiker stumbled into my path, I had no intentions on giving him the disemboweling he rightly deserved. Sending one of them back home with tales of a creature served well to keep the wanderers away. Maybe I would have shown him some teeth—a grisly attempt at a smile.

Then the girl stepped out of the trees, off to my right and to his left.

Just me, the girl, and the stupid man staring between us. I held a clawed hand to him, to warn him, but my body couldn't make human sounds, not anymore, and he had no chance of understanding. All he heard was the growling.

He twitched back, nearly stumbled, and half turned to flee. But I knew it was too late for him. He reached out a shaking hand for what he thought was just a small girl in danger, likely wanting to pull her along with him in fleeing the area.

Instead, his jerky movements set something off in her. The beast child pounced.

She reared back, her mouth stretching open wider and wider, lined with rows of fangs. Beyond those rows of sharklike teeth, the darkness was somehow hypnotizing, inviting, even to me.

I took a few stumbling steps backward.

The man died quickly from the shock and the blood loss. But his screaming went on too long to go unanswered. Bigger things from deeper in woke, shook, and shuddered. The birds took to the skies.

Marie burst from the trees and came to an abrupt stop, arms pinwheeling two or three times before she regained her composure. She looked over at me, mangy and unnatural, woefully unimpressed. She turned her attention over to the girl beast.

"Seriously, Maybelle?"

The May-Thing peeled its maw from the neck of the man and fixed glassy eyes on the older girl, blood dribbling down her chin. Neither of the two seemed to care that I existed.

She climbed off, leaving the corpse twitching beside her. Then she smeared the mess in a streak across her cheek with one bloodier hand and made a move almost like a shiver.

"Again?"

She grabbed May by one bloody wrist, less bothered by the murder than the mess, and dragged her off in the direction of the river path. As they walked away, I heard:

"I am going to have to tell mom and dad about this, you know."

I stood a few moments, heavy breathing in death smell and fading fresh blood. When I was sure both demons were gone, I dragged what remained of the hiker further off into the depths of the woods. Then I tucked it away where it wouldn't be found.

Then I took only my favorite findings and left the forest to its bigger monsters. And the smaller ones.

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

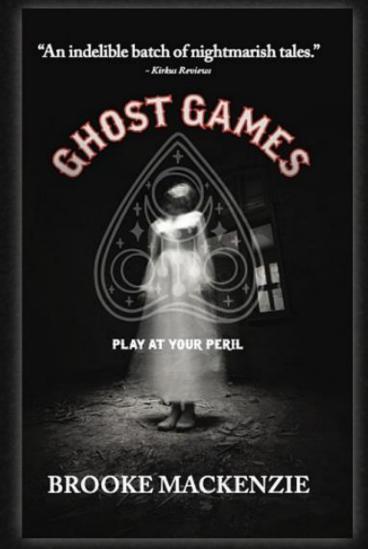
Casey Kelley is an aspiring author from the Great Lakes region. She has been writing recreationally for as long as she can remember. She spends her free time watching horror movies and musicals.

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#### The Library of Souls | Derek Austin Johnson

The faces haunt me.

Most are peaceful. Those who traverse unfolding dreamscapes before coming to me are the easiest. The dreams from which they never wake are, I hope, pleasant and unpopulated by monsters.

You would think accidents are the worst, the potential cut down before it can grow. But often these are quick, though far from painless, too close to fear. I remember the young woman a week past her eighteenth birthday suddenly killed in a car crash. She scrambled from the wreckage, hands clawing at the asphalt as she searched for the head behind her, mouth open in a silent scream.

I will not speak of those who arrive by choice, or due to the continuing emergency, their eyes focused in determined resignation or squeezed shut in agony.

Every soul making the journey—they all must, at some time—I bring to the Mausoleum outside of the All, where they are kept for a purpose beyond my understanding. I am a Librarian; I have no need to understand. I catalog each in a log with an endless supply of blank pages, preserve them with charms and incantations, and archive them on everdeepening shelves. One space forever stays open. This is my space, reserved for when I no longer can serve as Librarian.

Occasionally, I wonder about humanity's changes. At random I may take down a volume from the shelves and peruse. I skim the contents and compare what I remember from the days when I shared their experiences. At my age, I forget the desire of those who yearn for one more day, and I forget the details.

But I remember the faces. Always.

I said you would think the accidents are the worst. No. There is something far more horrible.

\*\*\*

Pieces littered the aisle between shelves. Cracked vessels strewn across marble floors, shattered containers dusting dark grout. I crouched and examined the remains, nudging a shard with the bronze tip of my wooden cane. Shards ground against the floor and glinted from the lanterns overhead.

The souls were gone.

Neither a drop of ectoplasm nor a beam of shimmer remained.

In aisle after aisle I discovered a similar scene. Damaged containers, the contents vanished.

I dispelled the possibility of some disturbance in the All. No shelves had collapsed or toppled. Of the vessels, not everything was broken; some lay smashed on the floor while others stood intact and undisturbed. One had been a chemist who had helped eradicate a disease that crippled and killed many; another labored over a telephone day after day and explored imagined electronic worlds for points at night, finally expiring over a plate of homemade penne arrabbiata one afternoon. (I remembered his concern for his cats. Had they eaten? Would they be okay? I assured him cats were survivors, though they dined on something more palatable than the meal he prepared.)

An intruder roamed the Library.

Somewhere, a whimper whispered.

I traversed the labyrinthine stacks in search of its origin, the sound growing fainter no matter the direction I turned. I stumbled upon it by chance: a translucent face looking up from the teeth of shattered crystal. Its mouth opened and a gasp escaped, softer than its first sound. Where eyes would be sat nothing. Not the floor beneath, as one might see in an unworn mask, nor the dark material littering the All that humanity cannot yet see, nor the void in which it is nestled, but nothing. A non-space.

But I could see the fear there. The realization that this soul would soon join the nothing behind its eyes and had begun seeping into its mouth.

"Can you hear me?" I asked.

Its "Yes" was almost inaudible.

"Did you see what did this?"

Another "Yes," even more slight. "A creature, so dark that, initially seen, offered nothing but silhouette. A shadow, all shape, but only came to life when it dined on him. And others."

I leaned so closely to the soul that I could smell its remains, a fetid odor left by whatever had eaten it.

"It was all teeth. It chewed us, then drained what was not solid." A moan. "I'm frightened. Not of what will happen, but of taking this pain with me. Does it have to go?"

Shaking my head, I pulled a charm from my coat and murmured. Amethyst hummed in asymmetrical silver, warming my hand.

"Thank you," the soul said. Its eyes and mouth opened, then opened wider still, until the nothingness the light and the face itself.

That is the worst, something I wish never to experience for myself or for others in my Library. Which meant I had to find the intruder and rid the Library of it.

\*\*\*

I closed the door to my office and, in vain, incanted a request for guidance to Those Above. At the very least, I advised Them of the need for the Warrior Class. Those Above expressed Their concern and their regret but offered no assistance—more, they suggested I was not capable of meeting the requirements of a Librarian. Futility would surround any appeal.

I looked for this dark parasite feasting on the souls under my watch. Whatever manner of being this was concealed itself well and continued to feed. I spied more wreckage; more souls absent because it had slaked its thirst. I knew only that it would feed indiscriminately.

After a moment's rest I considered a plan. Seeking a mix of old wisdom and new, I consulted the Library itself. This was a violation, I knew, but Those Above had made it clear help would not be forthcoming.

So I marked a circle, lit my candles, and sought the advice of humanity: its philosophers and metaphysicians, its biologists and zoologists, its scouts and hunters, its strategists and tacticians. Every aspect of humanity's vast knowledge and skill set I made my own. Each new piece of information I forged into a new charm.

It came to me as I enacted a spell imitating the overpowering smell of souls. A Devourer, its lean arms and legs tipped with onyx claws. The Devourer flared its thick proboscis and shot out its tongue, the carrion crimson interior appendage studded with barbed filiform papillae. I parried, but it was quick. Another flick of its tongue caught my arm and I cried out, dropping my staff and many of my charms.

But not the most important one.

I held the intricately woven silver and intoned a command that included every pitch in my vocal register. The charm woke and attacked.

These were not soldiers. One or two warriors spoke to me in my research, but most expressed a desire to abstain from further combat. Skimming them, I understood why.

Fortunately, there were others.

There were those humanity had forgotten: those who had been taken from life far too soon, who had dreamed of contributing to the human story but were too fearful or too anxious, who had never found their place and who had just gotten by. The young man who had worried about his cats. The young woman decapitated in the car crash. They all attacked. I could not tell you how many. A number means nothing as it closes on infinity.

They attacked. They clubbed. They cut. And as they did, the Devourer lost its darkness, and faded to gray, until it no longer remained even the idea of a shadow.

After this battle I repaired their own vessels.

\*\*\*

Those Above expressed displeasure at my actions. I offered no defense; how could I, when the Library itself had been at stake. Would They have allowed the Library's contents to be destroyed? What else would They have had me do?

My consulting the souls was a violation. As punishment, I would be stripped of my duties as a Librarian. They would assign the space where I would have retired to another.

And they would send me to live among humanity again.

I have been a Librarian so long that I know not what I shall do among them. Yes, I lived among them before, but returning may prove a challenge.

Their faces haunt me. They always have. But the gratitude of those who found purpose, even after life, lifts my own spirits.

#### **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.



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### Hunting the Goat Man | Pamela K. Kinney

Goat Man's nothing more than an urban legend the kids around here tell when the weather cools and Halloween is on everybody's mind. Since Virginia has the Bunnyman with his bridge, someone decided Maryland had to do 'em one better and make up a half-man, half-goat monster. A satyr caused by a scientific experiment gone wrong in one story; another story claims it's due to a deal made with the Devil.

Sure, and I'm gonna rot my brain playing video games, just like Mom says.

With Mom gone grocery shopping, I'd invited my friends, Ty Phuong and Lucy Bovid to play the latest game I'd bought: Monster Hunter World. This gave Ty an idea.

"Hey, I think it'd be cool to go monster hunting," said Ty, pausing the game after the creature had killed him again. "You know about the Goat Man, right?"

I glanced aside at Lucy to see her reaction and saw her deep in an issue from my comic collection. I turned back to Ty. "Uh, yeah, who hasn't heard of that lame urban legend?"

"Let's go see if we can find him," Ty said.

"Because we're playing a monster hunters game, you think we should go hunt something that doesn't exist? Aw, come on, Ty." Irritated, I shut off the game.

He dug his phone out of his jeans pocket and brought up Google, searching for stories about Goat Man. 'Goaty' (an affectionate nickname given to him by locals) had lots of hits. Ty clicked on the latest article written about the legend. "He's been seen again, three days ago, at some shack off Fletchertown Road. A man and his wife were hiking and stopped by the building to drink from their water bottles, when Goat Man attacked. Lucky for them, they got away."

I scratched at the side of my nose. "Real opportunistic. I would think the monster would have kept stalking these people until it captured and ate them, or whatever it does with its victims."

Ty clicked off the Google app and shoved the phone back in his pocket. "The legends claim Goat Man has been terrorizing the area for eighteen years. It says he escaped a lab after killing all the scientists and then attacked a couple parked nearby right afterward." He shook his head. "Honestly, Jake, always acting as if you know it all. Maybe you're too chicken to find out."

I snickered. "Yeah, that's right, dork, call me chicken. That's not going to make me do your cracked idea."

Ty stood. "Well, I'm heading to that area right now. I go ghost hunting with my friends all the time, but this takes it to the next level." He looked over at Lucy, who had put down the comic and sat staring at us. "Hey, Lucy, wanna join me for a little adventure? I got a digital camera, a night vision camcorder, and a thermal imaging camera that I keep in my car for the paranormal investigations. Maybe we'll prove to dipshits like Jake here that Goat Man exists."

Lucy got to her feet, stretched, and nodded. "Yeah, why not? Sounds like fun."

Fun? Did she actually think searching for something from a campfire tale was exciting?

Lucy and I became friends when she moved here three years ago. I never thought of us like a boyfriend/girlfriend, but I did take interest in the things she liked, which was mostly video-gaming, schoolwork, and reading. But from the glint of excitement in her dark brown eyes, I could tell Ty's suggestion thrilled her.

I grinned. "Okay, if Lucy wants to do it, I guess I can try this monster hunting idea of yours, Ty."

Lucy smiled. "I'm glad, Jake. I've been reading about Goat Man in this book on Maryland monsters I checked out from the school library, and I had always wanted to see if he's real or not. It'd be fun doing it with you."

My heart went into double time. *Is Lucy interested in me*? Mom arrived home five minutes later, and I clamored downstairs to tell her that the three of us were going for a drive. Well, it's sorta true – the only way to get to the cabin in the article was by driving. She frowned as she put down the two bags of groceries, one of them loaded with steaks.

"Jake, I need you to stay in tonight—"

"Why? You always want me staying indoors at night. I couldn't try out for football because they hold the games at night. Forget the school dances; you used the drugs and underage drinking reason. And we fought over me getting that job this summer." I paused, working to calm down as the heat of anger rose inside me. It burned in my chest like acid reflux. "Well, I'm going out with my friends and you're not stopping me."

I gripped my keys and barged out the front door. Ty had already seized his equipment and waited with Lucy outside.

Damn, Mom, what's up your butt with me being out at night? Because Dad left you when it was nighttime, leaving you pregnant with me? Or is it something else? I'm close to being a man, not a little kid, and you need to quit being such a bitch.

The burning sensation hit me in the chest again. I backed the truck out of the driveway and roared down the street. Both Ty and Lucy held on tight, not saying a word.

Clouds rolled across the sky, covering the moon and stars. My headlights were the only light tonight to banish the darkness. Not that they helped much beyond lighting up the asphalt road a few feet in front of us. The trees on each side of the road ghosted out and were only revealed when I drew close enough to hit them with the LED glow from my headlights.

Ty touched my shoulder. "We're here. See the gravel road? Take a left there."

I whipped left, and with my window down, I could hear the wheels riding the gravel road with a constant crack-and-snap sound. Goosebumps popped up along my flesh and I blamed it on the cold night air and not the sense of dread overriding me.

The truck's wheels kicked up gravel when I screeched to a stop, some of the rocks pebbling the dark shack. Before I could shut off the engine, Lucy flung open the passenger door and bounced out, followed by Ty, who eased out more slowly, carrying an armful of cameras.

I shook my head, thinking, Such a geek.

Pocketing the keys, I climbed out and banged the door shut behind me. I clicked on the flashlight I'd snatched from the glove compartment and stabbed the trees with its beam. I didn't see anything there, so I did the same to the shack.

I didn't hear anything, not even crickets or bullfrogs. The cabin's windows reminded me of dark eyes. A chill rushed up my spine. My stomach cramped, my heart hammered, and cold sweat glued my shirt to my skin. This building and the entire area spooked me. Neither of my friends was panicking; Ty had simply handed his thermal camera over to Lucy and showed her how to operate it.

Once Lucy had it figured out, Ty tried to open the locked door to the decaying cabin.

"What the hell are you doing, Ty?" I asked.

He kept his eyes on the lock but continued using what looked like a hairpin to gain entry, twisting it this way and that. "Trying to jimmy this open so I can get inside to take some photos and video." He groaned, unable to get it to unlock.

Lucy called out, "Jake, Ty, look at this."

We joined her and as I peered over her shoulder; I saw a big red image on the thermal's screen. I hoped it might be a deer, although it could be a cougar or a bear. Not that I wanted it to be a bear or large cat, but either would be better than the Goat Man. I didn't believe in the monster before, but in these silent woods at night, one might have a belief in monsters existing.

Ty's eyes widened. "It's big, whatever it is." He lifted his night vision camcorder and started filming, pointing it at the area of the trees a few feet away.

Lucy squealed, "Shit, oh shit. It's heading toward us." She turned to me but fumbled and lost the camera. Scrambling down to her knees to find it, she kept her eyes on the woods across from us. Suddenly, she jumped to her feet and screamed.

I wondered what the problem might be and though I was frightened even to look, I aimed my flashlight anyway.

Oh God, screw me!

He wouldn't, but whatever stood between the two trees in front of us might do something unpleasant.

A hulking shadow stepped out into the glow of my flashlight. It had furry skin colored mottled gray and black. Two large horns rose from its head to curve over like a billy goat's would. As it approached, I saw a face that was a nightmare mix of goat and human. A man's checkered shirt stretched over its chest while torn jean shorts molded its lower half, tight enough to be blatant in displaying the monster's maleness. It had a man's beefy hands and goat legs ending in hooves. Exactly like a satyr, except satyrs only belonged in Greek myths and had no place in a forest off Fletchertown Road.

Goat Man roared and rushed Ty, and before my friend could escape, the monster snatched him by his neck. Ty was choking, held up by the creature as if he didn't weigh anything at all. A whiff of excrement drifted to me. God, Ty shat his pants. Hell, I didn't understand why I hadn't done that yet.

Goaty drew Ty closer to his wide-open mouth and bit his face. The sick sounds of cracking bones, sucking, and chewing filled the air. Terrified, I clutched my flashlight like a weapon, ready to fight if I couldn't make it to my truck.

A soft hand touched my back. "Wait. Don't do it. Don't kill your father, my father – our father."

I stopped and turned around. "What did you say?" I didn't flash my light on Lucy's face; I could see her despite the darkness. I couldn't understand how I was able to see her. I realized that she could also see me.

She looked grim. "Your mother kept what you truly are a secret from you, and that's not your fault. She should have told you the truth."

"What are you talking about?"

"Remember the story Ty told you about Goat Man killing those scientists and attacking the couple afterward? Our father didn't kill all the scientists, as lust overcame him, and he attacked the last one, my mother, leaving her unconscious and pregnant." She took a breath. "He encountered your mother with her boyfriend, killed and ate the guy, and raped her, too."

I opened my mouth to tell her she was crazy but snapped it shut because I knew she spoke the truth. Insane as it sounded, it felt oh, so true.

Lucy continued. "Mom bolted and ended up in Montana, where she gave birth to me." A shark's grin formed on her lips. "We lived there until my true self emerged one night three years ago and I killed her and feasted on her corpse. I discovered her diary and learned about the Goat Man, so I came here to investigate, and I met you – my brother."

I looked at her face and saw for the first time the same features my own held each time I stared in the bathroom mirror. She was my sister.

The eating sounds stopped, and we turned to Goat Man, who stood over the bloody remains of Ty. He pointed at us, and down at the carcass. My stomach gurgled like it always did whenever I felt hungry.

Why would I feel hun—

"Come, brother, I know you have been feeling the change, along with the hunger for human flesh."

I looked down at my feet and saw my tennis shoes had split apart and instead of bare feet, hooves ended at the end of legs that were covered in the same hair as the Goat Man's – my father.

With the hunger raging, I let my half-sister lead me to the remains our father had left for us. I laughed, but I bleated instead.

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

Pamela K. Kinney gave up long ago trying not to ignore the voices in her head and has written horror, fantasy. science fiction, poetry, nonfiction ghost and cryptid books ever since. One of her horror short stories, "Bottled Spirits," was runner-up for the 2013 WSFA Small Press Award and considered one of seven best genre stories for that year.

Author Website: Pamela K Kinney Instagram: @pamelak.kinney author

#### Colors Not Seen in Nature | Sheri White

"Are we ready to hike, everyone?" Dan asked. His family nodded in response. "Then let's go before we need to turn around. We want to be back at our campsite before it gets dark."

They walked together, chatting and laughing, not really paying attention to where they were going, but taking in the beauty of the forest. Then Evan stopped. Emily bumped into him.

"What is your problem, dork?"

Evan pointed up. "Look," he said in a whisper.

"Oh, wow," Dan said with wonder in his voice.

They were in a clearing, surrounded by tall trees with gorgeous leaves. Red, green, yellow, orange—amazing Autumn hues.

"I don't think I've even seen some of those colors before," Celia said. "I can't even describe them, but they are beautiful. Mesmerizing."

Dan pulled his backpack off and let it drop to the ground, landing with a loud thud. The leaves shook on the trees as if disturbed by a breeze, but the air around them was still.

"Oh, my god—those aren't leaves!" Dan shouted. "They're butterflies!"

The four of them watched as the cascade of butterflies took flight.

"There must be hundreds of them," said Celia. "This is amazing. You can actually hear their wings beating!"

"It's getting really loud!" yelled Evan. He put his hands over his ears.

A deep, vibrating hum joined the cacophony of their beating wings. They all covered their ears.

"I don't like this! Let's go back!" Celia shouted.

Dan picked up his backpack and they started to run. Before they could leave the clearing, the butterflies flew at them, blocking their escape.

"I don't think this is like the butterfly house at the park, Dad!" Emily yelled.

Butterflies began to alight all over them. Emily shrieked in terror.

"It's okay, Emily. Just start walking slowly," Dan said, grabbing her hand.

"No, I can't! It hurts! Something is hurting me, Daddy!"

Then Celia screamed. "They're biting!" Dan turned to his wife. Blood dripped from small wounds in her skin. He tightened his grip on his daughter's hand and reached for his wife's. In seconds, butterflies covered Celia entirely.

"Celia...Celia, take my hand! Please!"

A shaky hand, bloody with bones protruding through ribbons of shredded skin, slowly emerged from the swarm. Before Dan could rescue Celia from within the insect horde, she fell to the ground with her skeletal hand still held out for her husband to take.

"Kids, run!" Dan screamed. Butterflies began to cover him next, and he screamed in pain and terror. A few of the butterflies flew into his mouth as he screamed. Seconds later, he choked out blood and pieces of his tongue.

The kids ran, swatting and slapping the butterflies landing on their skin. "It hurts so much! Why are they biting us?

"Emily, just run!" Evan looked behind him. "They're chasing us! Hurry up!"

His sister ran with him, crying and screaming.

"Faster, Emily!" Evan ran ahead of her, then realized he couldn't hear her screaming anymore.

He looked back. Emily lay on the ground, covered in butterflies. Evan could only see his sister's face and an arm, stretched as if beseeching him, her face frozen into a scream. Butterflies crawled on her lips and into her mouth, and bit her open eyes, ripping and shredding through the sclera. Clear fluid and blood trickled down from the corner of her eye and into her ear. Evan let out a sob, knowing his big sister was dead like his parents.

Then she blinked which disturbed the insects feasting upon her eyes. They flitted off for a couple seconds before landing once again.

"I'm sorry, Emily! I can't help you; I have to leave. I'm sorry!" Then he turned and kept running.

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"Do you hear that?"

"Hear what, Dennis?"

"It sounds like someone is screaming. A kid or something." Dennis shielded his eyes with his hand but couldn't see anything.

"Maybe it's an animal," Amy said. "Oh, wait, I hear it now."

"Hey, let's go back," Dennis said. "Something is wrong here. We can send a ranger back to check."

"Yeah...yeah, okay."

The couple turned around on the trail. Amy looked up at the sky and pointed.

"Hey, look at those butterflies! Aren't they just gorgeous?"

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

Sheri lives in Jefferson, Maryland with her husband Chris, their daughter Lauren, their three black cats (Lucy, Sadie, and Vlad), and two dogs (Dobie and Josie). Their other daughters Sarah and Becca fled the scene last year.

In accordance with unspoken Maryland state laws, there is always a can of Old Bay in her cupboard, and she visits local breweries as often as possible.

Amazon Author Page: <u>Sheri White</u>
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#### Featured Artist | Katie and Chris Robleski - The Flash Nites

#### While You Were Sleeping



In the darkness, the undercurrent of suspense is always the same. We never know what to expect when we set down the tripod, release the camera shutter and, literally, climb into unfamiliar territory. Frozen appendages? Maybe. Strange beasts? Probably. Dark, grimy, haunted corners untouched by humans for months, years, maybe decades? Definitely. We have to put fears aside, however, because our aim is to pull a beautiful composition and surreal story from this black canvas.

We are photographers; technically. That's the box we have to check. But the art actually happens out in the field. Not a computer. Not a darkroom. Through our atypical process—using long exposure and light techniques—we dismantle the notion that photography is a static art form. Our inspiration derives from an urge to challenge ourselves and the audience. We encourage viewers to conceptualize the physics at play, rather than the fact that this is photography. The creativity happens within the adventure, not stuffed into an isolated darkroom amongst toxic chemicals (no offense to those of you who dance with chemicals of such nature!)

If our subject is an external structure, the full moon exposes the landscape. Star trails that collectively curve through the sky remind us that we are hardly anchored to one spot. Inside the bones of such spaces, we bounce color flashlights at walls, windows, doorways. We give the space a neon life. These techniques are merely tools to tell a bigger story.

By light of day, these lost places might conjure sad, even dismal emotions. Perhaps they don't even seem worthy of thought. By dark of night, however, a colorful glow triggers a memory; it returns a warmth that once was. Our passion for exploration, for uncovering lost relics, and even fear itself culminate to produce not just an image, but the challenge to tell a story.

Chris's night photography adventures began in his Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design days, over two decades ago, when his job and class work thwarted creative experimentation during the daylight hours. Several years later, he began to add colored gels over strobes and flashlights to his long-exposure work. I (Katie) met him in 2009, and he revealed his unique and adventurous nightlife to me on one of our first dates. It was love at first sight. He wasn't so bad either.

From midnight escapades through the empty streets of Gary, Indiana, to three-mile, moonlit hikes out to a forgotten trading post in Arizona's Painted Desert, and everywhere in between, we've been artistic and business partners ever since. We formalized our business in 2012 and started to travel the country not solely for photography, but to sell our work in art festivals from Austin to Kansas City, Minneapolis to Nashville. As Johnny Cash sang, "I've been everywhere, man."

#### "Do you have any photos of mermaids?"

We've clocked in over one hundred art shows since our first one-day gig in Kenosha, Wisconsin, in 2011. That's a lot of chatting! If we can count on one thing, it's the abundance and range of questions we get from the people who stop to look at our work. "Do you have any photos of mermaids" was, in fact, a question asked and answered! ("um....not today?") We figured you might have some of these tumbling around your skull container, so what better way to share more about our work than through an informal FAQ? Let's do it!

#### "Are these doctored / manipulated / Photoshopped?"

This is, of course, the most popular question we get. And, no. It's all created onsite. Once our booth visitors read signs or listen to us talk about the process, they respond that they're so glad it ISN'T 'shopped. In this airbrushed, Instagram-perfect, Al-generated digital world we live in, do you crave something real? No offense to anyone who plays on their computer and enjoys a good romp with Midjourney (trust me, I've been there!), but there's something about the musky scent of prairie fields and cobwebs that you just can't get sitting at a computer. Or maybe it's just fun to picture Chris falling through a basement floor or me tumbling down an old staircase (yep, both happened.)



In all honesty, we get so huffed and puffed about computer manipulation because it's so hard for us to be taken seriously by judges and juries in this cutthroat art world. So we do have to stand our ground and be loud and proud about the "No Photoshop" thing.

#### "Are these meth labs?"

Right up there with "These remind me of Breaking Bad," we get a lot of questions/comments about the 'scary-ness' of our work. And that's all good with us! At least it triggers a visceral emotion! Because—if you're not feelin' it—then we're doing it wrong.

We do this work so YOU get to see something different. Maybe mysterious or strange. And definitely a lot freakier than your average black-and-white landscape. But probably completely new to you, right? Something you've never seen before? Something that might even make you think or wonder?

This year we've received a lot of "scary" comments about a South Dakota gingerbread-style house we lit with green. And yet, the people who love it simply HAVE to purchase a print of it. To each his own. We never judge.

But no, we've never stumbled into a meth lab. Not even in Albuquerque.

#### "Are you afraid when you're at these places?"

We get that one a lot too, and you want to know the honest truth? *Hell yes.* 

Still! We're scared just a smidge less than "scared shitless," even after all these years. Before every shoot, that drive is always the same: the nervous swirl in my stomach. Often times we don't see these places in the daylight because they're just too far away, so our first encounter is around midnight. I try to anticipate or imagine what the location will be like, but it's impossible. When we get there, it's always SO dark. Usually really quiet. Eerily quiet. And those first few steps inside ... no idea what to expect ... tiptoeing around to find the holes in the floor. But we survey the situation, get our bearings, and everything's cool.

That is of course until I hear a weird noise or tires rolling down the gravel outside. Ask Chris. I've been known to duck down or even run. He finds it pretty annoying. But you know what? At least I never got spooked by a raccoon—during the day, mind you—run out of an old house, fall down the porch, rip open my hand, and go to a rural ER miles away for stitches during the height of the pandemic. (Yeah that also happened.)

But that's adventure for you! You gotta find something in life that grabs you by the shoulders and tells you to wake the hell up and do something different, something exciting, something scary.

Here's something even scarier...

We decided to take a big leap of faith, invest money in all the art fair materials, invest time in building our booth, and show this work to the public in the hopes that they would purchase it. Yikes.

We could've totally crashed and burned! But here we are, my friend. Here we are showing you places you've probably never seen, in a light that might look a little scary to some people.

Hopefully, for you, it's just the perfect amount of chills.

#### "Do you get permission to go inside?"

Ummm...who's asking?

In all seriousness, this is a loaded question. More so comprised of the following 2-part subversive questions:



- 1. **"Do you trespass?"** Kinda. Maybe. Sorry, we didn't see the warning sign posted, we apologize, Mr. Officer. (Yeah that happened too. I even had to explain myself when my new employer confronted me after my background check.)
- 2. **"Do you break and enter?"** Nope, that we *don't* do...ok, like 99% of the time. (But that 1% is a story for another day and totally historically justifiable.)

If this country is built on anything, it's not really so much freedom, but more so ownership of property. The white picket fence. Amber waves of grain. The American Dream. Even when that dream is completely dead, rotting, literally being swallowed back into the earth with every drop of rain that gobbles up the collapsed roof because its owner sadly passed away or had to give up on it and now lives somewhere else, perhaps hundreds of miles away.

But, hey, it's probably still got an owner because that's America for you. So we step foot inside ... we're trespassing ... technically.

It all comes down to this: Chris and I have this passion for crafting a hunk of decay into something worthy of attention, worthy of an audience (that's you!). On the flip side, typically these places are abandoned for the very *opposite* reason: Someone decided that they're no longer worthy of attention and jumped ship.

When we stumble upon a place that *used* to be someone's prized possession—*used* to be someone's American Dream—how can we not give her one last go at magnificence? One last chance to feel alive and breathtaking and beautiful even in her old rotten rags. We don't damage anything (hence shunning the B&E method). We don't tear down or tag or steal or ruin. "Take only photographs, leave only footprints," as the old oath goes.

So—even despite signage *occasionally* telling us to stay out—we'll head in.

If someone hints to us that there's a secret entry, we'll clutch and climb, we'll search the weeds for 45 minutes, we'll take the 3-miler long way around, we'll get down on our bellies, shove all our equipment through the shoulder-width

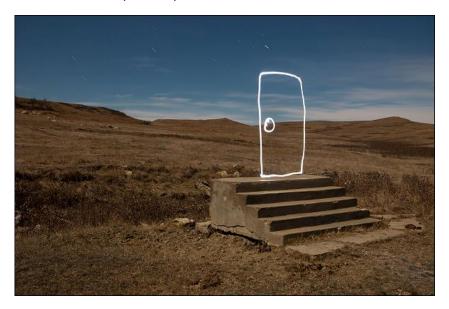
hole, and shimmy on in there, coated in all kinds of mud, grime, and animal excrement (definitely happened). We have to. It's our job.

#### "Do you have a favorite image?"

Well, that's like telling someone you have a secret favorite child! We do have our favorites (many of which you'll see here), but the real favorites are the experiences we have either on our photography adventures or during our art festival season.

Chris and I have had our fair share of mishaps over the past few years as we attempt to make a living out of what others might deem a "hobby." But along the way, we've discovered that we can't look at this thing we do as a means to an end, but rather a series of gems we collect that teach us a little something ourselves and about our fellow humans and the light they have to give.

Truth is, for every accolade we've received, we've got lots of rejections. For every record-breaker, there are super rainy or hot weekends the crowds just don't attend ... or times when we're literally up to our eyeballs in mud trying to take down our art fair booth (oof, that nightmare was all too real). For every awesome location we reach, there's another one that's out of our grasp (thanks North Dakota blizzard of 2023). For every cool opportunity we receive, there are lots of proverbial doors that remain locked despite our proverbial knocks. Real doors too.



But every time we run up against frustration or disappointment, I keep a fix at my fingertips. At the top of my inbox, I've starred an email we received long ago from a father who surprised his young son with one of our prints and snapped a pic to show us his excitement. If ever we're particularly down about a detour or blockade we've come up against, I open that email. That boy's smile is the unassuming gem that soothes and dispels the frustrations. Because maybe that image of the door made out of a beam from a flashlight, sitting on those "steps to somewhere" is something he glances at too, even to this day, if he's having a rough go at life.

No matter what you're doing right now that's working—or not working at all—maybe there's a small, unassuming reminder that you can grab onto to show you everything's alright, to show you—yes, you—keep going.

Onward, friend. Stay weird. Stay creative. Stay kind. Katie & Chris Robleski - *The Flash Nites* 

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# THE ART YOU COLLECT TELLS EVERYONE YOUR STORY.





WE CAN BE THE PLOT TWIST.



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### Poetry

#### Blood Spills Through Time | Anthony Bernstein

Blood spills through time Eternally it drips Down centuries blind Stalking eons yet ranged

Blood spills through time Eternally it flows From temples and shrines Staining monarchs and lords

Blood spills through time Eternally it slips Through lips red and wet Parted in crimson smiles

Blood spills through time Eternally it spews Across stellar seas To where virgin globes roll

Blood spills through time Eternally it drips Like tears of vermillion Down the torn cheeks of man

Blood spills through time Eternally it flows Past lovers and loathing Sowing envy and rage

Blood spills through time Eternally it slips Down blasphemous alters Through the Vatican gates

Blood spills through time Eternally it spews Flooding cities and towns Blood spills through time

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

Anthony Bernstein is a writer of strange poems and tales, also an accomplished musician. Originally from NYC, in the mid-nineties he moved to Providence RI, land of H P Lovecraft. Bernstein lives with two cats. He has made over fifty-nine laps around the sun so far. His writing appears in several dozen publications, including Space and Time, Rhysling Anthology and the now defunct Cthulhu Sex Magazine.

#### The Bleeding Pool | Meg Smith

The bare forest devours me, and I don't protest. Even disintegrating, I become whole. Moss riddling blue stones never loses its green. In this way, a ring forms encircling a place of water, a moon reflecting itself, but in scarlet. Shadows of trees fall here, forming veins. So, too, when I kneel, my fingers touching the surface, rippling in blood, and sea, reflecting only the coming night.

#### **Terrible Wings | Meg Smith**

In the valley of falling rocks, the road takes flight through a graying sun.
The sky opens, all for hunting.
When feathers fall, the hunter claims all in the open space.
A copper wind loosens bones from the soil, as if rudely shaking a servant awake. From the good of the spreading shadow above, all telling of a hundred hungers.

#### The Things We Do for the Living | Meg Smith

We keep them, how we keep them. As they struggle for sleep, we rush to them with blankets of shadows, and a cold whisper, of hush. The shadows will stir around them, forming dark dunes, and our whispers will seal their dreams. This night will meet night, black moon to black moon, with no disbursement of sunlight. No such light will be wasted.

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

Meg Smith is an author, journalist, dancer and events producer living in Lowell, Mass. In addition to *Sirens Call*, her poetry and fiction have appeared in *The Cafe Review, Muddy River Poetry Review, The Horror Zine, Dark Moon Digest*, and many more. Performing Middle Eastern dance and singing are two of her passions.

Author Website: Meg Smith Writer
Facebook: Meg Smith

#### Murmuration | Alex Grehy

Who can imagine the pain of such a tragedy? Branwen, princess of the Britons, imprisoned and cruelly abused by her husband, now dead of a broken heart, unable to bear the dreadful cost of her rescue. So much bloodshed, men killing men until the land was carpeted with the bones of their dead. Her brother, Bran, king of the Britons, mortally wounded, a cruel fate for one who waged a righteous war to save her. A mere seven survivors there were to tell the tale. Mighty Britons who found the strength to carry their king's disembodied head to his final resting place. Who can imagine such sorrow? So it was that Rhiannon, queen, goddess, legend, sent three birds to comfort them on their journey. The tales of men are writ in history and lore, but who knows what became of the birds?

They once were three, beholden to Rhiannon, starlings who sang according to their nature without guile or intention, their sweet voices soothing troubled human souls.

Yet down the long years the cacophony of clashing wills perpetuated war, the birds' small symphony of peace, unheard.

Centuries passed; where once were three are now three hundred million.

Mesmerising murmurations gather - dark clouds of tranquillity undulating across the crystal sky, their beating wings stirring no breeze, so far away they seem, ethereal, yet their plangent song saturates heaven and earth.

The people stop and stare, caught in the joy of visions daubed on the sky's canvas in the dark ink of graceful wings.

The people lie down, resting on the soft beds of their dreams, closing their eyes to the reality of the hard earth beneath them. Babes lie smiling at the breast, suckling contentedly, tasting ambrosia in the thin milk of their euphoric, starving mothers

The people rest in peace their sorrows soothed by the starlings' song.

Lost in dreams the people die placidly, too blissed even for the elation of ecstasy.

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

Alex Grehy (she/her) is a regular contributor to *The Sirens Call.* Her vivid prose and thought-provoking poetry has featured in a wide range publications including *Aphotic Realm* and *Luna Station Quarterly* and anthologies by Water Dragon and Red Penguin. She has also published essays on her experiences as a Lady of Horror. Her sweet life is filled with narrowboating, rescue greyhounds, singing and chocolate.

Twitter: @indigodreamers
Blog: Alex Grehy

#### The In-Between | Jennifer-Marie Montgomery

On the eve of twilight's drear
A score of the forlorn did I hear
A song of the melancholy came to me
'Twas an ode to the fate of the sonneteer

Bleak and cross her beauty bore
The curl of her horns, forgotten lore
The fervent weeping of a wicked thing
Broke my heart like no other ever did before

Never hath a mortal seen
Grief on the tongue of a ravaged queen
Her sorrow heavy with an ancient pain
Accursed to forever roam the in-between

#### The Monster | Jennifer-Marie Montgomery

dance, said the man
in the middle of the wood
So I danced and I danced 'til I could no more
spin, said the creature
with the horns upon his head
So I whirled and I twirled for the hungry carnivore
jump, so I jumped
sing, so I sang
love, and I tried, but I couldn't love the thing
then bite, it demanded
and he offered me a vein
So I drank and I drank while the monster roared
now you're mine
it declared with a grin upon his face
And I cried and I cried and I will forevermore

#### The Slaughter | Jennifer-Marie Montgomery

In the half life and shadows of mist and tomorrows,

both truth and illusion, superstition and make believe, there sings a symphony of the fallen.

The irrevocably broken dance upon ashen embers in the sacred wood,

catching lightning bugs upon their forked tongues.

I peer through veiled oleander, witness to the bloodbath of the fireflies, and I can hear the wolves baying, and the split oak swaying, beneath a canopy of wisteria and fallen cinder.

Beyond the wailing of the dying night things, come the hounds,

and they are creeping over midnight moss and splintered wings of once iridescent things, and as they draw closer, I can hear my name upon their snapping teeth, and I know that it is time for me to disappear.

#### The Unquiet Night | Jennifer-Marie Montgomery

Darkness trembles outside my door, and a surge of biting wind creeps, much like a centuries old cockroach on the last of its spindly legs, through the fissures that spread like veins, over the scored glass of the windowpane. The opulent flame, with its tenuously sanguine tendrils, twists and turns macabrely in the hearth, as if stirred to and fro by a mad puppeteer, desperately clutching at the last vestiges of his sanity. I abide the discomfort of my stool, as I dwell timorously in the recesses of the dimly lit room, enveloped in a threadbare patchwork, wrapped rigidly about my shivering shoulders, (a comforter vastly underserving of its personification.) The thrashing of the gale upon my shutters evokes an inescapable trepidation, and the pounding of the tempest, and the screaming of the wind, and the pandemonium of the unquiet night, engulfs my senses, terrorizing my irrational soul. My skin quivers unceasingly, my heart thrashing about loudly enough for the creature in the dark to ascertain, and it is there.

I know it to be true.

This thing which heeds my terror and covets my consternation. It is there, as it was before, and it has cometh yet again.

#### About the Author:

Jennifer-Marie Montgomery is a poet and author from Cedar Hill Missouri. Influenced heavily by her mother, also a poet, and her father, a writer of horror poetry and short fiction, Jennifer worked with her father on his small press Sci-Fi/Horror magazine in the early 1990's and has been creating dark works ever since. Jennifer is currently writing her first full-length gothic horror novel.

Instagram: @jennifermontgomerywriter



#### The Bouquet | Michael Perret

The bouquet my parents gave me was cursed. It took generations, they did their worst And when I graduated, there it was—Blooming, colorful, stems covered in fuzz. "You're dead," I told it, 'cause I'm forgetful... Irresponsible... also regretful...
But I knew myself. I gave it four days Before its water was gone and its sprays Were drooping. "You're already dead, my friend," I said and, vaguely, imagined its end.

Days passed, and then my cat suddenly died. I'd seen her sniffing the bouquet and tried To get her off the table with a squirt From her water bottle. It doesn't hurt— It doesn't really work either, but, hey, You can't just let your space go in that way— Well, later that day, I found her there, dead— Mouth open, eyes wide, stiff, under my bed. "What the fuck..." I said, as I left the room, And saw the bouquet had another bloom.

I hadn't watered the bouquet, not once,
Except for some spray from that squirt at Dunce,
My cat, so I decided, from now on
I'd take better care of the blooms upon
My bouquet's fuzzy stems: water and food —
But then Paul came over because my mood
Was a little depressed—dead cat and all —
As he took my waist I saw a leaf fall.
A passing thought, The bouquet's getting dry —
Would return as I watched my boyfriend die...

I heard him, naked, from the other room.

"Pretty flowers," he called, then sneezed, then boom—
He collapsed on the floor seizing, then still—
He was dead too. I looked up, felt a chill—
I saw the bouquet and somehow I knew—
I held my nose, grabbed the vase, then I threw
It out the door. Out of sight, out of mind...
But I hoped nobody's pet dog would find
It out on the sidewalk, sniff it and die—
I thought of poor Dunce and started to cry—

They say there's a drought and that we're to blame.

Just like my bouquet—it's one and the same—

Those plants are good as dead, like cut flowers,

They need us, their procreative powers

Depend upon us not starving them first...

The bouquet my parents gave me was cursed,

But I probably deserved it and soon

Here in the world hot-house one afternoon,

I won't be surprised if in on our breaths

A toxic pollen ushers in our deaths—

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

Michael Perret is a poet and translator from Austin, Texas. His first book, *The Chimera, and Other Dark Poems,* was published by Curious Corvid Publishing in 2023.

Instagram: @michaelperret78

#### A Slavering Ringtail | Amy Zoellers

A campout is safer, actually. You wouldn't think so, but it likes to open windows with its boneless, taffy hands.

The monster is haughty of its skill,

masked, raccoon-like, a striped tail that could be so endearing if only not so monstrous, toxic and oily.

Its favorite is jack-o'-lanterns left on porches, so trusting, for Halloween. In one night, the raccoon-beast thumps down the street; eating out jack-o'-lantern faces and leaving eerily perfect oval-shaped holes behind.

But is he not hungry again in November?
January? February?
June or July?

Yes, and so turns to his next favorite, with chirp-shrieks like grinding metal, scuttling along rooftops.

Proudly unlatching windows—boneless jelly fingers slithering through crevices.

Eyes glow silver, hungry moonlight. Long gray teeth twinkle with paralyzing drool and anticipation.

How he loves a face—pickings so soft and nourishing—and leaves behind sticky crimson oval-shaped holes of unsettling precision.

#### Song of the Creek Snipe | Amy Zoellers

A town evolved musical owing to the Creek Snipe, water-bogey, salamandrine, mammoth cougar, and scaled in glittering plates that chime in song. The bogey sings along in chilling echoes as through fogmedicine-bottle tunes of grief. And she waits for a response, an aria from the land-folk. For a time her melodic demands went ignored in ignorance. She waited—yearned writhed ashore, dripping her tears, and a baby would go missing from its cradle. Many children were lost to the Creek Snipe's longing until the people learned her ways and readied their arsenal of answering songs. Harmonies crimped and haunted, shuddering, tuned whimpers grown to soaring-choral-terrible embraces for their greedy, keening beast.

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

Amy Zoellers is a poet, multimedia artist, podcaster, and musical being. Author of *Transfusion Poetica* and *Art Wraiths,* among other works, she hosts "Podcast in A Minor" and co-hosts a live monthly poetry livestream with Angela Yuriko Smith. She lives in Independence, Missouri with her husband, son and cat.

Instagram: @hipness and outrage
Website: Amy Zoellers Art



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#### The Mole Man | Simon MacCulloch

The mole man wants your eyes

Beware! He's in disguise

His mask will help to hide the fact he's groping halfway blind

So on the city street

Be careful who you meet

And if you do not meet him, know he follows close behind.

Your office may be high

Ten storeys in the sky

And filled with people known to you by function, face and name

But be assured by me

For every face you see

The mole man has a skin-tight mask to make him look the same.

The lift is slow today

And who are we to say

The shaft it travels never runs below the lowest floor?

So as you start to drop

Keep hoping you will stop

Much nearer to the surface of the planet than its core.

In tunnels Underground

If you should look around

Your fellow passengers may gaze indifferently back

But can you ever tell

Which one has come from hell

With eyes gone dead from staring at a deeper shade of black?

And now that you are home

That creeping smell of loam

May merely be those muddy boots abandoned in the hall

But is the polished floor

As solid as before?

The mole man's claws can find his quarry anywhere at all.

And so at last to bed

The sheets above your head

Thus burrowed in the blankets, why, you're like a mole yourself!

And I would join you, love

Except - dear God above -

I see your face in rubber folds upon the bedside shelf.

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

Simon MacCulloch lives in London. He is a regular contributor to *Aphelion, Reach Poetry, The Dawntreader* and *Sarasvati*.

#### Gangrene | Julie Allyn Johnson

Auburn-haired waif canters chestnut mare along the periphery of the Quag of Souls, brisk cadence teasing toward gallop.

Both she and her mount long since agnosticized to the muted beauty found here — the darting damselflies, Goliath herons, fragrant swamp azaleas skirting this venue of death.

Children vanish here via black-hearted evil it's said, swallowed whole by the tangled overgrowth of elderberry, spike-rush, the triangular green stems of tussock sedge.

Sons and daughters snatched away under the dim starlight of Orion's belt, the hunter never satisfied with the spoils of the game.

Spare, little ones, eternally youthful...

The young woman dismounts and removes a small bundle from a stone-leather saddle bag, a little one coos while its mother coldly disregards the child's wide-eyed innocence.

Unmindful of the Quag's oppressive air, its haunted reputation or perhaps because of it, she leads Perry to the water's edge to slake his thirst, revels in the sky-dance of red-tailed hawks in flight steels herself for the long solo journey home.

#### apocalypse wanderings | Julie Allyn Johnson

hint of sky, thunderous as if never-yielding to time or place or the scarlet grief of unendurable hardship

malevolent beings abandoned to an ocean of discontent, smoldering

in the ashes of a secular zeal, pride bound to a misdirected conceit

a jumbled mixtape of erotic overtures stealthy alignments, fraught with terrors

unaccompanied by the grace allotted to every good man left still, undefiled

#### agatha | Julie Allyn Johnson

I'm drawn to witch the slender thread the word, the image

Salem's chagrin the darkness that creeps and traces an ungodly

woman of torment, unsavory seductress of all that is malevolent—

her unspeakable acts blood without remorse cloaked in midnight shadows

I'd love to tell you a story juicy in its exasperation to prompt jaundiced eyes

to scan every page but I'll leave that to others those who would

fan the flames expose the lies sweeten the burrito,

exacerbate the hate

implicit proviso | Julie Allyn Johnson

the devil's horn blankets the brambles of a broken wood, the metallic din of his trumpet blast obliterates the rumble of thunder, the crack of lightning's script— writings of a ragged hand across an unfruitful landscape

rain cleanses the root and stubble of last year's failed harvest here, evil's clamor permeates crumbling chimney spires forsaken manors lame cattle dying children while manna from the heavens dilutes the confluence of runoff from rusted bridges & archways, decrepit structures cloaked in the laments of despairing men, despondent women

backtracking on the bonds they've forged, mortals try to rescind these unholy contracts as if Old Scratch himself would ever falter or shrink in the wake of their wretched attempts to undo the ties thus freely enjoined—he's a fat old man with big ears, reads the morning paper, enjoys a hot cup of joe dabbles in small talk with the locals

but make no mistake when his tutelage is challenged, The Tempter will bide his time perpetuating the Mephistophelian dread for which he is darkly celebrated, adjudication administered in his unflinching terms, a retribution blood alone can never slake, reduce, or cower in shame

#### About the Author:

Julie Allyn Johnson is a sawyer's daughter from the American Midwest whose current obsession is tackling the rough and tumble sport of quilting and the accumulation of fabric. A Pushcart Prize nominee, her poetry can be found in Star\*Line, The Briar Cliff Review, Phantom Kangaroo, Haven Speculative, The Sirens Call, Coffin Bell, The Lake, Chestnut Review and other journals.

#### Dinorachnids | Terry Trowbridge

Of all the dinorachnids the most intimidating is the brontorantula – THUNDER RANTULA – towering

eight elephantine legs leaving car-sized footprints up the Atlas Mountains of Gondwana

shadows of enormity hanging from sky-scraping Laurasian jungle canopies heavy with bellyfuls of spidadactyls and pteracorpions caught in their horizon-to-horizon webs

Are those three necks and three heads? Worse.

Flanking the colossus of eyes two reaching pedipalps to palpate the ground splitting open calderas, foreshadowing Chicxulub's eclipsing grandeur, redistributing topsoil, an entire species communicating with timpani and tsunami in their carnivorous lust

tails tying silken knots around T-Rex wrigglers to distract and plunder cannibal dinorachnid nookie

weeks later, males eaten in their ecstasies, female brontorantulas curling their tails around pulsating silken Moons of throbbing young waiting for hatchlings to scramble across the veldts and deserts

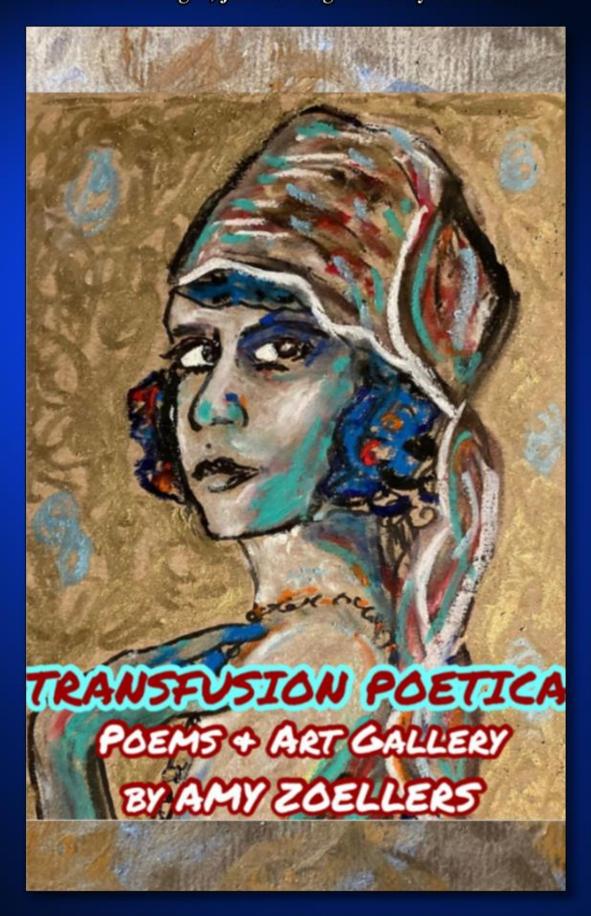
in pursuit of infant mammalian species unproven, unprotected, naïve, edible ancestors of us

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

Terry Trowbridge is a Canadian poet who is thankful for his first writing grant from the Ontario Arts Council. His Erdős number is 5.



Transfusion Poetica provides a swig of the mythic artist-life--where muses haunt the skies at night, just waiting to enter your dreams.



### AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

#### The Collector | Pete Kelly

A massing of unnatural weather Silences the twilight chattering Creatures feel an air of corruption Hunter and prey alike left quivering.

Along a snaking highway, hurtling A horse drawn hearse be plumed Sways wildly disobeying all sense But never letting go of the road.

Hooves pound the soft ground Amongst themselves nags nicker Whinnying pleasure at each whip strike Dealt with feverish glee from the driver.

Atop the coach like a preacher possessed Eyes wild as the storm overhead Beneath a crooked stove pipe hat Blazes a countenance bearing dread.

Fashioned he was by a people For disposing of human detritus A consequence of their fervency In keeping a town unblemished.

Birthed into lowly orphanage So were his parents a stain With the ruin of a child's mind A loyal servant was made.

Now where a man once hung From an old gnarled tree A noose now lazily swings In a cool night's breeze.

Reaching out a cold grey finger
The rope's sway he ceases
Fury flashes across his mind's sky
A howl from the depths he releases.

All was as it should have been For he had collected one other She by a pier the sea had claimed Upon hearing of her hanged lover.

Retreating to his sanctuary Materialised from seclusion A fantasy soon to swell With his new found companion.

Rage melts from warm greetings Within this reality he constructs For arranged about, silent and still Sit the corpses of the town's rejects.

They who raised him loathe him As an evil of necessity He serves them emulates them In creating his own family.

#### Death is heaven | Pete Kelly

A soul ripples As a pool Disturbed, A hand glides To a music Unheard. Head back Catching drips Upon a tongue From fingertips. A life craved To be absorbed Into empty veins Without soul. A clown's smile Lips glisten Slaked thirst Death is heaven.

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

Pete Kelly is a shipwright who writes poetry when the sands of time allow and the voice of Gothamistic a band mixing poetry and music. He has been a fan of horror films since birth (so he says) and loves to grow carnivorous plants. He is a Pushcart nominee.

Instagram: @splatz007
Amazon Author Page: Pete Kelly

#### Dark | Ivanka Fear

Dark falls from the sky entombing all below as she slips from the confines of her box.

She searches the stars, seeks out the moon, looking for answers, watching for signs.

Dark flows around her and guides her to the edge as her red eyes adjust to the alien world.

She ventures past where the sidewalk ends where the streetlights end where the end of the town's civilization lies beckoning.

Dark follows her shadow leaving no sign of her presence as she disappears into the void of space.

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

Ivanka Fear is a Canadian writer. Her poems and stories appear in numerous publications, including The Sirens Call, Scarlet Leaf Review, Mystery Tribune, October Hill, Close to the Bone, and elsewhere. Her debut novel, *The Dead Lie*, is the first in her Blue Water Mysteries series. Ivanka enjoys watching mystery series and romance movies, gardening, going for walks, and watching the waves roll in at the lake.

Website: <u>Ivanka Fear</u>
Twitter: @FearIvanka

#### The Promised Land | Brian Rosenberger

The Hudson River bleeds from broken promises.

Blood from blood. Hope replaced by holes in the ground.

For these immigrants, their American Dream stolen,

Dead And buried.

"Give me your tired, your poor,

Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,

The wretched refuse of your teeming shore."

The Statue's message ignored.

The huddled masses, the wretched refuse, the buried

But not buried deep enough.

Nosferatu rise from the holes in the ground,

Nosferatu, rise and are eager to taste their American Dream.

#### Uncle Artrellia | Brian Rosenberger

We visited our relatives in New Guinea over the years, Always treated like royalty. To be expected. Uncle Artrellia was royalty in the province of Milne Bay, A scattering of hamlets dominated by clans and their totem animals – Snake, lizard, fish, bird, even plants. On our visits, we marveled At the larger-than-life wood carvings and the smaller carvings Available for sale to tourists. We still have several keepsakes in our home. We dined like royalty when we visited. Flavors beyond comprehension. Uncle Artrellia always smiled, too many teeth for a human mouth, His skin like leather, and of course his four-foot tail. Our last visit - Uncle Artrellia's funeral. Carved statues of dragons paid tribute to our Uncle's smile, Greeted the grieving and citizens of the various hamlets, Paying their respects, as did my family, our shorter tails tucked but Our reptile teeth, our heritage, on display, upholding tradition. Sacrifices. Feasts.

#### Stumptown | Brian Rosenberger

Still expected.

Small town, guiet, picturesque. Generations of families Have lived here, long enough that streets are named after them. Most born in Stumptown never leave. Almost no crime. Murder and rape, non-existent. Just the occasional traffic violations, Public intoxication charges, domestic disputes, neighbors being Less than neighborly, teenagers being teenagers till they learn Their lessons. Stumptown makes sure they learn. Everyone knows everyone's business in Stumptown. Sometimes, it's publicized in The Stumptown Gazette. More often, it's neighborly gossip. Did you hear... A runaway lawn mower costs Alex Jordan part of his foot. An unstable ladder led to broken bones, never to heal, A tragic accident for Jose Garcia. Jose still enjoys yardwork, Just less than before. An overturned tractor cost Farmer Melvin Ott His mobility, his wheelchair notwithstanding. The insurance payout Ensures the Ott family farm will continue for years to come. A chainsaw, hungry for fingers, chewed up digits belonging to Thomas Markland, owner of Markland's Tree Service. You know their slogan - No job is too small... No tree is too tall. Not much crime in Stumptown. But plenty of accidents. Wood chippers, slammed car doors, black ice, the day-to-day That we all endure. We the Innocents, the Sacrifices, the Appreciated. The God of Accidents, who moved to Stumptown long before "The Welcome to Stumptown" sign existed, smiles a saw-bladed-smile. Appeased. For now.

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

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

Facebook: <u>Brian Who Suffers</u> Instagram: <u>@brianwhosuffers</u>

#### Jersey Devil | Brooke Mackenzie

I saw it once

Its wings were spread so wide
They darkened an entire patch of sky
Absorbing all light and color
And its scarlet eyes were almost beautiful
Rubies quivering with malicious intent
Its jaws opened
Solid enough to grind bones into dust

And its ear-melting shriek saturated the air Rattling my teeth and the tiny shapes in my ears It was many different pitches threaded together In a noose of noise All I could do was cover my ears and scream back

The two of us were wounded creatures
Boiling in our own pain
Letting the endless steam of it escape through our mouths
Crescendoing into an unbearable sound

And with a cataclysmic flap of its wings, it was gone
Out of my sight
Out of the world
For a little while, at least
Leaving a vacuum that sucked at my chest

I wish I could say that the silence was peaceful But instead it stung The way skin feels in the aftermath of a slap

I was left alone with myself Once again But still, I keep my eyes forever skyward, scanning For a creature that is far less frightening Than my own thoughts.

#### About the Author:

Brooke MacKenzie is the author of the short fiction collection GHOST GAMES, which Kirkus Reviews called, "[a]n indelible batch of nightmarish tales," as well as the upcoming horror poetry collection, THE SCARY ABECEDARY. Her short fiction and poetry have been published in numerous magazines and anthologies. She lives in a delightfully haunted town in Northern California with her husband and daughter.

Author website: <u>Brooke MacKenzie</u> Instagram: <u>@mackbrookepro</u> Victims, a collection of dark poems by Marge Simon & Mary A. Turzillo is a 2022 Bram Stoker Finalist!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

#### From the Tomb | DJ Tyrer

Marching forth

Unexpected stirrings
Behind heavy stone doors
Eased slowly aside
With ominous grating sounds
Inhabitants stepping forth
Into the grey light
Of misty day
Stumbling from the tombs
Where they were laid
Others clawing up through earth
Desperate for air
Or worse
A multitude of the dead

Revisiting their haunts of life

#### In The Depths | DJ Tyrer

A single bubble of light
Wends its way downwards
Down, down into the depths
Down, down into the dark
A membrane of no consequence
Shielding against crushing pressure
Shielding life from death, depth
Beyond the shield
Beyond the light
Darkness, a crushing weight
A sort of silence echoing
Trembling with deep distant sounds
Echoing with unknown sounds
An alien world of darkness
Of darkness and deep despair

#### Ratman Passage | DJ Tyrer

Did the name suggest the story
Or, did the story suggest the name?
Ratman Passage... an evocative one
Yet it looks like nothing much
Just an underpass for pedestrians
Beneath a busy street.
But, stories tell the origin of the name
In cruelty and nature's pitilessness...

An old man, homeless, sheltering
From rain and cold in the underpass
Set upon by a gang of young thugs
Finding entertainment in cruel sport...
Leaving him half-dead and bloodied
That was bad enough...
But, the scent of blood brought rats
Hungry, seeking easy prey...

They devoured his flesh
But, left his soul, his spirit
Twisted with fury and rage
Appearing at night to those taking the tunnel
As a huge and monstrous rat
Or, a bent and shuffling, ragged figure
With a cruel and murine face, and tail
Desperate to take his revenge...

#### Strange Runes | DJ Tyrer

Strange runes cast wan light
Wan light etched in stone of aeons
The thrashing entourage of Woden
Shrieks their path overhead
Shrieks past overhead dead
Dead souls unbaptised babes the damned
A curse-shriven host charging
A tumult airborne over the stones
Those dark dead stones carven
Carven with strange runes
Wrought upon ancient stones
Wrought to defy the passage of time

#### Tunnels Below | DJ Tyrer

That there are tunnels is not disputed (Though the number beneath the city is) Smugglers' tunnels, allegedly With the romantic images that brings... But, what about those beneath Prittlewell Priory? Built by monks centuries ago, perhaps Though some claim they are older, go deeper (Too deep in such waterlogged country) Certainly the stories claim they are haunted Or horrific in some unknown sense Tales told of expeditions by the intrigued Into tunnels that surely didn't go so far That it would take more than hours to explore Yet claim one group never returned at all (Save for a single terrified dog) And another was survived by a single man alive Returning days later, mute and hair white... What had he seen down there? Of course, it's probably nothing more than fiction Scary stories and urban legends, lies... Certainly, it's safer to think that Than to wonder what lurks beneath our streets...

#### About the Author:

DJ Tyrer dwells in Southend-on-Sea, where you can find Ratman Passage and the tunnels beneath Prittlewell Priory. DJ 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, Occult Detective Magazine, and Tigershark.

Author Website: DJ Tyrer
Twitter: @DJTyrer

#### **Lake Erie Omen** | *Rebecca Cuthbert*

You call me an *omen*, good or ill, but I have a name and it's not *Bessie*—that tourist's barb, that cheap shot glass logo.
But how could you understand? You with your broken scavengers' tongue, and mine deeptoned chantings from nightmares long since dreamt.

Do you know what I've done with your zebra mussels?
Did you think their weak shells could colonize me, too?
Foolish men,
I wear them like jewels,
like the crown I've surely earned—for who else would spend eons ruling over this lakebed?
Doling out petty fates for lesser monsters like you?

Don't think I do not mark you, always, standing on the shore, pretending not to see me, stupid—driftwood doesn't blink.
You know the lore: to spy me with dry feet on land foretells a death by water.

It may be a drowning, or something with more flair: your neck caught in a coil of rope, a slippery deck and a step misplaced. But if, as they say, you're lost in a storm, flimsy boat tossed like litter, like the floating trash you are— I might afford you pity—me, your queen of scale and bone.

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

Rebecca Cuthbert is the author of IN MEMORY OF EXOSKELETONS, a dark poetry collection published by Alien Buddha Press (2023). Forthcoming publications include the hybrid collection SELF-MADE MONSTERS (Alien Buddha Press, 2024) the sonnet "No Rest Nor Relief For You With Me Dead" (SHAKESPEARE UNLEASHED, Monstrous Books and Crystal Lake Publishing); the story "The Quilting Circle of Bygone Gardens (SOUL SCREAM, Seamus & Nunzio Productions); and "The Cliffs at Battery Pointe" (CREEPY PODCAST), among others.

Author Website: Rebecca Cuthbert
Twitter: @RebeccaJCuth

#### Oarfish Remix | H.V. Patterson

Mystery of pelagic depths the violence of your red crest a herald of end times your teeth for squid, jellyfish, zooplankton not human flesh

But you adapted to a poisoned world: mutation birthed by plastic-choked seas, legendary sea serpent transformed, newly crowned apex-predator

My last thought as I behold the gateway between your jaws, your throat a road I soon must walk: Here Be Monsters

#### Farewell, My Oklahoma Octopus | H.V. Patterson

When we were young, we were the best of friends, and summers were our favorite season.

We thought those golden days would never end; to imagine otherwise was treason.

Alas, as teenagers we grew apart, and memory was not enough to build a shared future, for your three vicious hearts and eight tentacles so eagerly killed.

Lake Tenkiller's cold depths called to you, while I for sweltering sun so often yearned.

You supped on dead men rotted purple-blue, while for chicken fried steak, my stomach burned.

Do you still recall our childhood laughter as you rip apart tourists in joyous slaughter?

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

H.V. Patterson (she/her) lives in Oklahoma and writes speculative fiction and poetry. Her favorite cryptid is the Oklahoma Octopus! She's a cofounder of Horns and Rattles Press and runs Dreadfulesque.

Twitter: <a href="mailto:@ScaryShelley">@ScaryShelley</a>
Instagram: <a href="mailto:@hvpattersonwriter">@hvpattersonwriter</a>





## FANTASY • HORROR • SCIENCE FICTION

PREDICTING THE FUTURE SINCE 1966









#### Satanic Panic | Jason Jones

The ritual, satanic
The result, demonic
The killer, apathetic
Into fits, kill the body, the implement used, ceramic
Through bleeding eyes, the panic
The sounds in a candle lit room, horrific

Mouth sealed shut with thread Blackened robes communicate with the dead Brains upon table, spill open the head Bring in the next victim in this game of dread

Tied to a beam, the inner self displayed
The skin, bruised, bleeding, and flayed
To the creature in the pit, the killer prayed
And to the victim, the throat, opened by the blade

The cup runneth over with blood With delight, they bathe in the crimson flood And now the deeds, fantastic, are done With the creature in the pit, they become one

#### About the Author:

Jason Jones has written poetry since the mid 90s and has only taken it seriously here recently. His poem, The Gemini Rose was recently published in Horrorscope: A Zodiac Anthology Vol 2. Edited by H. Everend. He currently resides in central Indiana with his wife.

Instagram: @thehorrornovelnut76
Facebook: Jason Jones

#### Hunger | A.N. Rose

In through your nose, Out through your mouth

Breathe slowly, Deeply Relax

Let your heart Fall silent Let your adrenaline Rest

She will be alone soon Just You, Her And luck

Bad for her Good for you

Yes, Hunger It is time we eat

#### About the Author:

A.N. Rose lives in a suburb outside of Philadelphia with his beautiful wife and children. His work has been previously published in Black Petals and The Chamber Magazine. When not writing poetry, you can find him reading comic books or drawing.



#### The Scrying Mirror | Erin Walmsley

I used the scrying mirror to foresee my one true love. His face as kind and gentle as an angel from above.

I wished to glimpse a moment from my future happy life, To see myself contented, As a mother and a wife.

Instead, I watched the shadows start to swirl around the room, And cowered as a hooded figure drifted from the gloom.

He paused behind my chair and stooped to whisper in my ear: "I bring the truth that you desire, Now listen well, my dear.

You asked the scrying glass to share its gift of second sight. Well greetings, child, my name is Death, And you are mine tonight.

Do not resist, you little fool.
The mirror never lies.
It summoned me to claim your soul,
So hush your feeble cries."

I screamed and in my terror, smashed the mirror on the floor, And suddenly, Death disappeared. The room was light once more.

But then a force consumed me and unable to resist, I took a shard of glass and dragged it hard across my wrist.

And as I bled, I realised, A lesson learned too late, That once the scrying mirror speaks, You can't escape your fate.

#### In the Dark | Erin Walmsley

Do you ever hear a creak in the corner of your room, Or a muffled little thump from your closet?

And you sit upright in bed, Heart a drum against your ribs, And you wonder to your trembling self "What was it?!"

It was me, you little fool, Moving from my hiding place, Crawling closer, ever closer to your bed.

In no time at all I'm hunched in the darkness on the floor, Reaching with my gleaming talons for your head.

And although you know I'm there, You refuse to face the truth, As you cower, blankets pulled up to your chin.

Any moment I could spring, Hold you, powerless and mute, While with teeth like knives, I rip away your skin.

Sucking marrow from your bones, As your blood spills from my lips, I would gorge myself and savour every bite.

So be vigilant, my child, When I'll visit, who can tell? But you never know – It might just be tonight.

#### The Summoning | Erin Walmsley

Did you really mean to bring me from my realm to yours tonight, As you stand there, bleating nonsense in your ring of candlelight?

How your arrogance astounds me! You don't know the risk you took, When you summoned me with ancient words recited from your book.

For you think that I'm a willing puppet you can shape and mould,
Just a slave to take instructions
and to do what I am told.

But you can't just toy with me then send me back where I belong. No! You think you can control me? I can't wait to prove you wrong.

Yes, there's something that I really think you need to understand. When I wish it, I can take your skull and crush it in my hand.

I can crawl inside your mind and fill your nights with pain and fear, I can break you piece by piece, and decimate all you hold dear.

Oh, how careless of me, snuffing out your candles one by one.
Well, I've waited long enough and now it's time to start the fun.

How delightful to observe the way the blood drains from your face when you're terrified. Yes, little fool – It's time you learned your place.

#### Cat Got Your Tongue? | Erin Walmsley

"Cat got your tongue?" they asked,

And silently I wept, Unable to explain that yes, She stole it as I slept.

She gently prised my lips apart with dainty velvet paws,
And seized the precious lump of flesh securely in her claws.

Then with her treasured prize held fast, she pulled with all her might.

She stretched my tongue to breaking point and took a hungry bite.

Her nasty little fangs sank deep into the spongy meat,
And once she'd ripped it from my mouth, she made a swift retreat.

She ran into the shadows on the far side of the room, Her huge green eyes like saucers, blazing fiercely in the gloom.

My blood was wet and slick upon her tiny pointed chin, And as she crouched to feed, I swear she looked at me and grinned.

Then panic overtook me and I tried to scream for help, But all that I could manage was a feral, wordless yelp.

The ragged stump inside my mouth twitched uselessly and then, I realised with horror that I'd never speak again.

#### Dolly | Erin Walmsley

I threw my dolly in the well because she scared me so. She giggled as she told me lots of things she shouldn't know.

She blinked her big blue eyes at me, and whispered in my ear,
And when I shrieked, "No more! Please, stop!" she didn't seem to hear.

She told me how to summon ghosts and how to raise the dead, And though I blocked my ears, her words crawled right inside my head.

And when she said that Mummy didn't love me and I should cut out her heart that very night, I told her that I would.

So I went to the kitchen drawer and found the biggest knife, Then crept into my mummy's bed, and swiftly took her life.

But when I proudly rushed to tell my dolly what I'd done, She wouldn't say a word to me, No, not a single one.

And as I held my dolly, through my frantic tears I saw a smirk upon her rosebud mouth that wasn't there before.

Her face was twisted with such glee, It chilled me to the bone.

And so I threw her in the well,

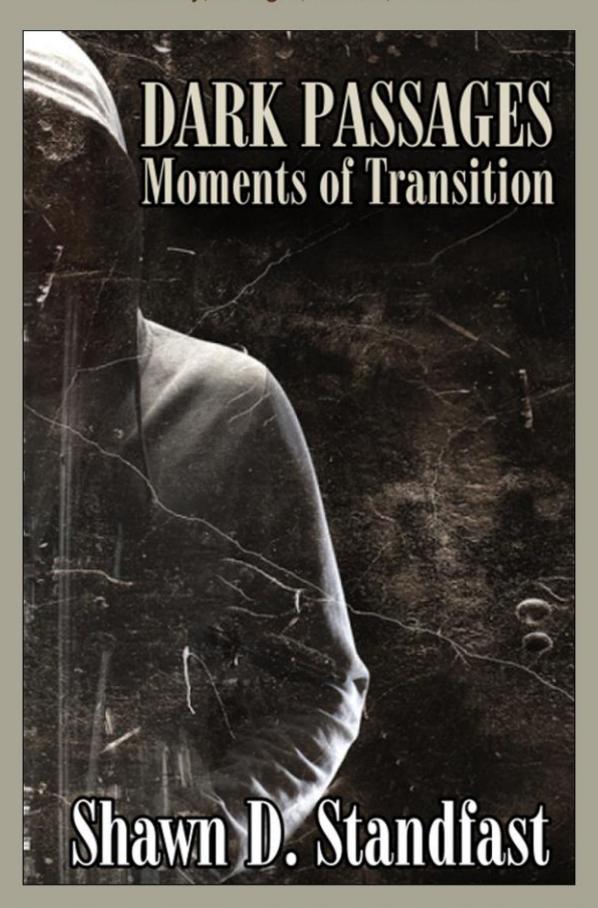
And now I'm all alone.

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

With her Cornish and Irish heritage, Erin grew up surrounded by tales of ghosts and witchcraft. Her most memorable supernatural experiences include being yelled at by a furious spirit on a paranormal investigation, and witnessing poltergeist activity in her friend's (very haunted) house. She loves the ocean, the moon and spiders, especially the ones with "darling little knees."

Instagram: <u>@erinwalmsleyauthor</u>
Amazon Author Page: <u>Erin Walmsley</u>

A collection of poetry caught in shadow, interweaving the remnants of memory, thought, dream, and desire.



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

#### Don't walk on the grass | Mathias Jansson

He loved to walk in the tall grass to be surrounded by the green sea feeling the sun in his face the blades touching his hands the first cut was therefore a surprise the sharp edge cut his skin he saw a drop of blood fall from his little hand coloring the green grass red the second cut was deeper the blood flowed from his naked ankle the cut hurt and he felt tears in his eyes he started to make his way home but the grass was thick like it wanted to hold him back the razor sharp edges cut him on the arms, legs and in the face the blood was pouring from his tiny body he was scared and couldn't understand why the grass wanted to hurt him suddenly a sharp blade sliced his throat open he gasped for air and fell down into the green sea drowning in his own blood for his inner vision he remembered the warning sign on the fence 'Don't walk on the grass'

#### **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



#### Careful at the Edge | Brianna Malotke

Children were told not to wander Too close to the ocean's edge, For the scaly creatures, green in hue with wiry limbs, Would take them, And drag them out to sea. Eager to feast on anyone That dared dip their toes, Linger just a moment too long, In their watery abode. And there was always At least one who didn't listen.

Once they had you, their face
Would be the last screaming image
Of your mind – the creatures' crooked
smile displaying razor-sharp,
slightly decaying, yellowing teeth,
As it wraps its long, and bony, fingers
Around your water covered ankles
And swiftly pulls you out to sea,
Before you even have a moment
To take your last breath – in
and out – the briny ocean waters
Replacing the fresh air in your lungs.

#### Playing with Food | Brianna Malotke

Don't wander in the forest
Alone, especially at dusk
For once the sun sets and
The moon starts to glow
All of the things that lurk
In the shadows come out
To wander and play and feed.

If you must be in the woods At night in the northwest Then do you best to avoid The owl people, mutated From the Strigiformes.

You may think you're brave, And go exploring anyways.

But they have feathered wings, And stand six feet tall, Just like an owl their eyesight And talons are sharp, with Ease they take to the sky Gliding silently through The night, looking for prey.

If you run, they'll catch you. If you hide, they'll find you.

They like to play with their food.

And you my dear risk taker, Are their next meal.

#### About the Author:

Brianna Malotke is a member of the Horror Writers Association. Her most recent work is in *The Nottingham Horror Collective* and *HorrorScope*. She also has work in the anthologies *Beautiful Tragedies 2, The Dire Circle, Out of Time, Their Ghoulish Reputation, Holiday Leftovers*, and *Under Her Skin*. In August 2023, her horror poetry collection, *Fashion Trends, Deadly Ends*, will be released by Green Avenue Books.

Instagram: <a href="mailto:object-right">object-right</a> Author Website: <a href="mailto:Malotke Writes">Malotke Writes</a>

#### Frost | Engilbert Egill

The frost covered tree in the clearing.

The frost-covered tree stands in the clearing

I walk these woods with fear in my heart

As I wonder, what's that voice I am hearing?

I wander closer to the frost-covered tree in the clearing

Caressing its bark, I feel a presence

An owl stood perched on a branch, its eyes piercing my soul

Is it you that I have been fearing?

I had not noticed when you came fluttering to the clearing

The owl tilted its head while never taking its eyes off my own

I heard whispers in my head, the owl looked at the golden ring I was wearing

Knowing it was taken from cold dead fingers, I felt a shiver in my bones from the owl's judgmental staring.

The whispers turned to howling

The howling turned to roaring

Fear-struck my feet froze to the ground, or so I thought

The frost-covered tree in the clearing had its roots wrapped around my bones.

The earth opened like a deep cut in human flesh and the heat burned my eyes

Towards my infernal doom I was nearing

As I sunk ever deeper

A single hoot from the owl was heard in the night at the frost covered tree in the clearing.

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

Engilbert Egill Stefansson is an Icelandic poet who lives in the Westman Islands in Iceland with his fiancé and their two beautiful daughters.

Facebook: Engilbert Egill Stefansson
Instagram: @engilbertegill

#### Mother | Robert Beveridge

So when they pumped her stomach they pulled out ten miles of umbilical cord

later she was heard to explain

when she tried to free her first child she had swallowed the bitten piece

she found she liked it and began to eat the placentae of the world's illegitimate children

#### Discharge | Robert Beveridge

The road winds between Athens

and the olive groves to the west. We pass the bottle of apple liquor with every seventh step, hiss back at every wren that hisses at us as we pass. We keep watch for the kitten snipers we have heard tell inhabit the branches of the almond trees, all the while suspecting their existence is fake news. We stop every hour to continue the endless game of Parcheesi where you attempt to whittle away at the twentythree thousand four hundred six dollars and seventy-two cents you've already lost to double fives.

Electricity cracks; an oncoming storm, cellphone tower surge, the pendulous bollocks of some sort of static god. We have no idea, continue our journey with hair on end. We can no longer see the road, travel only by night, by applejack, by the scent of Kalamata on the breeze

#### **Unearthed Arcana** | *Robert Beveridge*

Fenris stares, crouching under the chokecherry bush, as I split timber.

The last dozen dead leaves fell thanks to a careless, missed stroke

attention returns, dragons of autumn twilight burst forth from my calf.

Stare back: nothing more still than a hungry god with blood-scent.

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

Robert Beveridge (he/him) makes noise and writes poetry on unceded Mingo land (Akron, OH). Recent/upcoming appearances in Stygian Lepus, Live Nude Poems, and Sublunary, among others.

Instagram: <a href="mailto:one-weight: 20%">one-weight: one-weight: one-weight

#### The Resurrection | Robert Beveridge

The old man stands
before the grave, waves
hands the color of coffee beans
in circles, squares, a continual line
of shapes punctuated with words
in languages most people
hear only in dreams. Behind him, the river
burbles, flows always downward
towards the sea that rests still
beneath starless mountains.
Blind white fish look up, startled

as the old man stamps, his voice in glissando, hands akimbo, the climax with a razor to his wrinkled flesh. Drops of blood patter to the ground, a square within a circle, and he waits.

Nothing. The sun rises as always. Bandaged he retreats to his hut at the village edge.

That night, in the sand each long dragged footprint complemented by a hole as if made by a crutch carved of the finest cedar.

# **Lovely Lillith** | *Thomas Fisher*

Watch her as she goes Golden haired, skin that glows Those dancing diamonds for eyes A forked tongue that tells only lies

Luscious lips, flawless form See her there, smiling warm Teeth so pretty and white A soul pitch black as the night

Her sing song voice, so crystal clear Her playful act draws all men near Watch them and see how they go Those damned fools that never will know

When you let this girl into your life You'll want to make her your wife You'll give her your time and your heart And beware the day she tears you apart

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

Thomas Fischer (he/him) is a research assistant for Auburn University. While science is his trade, Tom has always had a passion for poetry and short fiction. From the older classics such as the works of Poe and Bradbury to the modern works of King and Koontz, Tom is always looking for terrifying tales to frighten and fascinate him.

## The Bog Maiden | Rachel Anding

An ancient child in her watery green cradle, Dark streams of hair ripple lazily in her wake. Sightless, soundless, hungry. Waiting.

Carnivorous, and still more flora than fauna, You will feel her stir beneath your feet as you walk. She will taste your shape like an echo, As the moth dances blindly toward the bat.

Ravenous, purple-veined as her offspring, Waiting in fleshy peat bowers, honey-scented, Their green bloated bellies, Yearn for careless wanderers.

Digestion can take days, even centuries, Depending on her whim. Sweet nectar and spent wings, entrails, Suspended, in the belly of the earth.

Dewdrops adorn her like poisoned diamonds, Lips, black as berries and skin speckled with moss. Her trigger is gossamer-thin and lightning-fast, You will never know what hit you.

#### **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 of exotic animals and large collection of antique books.

Author Website: R. F. Anding





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## **Deathscent** | *Christopher Hivner*

She will find you. She will find me. She will find all of us hiding in the chasm of eternity. She has the whole of time to find the corpses we let behind, to follow our trail of blood and stench and in the throes of our dying she will pick out the scent of our fear. Like the attraction of perfume, it will lead her to us to the graves we have already dug to the freshly turned soil that makes her quiver in ecstasy. She has found you. She has found me. She has found all of us hiding like dogs, in the dirt.

# Twilight | Christopher Hivner

Shadows live there dancing with light in a game that ends when darkness swims over the world like a wave.

Shadows live there chasing humans into their homes where nothing can harm them until morning.

Shadows live there hiding the monsters waking them from slumber as they wait for their master, darkness, to fall so they can feed.

Shadows live there.
Shadows die there.
And in their time
they hover over the edge
between the worlds.

## A Song of Vengeance | Christopher Hivner

I walked on fire to reach the outstretched arms, but the flames took its price in flesh. Stripped to muscle and bone I reach for my love, my only family, but my welcome is rescinded. Am I too ugly now to love? Was my worth counted only by my pelt taken by the fire below? The outstretched arms that beckoned from the other side of the chasm between us now hang down, flaccid and pale, while I bleed onto the holy soil. I take a step forward and my future slips further into shadow. I walked on fire to reach nirvana only to be rejected. Where do I go now? I choose to go forward, toward my former beacon, my own flayed arms outstretched, blackened fingers balled into fists, bloody tears in my eyes, a song of vengeance in my heart.

## **About the Author:**

Christopher Hivner writes from a small town in Pennsylvania under the watchful eye of his cat Colleen who corrects his grammar and suggests adding more cats to everything. His book of horror/dark fantasy poems, *Dark Oceans of Divinity*, is available from Cyberwit.

Twitter: <a>@Your screams</a>
<a>Instagram: <a>@ragnarjet</a>

#### Bigfoot Hereabouts | Akua Lezli Hope

The Bigfoot Group meets on Nextdoor they compare notes of sightings arrange for socially distant hiking they're always inviting, there's room for one more

The Hills are higher than we bargain for where rattlers and ruins await where contraband was once contained when flat fields below wore tobacco

Now pumpkin remnants ret, remain await the spring's strawberry picking across the road from baby Xmas trees and furry horses mutating to meet the harsh season

Where thermals flow and lift soaring planes gliders float in silence and see the world unfurl below glimpse the darting shadows of dancing trees or something else massive, moving slow

Why are Elmira's children so constrained while Mysteries roam our undulating hills Disarm their urban angers in these woods suck out their violence on these trails

Loose them to search with you for Bigfoot dodge mean snakes and poison ivy learn this lore of green and growing ready and free them from unknowing

what waits unsought, unbought, unseen,

still

# Things Glimpsed on Rings | Akua Lezli Hope

Nextdoor neighbors share *Ring* videos the missing alien sometimes resembles a catchild or dogbear, shiny wet black streaks unclear in the grainy dark of snow-streaked streets

Chinooks spotted in Painted Post hovering, hovering remind that there are bases nearby Chinooks make passes over Coopers Plains afternoons tattooed with sounds of chopped air

It's never clear— pied-pipered pets disappear Double rotors circle against high stratus clouds Rochacha or Horseheads Army Reserves frothy atmosphere, from no one knows where

Pictures shared of foot-paw prints which disappear with rise of day (BlackHawks refuel at CornElm airport)
Osprey with side props over Coopers Plains search for those unnamed things glimpsed on *Rings*.

## Smilodons | Akua Lezli Hope

In Big Flats, big cats were rumored to have returned Some said they saw huge, dark shadows others said we never learn never during daytime, only at night

Neighbors warned each other to mind what had caused their grandparents' fright to watch their children and small dogs, but bigger pets disappeared

as did the occasional cow and road-crossing deer Horses weren't left alone in fields without electrified fences to serve as shields As we drove down Route 352, we searched for signs

The furrows in our hills like finger-squeezed clay whose creases may yet hold hidden, ancient caves formed by a retreating iceberg as it melted away the same way our Finger Lakes were made

This land named for the smilodon whose massive canine was discovered a century back
Chemung place of the big horn in the Shumuonk dialect or it was a mastodon whose tusk was found intact?

The Department of Energy Conservation's dark cars and trucks suddenly appeared always slow to respond unless there is injury usually came to relieve us of rogue bear —

though humans were not yet attacked We were left to wonder what brought these legends back the rich building on the hill? encroaching human population? Only the wealthy built up there, causing all consternation

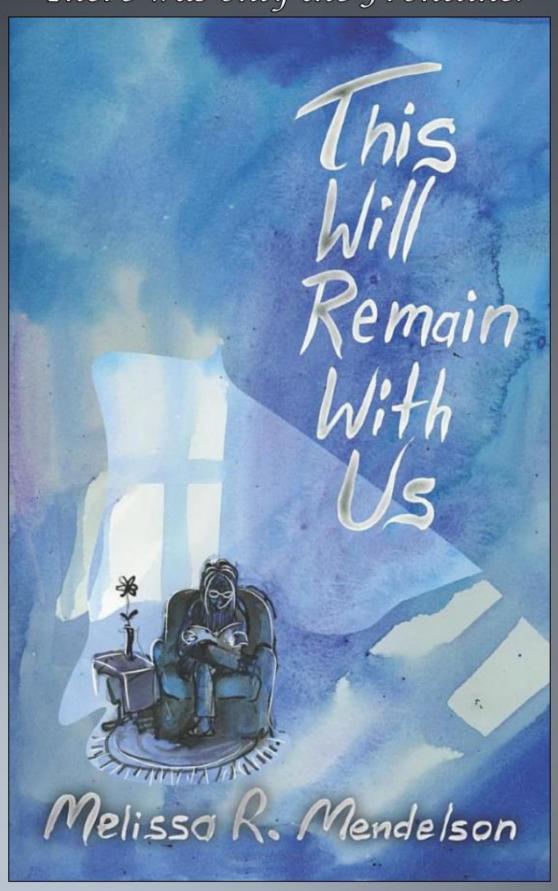
The rest of us bought motion sensor lights and cameras glimpsing some things big as bears but twice as long recording the gleam of a scimitar, curved tooth emerging from a hulking, slinking nightmare form.

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

Akua Lezli Hope, 2022 Grand Master of Fantastic Poetry (SFPA), creates poems, patterns, stories, music, sculpture, adornments & peace. Author of Embouchure: Poems on Jazz and Other Musics (Writer's Digest award winner), Them Gone, & Otherwheres: Speculative Poetry (2021 Elgin Award), she edited NOMBONO: (the first) Anthology of Speculative Poetry by BIPOC Creators. She created The Speculative Sunday Poetry Reading Series now in its 4th season.

Instagram: <u>@akualezlihope</u>
Amazon Author Page: <u>Akua Lezli Hope</u>

There was no Normal waiting ahead.
There was only the Frontline.



Available on Amazon

## A Ticket To Die | Lori R. Lopez

Discovering a Ticket on the counter of a Cafe, I attempted to follow the stranger who forgot it. Engulfed by a pewter-gray fog that swallowed even echoes of footsteps, I squinted at a stub: ONE FARE TO DEAD MAN'S ISLE was printed . . . I boarded the Ferryboat, bound for a mystery — my passage free on a single-day trip. No problem I figured, should be an adventure. Might dig up a Treasure to salvage my house from threats of Eviction — the payments were months behind. "Let's go!" I enthused, and a vessel shoved off, though it wasn't my habit to indulge spontaneity.

Too late, I would find the Ticket Station burned: a charred spot, a scar unhealed, no hope of return when reaching the shore on the other side . . . Only mists and shadow. An old guy on a bench by the end of the Pier cackled and muttered; he sputtered "It's gone!" Did I miss the boat? "What time is the next crossing?" I consulted my Pocketwatch, intending a meal and a stroll. "The Ferry always travels in this direction. But the barge never leaves," I was gleefully told; "It's a paradox!" I blinked. "A pair of docks?" Then chuckled as one might for an unfunny joke.

"Really, when does it depart?" Staring uneasily. "Can't you hear?" complained a fusty fogey. "People are idiots these days!" Gruffly I glared; disbelief in my tone, I rebuked the curmudgeon, "Some are plain rude. How can I voyage home if it just goes one way?" My voice raised a notch to ensure he understood. "That makes no sense." "Lotta things don't make sense to me anymore. Been thirteen or thirty years," claimed the spook. "This place has its rules 'tis wiser to obey . . . Ya can't buy a Ticket, or hire a Boat Captain." "How will I get back?" I shouted the query.

"You don't." These words slammed a jaildoor on a Dungeon Cell. "Did ya read the tiny letters? (They never do.) You're stuck here like me — but ya won't last the night unless you sit tight. If you swim sharks'll bite. The most obvious solution is not to worry, unless to die you're in a helluva hurry." His tragical rhymes disturbed. I connected the truth of the chanting, not ranting. Island Vibes. Restless Spirits. Ignore a specter's tenets, I'd be forced to bury doubts in a watery tomb, flooded with tides of regret and superstition. While the ride and accommodations are free . . .

Never take the Ferry to Dead Man's Isle, for it's populated by Wispies and Skellies!

# Scorched | Lori R. Lopez

Crackling crooked crimson streaks of pure Hellfire, from a Tempest drier than any had ever been endured, kindling separate superblazes through dense timber — bone-parched thirsting stands of primal tinder, apt to erupt in flames like a Viking's Funeral Pyre.

Scorched and shriveled to blackened floating cinders wafting from ghastly regiments of burnt umbral shades: wraith-like remnants born of smoke, a choking smog. They stamp and stump and stalk in fuming ranks — weathered, untethered from formerly thriving woods.

Ravaged, brutally savaged by waves of Brimstone . . . walls of infernal careless billowing destructive fury . . . tongues of heated leaping hound-like rampages . . . out of ruined withered stubs and brittle shards go they, soldiers grim; ghosts of a slain arcane haunted forest.

Once a mighty connected network of humming lives, reduced to gaunt sticks, darkened skeletal remains. This day not felled by axe or loud disruptive saw. This time no need to strike a match or fatal blow. Storms are immune to Justice and Prosecution.

The usual suspects and culprits wander free, clearly guilty of many crimes, negligent or breaking but a few flimsy Laws. It was their touch, their handiwork! Charred and smoldering, cold ashes scatter — gray effigies and memories; fragile fleeting wisps.

The greed and plunder leading to countless deaths, boundless debilitating deeds; an utter disregard for what is beautiful and priceless, replaced by a businesslike lack of Ethics, Conscience, Truth; a disdainful baneful embracing of Extremes.

Pillaging a planet. No respect for health or Rights. Sheer devotion to rampant notions of blatant villainy, protecting Commerce over safety and restrictions. Sparking disasters and extinctions, igniting conflicts — tipping the scales of Sanity and basic Humanity . . .

Yet all must listen, awaiting that eldritch cadence: the march of a shattered community's savage unrest. The cycles of Nature, the circles of Life eternal, things always return to where they began — for what goes around will come around again.

This is a world controlled by the worst ideals . . . unhinging all that could be done with care and grace, abandoned now to what must rise and fall like rains, in multitudes of consequential climate change! Warbeasts frothing, legions gallop, weapons drawn.

There is no stopping them when lines are crossed, the warnings issued, demands delivered and ignored; incessant times the chances overlooked, plans denied, last hopes forsaken as the power-hungry peered away, and masses bear the burden: immeasurable lives lost.

# The Brainrobber | Lori R. Lopez

Opaque pools of liquid punctuating asphalt. Idle vehicles fumed, waiting to be driven. What drove me was an urge to be safe as I ducked between a Van and a Pickup, disturbed by footfalls. Scrapes and taps. I crouched, legs stiff, heart aching. *Unafraid*. Furtive shadows and flickers of movement captured my gaze. Narrowed eyes staring hard into a night where bulky forms milled and paced, gleaming metal in hand, no member of the pack defenseless. Heavily armed, silhouetted by the glares of headlamps. Not one with an ounce of mercy in mind. Living to kill.

I simply existed, striving to maintain a sense of self and forge a bond, an awareness of highly abnormal kin, who did not ask to be born in such states — products of reeking oozepits; wrought by seething toxic cesspools of Industrial Waste, rejects and defects of birth. Abandoned to the Wild. No longer able to be ignored, discreet, unknown. But did any of the anomalous anonymous deserve to be eliminated, exterminated? Chased and pumped with Lead or Iron, Silver Bullets? Did we not bleed? And mourn, pursued by Hobby Hunters and Pros carting agendas. Sure, I could suck brains through nostrils . . .

Everyone has their quirks. We were targets. All we wished, to be left in peace — to dwell undisturbed whether the deep forest, polluted bog, cavern or crevasse, gully bottom, overgrown ruins. In my strangeness I sparked a local legend. I was human once upon a time: a loner in a family residing too near the edge

of a dumping site. An only survivor, untouched by Cancers, fatal conditions. Horror Stories like this abound, filling back-pages of magazines and newspapers. I adapted, freakishly modern, uniquely suited to a new terrain and climate. Erupting, evolving out of haphazard Chemistry.

They ruined my home; a Rage War burned in the soul of a monster as I surged against grain to lure not escape, leading these assassins toward their demises. Paid by Factories taking up farmland, Gun Mobs willfully followed, sent to clean the messes and embarrassments, the harmful Side-Effects . . . So many others like me, misshapen, misbegotten; yet none the same. Malformed, unsightly, morbidly grotesque. I inhabited screamfest dreams of Cryptids, branded The Stellas Point Brainrobber in these parts! Now I eat a plant-based diet. Reclusive; at peace.

# Skeleton Key | Lori R. Lopez

There are no bones about it — crafted in a drab suit of iron, creepy as a devil wearing a snide skullish grin, the Harlequin almost winking. (Perhaps a few bones. Stealthily borrowed.)

Tremblesome fingers insert the frigid relic.

Trance-like. Mesmerized by a spectral connection. Left by a Cab along a desolate road. Under the drug of an eerie unnatural resonance, I was drawn toward a Temple or Crypt shrouded in outlandish brume.

Staggering over tangles and untamed wilds . . .

A remote dismal hinterland off an unbeaten path — the weird uncanny scene from an irrational dream. Overcast by shadows, I trudged the wasteland as if my lower limbs were prone to sleepwalk.

Arriving at the door, a thirteenth hour struck.

My wristwatch crystal split in half. An omen? Dread pooled to my feet, a damp shivery residue. Skin clammy, spine chilled, pulse and breath ragged like the coat of a gaunt Tatterdemalion leering . . .

Trapped in the thrall of paranormal clutches.

I squawk when the Skeleton Key twists itself! A stone portal swings with a slow anxious creak, and that pallid expression emerges from pitchblack. A dark vintage garment cloaks the macabre figure.

A spook from childhood nightmares! A wraith.

Calling, crawling from the tomb. I struggle . . . Male or female? Hairless dome, lurid features give no clue. The archetype for Night Terrors; a ghoulish phantom complexion glows bright as the Full Moon.

My steps retreat, stumbling backward in fright.

Summoned by force, a resisting servant. Am I so weak, so pathetic and meek, an empty vessel to maneuver — to be manipulated by something dead? The lips bare a moist, unsavory, grimacing smile; hideous teeth!

Feral and fetid, gray and yellowed. My eyes avert.

To a Family Name above the portal: MERCER.

A jolt of numbing shock — a wave of horror ripples through me! I am Magenta Mercer. Who could this Ancestor be, this banished Soul . . . spurned, isolated?

The Skeleton Key throbs. A cold silent warning.

"Who are you?" I gasp, strangled by a mental grasp. "Magnus." Exhaled. I recognize the searing gaze — an Oil Portrait in Nana Maggie's Den, seldom spied, always off-limits, until this errand. Visited alone.

"Come near," the Spirit entices. Reluctant I obey.

A repugnant snarl. Then an oath of crass rejection: "I shall be no woman!" Surges of harsh rebuke. Charging, I thrust the Skeleton Key. Salvation . . . The door slams. The heavy lock clicks — a Seal.

"Stay dead, old man! Neither will I be you!"

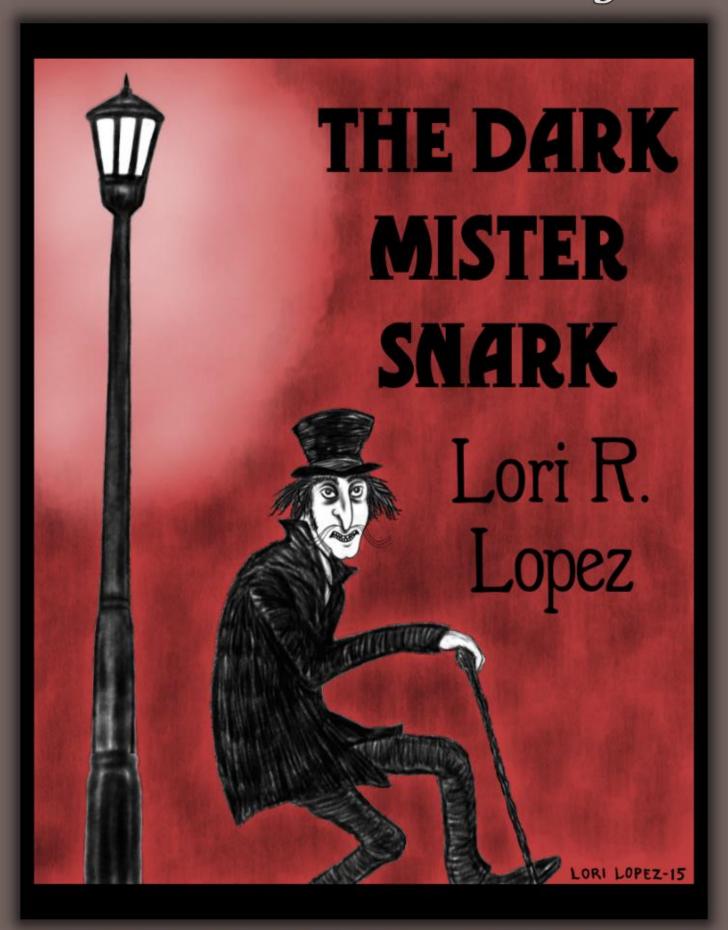
#### **About the Author:**

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...



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

## **Demon Dogs** | *Heather Moser*

One sunny morning Sarah and Jean were on a drive. Both of them had recently received their licenses and dedicated their summer to using any excuse possible to pal around together. They didn't have any particular destination; their only goals were to listen to the radio and try to see where every dirt road would lead. Maybe they could manage to get themselves lost and add a bit of excitement to their otherwise uneventful summer.

"Which way?" Sarah asked Jean as they came to a four-way stop.

If the windows had been down, they would have heard little more than locusts chirping away and the branches of the trees swaying ever so gently with the breeze. They were far from any main roads. Exactly where they wanted to be.

Jean looked left, right, and straight ahead, examining the trees and road for as far as she could see from her passenger seat.

After a few moments, she murmured, "Hmm. My gut tells me we should go left."

Sarah began to turn the wheel, "I think left is farther away from town anyway. Perfect choice."

After a few minutes, the trees that had been providing a canopy over the gravel road began to thin and give way to a cornfield on both sides of the road. Sarah and Jean admired how high the corn had come despite the lack of rain. It looked to be taller than they were, although it is difficult to judge elevation from the seat of a sedan.

The height of the corn made the tractor path off the left side of the road difficult to see. In fact, they may have driven right by it if it weren't for the girl with the low dark pigtails who was wandering in circles at the opening of the path, nearest the road. She was in a white gown that looked tattered and dirty. Was that blood? Jean saw her first. Sarah was going too fast to slam on the brakes, but she began to slow down due to Jean's audible gasp. Sarah looked in the direction Jean was staring, and it was then that the girl locked eyes with them. It was only a moment but felt like an eternity. Suddenly, the girl faded away like snow on a television set.

By the time the car came to a stop, Sarah was frozen, unable to process what they had just witnessed. Jean, when she came out of her stupor, voted to turn the car around.

"What if she needs help?" Jean pleaded, albeit weakly.

Sarah snapped back to the present. "What if WHAT needs help? What was that?"

"Just...turn the car around. This could be the excitement we are looking for! I mean, how cool to say that we saw something weird out here on the backroads. Maybe it was a ghost!"

Sarah begrudgingly put the car in reverse, backing up past where the girl faded away, before driving forward down the worn path. Surrounded again by the high corn, it wasn't long before they saw a woman run out onto the path from some clearing in the distance. She was waving her arms frantically. Sarah proceeded with a bit more haste, the car jostling due to the uneven ground.

The woman darted back out of their view. As they got closer, Sarah and Jean saw that this opening was, in fact, a small cemetery at the edge of the woods, at the end of the corn field. Judging by the worn and dilapidated condition of the headstones, the cemetery had not seen new burials in close to 200 years. Despite their age, all were still intact, save one which was broken into multiple pieces on the ground. From the edge of the woods, the woman they saw a few moments earlier came running over to Sarah and Jean, sobbing and screaming. With her, a little girl who looked smaller than the one they saw by the road, standing motionless, giving no mind to the arrival of the teenagers, as she stared off into the woods.

"My daughter! Please! Do you have a phone? My daughter has gone into the woods. *THOSE* woods! She won't come out! Please! Call the police!" The woman yelled, her voice cracking, as she ran toward Sarah and Jean.

Jean, having just slid her cell phone into her back pocket upon exiting the car, fumbled it to the ground, unnerved by the recent turn of events.

"What does your daughter look like?" Sarah asked, just as the woman dove to the ground after Jean's phone.

"She is still in her nightgown. She has been sleepwalking lately and disappeared early this morning. Our front door was open. My youngest said she saw her sister walk out of their bedroom but thought she was trying to scare her. She said she mumbled something about the dogs needing fed and Great Grandpa needed help. We got here about half an hour ago, and I have been screaming for her to come out of there. It is dangerous!" The woman began to hyperventilate.

"Ma'am. Well, I think we saw her. She was back on the road. Dark hair? Pigtails? We actually started heading this way to try to talk to her. She was at the road but looked lost. By the time we turned around, she must have wandered back this way," Sarah tried to say in a calming tone.

Jean looked uneasy. They both saw something weird. She didn't just 'wander away'.

A wave of relief swept over the woman's face. "Yes! That's my baby! Oh! Goodness me! Sweetie...she's not in the woods! She's down by the road! Let's go get her!"

She turned to motion toward the smaller girl at the edge of the cemetery. The little girl did not break her concentration into the darkness of the trees.

The little sister's voice cracked as she said, "No, Mama. They are already here. Sissy is hurt. They are angry with us. I'm so sorry, Mama. We didn't mean to break Great Grandpa's headstone. We just tried to move it and then it broke...then we were just trying to laugh it off."

Before she could finish her sentence, a blood curdling scream let out from inside the tree line. Growling and snarling soon followed and then a howl let out from deeper in the woods. The screaming went on for only a few moments, with more howls popping up from different depths of the woods. The mother fell to the ground, screaming for her daughter. The smaller girl winced, shuddering her shoulders as each scream of her sister reached a new intensity.

Then silence. The younger sister turned toward her mother just as Sarah and Jean noticed red eyes emerging from the darkness. "I'm so sorry. We were just playing a game. We didn't mean to upset him."

Before she could say much more, two massive black dogs pounced upon her, one on each arm, dragging her back into the woods. Her screams did not last long. When the silence fell again, a man was standing near the broken headstone. His outfit was from a different time. He looked angry. He stood there until the mother, now completely numb, looked up from her tear-soaked hands.

Seeing him, she understood. She approached him but stopped just short of him, kneeling down by the shattered headstone. Sobbing, she began to arrange the pieces. Jean and Sarah watched, in shock themselves. When the mother was finished with the assembly, she looked up at the old man and promised to atone for her daughters' disrespect. In her complete misery, she asked for him to take her as well and be done with it. He nodded in approval and faded away.

The mother turned to Sarah and Jean. "Go, now...before even I am not enough. You don't need to meet this fate as well. I am sorry we dragged you into this."

Sarah and Jean ran to the car. As they closed their doors and Sarah put the key in the ignition, the howls began again...

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

Heather Moser resides in the foothills of Appalachia where she collects tales and scours historical records. She is a classics professor and author. She is a producer and researcher the film production company Small Town Monsters, and she is the editor for Small Town Monsters Publishing. You can find some of her other work in volumes 1,3, and 5 of the Feminine Macabre.

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## The Colony | Francesco Levato

The shape is blurry. It always is, even with the high definition of digital cameras its edges shudder with an insect-like malice. I have hours of it on video, this buzzing shadow contrasted against the carnival colors of the fumigation tents. It's the same at every sighting I document; the shape lurks just outside the tented house, hugging its perimeter—too close to the poison billowing inside for me to approach and get a decent shot. It seems to know this; to understand what the poison would do to me if I moved closer.

It also seems to understand the purpose of the gas mask I brought this time, and that I'd finally risk getting close to it. Close enough to see why it was always out of focus, to see that its form undulated with countless segmented bodies. Close enough for it to grab hold of me, drag me inside the tent—and pull the mask from my face.

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

Francesco Levato is a poet, professor, and writer of speculative fiction. Recent books include SCARLET; Arsenal/Sin Documentos; Endless, Beautiful, Exact; and Elegy for Dead Languages. Recent speculative fiction appears in Savage Planets, Sci-Fi Shorts, and Shacklebound Books. He holds an MFA in Poetry, a PhD in English Studies, and is an Associate Professor of Literature & Writing Studies at California State University San Marcos.

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#### Down Deep, in Summer's Keep | Aaron E Lee

Noonan and Samir had been friends for almost two years. They worked together in Hospice for six months, but Noonan had quit. They had already become fast friends so when the job fell apart for Noonan, neither of them were ready to say goodbye and they had kept in touch. Today was the first day of Summer and they were together again on one of their hiking trips — which were some of their best days together in Samir's eyes, but not so much according to Noonan.

Noonan watched Samir closely, how something as simple as a scenery change could light up his face. They had never been together as anything but friends. Shortly after meeting, Samir had found his own life partner, but it was easy for Noonan to imagine what things might have been like had they met just a few months earlier.

When anyone questioned the idea of magic, or miracles with Noonan, he would calmly reflect on days such as these when something as simple as the miracle of nature could have a deep and profound impact on people. Noonan himself didn't hate the outdoors, he had spent most of his childhood under the clouds and stars. There was something a bit unsettling leaving the modern world behind, though. As an adult he had grown a bit of a dependency on the luxuries of technology. When he and Samir had become friends he had to be re-acquainted with the outdoor world, as Samir was very much an outdoorsy kind of guy.

So here they were, in the humid morning air. The shade of the trees didn't seem to help; they only held the thick air beneath their branches. The duo bounced along a trail with a dozen or so other guests, riding in a trailer pulled by a small convertible Jeep.

Samir had seen this guided tour advertised on billboards all along the highway and for years it had been one of his destination dreams, but they had been busy zip-lining, indoor skydiving, and river-rafting for the past several years. A cave didn't sound as much fun to Noonan and he had managed to steer Samir to those other activities, but this year the man had his heart set on it. A few weeks ago Samir was going on and on about a cave he had seen as a child.

So this was the year that Samir finally got his wish, and Noonan knew he would be willing to cringe and bear with it. Because it was worth it to see his friend happy.

This cave tour was only one of a few around the world where you didn't have to walk yourself, but rode in the back of this trailer as they drove you through the cave system. How can you get lost if you're all riding together? Samir had asked Noonan rhetorically. It wasn't really the possibility of getting lost that Noonan feared, it was a much more basic fear of the dark and enclosed spaces. Noonan had seen a documentary about a hiker who found himself stuck in a cave. That poor fellow wasn't lost, everyone knew where he was, he was just stuck – and he died alone in the dark because neither his hiker buddy nor the cave experts who were called in could get him out. It gave him the shivers.

The tour guide talked about some of the cramped spaces in the cave. There weren't many, he assured, but they would be driving through some smaller areas where everyone would have to duck their heads because the ceiling came down low.

At the entrance of the cave Noonan found himself feeling rather brave, having shoved all thoughts of cave-ins and small spaces to the back of his mind. The ceiling was a bit low, but they didn't have to duck to drive through the entrance. The light dimmed immediately but it was not pitch black. There were lights in here, and plenty of them. It almost reminded him more of riding through a haunted house, artificially made to look spooky, which in turn had the complete opposite effect on him. The ground was cement, there was another jeep with another trailer up ahead, this was clearly a very well-traveled path, and his mind was set at ease for a bit.

Samir laughed, and was in awe of everything around them. To Noonan, it was just a cave, but to Samir, this was clearly a place of magic. Noonan was suddenly very happy he had come along.

They were underground a long time, almost 30 minutes now, but the tour kept stopping and starting again, so they couldn't be that far underground. Every new rock formation was something they had to stop and see. The large stalac-TITES (the guide made it very clear that the stalactites hung from the ceiling and the stalagmites grew up from the ground) made him nervous as they drove underneath, but he reassured himself this was a very well-traveled path and the guide guaranteed that not a single stalactite had ever broken off and fallen on someone.

They reached the deepest part of the cave, the deepest region that the tour covered, and Noonan was even more refreshed. The rest of the trip would be a return to the surface. But that's when he saw something in the shadows. He said nothing at first, sure it was his imagination. Then he saw it more clearly – it looked like a person hiding just beyond the turnaround point. Deeper, in part of the cave where the tour wouldn't ever go. Maybe it was one of the guides, so Noonan continued to say nothing.

Someone else spotted the figure and pointed them out. The figure suddenly disappeared and there was a distinct splashing sound. Water, there was a pool or a river in that part of the cave.

The tour guide followed the pointing finger of the other guest, using his high-powered flashlight to inspect the deeper area, but Noonan could see even he didn't want to go very far into the deeper part of the cave. Once lit, Noonan was sure

there was a pool over there, which had several ripples across its surface. So there had been someone...or something over

And that's when the tour guide told them the story of the Sala-Man. One of the few creatures that inhabited these deep caves were salamanders, but plenty of tour guests and even guides had claimed to see the Sala-Man, a creature that walked upright like a man, but who had white skin and large eyes like a salamander, probably having developed after living down here so long. Noonan was not going to be frightened by the guide's stories, and like the lighting in this place, it only made the trip feel a little more artificial.

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In the depths of the cave, through a passage rarely explored – underwater – the Sala-Man rose. He had seen the machines, all the surface dwellers, and their lights that they relied on. He had seen them. He was not blind, like the stories all told. He was not a creature, either. He was a man, or had been, once...his memories of life on the surface had dimmed. Years underground had changed him in many ways...maybe he should be called a creature, and he fully embraced the name: Sala-Man. The salamanders here were his new family. Life on the surface had been hard and unfair.

He remembered his earliest days living in the dark. Back then there were no tours. Cave explorers came from all around and he had been one of them. A rookie, but an enthusiastic one. He had not become lost, not really. He fell. He was asleep for some time, but he had no idea how long. When he awoke he knew where he was, and he knew who he was...but he had fallen to a lower level of the cave. He had seen it while walking on the trails above, but he hadn't known how to get down here, or where this trail led. After walking around for an hour it didn't seem like it led anywhere, and the only way down was the way he had come – by falling. He was upset, but not hopeless. Surely it wouldn't be long before another explorer passed on the path above.

But no one came. How long had he been out? It was impossible to tell. His watch was the only thing that broke in the fall. The only piece of technology he had brought. His only light had been an oil lamp, common for cave explorers in his day. And the light had long gone out while he had been waiting for someone to show up.

He went through bouts of worry and distress, but calmed himself by doing what he loved – exploring the cave some more. On his first walk along this path it seemed there was nowhere to go, but now that he had some REAL TIME he could take a closer look.

There was a pool in one room, and after talking himself into a blind swim he discovered the exit (or entrance, depending on your point of view) to this room lay through the underwater tunnels. Without light it was impossible to know which tunnel to take, or how far they went. So with each breath he traveled a little farther, and eventually he learned that the tunnels both opened up to other chambers. One tunnel was only about five feet, and he could easily reach the next chamber over without much danger. The other one was quite a bit farther, it must have been twenty feet or more, it took almost all of his breath to get through that second tunnel.

Both of these chambers had paths leading from them, and at first he was happy to explore, believing he might find the exit. Time passed. A lot of time. He became a survivalist. He ate the few plants that grew out of the walls – they were root systems from trees that had broken through the cave walls. He also fed on the salamanders he found. And after time, he stopped trying to get out, and only wanted to explore more.

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"He sheds his skin once a year, and breathes underwater!" The tour guide shouted excitedly. Noonan was to the point of rolling his eyes. Not even real salamanders breathed underwater. The natural beauty of this place had lost something with all the theatrics. Even Samir's smile seemed to have faded as they were approaching the end of the tour. The low hanging ceilings were all on their way out, but they drove straight through without any problems. The warm summer sun made this place feel mucky, but the light looked more real as they exited the artificially lit cavern. Noonan was feeling good, and ready for lunch, but Samir had clearly felt worse exiting the cave than he had entering it.

"Hey, we finally got to experience the caves, isn't that what you've been wanting all this time?"

"Yeah, but, why did we leave that guy down there?"

"What?"

"The Sala-Man."

"We didn't leave him...it was just a story."

"No, it wasn't! I saw him, didn't you? I thought everyone did."

"I saw..." What had he seen? The stories the guide told were all so far-fetched, Noonan had almost forgot that he had seen something... "It must have just been part of the tour, Samir...har har, am I right?"

"I dunno," he answered. "I thought I saw something real."

"Chock it up to the magic of the caves," Noonan repeated part of the guide's goofy speech. Though he regretted it as soon as he said it. Samir's smile returned, though never as he had seen it before. Cynicism. Noonan had stolen the mystery, the magic, and he hoped that whatever was in that dark place stayed there.

## Rain Delay | JB Corso

Katrina's mother pulled the new bride into a side hallway away from her wedding reception.

"Hon, it's going to rain tonight into tomorrow." The elderly woman's face frowned at the burden of bad news.

"Yeah, so what, Mom?" she asked, her focus bending back to the music's quick beat.

"I need you to pay attention, Katrina." She furrowed her brows. "I know you and Frank are excited about getting upstairs, but you two can't make love tonight. It's just not safe."

The young bride grimaced. "I think we've been doing this long enough. Frank got snipped and both of us were tested years ago. We'll be fine."

Maria grabbed her daughter's arm. "No, you won't. If you make love on your wedding night, during a rainstorm, the room will fill with demon droplets." Her eyes grew wide with a mother's care. "And I don't know exactly what's going to happen, but I'm worried about you or Frank being in grave danger."

"Mom, I don't have time for more of your nonsense. When I was young, I couldn't sleep over with my friends because you were so concerned about kidnapping trolls. I had to stay in during dusk because you were afraid crimson vultures would snatch me up. Now, it's demon droplets. You had your fun." She took her mother's hands in hers. "Tonight, I want to ce*lebrate* with my husband. That's how honeymoons work. We're going to have sex. Lots of it. Rain, no rain, a monsoon of rain. I don't care about what's happening outside as long as I can be with Frank."

"Katrina, please, please, put your loins away for one night. You have the rest of your lives to be intimate." Her voice held the sternness of a mother's love.

"I need to enjoy my party right now and Frank later tonight." She leaned in, kissing her mother's cheek. "Have another drink. Relax. I love your craziness, but not on my big day." Katrina pivoted back to the music as the DJ called for all the bridesmaids to dance.

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The new bride performed a drunken striptease in front of her husband. She gave him a sultry smile as her lingerie slipped onto the floor. The raging storm threw sheets of icy rain against the honeymoon suite's window panes. The couple giggled to each other as she fumbled with her strapless bra's hooks. She flung the elastic band, hitting the parted curtain. They embraced on the king-sized bed, enjoying each other's warm presence.

Water droplets bore through the tight window seal, running across the inner dry glass towards the pane's center. The drops converged into a bulbous watery mass. It slid up the wall into the ceiling corner. A pungent rain scent hung around it. The lovers' moans mixed together, forming an acoustic orchestra as their foreplay became more passionate.

Katrina laid on her back with a deep longing in her eyes. Frank slowly scooted up between her bent knees, keeping himself just outside her pleasure. She smiled at him, ready to share their bliss. He held her lustful gaze, teasing her with gentle touching.

The water creature slid along the ceiling as Frank fulfilled Katrina's lust. They moaned with deep satisfaction. The aqua form slithered above their unified dance. The overpowering scent of rain saturated the lovers below. Katrina's eyes opened to the unexpected aroma. Her heart pounded at the overhanging curiosity.

"Frank," she tapped his back, staring at the shallow waves over their bed. It rippled through several colors like a liquid chameleon, settling on a moldy orange hue.

"Yeah, baby, it feels so good for me, too." He held his new bride tight.

"Frank, I need you to," she slapped him harder. A bulbous head descended over them. She froze in terror. Her eyes grew wide as it developed features that resembled a bald woman. It slunk down, stopping over Frank's tussled hair. She stared at its pouting lips and curved cheeks. Katrina stopped moving her hips. Raging panic flooded her heart. Her calves slipped off his hips as she scrambled to get away. "Oh, god, no."

"I'm almost there," he moaned, drunk with lust. "Oh, god, oh, yes."

"Oh yes," it said, sounding like an older woman speaking through an underwater bullhorn.

Frank's body stiffened. The watery profile collapsed atop them, splashing her in the face. Charles' back dissolved into a gooey, pink paste, dripping around Katrina like a fleshy waterfall. His chest writhed against hers. The back of his head boiled and popped. Singed hair and bloody skin slipped off against her cheeks. Water seeped across below her chin, pooling in the notch at the base of her neck. Her screams raged until her voice box melted into a mass of red pulp, draining down her throat. Frank's full weight pinned her to the mattress. Katrina fought to get free from her groom's corpse. Her one good eye stared at the ceiling as her breathing went still.

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Her mother knocked on their door the next morning. She hoped to avoid hearing any passionate noises from inside.

"Katrina. Fred. Why aren't you answering your phones? You're late for the family brun-" Maria noticed a watery trail leading from under the door's gap down the hall. She wrung her hands as she tracked its progress to a nearby staircase. The residue descended along the stairs in a perfect line, ending at the main floor's drain hole. Maria collapsed to her knees on the cement. Her tears struck the metal grate, trailing down into the darkness.

# Ugly Georgina | JB Corso

The thick scent of rosemary pulled around Georgina's wrinkled face. *Luci's here*. She closed her eyes at the expected arrival. She opened them to meet the aged reality of her naked chest and stomach in her bedroom mirror. *C'mon Georgi, you can do this. You've already done this six times, and there aren't too many more to go.* 

She panned over her obvious flaws. Sagging skin, facial wrinkles, drooping breasts, moles, and the rest of aging's curse.

"You're also a terrible mother and a poor lover." A familiar woman's voice called out from down the hall. Georgina's blood ran cold as she stared at herself.

"Georgi, despite your body getting older, you've come a long way, baby. Your body still works. You've most of your beautiful hair. Bob loves all your faults."

A pale, oval face peered around her bedroom's doorway, a foot off the carpet. Her orange eyes glowed with demonic malice. A demure hand touched its impossibly smooth cheek, taunting her. "You never were good at lying to yourself."

Georgina held a tight focus on her reflection, mentally reaching back through the decades of memories. She paged back to her nine-year-old self sitting on her mother's lap. When you opened up your grandmother's trunk, you freed that monster. Unfortunately, without your aunt around, we can't ever lock it back in there. Georgi, from now on, when you smell the scent of rosemary on your decade birthdays, you must get to a mirror. Say those special words and it'll go away. She recalled her mother's pained expression. Otherwise, you'll end up like Aunt Ruby. Her panicking mind scrambled to decipher the phrase. Remembering on her sixtieth birthday had been a struggle enough. She cursed her aging mind's porous holes.

"Georgina, look at me. I'm the only one who'll be honest about your old-lady skin and saggy ass. Look at me." Long, dark hair framed its porcelain-like face. The figure rounded into the bedroom.

She stared at herself, forcing a smile over her dentures. "I'm beautiful the way I am. My body is—"

"You're not beautiful. Just look," it teased.

"My body is..." The two words eluded her.

"You won't remember it. You barely remembered the last time. I was so close to finally touching your skin." It ventured to the vanity table's far legs.

"My body is a..." Georgina cursed herself for forgetting.

"You're too ugly to matter. All the cremes in the world can't hide that." Its teeny body reshaped itself into a replica of her at twenty-five. "See? Youthful then," she pointed at Georgina, "ugly now."

"My body is a..." She flipped through her mental dictionary. I'm sure it starts with a 't'.

"Just stop." Its fingers reached out for her ankle.

"Temple. My body is a temple."

The creature shrieked. It flashed out of sight. The rosemary scent dissipated, leaving her basked in the effluvia of oils and cremes occupying her desk.

Georgina drew in a deep breath, wondering how she'd manage at eighty.

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

JB Corso is a mental health clinician who works with vulnerable populations. They enjoy spending time with their children, writing, and sifting through existential questions. Their writing motto is "Developing stories into masterpieces." They are a Horror Writer's Association member and a NaNoWriMo winner (2021, 2022). They're an international author with works published with Sirens Call Publications, Black Hare Press, and The Stygian Lepus.

## Nekomata | Evan Baughfman

The cat had raced right under Mari's tires! Now kneeling roadside, she cradled its twisted body.

She suddenly yanked dark tufts of fur from the carcass, shoving bloody fistfuls between her lips.

Hair clung to the insides of Mari's cheeks, her oesophagus. A mesmerizing voice kept her swallowing, feeding, swallowing, feeding.

Minutes into her strange binge, Mari's chest tightened. She couldn't breathe, her airway clogged.

Gagging, collapsing, Mari disgorged a full-grown feline, one forged anew from stolen ribs and breastbone, from pilfered organs.

In the cat's mouth: Mari's tongue.

The yōkai thanked her corpse for a chance at another life.

#### Security System Down | Evan Baughfman

BOOM!

The next shotgun blast ripped the monster's bulbous head from its shoulders.

The giant scarecrow had stood thirteen feet tall. Had chased me through a maze of corn after my car stalled on an adjacent road. Now, the beast was a lifeless mountain of cloth and straw.

The farmhouse owners were gone. I'd found their gun and used it against their otherworldly security system.

But that's when the hungry things flew in from the hills. Reptilian creatures with six-foot wingspans and knife-like claws.

The scarecrow had tried to warn me.

I only have two shots left.

I should've listened.

## **Skipping Stones** | *Evan Baughfman*

Mom was trying to read a book while Dad watched the game, so they told the boys to go skip stones down by the lake.

"Don't throw big rocks into the water," Dad advised. "Fish don't like that."

Lakeside, the boys quickly grew bored of skipping stones. They grabbed larger rocks, splashing them thunderously from the shoreline.

Fish weren't the only lake-dwellers bothered by that.

Soon, the boys were screaming.

Mom and Dad ran onto the porch in a panic.

Two round objects soared at them from the treeline.

The boys' heads skipped wetly across the porch like slick stones.

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

Evan Baughfman is a published playwright and author. Evan has found a lot of success writing horror fiction, his work found recently in anthologies by No Bad Books Press and Grinning Skull Press. D&T Publishing released his novel, *Bad for Your Teeth*, in April 2023. Evan's other book with D&T is novella, *Vanishing of the 7<sup>th</sup> Grade*.

Amazon Author Page: Evan Baughfman Instagram: @agent00evan 716





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# **Gutter-Snipe** | *Jack Kaide*

We mustn't call his name Whilst we're walking past the lanes Gutter-Snipe, Gutter-Snipe We will not play your games

Last we heard, he lived in the drains, down in the dark among the slime and the filth. Sometimes you could see his eyes glinting like two silver sixpences hidden in the murk. When it rained, you could hear him gurgling.

Others say he hides in the coal sheds, sooty and dark, with teeth sharp as flints. He likes the cold, the damp, the hidden places. He's always hungry, always waiting for his next meal.

A hand.

A foot.

A finger.

Our mothers told us not to be so simple-minded. There's nothing under the bed, nobody hiding in the attic or the spaces between the floorboards. The scratching in the walls is just mice. The creak of footsteps on the stairs at night is just the house settling. Nothing to be afraid of. Now go outside and play. *You're all too old to be dreaming of monsters*.

It's in the big, wild outdoors where he's strongest. Plenty of places to hide and lots of dark corners to lurk in. He likes the in-between spaces best; burnt-out cars and houses where nobody lives. Old empty factories and shops that have been closed and boarded up are his favourites.

He's got brown fur all over his body like a rat, but the skin underneath is scaly and rough like a lizard. His teeth are made of coffin nails and bits of broken bottles, and he wears a necklace of babies' toes. Gutter-Snipe stands upright like a man when he speaks, but when he's got your scent, he comes at you on all fours like a dog. His voice sounds broken, all wheezy and full of stops and starts. He smells of vinegar and rotten apples.

You're supposed to hold your breath and count to twenty if you hear him coming. You must also think of something only you would know. Your favourite colour. The number of stuffed toys you have in your bedroom. You think, and think, until his voice begins to get quieter and quieter. Shut your eyes, wait for the stink of him to go away. Then you're most probably safe. At least that's what our older brothers and sisters tell us to do if we hear him calling, asking us to play his games. Sometimes it works; sometimes, it doesn't.

The alleyways behind our houses are narrow and dark. If you didn't know the way, you could get lost just leaving by the back door of your home. My mum said when she was a girl, all the ladies would hang their washing out to dry around there, big white bedsheets like sailcloths from one end of the back alley to the other. If the wind blew the wrong way, all the soot from the factory chimneys would stain the linens with black, inky spots and ruin everybody's laundry. Not anymore. No one likes the back alleys around our way now.

She said there was an old man back then who lived on the bad end of the street. Never went to church on Sunday, never said hello to anyone and would bark at you like a dog if you got too close to him. He worked as a rat catcher at the grain warehouses and had a big black bag full of poisons that he carried around wherever he went. Everyone was scared of him, said he was a cannibal or a witch doctor or an axe murderer who'd creep into your bedroom at night and kill you if he ever got the chance. Only one day, he went into his house and never came out again. The landlord broke down the doors, but all the rooms were empty, nothing in them but dust and sunlight and a few small bones that looked like they belonged to an animal. They said the place smelled like vinegar and rotten apples. Nobody moved into the house after that. People said you could still hear him whispering in the walls.

We made up the song as a warning so the next lot of kids who grow up on our streets know to be afraid. Gutter-Snipe could be here forever, or maybe only so long as we keep believing in him. Tom, my brother's second-best friend, gave him the name. *Gutter-Snipe*. Said he read it in a book.

Tom went missing last summer. It got in all the papers. His mum and dad even went on the evening news to ask if anyone had seen or knew anyone who might have taken him. We all knew *who* it was, but nobody would have believed us. Gutter-Snipe isn't a person; he's a *thing*.

If you hear him, do not follow his voice. Because if he catches your scent, smells the fear creeping up you, there's nothing you can do to stop him. He likes to make up games with rules only he knows. There's run-and-l'll-catch-you and l'll-eat-your-eyes-last; those are his favourites. He'll take you down into his house under the earth, where it's

too dark to see and a river of screaming bones runs forever in the gloom. He'll keep you alive just long enough for you to think that maybe someone will find you.

Gutter-Snipe has long, twitching fingers that can open any lock and slip through any door or window. He can make it so only *you* can see him, and adults can't. Sometimes he can make his voice sound like your mum and dad, calling you by the secret nicknames only they would know. He can make himself look like them, too, but only when the moon is full. If you smell vinegar and rotten apples, *run*.

If you hear him, shut your eyes. Count to twenty. And pray that he doesn't find you.

We know when you've been hunting You tell us with such glee Oh, Gutter-Snipe, Gutter-Snipe We beg you, leave us be

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

Jack Kaide is a writer, musician and teacher living in Hackney, London. His short stories have recently been featured in *Horrified Magazine*, *Skullgate Media's* 'Tales from the Year Between', 'the no sleep podcast' and 'Tales from Fiddler's Green vol. II'.

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# Debbie Does Deuce | Diane Arrelle

Hanna studied her opponent.

Chubby, acne-scarred Debbie Shuller tossed the tennis ball low and came down hard with her racket. Smack...into the net. Debbie shrugged and smiled that sickly-sweet smile that always made Hanna want to puke. She carefully set up her second serve and sailed a soft easy ball over to Hanna's side.

Hanna watched the approaching shot and crowed as she ran forward to slam it back. Only... the ball must have had a spin to it. Instead of bouncing back and into Hanna's waiting, big head, extra-long racket, it bounced sideways out of her reach.

Debbie smiled even more sweetly and yelled, "Deuce."

Hanna gritted her teeth. How could it possibly be tied, she thought. Five minutes ago she'd been leading forty-love, whacking those first three balls back at that cow before she could blink. Now they were at deuce, forty-forty. "Well, I'll win this one, Debbie," she muttered. "I always win."

She waited as Debbie crossed the back of the tennis court. Debbie seemed to be moving in slow motion as she got into position, stretched up, tossed the ball high and then hit it out of bounds.

"Long!" Hanna shouted, waiting impatiently for the second serve. "Come on already," she muttered as Debbie seemed to slow down even more before she hit the second serve low and into the net.

Debbie still smiled, unruffled. She appeared cool and collected as she yelled, "Your add, guess I'm a little rusty. Oh well, plenty of time to warm up."

Hanna wiped the perspiration from her face. *God*, she thought, *it's hotter than hell out here and Debbie hasn't even broken a sweat yet*. She snarled at her old adversary and squinted at the halo the sun made around her mousy, limp hair. "No time for you, honey, I'm gonna put this one away and win."

Debbie stopped preparing to serve. "Did you say something?"

"Yeah, I said serve already."

"All right," Debbie sighed. "You always were impatient."

"Well you know how it is, I've got to get home to Timothy," Hanna shouted back. "He hates when I'm away too long." She felt immense satisfaction as she watched Debbie quickly blink her eyes. "Oh, I'm sorry," she called. "I forgot that Timothy was your husband first."

Debbie served the ball, crossing the net at a sharp angle just grazing the line. Hanna ground her teeth harder, wanting to call the shot out, but knew she didn't need to cheat to win. "It's good!" she announced.

Debbie crossed the court again. "Back to Deuce."

After the sixth return to deuce, Hanna knew the pattern. Debbie would blow the first two serves letting Hanna have the point, then she'd win the next shot taking the game back to deuce.

Frustrated, Hanna wondered why Debbie had called her and asked for this match. They hadn't spoken since she'd taken Timothy away. Had it only been this past morning when the phone rang as she was driving?

She remembered it vividly because she was almost involved in a head-on with a truck. She didn't know how it had missed her, but she was still shaking when the phone beeped. She'd been so surprised to hear Debbie's voice that she didn't react as she normally would have, with enough sarcasm to put the cow in her place forever. In fact, she had been mildly surprised because she sort of thought that Debbie had died or something. Obviously, she'd been wrong, but after all, who had time to keep track of all the losers in the world.

She figured Debbie challenged her because if she could beat her at one thing, like tennis, then Deb could feel a little satisfaction. Hanna had to smirk. After all, she'd always beaten Debbie at everything, ever since grade school. She never understood how Debbie had gotten the guy. It wasn't fair and it took Hanna five years but she'd finally won at the marriage game too, stealing Timothy away.

"Add out... Deuce."

Hanna'd lost count of how many times they'd tied. Debbie had to be doing this on purpose, but how'd she get so good? She'd always stunk at sports and Hanna had trophies to line a room. *How,* she wondered wiping the sweat off her face, *could Debbie be doing this?* 

"Deuce!" Debbie yelled. "Again."

"Just serve!" Hanna snarled as she struggled to catch her breath in the stifling heat.

"Getting testy, aren't we?" Debbie cooed. "Don't you just love tennis? Why I could play forever."

"Yeah, yeah," Hanna yelled back. "You may want to play forever, but I've got a life. Let's stop screwing around and end this."

Debbie laughed and lowered her racket. "Why, how appropriate, you've insinuated that I don't have a life and you're right. I was so depressed after Tim left that I moved to Colorado and splat, got hit by a truck last month. Lord, I was nothing but roadkill. But what does that matter anyway, you were too busy living your own life to notice a dead Deb. Bet you didn't even notice Tim's been upset the last few weeks."

Hanna put down her racket. "What are you talking about?"

Debbie continued smiling. "Why, Heaven. You see, we play tennis in Heaven. That's how I've improved, eternal practice."

Hanna laughed. "You are nuts! If you are so damned good, how come we can't get out of deuce?"

Debbie joined Hanna's laughter. "Because I'm not the damned one," Debbie said through her laugher. "You are."

Hanna watched as a breeze that didn't reach her side ruffled Debbie's hair. Debbie stopped laughing and smiled at her opponent. She took a sip from her water bottle, that hadn't been there a moment ago, and added, "You see, tennis is my heaven, but deuce, why Hanna, deuce for some of us can be an infinite hell!"

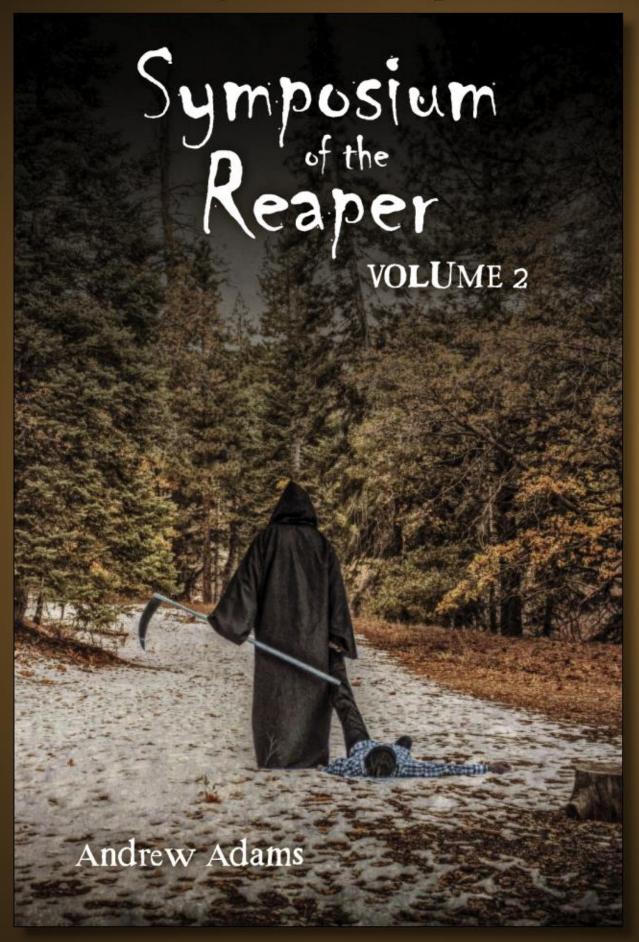
#### **About the Author:**

Diane Arrelle has more than 350 short stories published and two short story collections: Just A Drop In The Cup and Seasons On The Dark Side. A retired municipal senior citizen center director, she's co-owner of Jersey Pines Ink Publishing. She resides with her sane husband and her insane cat on the edge of the New jersey Pine Barrens (home of the Jersey Devil).

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## The Midlothian Luddlecuttie | K.A. Johnson

"Pumpkin!" Keri called out.

```
Keri walked down the concrete sidewalk.
        "Pumpkin!" Keri called out again.
        "What's a Pumpkin?" came a voice behind her.
        Keri jumped and turned around. A scrawny boy about her age was standing behind her.
        "Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you."
        "Who are you?"
        "Christopher. I live a block over. You just moved into Scotter Hills at the Grove, right?"
        "Ya, I and my parents, Frank and Mary, moved in there, and Pumpkin is my cat; she doesn't usually disappear
like this."
        "The Luddlecuttie probably took Pumpkin."
        "The Luddlecuttie?"
        "You've never heard of the Luddlecuttie?"
        "No."
        "Sneak out tonight; I'll meet you at 11 at the end of Scotter Hills."
        "So, you can learn about the Luddlecuttie."
        "At 11?"
        "Yes."
        "You can't just tell me now."
        "No."
        "Why's that?"
        "You'll see."
        "Okay, weirdo."
        "See you at 11."
        Keri found Christopher waiting at the end of the street.
        "Okay, let's see why this had to be done so late," Keri said.
        "Not here," Christopher said. "We need to go to the old Grove Shaft."
        "The old Grove Shaft?"
        "I forgot, you just moved into the neighborhood. The old Mid-Lothian Mines site is just behind these
townhouses. There's a whole park dedicated to it. You must have seen the old headstock structure when passing on
Woolridge. You can't miss it."
        "I don't even know what that is."
        "It's just down the road... oh ya, it has been removed for repairs. Never mind. This sidewalk takes us to the park.
Come this way," Christopher said and turned on a flashlight.
        Keri had never even noticed that there was a sidewalk that went past the back of the townhouses. Keri followed
Christopher and watched as the white-manicured flowers gave way to trees. Then, up ahead, she noticed a dark, creepy
concrete tunnel to the left. Christopher stopped at the mouth of the tunnel.
        A clomping noise echoed from deep within the tunnel, slowly getting louder as it neared. Keri felt her heart
racing. Then, just as she was going to run, a boy burst out of the darkness in the tunnel, and he and Christopher burst
out laughing.
        "Not at all funny!" Keri yelled at the two boys.
        "You should have seen your face," Randy replied.
        "Totally worth it," Christopher added.
        "What is this?" Keri asked. "Haze the new girl?"
        "No, we really are going to the Grove Shaft; Randy just thought it would be fun to scare you," Christopher said.
        "And," Randy replied, "it was."
        Christopher handed Keri a flashlight.
        "You'll want this," Christopher said.
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Keri pushed the tab on the top of the rectangular flashlight, causing a beam of light to emit. She saw the tunnel in better detail. There was graffiti along the concrete sides—one of a grayish imp-like figure that had been poorly sprayed over kept catching her eye.

"I'm not going in there," Keri said.

"Good thing we are headed into the woods to the right, then," Christopher replied.

Keri shined the flashlight to the right and noticed that a paved path continued in that direction.

"Oh, I didn't even notice that," Keri said.

"Good thing you have us as tour guides," Randy said.

Keri followed Christopher and Randy deeper into the trees. Finally, they came to a long, raised wooden footpath that kept them above the wet ground. The boardwalk led further into the trees until they came to the end where there was a large dirt path, big enough for a car to drive down, that went to the left and the right.

Christopher and Randy veered to the right. Keri was starting to breathe hard. She wasn't used to this much walking, especially at the speed the two boys were going.

"Slow down," Keri called out.

"Sorry," Christopher called back.

Their pace didn't seem to slow to Keri at all though. To her left, she saw house lights in the not-too-far distance. The path continued until they reached a large clearing. The remains of a brick structure was to their right. A wrought-iron fence with a curvature at the top that went out toward them.

Christopher and Randy stopped.

"Is that Grove Shaft?" Keri asked.

"No, that's the remains of the old fan building," Randy said. "The shaft is to the right, but you can't see it from here."

"So, you dragged me out here in the middle of the night to see an old building behind a fence?" Keri asked.

"No," Randy said.

"We took you out here to tell you a creepy story inside an old building behind a fence," Christopher said.

"It's called atmosphere," Randy finished.

Keri shone her light up and down the tall unbroken fence.

"Excuse me, but I don't see any way to get in," Keri said.

"That's why you have us," Christopher said.

"Your tour guides," Randy finished.

Christopher headed to the right corner and started making his way along the fence.

"Be careful," Randy said. "This isn't exactly a path, and you could get a branch in the face if you aren't careful." "Thanks," Keri replied.

Further along, Christopher stopped.

"Wait here," Christopher said.

Keri saw him rustling in the woods next to the fence; then she saw Christopher raise a board against the fence creating a ramp. Christopher scurried up the ramp and jumped down to the ground below. Randy followed.

"Well, come on," Christopher said.

"Just don't boff the landing," Randy finished. "We'll get into a whole lotta trouble if we get caught here."

Keri made her way up the board and landed on the other side.

"How do we get out of here?" Keri asked.

"There is another board over there," Christopher said, pointing.

"Where is this Grove Shaft?" Keri asked.

"I'll show you," Christopher said, "but be careful."

Christopher brought her past the old building as Randy went into the building. Christopher stopped and shone his flashlight ahead. A wire mesh was anchored around a hole in the ground.

"Don't get too close," Christopher said, "I don't know how strong the mesh is."

Keri could see a square wooden shaft going down into what looked like water.

"Come inside."

Christopher led her to the building. Randy had started a small fire inside, and there were crude wooden benches. They each took a seat.

"Let me tell you the tale of the Luddlecuttie," Christopher said. "Midlothian was a mining town long ago, and coal came readily from the ground. However, the end of the bounty started in 1836 with the construction of the Grove

Shaft. The one next to us. The Grove Shaft became an underground labyrinth of tunnels that stretched three-quarters of a mile into the earth.

"The Grove Shaft yielded enough coal to keep the Mid-Lothian Mining Company happy and suffered only the standard issues expected for a mine shaft. That was until the fateful day in 1882. February 3<sup>---</sup> it was. Some say they dug too fast; others say they dug too deep. Many of the details of that day have been covered up with alternative stories; however, what is for sure is that one bloodied miner made it out of the shaft. While most of what he spouted was claimed to be pure gibberish, the word Luddlecuttie was said to have been stated multiple times.

"The foreman was about to ring the alarm, fearing a gas leak deep in the earth, when another miner made it out screaming about a creature attacking the miners. At first, it looked like he was dragging another miner with him, but when he fully emerged, he only held an arm, gnawed off at the shoulder. The foreman, realizing something horrible must have happened deep in the earth, sent charges down the shaft and blew them at 1 pm – trapping 32 men, four mules, and whatever the men had unearthed in the mine.

"The blast severed the signal cord. Unsure if anyone had survived the blast, the foreman ordered the mine to be filled with water to kill off any survivors. They used the ruse that there had been a methane explosion and the water was needed to put out the fires deep within the mine. The threat contained – trapped deep in the mine. As you saw, the mine is still filled with water to this day.

"However, pets, like Pumpkin, kids, and people who visit the Mid-Lothian Mines park disappear. Never to be seen again. No one knows for sure what the cause is – but people say that the Luddlecuttie escaped the mine before the blast and lives in these woods. And as housing developments have gone in, like your new home, Scotter Hills at the Grove, removing more of the forest, the number of missing people has increased."

"Wow," Keri said. "That's quite a story."

"What was that?" Randy exclaimed.

"Ah, yes, thinking I would fall for another one of your pranks," Keri said.

"No, for real," Randy said. "I heard a rustling from behind Christopher."

"You really got yourself all freaked out over your own story?" Keri asked. "I thought I was the one you were trying to scare."

"Dude, really!" Christopher said. "We want her to think we are suave, not scared of our own shadows."

"Prolly some wind and the old dried leaves in here," Randy said. "We should head back now."

"Oh man, you gave yourself the heebie jeebies," Keri said, laughing.

Christopher got a weird expression on his face, just staring at Keri.

"You scared yourself speechless?" Keri said, still laughing.

Suddenly, Christopher's neck puffed out like he was about to get sick. Keri jumped up and moved away.

"Don't face me if you're about to boot!" Keri said, the laughter gone.

"Dude, you okay?" Randy asked. "You aren't looking good at all."

Christopher's mouth started shaking as if he was about to vomit.

"Come on, man, go outside," Randy said. "You're going to get that shit all over us."

The top of Christopher's head angled up, and at the same time, his jaw pushed down. The jaw kept going down until the sound of the bones breaking was heard.

"Fuck me running," Randy yelled.

Christopher's oral commissures split, causing blood to spray into the air. A small mottled gray bulb stuck out of where Christopher's mouth had once been. As more of the bulb stuck out, it became apparent that this was some creature's head. The creature had two eyes that seemed abnormally large for its size, and they looked, in the firelight, to be all pupil. Two holes were located below the eyes that were flush with the skin and appeared to be nostrils and a mouth that seemed entirely composed of cuspid teeth.

As the head turned, a hole shaped like a single quote mark was visible on the side. Small-clawed appendages pulled away the flesh of Christopher's face allowing the creature to exit his body. It ran on all fours, like a cat with no tail, into the shadows.

"What the fuck!" Keri exclaimed.

"I dunno, but my ass is out of here before that thing gets us."

Keri backed away from Christopher's still body. She backed into something and fell backward, hitting her head hard on the floor. Randy didn't bother to look and see how Keri was doing as he tore out of the old fan building.

Keri looked around, staying very still, trying to see if she could see any movement from the creature. From outside, she heard Randy cry out. She didn't know if the creature was attacking him or if he had just hurt himself on

something and refused to let down her guard. She saw nothing moving, so Keri slowly got herself off the floor. Her head hurt where it had hit the rock, but that could wait. She didn't hear anything, so she approached the opening to the outside.

When she looked out, she realized how much the light from the fire had affected her ability to see in the night. She realized she hadn't taken the flashlight that Christopher had given her. Knowing she wouldn't make it anywhere without light, Keri returned to the fire to retrieve the flashlight.

She heard no sounds from Randy.

Asshole cleared out and left me, she thought.

She turned on the flashlight, relatively sure that whatever had come out of Christopher wasn't an immediate threat. Keri scanned the exterior with her flashlight, looking for any sign of the creature or Randy. She was also trying to figure out where the board to exit was located. She saw sneakers poking up from the vegetation. Slowly and cautiously, she made her way over to the sneakers, trying not to make noise but also being hyper aware of any noises around her.

That thing may be small, but it's fast, she thought.

As her flashlight illuminated where the sneakers were located, Keri had to turn her head away before she got sick. Randy was lying on his back on the ground. His shirt was shredded, and his chest had been ripped open. The bones of his rib cage had been exposed, and organs had been pulled out of his body.

Keri realized she would have to look back toward him since he clearly knew how to get out and was likely headed there when he met his end. She aimed the flashlight toward the fence and could make out the board they used to enter on the opposite side. She remembered that the board on this side was close to there. She scanned the area and saw the board and two bright greenish orbs right by her.

She quickly moved the flashlight toward the orbs and saw that they were the eyes of the creature. It was hunched over the remains of an organ connected to Randy's body and staring at her. Hoping the creature was full, she slowly moved toward the board, staying clear of the creature. It watched her but did not attempt to move in her direction.

Keri paid too much attention to the creature and missed a rock jutting from the ground. She tripped over it and went down hard, wrenching her ankle. She stared at the creature, but it had gone back to feasting. She tried to stand but found the ankle couldn't take any pressure. She slowly crawled to the board, rocks jutting into her kneecaps, causing pain with each movement. When she got to the board, she looked back, and saw the creature still wasn't paying any attention to her. She moved the end of the board up to the top of the fence. It was heavy, and her inability to stand didn't help. Her muscles burned, but she got it on the fence. She started pulling herself up the board and heard rustling quickly approaching her. She saw the creature come up the board at her, and she kicked at it with her good leg.

\*\*\*

Mary heard a low scratching at the door.

"Keri, can you check the door?"

Mary heard no response. Weird, she thought. She must be sleeping. Mary went to the door and opened it a little to see outside. The shape of Pumpkin filled the gap.

"Keri was looking for you earlier. She'll be glad to see you when she wakes up."

#### **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.

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# As Still As Shattered Glass | Ken Hueler

The kindness of being buried alive is the calm. The simple unbinding. Mistakes no longer matter. Grudges are cancelled. Even knowing why I'm here, who I finally offended, won't change one thing.

And best of all, action is meaningless, impossible.

For a bit, I did try escape: clawing at the coffin until my fingernails popped. Adrenalin was deadening the pain, so when I stopped, it was because I finally saw the futility. And by letting go, I can spend my last breaths enjoying the free-fall out of existence.

Whoosh.

Actually, that's the sound of air rushing from my lungs, of blood hurrying past my ears. Six feet up, nobody's shouting, just murmurs at nearby graves, and traffic has hushed down to the occasional hearse. It's quiet. I've heard about soundless rooms, places so silent you can only hear the body's tireless inner goings-on: blood, breath, digestion, fear, despair. There's a limit to how long a person can take the complete absence of sound—forty-five minutes? I can't remember. But I do like overhearing myself. It means I'm still here.

In the flat dark, my sharpened nerves can separate the chittering of shiny feet against wood from the grainy slither of earthworms. What does an earthworm's mouth even look like? I never really thought to look that up. It's funny, they're our final guests, but we don't pay them much mind. And by focusing, I mean really focusing, I can also feel things in dreams rubbing up against my shins, smell people in my memories sweat.

How did such loud people, such a loud life, steal the quiet kid I was? They say, about growing old, that you die right when you finally figure it all out. So where's my epiphany? I already know I should have said *no* to most everything, especially toward the end. Mama used to tell me, "Not using the potential life gave you is same as stealing, and you will be punished." I've taken a lot of abuse to pay for my *yeses*, and someone must have taken my switch to *no* extra poorly.

I hear something like a shirt being torn, but deeper. It's powerful enough that vibrations tingle down to me. Sod. Sod is getting ripped up.

I fell asleep in a bar bathroom, woke up here. What now? I'm too smart for hope. I listen for shovels scraping grit, but a sound, so familiar—it's my puppy, digging up my parents' old yard. But it's hands. Eager hands scooping dirt. I start to panic, but no, I will keep this calmness. I earned it. It's all I have. This, at least, I will keep.

The lid lifts, and now I'm gazing up at the moon, a beautiful full moon through leafless trees—wasn't it summer that I fall asleep?—and then at men and women peering down at me. They are full and healthy and fit, but their skin is white, their irises red as blood. Ghouls. I've heard about them, but I never paid much attention. What are they? Why do they do this? I should have spent more time learning things, in that little life of mine. But no, again, none of that matters.

They are so loud. They drown the blood in my ears and the whisper from my lungs. Nervous intent trickles down my body but I can't move. I'm helpless, exhausted, same as when I was hiding in that bathroom stall. If Mama's right about payment and a wasteful life, I'm about to be useful, finally.

I refuse to be defeated again, so I relax back into calm: a final *no*. I expect to be gobbled, but instead the creatures nibble. Nibble at my skin. But the teeth don't hurt. They tickle. I want to laugh. It's almost erotic.

I think: This is good, being alive. Feeling alive.

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

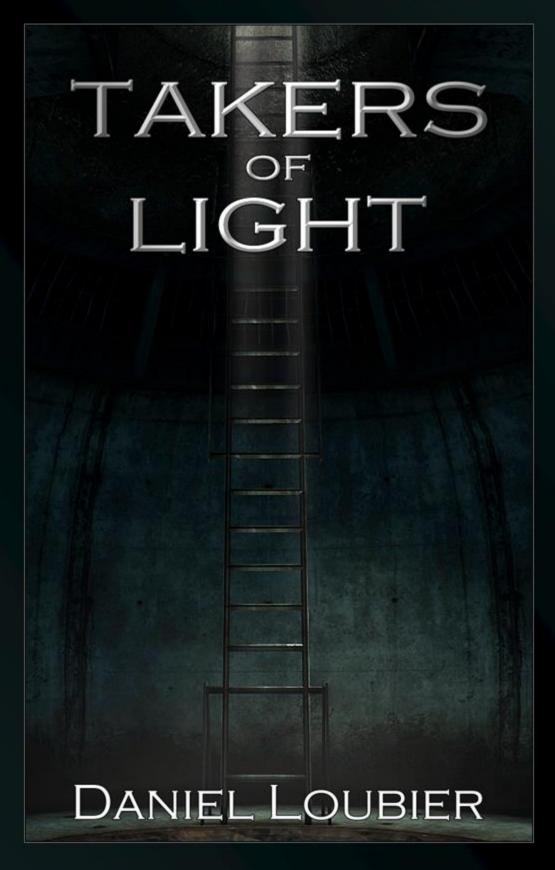
Ken Hueler teaches kung fu in the San Francisco Bay Area and, with fellow members of the Horror Writers Association's local chapter, gets up to all sorts of adventures (only some involving margaritas). His work has appeared in Weirdbook, The Sirens Call, Space & Time, Weekly Mystery Magazine, and anthologies such as "The Lost Librarian's Grave" and "Tales for the Camp Fire".

**Author Website:** Ken Hueler



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## Harvest | Corinne Pollard

The shackles twisted harder, tightening the more I struggled, but I couldn't help it. Despite the needle inserted. Despite the clouds behind my eyelids.

Pain shot down my shoulder, and my arm jolted, whirring aluminium bones to swipe my mouth. The needle clunked. I focused and swiped at it again.

The clouds scattered, and I raised myself, but then bumped against a wall. No, not a wall, glass.

Red beams peered at me, lying in my tube.

I scowled back.

"Cryo pod 1004 is active. I repeat. Cryo pod 1004 is active. Do we harvest the cyborg ahead of schedule?"

## The Advert | Corinne Pollard

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- \*Parts sold separately.
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#### Chained | Corinne Pollard

The white-cloaked mortals bow their heads outside my cell, whiplashing their nonsense.

'The Almighty Lord gave breath to every living thing, and you stole it.'

'He wants you in chains for the wickedness you have brought.'

A fire roars in my chest, and I bare my fangs. It doesn't deter them, and again I vow to rip their heads off and shove them up their legs.

They cannot keep me locked up. Bloodsoaked feathers fall as I crack each blade of my wing, twisting them out of the iron.

Blind with fear, the mortals do not see my impending escape.

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

Corinne Pollard is a disabled UK horror writer, published with Sirens Call, Trembling with Fear, Black Hare Press, Three Cousins Publishing, A Coup of Owls, and Raven Tale Publishing. With a degree in English Lit and Creative Writing, Corinne enjoys metal music, visiting graveyards, and shopping for books to read. Follow her dark world on Twitter and Instagram.

Instagram: <a href="mailto:@CorinnePWriter">@CorinnePWriter</a>
Amazon Author Page: <a href="mailto:Corinne Pollard">Corinne Pollard</a>

## Little Brother | Nina D'Arcangela

Back bent, the goliath strove to rise as the weight of the water held him down. Mother begged him not to destroy all she had created and cared for, but he was of no mind to grant quarter. Too many abuses he'd seen, too many injustices his brethren had suffered. No, this would be a day of reckoning; one in which those who had destroyed Mother's grace would pay for their transgressions. This would be the day the world met its little brother.

## Bird of Prey | Chris McAuley

The priest moved his hand across the rough, jagged limestone rockface. His fingers traced the lines of the ancient chalk painting. He had never seen any depiction like this. A large bird-like creature with a scaly back and mane which resembled a tiger's. In its claws it had scooped up a dozen men. This aspect of the illustration helped Father Marquette gauge the size of the creature but it was its face which held his attention. Its features resembled that of a man, cruel and leering. Its tongue rolled from its mouth as if it were too large for its head. As the priest mused his companion on this expedition drew. Louis Jolliet attempted to replicate the painting but in his sketching he began to realize the skill which the original illustrator must have had.

"Father, this was not painted by any crude hand. Its linework appears simple but the forms are blended together with artistic excellence."

Marquette turned towards his friend and smiled. He absent-mindedly stroked his beard; it was an affectation which indicated a deep train of thought was stirring.

"I concur, the colours are incredibly vibrant. Whomever's imagination this design came from would give Homer a run for his money. This creature belongs more in classical myth than in the native tradition."

This discovery was a turning point for Marquette's small expedition. He had been attempting to catalogue the meanderings of the Mississippi river and engage with the native tribes in the area. It was the year of our lord 1673 and he had intended to build a mission here. Mythology had been a particular passion when studying a seminary and the sight of this creature brought back memories of the Harpy. The symbol for the ancient Greeks of death, the underworld and fear. It was also named 'the snatcher' which seemed an appropriate name for whichever creature was depicted here.

"Put away your pencils Louis. Let us go to our friends the Illini for their chief may know more."

Together the two explorers traveled to the nearby Summer encampment of the tribe who had shared meat and broke bread with them in the previous nights. Marquette had displayed an unusual respect for the tribes' customs and traditions. The chief had not noticed this before in the religious leaders of the Belegana. Usually, they would brandish a cross of peace while holding the pistol of war. The tribe's healer met the priest as he entered the camps boundaries. He waved his shamanistic stick over the men and their animals as a blessing. When Marquette responded with a blessing of his own, tracing his fingers in the sky, a deep, throaty laugh issued from the medicine man's lips.

"You use signs and symbols which have no meaning my white collared friend but I respect your intentions. Come in peace and I shall rouse the chief from his slumber."

Much merriment was made that night over dinner and more stories were exchanged between those who held the tribe's legends and the European explorers. After the last exchange of peace was made, Father Maquette broached the subject of the creature he had seen earlier. He asked what its meaning was, did it symbolize an aspect of the underworld perhaps?

The chief took the rough sketch offered to him by Jolliet. His face took on a thunderous aspect and when he spoke none present doubted his sincerity.

"This is no mere story. It is a beast that has plagued my nation since we settled here. Those men and women you see in its claws were my people and this creature made no distinction between either gender or age. Many children have been lost to its insatiable hunger."

The priest apologized, he was unsure if he had misspoken or by his line of questioning offended the chief. His concerns were met with a brief shake of the head and after a moment's silence, the chief's baritone voice carried across the assembled tribe.

"It is important that we remember the nature of the creatures that assail us in this life. We pay more attention to the warring tribes who wish to conquer us and our lands but tonight we should think of the beasts who wish to destroy our souls."

Jolliet noticed that collective shudder ran through the Illini. As the tribal leader began his tale, Louis began to understand why.

The creature was known as the Piasa or 'the thunderbird'. Initially it had been a peaceful being while monstrous in appearance it would leave those encountered alone. It was only when it had come across the bodies of braves who had been killed in fierce battle did its nature begin to change. The beast's nostrils had been driven mad by the smell of the blood that had been shed. It swooped down into the canyon and drove its face into the flesh and exposed internal organs of those that had been slain. The Illini who had went looking for their tribesmen found the creature gorged, as it

regarded them, they saw their Kinmen's intestines fall from its lips. Yellow liquid spewed and dripped from its mouth as it continued to chew and the whiteness of its face was covered crimson with blood.

The Piasa's hunger was not satiated by its grisly feast. Having now tasted the forbidden flesh of man it desired more to fill its belly. It charged towards the warriors and slashed at them with its sharp taloned claws. It shredded stomachs with ease and with each opened belly dove its face inside, trailing out stomachs and kidneys. The tribesmen threw their spears with unerring accuracy and clambered off their horses to do battle with the monster. Using sacred daggers and spiked clubs. They caused some damage to the thunderbird but it was not enough, its hunger had driven it beyond any feeling of pain. Its lips spewed out rabid yellow foam and its eyes had become red-rimmed and crazed. One of the Illini present survived, he clambered onto horseback and rode back to the place of the wintertide. He was grievously injured, the Piasa's claws had inflicted a mortal wound upon him. He made it back however and with his dying words told the headman what had happened.

The thunderbird began a campaign of terror among the native peoples of Mississippi. Destroying villages and carrying off swathes of women and children. Hails of arrows and flaming torches did nothing to dissuade it and as the months progressed the headman of the tribe began to despair. It was then that the Gods intervened. The elder shaman was wise and versed in the all the ways of magic. He was powerful in the manner of the living winds and the sacred dead. He performed a Calumet dance to bring the lord of life and war into our midst. The tribe's leader began to dream and it was here that he was shown a way to destroy this evil creature.

Chief Ouatogo awakened and told the men assembled what he had seen. The great spirit had told him to select twenty of his finest warriors and arm them with arrows. One of those present complained and held up his left arm which ended in a stump.

"See here mighty chief, we have used slings and sharp tipped arrows against this demon. Each time he takes more of our friends and family. It has cost me dearly for it took the hand which I sharpen metal with."

Ouatogo listened as similar complaints were issued. He waited until the murmuring had calmed down.

"I understand your fears. It is true that our past efforts have been ineffectual but I have been shown a secret. A poison which can be brewed and placed on the tips of our arrow heads. With this knowledge we can kill this creature and put an end to our suffering."

It was now the shaman's turn to address the headman.

"Yes but mighty chief how will we bring this carrion bird to us? It only comes with death or the promise of our flesh."

In answer to the wiseman's question, Ouatogo bowed his head.

"I shall be the necessary sacrifice. Bind me to a wooden pole and leave me in the canyon where the thunderbird lives."

At this pronouncement the women wailed and the men slashed their chests. All manner of complaint was issued from the lips of those assembled but by dawn the matter was decided. The chief was taken to the canyon and bound. The twenty selected warriors took position and waited.

As Ouatogo waited he talked with himself. Remembering past glories and the faces of his children. He combatted his fear by reliving the first time he had met his wife, how they had made love under the light of the half-moon. These were the things which would define his life not his small moment of death. He only prayed to the great spirit that his warriors would be successful and that the Illini nation would continue after this monster was defeated.

A screech born from the azure sky roused him from his reverie. The Piasa had come to claim its prize. The size of its body blocked out the sun and as it descended the chief caught sight of the demonic hunger which blazed from its eyes and the lolling, rolling tongue whose stench made him gag. He chanted to the spirits of his ancestors and to the headmen of the tribe who came before. He needed to maintain his courage now more than ever.

The warriors rose slowly from their hiding places across the lip of the canyon. They drew back their bows and waited. Ouatogo tried to stifle the cry which came from his lips as the creature slashed his chest with its claws. When its tongue bathed his face in its vile juices he screamed, his disgust bubbling over to panic and fear. When the Piasa sank its teeth into his neck and tore out his jugular the warriors fired a barrage of arrows at the creature. The last sight which the chief saw was of the thunderbird collapsing onto the ground. Its dying body twitching in the harsh midday light.

As the tale hung in the air the priest thought about the noble sacrifice of chief Ouatogo. When he raised his head once again Father Maquette said softly.

"Your ancestor was a very brave man."

The chief smiled. "Yes, he saved all of us. Going back to the illustration. We believe that it was one of the warriors present that day who created it."

The priest took a drink of cactus wine from his cup before asking. "What was its purpose?"

The chief's somber look returned. "Tell me how many of the creatures did you see drawn on that rock?"

The priest responded "Why two."

The chief's next words chilled the explorers' bones. "It was a warning."

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

A writer who specializes in the Horror, Science Fiction, fantasy, western and crime genre. Chris has been the lead writer in novels, comics, audio dramas, and games. He is the co-creator of the popular StokerVerse, along with Bram Stoker's great-grandnephew Dacre Stoker. He has also created a science fiction and fantasy franchise with Babylon 5's Claudia Christian called Dark Legacies. Chris has worked on The Terminator series, is the lead writer for the Astroboy animated show, and also works on franchises such as Doctor Who

Website: Dark Universes

#### Yummy | Gabriella Balcom

"My smorgasbord," Matt murmured, snickering to himself. He slowly drove down the street, looked the prostitutes up and down, cataloging each one's attributes. He'd made some particularly large sales at work today and his boss had surprised him with a sizable cash bonus. Even though he hadn't expected the gesture, he'd known immediately just how he'd use the money.

Valentine's Day was only days away, but he had no sweetheart to be with or buy anything for. He didn't like boundaries anyway, and never confined himself to any one female.

A stunning blonde strolled by, ignoring him. Unlike the other women who were scantily clad, she wore slacks and a blouse. They were form-fitting, highlighting her lush bust and curves, but she didn't call out to passers-by or even look at them.

Matt called out to her and got a frosty glance in reply. If anything, he thought she picked up her pace.

Slightly peeved at the rejection but still more than a little intrigued, he parked his vehicle and hurried in the direction she'd gone. She rounded the corner, vanishing into a dark alley. He followed, cocking his head in curiosity when she glanced over her shoulder at him before entering an abandoned warehouse through the side door.

Matt went in, too, and found her standing inside, facing his direction.

The blonde silently studied him, reached up to fiddle with the top button of her shirt, and undid it.

"Now that's more like it," he thought, giving her a smile as she unfastened another.

"You want me, huh?" Matt asked. He smirked when she completely disrobed.

Feeling light-headed later, along with an unusual weakness, he wobbled on his feet. His companion laughed, and he demanded, "Are you the reason I feel weird?"

"Yes." She smacked her lips. "I have big plans for you."

"What'd you do to me?"

"Only what any good succubus would." Planting her mouth on his, she kissed him again, draining more of his life force; his face began to hollow.

She plunged her fist into his chest, yanking out his heart. "Yummy," she crooned, slowly licking it.

Matt's eyes widened. With one last grunt, he collapsed to the ground.

The succubus laughed as she removed his other organs, set them aside for later cooking, and cut off his genitals. Soon, her prey was nothing but a lifeless husk.

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

Gabriella Balcom lives in Texas, and writes fantasy, horror, romance, sci-fi, literary fiction, and more. She's had 400+ works accepted for publication, and won publishing contracts for her books, On the Wings of Ideas (Clarendon House Publications) and Worth Waiting For (JayZoMon/Dark Myth Company). Black Hare Press published her novella, The Return. Dark Myth Publications published her Down with the Sickness and Other Chilling Tales. Others pend publication.

Facebook: Gabriella Balcom





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## Featured Project | Paper Cuts Live Show and Podcast

## **The Origins of Paper Cuts**

(Read in the Voice of Morgan Freeman)

How did the show *Paper Cuts* get its start? Oddly, one or two people are curious enough to find out. Depending on who is telling the story, Brad or J, you may be surprised by their contrasting riveting tales. In all reality though, there isn't much to be told about the inception of the show. It actually came together rather quickly.

Back in the day – pick a day, any day – Brad and J were your typical run-of-the-mill book reviewers, using *YouTube* as their platform. As much as J would try to have you believe it, he did not coin the term "BookTube." Being two of the pillars of the horror BookTube community (that's a bit of a stretch), Brad and J were guests from time-to-time on other BookTube channels – Nichi from DarkBetweenPages, and Kelly from Kellyhookedonbooks, to name a couple – live shows, or streams as they are referred to in the biz. This gave them the opportunity to hangout and chat with the guest of honor, usually an author. Those live shows were always a lot of fun for these two, and gave them the desire to start hosting author chats on their own BookTube channels, that is if anyone would actually agree to grace these two dopes with their presence.

Songbirds & Stray Dogs by Meagan Lucas is not marketed as horror per se, but it's a Grit Lit masterpiece embraced by the horror community. Both Brad and J have mentioned it's a book that leaves them furious and heartbroken, giving them feelings they never knew of. Brad had the idea of asking Meagan to be his first guest for an author chat on his YouTube channel. He trepidatiously reached out to Meagan to see if she had any interest in the idea, while preparing himself for the inevitable "NO!" To this day he is still in shock Meagan not only agreed but actually seemed excitedly enthusiastic, without a single bribe. Brad sent a message to his fellow Booktuber friends to see if anyone would be interested in doing a live show with Meagan. Unfortunately for Brad, J was the only one who had read Meagan's book at the time.

Neither of the guys remember for sure whose idea it was to turn that forthcoming author chat live stream with Meagan into a proper "show", but J has spoken of a short conversation he and Brad had once of starting a podcast of some sorts. Brad disagrees with this statement, and to his defense, J is old, and his memory is even older.

They came up with a list of different names for the show, most of which were quite terrible. They ran a few different names by the real bosses, their wives, and both agreed *Paper Cuts* was the one. Meagan Lucas should win a medal for being a guinea pig on that first episode. She didn't really know what she was getting herself into, while Brad and J figured out what *Paper Cuts* was going to be on the fly.

Many episodes and a handful of release parties later and here we are. It seems that the creation of *Paper Cuts* just happened to be in the cards, being at the right place at the right time sort of thing. The show hasn't changed too much from that original episode, other than Brad and J have hopefully improved somewhat as hosts. They still try to keep it laid back, loose and conversational, like a late night talk show, keeping the focus on the guests and maybe having a bit of fun along the way.



Website: Paper Cuts Live
Instagram: Paper Cuts Live
Twitter: Paper Cuts Live
Facebook: Paper Cuts Live



# **An Unexpected Journey**

Brad Proctor – Co-Host Paper Cuts Live

I started my YouTube channel back in August of 2019. At that point in my life I was still getting back into reading on a consistent basis and was wanting a way to be able to connect and share my thoughts with other readers. I really didn't have any idea what I was doing but was inspired by creators like Edward Lorn who were able to sit down in front of the camera and talk about the books they were reading. It was a very approachable casual style which was something I wanted to emulate on my own channel. I thought to myself, how hard can it be?



Well, it turned out a lot harder than I was honestly expecting. The mighty presence of the all-seeing eye of the camera, or in my case my phone, was intimidating. Silently watching and judging me. I would sit in front of my phone and stare, as if my words had been dammed up, unable to flow. With time I eventually got better, at least I think I have improved somewhat over the last four years, at expressing my thoughts and opinions, but those first videos are horribly cringe. Those videos are still up on my channel, but I beg of you to spare yourself the second-hand embarrassment of watching them.

So, what does all of this have to do with *Paper Cuts* you may be asking? Well, I'm getting there, I promise. It wasn't until around October or November of 2019 that I was introduced to indie and small press horror. It was like I had discovered a key that unlocked a secret door to worlds other than this. So many talented authors with wonderfully dark and horrifying stories that I didn't know existed.

If memory serves me correctly, I believe that Cameron Chaney's *Autumncrow* was the first indie horror book that I read. If you are familiar with me or my channel at all then you know that was certainly not my last. I quickly went on to devour books by Cameron Roubique, Stephanie Evelyn, Gregor Xane, Chad Lutzke, John Boden, Laurel Hightower, and Sara Tantlinger to name just a few. Who were all these brand new (to me) authors and why had I never heard of them before? The quality of the writing and storytelling was on par with anything you'd be able to find in a brick and mortar store published by one of the Big 5.

Like *Alice in Wonderland*, I spiraled deeper into the indie and small press horror rabbit hole. This in turn altered the direction of my YouTube channel from covering a more diverse lineup of genres; science fiction, fantasy, historical fiction, etc., to being primarily a channel focused on horror literature. It was around this time that I decided to get back on twitter after my account had been dormant for over half a decade. I started following all of the horror authors and publishers that I could find, which led to discovering even more authors and publishers whose books I wanted to read. The problems of a reader, the never ending TBR pile.

I mention all of this because truth be told, as bad as social media can be sometimes, without it there would be no *Paper Cuts*. Without it I wouldn't have met the fellow BookTubers who's live author chats I guested on. I wouldn't have met J. I wouldn't even know about the majority of the authors we have had as guests on the show. Back in 2019 when I uploaded that first book review, I had no intention of starting a podcast, or doing author interviews, or having the main focus of my channel be horror, but that is the path that I have taken and I wouldn't change it.

To wrap up this rambling mess, I wanted to talk briefly about a few of my personal favorite episodes. Now, this is like picking which of your children is your favorite because I have thoroughly enjoyed each and every episode that we have filmed so far. These are listed in no particular order.







- Episode 32 'Attack of the Weird' with Sam Richard. This was Sam's second appearance on the show. Our
  episodes with Sam could easily have a four hour runtime. The conversations are always enlightening, a bit deep,
  and fun. This episode didn't get a ton of views, which is an absolute shame because it was a brilliant
  conversation.
- Episode 16 with Kathe Koja. Yea, you read that right. We had the legendary Kathe freaking Koja on the show way back on episode sixteen! How we managed to pull that off or why she gave us the time of day I will never truly understand. I could sit and listen to Kathe talk for hours. She is so passionate about her work and kind and brimming with knowledge. It was truly an honor to get to sit down and chat with her.
- Episodes 5 with Ross Jeffery, ep 15 'Haunting Halloween', & ep 33 with Rebecca Rowland. All of our episodes have a funny bit here or there, but these three episodes have some of the best laugh out loud funny moments that come to mind from the show. Ross Jeffery and the infamous "poop bag", J getting slap happy during Halloween trivia, and "that's the way the cookie crumbles" with Rebecca Rowland. When we can get a guest to break and truly get the giggles, it always puts a smile on my face.
- Episode 46 with Ashley Erwin. We've had quite a few authors doing live readings of their work on the show, but Ashley's reading from *Grit, Black, Blood* was above and beyond. She absolutely nailed it with the different voices and dialects. One of the best readings not just from our show, but one of the best readings I have ever had the pleasure of listening to, period. So, so, so glad that she is narrating the audiobook version!
- Episode 41 with Catriona Ward. *The Last House On Needless Street* is one of the best books I have read in recent memory. It completely blew me away. So, the fact that we were lucky enough to have Catriona as a guest on the show was a bit of a fanboy moment for me.

I could go on and on and tell you why every episode is my favorite but Sirens Call didn't give us that many pages for this feature.

Finally, I just want to say a thank you to every person who has ever or who will ever be a guest on the show. Thank you for sharing stories that transport us, the readers, to other worlds full of dangers and mysteries and things that go bump in the night. Everyone's time is precious and I so very much appreciate all of you who have decided to spend a few hours of your time with us to hangout, and talk about some books.

#### **About Brad:**

Brad lives in Kentucky with his wife, three kids, and two dogs.

He runs the YouTube/BookTube channel *Brad Proctor* where he does "reviews with bite." His genre of preference is horror, mainly indie and small press horror, but he also enjoys reading sci-fi, fantasy, historical fiction, regional lit, and pretty much anything else unless it is romance. Brad doesn't care for the mushy romance.

When not reading or filming BookTube videos, Brad enjoys cooking, watching sports (Yankees, Bengals, UK Wildcats), playing D&D, watching movies, and just basically being a nerd or acting like a weirdo while playing with his kids.

YouTube: @BradProctorReads
Instagram: @thebradproctor
TikTok: @brad proctor
Twitter: @brad proctor



# **Two Dopes With Microphones**

Jason Grell – Co-Host Paper Cuts Live

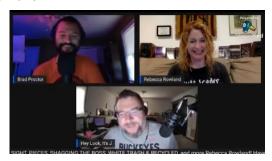
I think for me the biggest thing I try to bring to the show is an interesting conversation. A decent dialogue back and forth is important. The show is set up in a more conversational way. We try to make it more interactive. Not so much the question/answer routine of most interview shows. I feel keeping the human element active, and not becoming robotic makes for a much better show. That sounds easier than it is.

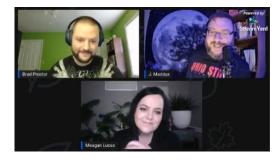
We try to make the guest as comfortable as possible. It can be very overwhelming for someone to have a couple of people throwing questions at them left and right, one after another. Having to sit there and answer each question in rapid speed to keep up isn't fun for the guests. I know it's not fun from my standpoint. I'm sure there may be some people who prefer the more formal approach, but after a few minutes of dealing with me they will either settle in and get comfortable, or fake a power outage.

We never truly know what we are going to get out of the guests until the show starts. And to make it more interesting, we do it live, without a net. Will the guests be drunk? Scared? Belligerent? Annoyed? Overly talkative? This is the chance we take. Throw in the challenges of technology and that just gives the audience a wide variety of things to expect when they tune in. Our third show in, we had Brian Bowyer as a guest. Now Brian can tell a great story. "Storytime with Brian" was what I was looking forward to. Shortly before the show started, Brad lets me know he lost power. We didn't want to cancel the show because we knew Brian made special arrangements to be in a certain place at a certain time, and we know how hard it is to get time off work. So I started the show solo. Brad never showed. The show ended up being a double-whammy because I ended up losing Brian about an hour in. By the way, that is one of our most viewed shows to date. I still hold that episode over Brad's head.

There are a few other episodes where technology wasn't our friend. I want a do-over with the EV Knight episode. We are convinced the streaming platform we use was having issues all around. The three of us looked and sounded like we were using dial-up internet at times. I could have sworn I started hearing the high squealing dialing sound. The youngsters of today will never know the struggle.

Although we run the risk of these technical issues, we've never thought of changing. Doing it live has a different feel. No editing allowed. Conversations can go in weird directions. We get interaction from the people in the live chat. Some of us get extremely tired and a little slap happy (see Halloween Special). We sometimes decide to throw a game in to break things up. Usually nothing too challenging. At least we don't think so heading into it. There have been times when the game just bombs. No right answers. If this wasn't live, we could easily edit it out. But we lose that human element we want.





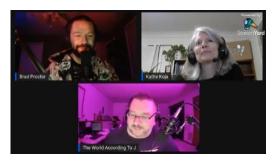
One of my favorite episodes was the first time Rebecca Rowland joined us. Rebecca and I talk music from time to time. I don't exactly remember how the conversation went, but leading up to the show it turned into us planning on talking about Hair Bands from the 80's. It seemed so funny because I know Brad and I knew he would be so lost. I somehow ended up creating an '80's Hair Band bracket much like the March Madness College Basketball bracket. Throughout the show, we chatted about Rebecca's writing and her current books and all the normal Paper Cuts topics, but every fifteen minutes or so we took a break and went to the bracket. It was great debating who should win each match-up, but it was just fun watching Brad's reactions and laughing every time he tried to move the conversation back to writing.

We've somehow been fortunate enough in-between our normal episodes to be asked to host special events, like book launches and cover reveals. I've said it before on the show, and I will mention it here: it truly is an honor that someone who has worked hard on their book or cover wants two dopes with microphones like us to help them celebrate their work and release it out to the world.

I think an element of trust comes into play. We've created a special kind of rapport, a connection with the writing community. We've become friends with a lot of the writers and publishers involved. Did I mention I know Laurel Hightower? That's pretty damn cool. I feel like most have grown to trust we're not going to run a controversial show or bash anyone's work. Instead we want to share the work and help celebrate it. It's no easy task to create stories and be able to release them into the world.

I'm not here to just ask off the wall questions and throw a joke in from time to time. I truly listen to the guests and take in everything they say. It's a lesson for me. I dabble in writing myself, so any inside information I may pick up from these conversations, I'm taking and running with it.



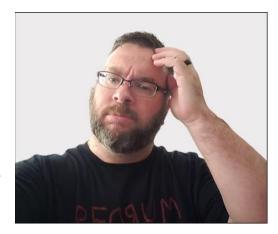


I think the show has grown organically. We were not sure what kind of reaction we would get starting out. I don't think either one of us expected it to last this long. It grew a lot faster than we thought it would also. I look back at the first episode with Meagan Lucas, who we may never be able to repay for throwing us a bone and help kick things off, and I see how so many things have evolved into what we have today. Still far from perfection, but I feel like we're closer to hitting our stride now. And there appears to be a lot of support coming from a lot of different directions. People are actually asking us now to be on the show. The legendary Ronald Kelly has been on the show a couple of times, and the three of us chat like we are old childhood friends catching up on lost time. I could go on and on and reminisce about every show and the friends we've made. We are very appreciative of that support from the horror community, which extends its boney, skinless, crooked hand to include the grit lit and crime world as well. We all know real life can be the biggest horror trope.

I will end this by mentioning Brad and I agreed in the beginning we would not turn this into a job, and we would be honest if either one was getting burned out or needed a break. I think those rules are what makes the show work. We are respectful of each other's time needed away from the show. We also have similar personalities, so we can give each other shit and joke around without anyone being offended. It works this way. We're having fun and making things interesting by not following the normal rules of the game. And we're doing it by just being ourselves. I have no clue how long Paper Cuts will go on, where it will take us, if there is a finish line in sight, or what we will eventually get out of it. But to quote Eddie Vedder, "I'll ride the wave, where it takes me!"

#### **About Jason:**

Born and raised in Columbus, Ohio, Jason Grell, known as J, spends most of his time cheering for the Buckeyes and listening to Pearl Jam. Being the only guy in the house, J is at the mercy of his wife and two daughters. He has become an expert at embarrassing them with his endless supply of dad jokes. Over the last handful of years, J has become an avid reader of horror, true grit lit, and space erotica while giving us his insight through written and video reviews. He enjoys literature and movies that push boundaries and stray from the norm. J dabbles in writing, having published poetry and has narrated an audiobook. He has a couple of different projects in the works for release this year. His sense of humor is shown co-hosting the World Renowned show, Paper Cuts.



YouTube: The World According To J!
Instagram: @the.world.according.to.j
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# The Tanning Tree | Josephine Queen

Shadows seeped from the darkness beyond the window and filled every corner of the room. Kayla tried not to think of the endless empty hills between the house and civilization. She wished she didn't need the money; she wished it was time to leave.

"Mum said I can be anything I want." Edie sat on her bed, small arms crossed, continuing the argument the girls had been having all evening.

"She didn't mean a bloody duck." Molly, Edie's older sister, sat in shadows on her own bed.

"Molly," warned Kayla. She turned to Edie. "It's late, time to sleep."

"Tell us a story," said Edie, a whine creeping in. "Granny always tells us stories when she babysits."

"Kayla's not Granny though, is she?"

Molly's tone made Kayla turn. The girl seemed older than her nine years. Much older. "Where's your granny tonight?"

"We could tell you a story," Molly said. "About the witch with iron claws. She lives under the hills. A big, creepy oak tree guards her cave. She comes out at night and takes naughty children."

"She's blue," said Edie.

"She hides in trees and jumps on people. She takes their skins off with her claws and hangs them in the trees to dry. Granny says she makes them into a skirt."

"You can hear her coming. She grinds her teeth," whispered Edie.

"All right, that's enough." Kayla stood up. "Time for bed."

"Can we keep the light on?" asked Edie.

"Yeah. But enough about witches."

"Don't you want to know her name?" Molly asked, a smile in her voice.

Kayla sighed. "What is it?"

"Black Annis," said Molly. "If you hear howling in the dark, it's her coming for you."

\*\*\*

As Kayla cleared the dishes from the sink she reminded herself how much she was getting paid. The girls hadn't been too difficult—other than the bickering. Kayla had given them free rein over her art supplies which quelled the fighting for a while. Edie spent an hour drawing ducks.

Kayla collected the scattered pictures and went hunting for tape. She stuck them onto the side of the refrigerator and smiled, remembering Edie insisting on being a duck. There were five pictures, each featuring a big yellow duck, a bright blue pond, and a pink cottage in the background. A large brown-trunked tree with a green mushroom of leaves adorned the side of each picture. Kayla's pocket buzzed. She fished her phone out. It was June. Kayla answered. There was a backdrop of chatter and music on the other end.

"Hi," said Kayla.

"Hey." June's voice was loud in her ear. "Are you almost done?"

"You're joking. I just got them to bed."

"What? I had a six o'clock bedtime when I was their age. Listen, Kay, when are their parents getting home?"

"Not sure. Could be late."

"Yeah? How late?"

"Dunno." Kayla closed her eyes.

"You're still coming right?"

"Yeah, I'll try."

"Do more than try, okay?"

The background noise increased. June must have walked further into the bar. "How's it going?"

"It's all right."

"Easy money, yeah?"

"I wouldn't say that."

"They live in that big old creepy house in the Dane Hills, don't they? Right by the cave."

"Thanks a lot." Kayla walked into the living room, started scooping toys off the floor. She tried, again, not to think about how isolated the house was; how far away June seemed right now.

"No-one likes to babysit there." June laughed. "But don't worry, you'll be fine."

Kayla perched on the arm of the couch. "Hey, have you heard of Black Annis?"

"Oh God! Those stories used to terrify me. She haunts those hills."

"Oh great. They're not true though, right?"

"I keep forgetting you're not from around here. She's a local legend. Did the kids tell you about her?"

"Yeah. Their gran usually sits for them. She told them."

"Lovely. Just the kind of warm and cozy story you want your gran to tell you."

"That's what I thought."

"Did they tell you about the girls that went missing?"

"What?"

"Yeah. I think one of them was their babysitter. Didn't make it home one night."

"Seriously, June, what the hell?"

"It was ages ago. Hey, don't worry about it, just come straight here when you're done." There was a scuffling on the other end, Kayla imagined June fumbling with her phone as she carried drinks through the bar. "Listen, Kay, I've got to go. But call when you're done, yeah?"

"Okay."

"Oh, and Kayla, watch out for Black Annis. She steals people's skins to hang on the tanning tree. Sews them together when they're dry..."

"Okay, thanks June!" There was a chuckle from the other end. Kayla ended the call. The silence was sudden, the only sounds the humming of the refrigerator, the ticking of a clock on the mantel, wind blowing across the fields.

Darkness pressed against the windows. Kayla wished there were curtains to shut out the night, but it seemed the girls' parents weren't concerned about peeping Toms. Why would they be? There was nothing beyond the garden but the hills—nothing but open space. Kayla turned the outside light on and let out a breath as the garden was bathed in light. She gazed out at the patio with the firepit, the grill, and the pool, covered for the winter by a frost-dusted tarpaulin. A large oak tree towered beside the patio, its leafless limbs like skeletal fingers. The edges of the garden were doused in shadow and, beyond that, darkness blanketed the land. Tiny lights flashed in the blackness—she couldn't help imagining they were eyes blinking. Kayla returned to the couch, burying herself in the cushions. She located the TV remote and flicked through channels for something to watch.

The wind picked up and Kayla tried to ignore the unease in the pit of her stomach. Black Annis was just a stupid tale told to misbehaving children—a macabre Santa Claus punishing with iron claws instead of lumps of coal. Act badly and see what you get. A strange flapping noise drifted into the room. Kayla turned the volume down and listened. The clock ticked and the wind whistled around the eaves. Maybe the girls were out of bed and sneaking around. She eased off the couch and went to the stairs, listening at the bottom of the steps. The more she listened, the harder it was to make out anything above the ringing in her ears. She crept slowly upstairs and stood outside the girls' bedroom. Pushing the door open a crack, she peeked in. The bedside lamp was still on and she could see the lumps of the girls beneath their covers.

Just as she was about to pull the door closed, Kayla felt an icy breeze. The window above the bookcase was open. It had been closed when she'd left the room earlier. She crossed the room and shut the window, pulling the curtains across to block out the night. At least there were curtains in the girls' room.

"It was Molly," a small voice piped up. Kayla gasped. Edie sat up in bed, her eyes still half-closed.

"Molly?"

"She opened it." Edie glanced at her sister's bed and lowered her voice. "She misses Granny."

Kayla sat on Edie's bed. "Is your granny okay?"

Edie nodded, her dark eyes serious. "Mummy doesn't want her here anymore. Mummy never liked her."

"Never liked your gran?"

"She's not our real gran." Edie looked toward the window.

Kayla followed Edie's gaze, but she could see nothing but the dark, not even light from passing cars, or the glow of the moon. "No?"

Edie shook her head, then whispered. "She used to live here. Before we did. Even before our house did." "What do you mean?"

Edie spoke so quietly, Kayla had to bend her head down next to the girl's mouth. "She's as old as the hills."

"But...if your mum never liked her, why did she let her watch you?"

"Mummy never knew. She watches us when we're all alone. Well, after the other one went downstairs. Molly always leaves it open, just in case she comes back."

"The other one?"

"The other babysitter." Edie bit her lip, her mouth turned down at the corners.

"What other baby..."

"Why are you in here?" Molly sat up in her bed. Kayla felt as if she'd been caught doing something wrong.

"The window was open," she said.

"You shouldn't be in here."

Icy fingers brushed against the back of Kayla's neck. "I just came in to close the window," she said. "Time for you to go back to sleep." She patted Edie's legs through her quilt and walked to the door.

Edie lay back down. "I'm glad you're here," she said. "You're much nicer than Granny."

"Edie!" Molly hissed.

"Time to sleep," Kayla said, rubbing the goosebumps on her arms. "I hope I see you again soon." But she wouldn't be coming back, no matter how good the money was. "Goodnight." She pulled the door closed and stood in the hallway for a minute, listening. But the girls were quiet.

A dog howled in the distance. Kayla froze. The howl came again, drifting across the hills. *Just a dog,* thought Kayla. Edie's story about their 'gran' lingered in her mind.

She walked back downstairs to the living room, grateful for the flickering of the TV. She glanced quickly at the patio doors. The back garden was just the same as before; pool, check; patio, check; fire pit, check; creepy, spindly oak tree, check. There were no blue-faced witches waiting to skin her alive. Kayla laughed to herself and sunk back down into the couch.

The sound of flapping came again, louder this time, like a flock of large birds taking flight from the patio. Or maybe sodden sheets swaying on a clothesline. But Kayla hadn't seen a clothesline in the garden. She went to the windows. There was nothing unusual out there. At least nothing she could see. She took her phone from her pocket and dialed June's number.

"Kay!" The background music and chatter were louder—the Saturday night crowd clearly getting drunker and happier. "Are you on your way?"

"No. I just wanted to call, because..."

"What? I can't hear you? Are the parents home?"

"No." Kayla didn't want to speak too loudly. She considered going out into the night so she could talk normally, but thought of the darkness. "I just wanted..." What exactly did she want? To hear June's voice? It would be weird to say that to someone she'd met two months ago. "It's super creepy here, I need a bit of company."

"You want us to come over?"

"No, I just wanted to talk to someone. It's too quiet here."

"Are you thinking of Black Annis?"

"It's seriously creepy."

"It's just a story, Kay. To make kids behave. You know, like, be good or the witch will eat you."

"I know. But this house is too big and far away from anywhere."

"Can't you just call the parents and tell them you've got to leave for a family emergency?"

"Hopefully they'll be home soon."

"We'll get you a jug of margarita."

Kayla laughed. June was right, of course. Black Annis was just a story. And the parents would be coming through the door any minute. "I'll see you soon." She hung up.

The flapping noise sounded again. Closer this time, as if it was right outside the patio doors. There was another sound—a grating noise, like metal dragged along a road. The wind must be strong outside, Kayla thought. It was as if the grill was being dragged across the patio. I'll grind your bones to make my bread. She really needed that drink. She'd spied wine in the fridge earlier and didn't think the parents would notice if she had half a glass. She went into the kitchen and flicked the light on. She glanced at the pictures on the side of the fridge and smiled as she opened the fridge door, then stopped in her tracks. Something was different about the pictures. Or maybe she hadn't noticed before. She looked closer.

Five drawings. Five ducks, five ponds, five trees, five cottages. Five witches, progressively getting closer to what would be the camera if they were photographs. Stick arms and legs, a pointy black hat, a hooked nose on a blue face. Kayla's stomach churned. In the last picture the witch was large and close to the front of the drawing and rags were draped on the branches of the tree. They were gray, with squiggles of red in the center. They hadn't been there before. And could that pond actually be a swimming pool? Kayla's breath came in short, sharp gasps. Her heart raced. She thought back to when she'd taped the pictures on the fridge. The witch hadn't been in them. Nor had the rags.

A scratching came from the patio door. She turned to see what was out there. Nothing. Of course. Maybe the wind blowing through the branches of the oak tree, knocking them against the glass. But the tree wasn't close to the doors. Kayla could see something swinging from its branches, casting black shadows on the tarpaulin stretched across the pool. She crept to the doors, telling herself there was nothing outside. It was just the wind, or something caught in the tree; a plastic bag or cardboard from the recycling. There was no Black Annis. *But what about the pictures?* 

Kayla peered outside. The garden was as it had been. But ragged pieces of fabric swung from the tree's branches, dripping onto the patio beneath. Dark puddles grew where the drips landed. *Drip drip drip.* Tears pricked Kayla's eyes and gorge rose in her throat. The objects in the trees flapped once, twice, and the grinding sound came again as they did. It echoed and Kayla stepped back as something skittered across the patio. Then the lights went out. The house was drenched in darkness. A knock at the patio door. Then another. And another. Three knocks in slow succession. Kayla crouched low to the floor, whimpering. The stairs creaked and she turned to see a pale figure floating down the steps.

"Kayla?" It was Molly. She stopped at the foot of the stairs. Kayla could barely see her in the gloom.

"Molly?" Kayla wanted to go to her, but her legs felt heavy and her fingers tingled.

Three more loud knocks echoed through the house, this time from the front door. Kayla watched in horror as Molly moved in the darkness towards the door, her hand reaching for the handle.

"Molly!" she hissed. "Don't."

Molly paused. She turned to Kayla and as Kayla's eyes adjusted to the darkness, she saw the child's smile as Molly pulled the door open.

"You can go now," said Molly. "Granny's here."

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

Josephine writes tales that tend towards the darker side of fiction. She is represented by Alyssa Eisner Henkin of Birch Path Literary and is currently working on a rewrite of a middle-grade fantasy novel. Her work appears in Devil's Party Press Halloween Party 2019, The Siren's Call, and Fudoki Magazine. She has a story in Flame Tree Publishing's upcoming Spirits and Ghouls anthology.

Twitter: @Josephine1Queen Instagram: @writejosephinewrite

# The Trick with the Thumb | William Kitcher

A mom and her daughter came into my shoe store. The little girl, who was about seven-years-old, was upset about something. I couldn't determine what it was, but Mom clearly wasn't resolving the issue; she wasn't even engaging with her daughter. That happens a lot.

The little girl continued to cry, and I felt I had to do something to cheer her up.

I went over to her and squatted down in front of her, and said, "Hey, honey, I know you're upset. Do you want to see something funny?"

She just stared at me with a look of contempt, said nothing.

I forged on. I put my hands together and put them in front of me. "Do you want to see me separate my thumb from my hand?"

"I've seen that before," she said. "All you do is pretend your thumb is connected to your other thumb, and you slide it along your finger so it looks like it's become disconnected."

Almost a smart kid.

I pulled my thumb out of its socket. Blood gushed, and the remaining tendons wiggled.

She screamed and the two of them ran out of the store. At least it stopped the kid from blubbering.

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

William Kitcher's stories have appeared in many journals worldwide, including The Sirens Call, Halloween 2021. He enjoys baseball, Bob's Burgers, Better Call Saul, and other things that begin with "B". His novel, "Farewell And Goodbye, My Maltese Sleep", will be published by Close To The Bone Publishing in 2023.

# Incident on Riverside Drive | H.R. Boldwood

Late one October night, near the end of my shift, the radio crackles.

"4 Charles 54."

"4 Charles 54. Go ahead."

"Respond, 100 block Riverside Drive. See the man. Animal attack. Code 3."

"4 Charles 54, clear." I sigh and flip on my lights and siren. This call needs to wrap up quick. I have a late-night booty call with the wife.

Riverside Drive winds along the Little Miami. Lots of wildlife in the area, not all of it indigenous. People have reported alligators in that river, not to mention an assortment of other unusual creatures. "Find it, shoot it, and be done with it," I mutter, checking my watch.

Forty-five minutes 'til Cindy.

The location in question sits about eighty feet back from the shoreline. When I pull into the nearest driveway, two frantic kids and an adult male center in my headlights.

"Hurry! Hurry!" the kids scream. "It's over there!"

I climb out of the cruiser, flick on my flashlight, and take a closer look at the complainant. It's Ben Foster. He and his brood live a couple of miles away on Branch Hill Guinea Pike.

"Evening, Ben. What's going on?"

He points to the overgrowth along the shoreline and stutters, "I n-never seen a-anything like it, Frank. It's big. Really big."

"Everybody all right?" I ask, counting body parts and checking for blood.

Ben stares into the brush and shakes his head. "Yeah. We're fine. But that thing's gonna hurt somebody...or worse." I pull my Glock, and he snorts. "I said big, son. Think again."

Ben's a good ole boy. If he thinks I need more firepower, he'll get no argument from me.

"So, exactly what happened?" I yank my 12-gauge from the cruiser and load it with #00 buckshot.

"Well, me and my boys were out gigging on the river, and this big-ass monster...thing hopped out and—"

"Hopped? Like a frog?" I lean into Ben and take a whiff. "You been dipping into your 'shine again?"

"Nope. Not a drop. Frank, you know me. I never put much stock in that old wives' tale, but I think we crossed paths with the Loveland Frog."

I roll my eyes. "If you dragged my ass down here for that ridiculous—"

"The bastard was enormous! Hopped right at—"

"And you want me to shoot this giant frog with a shotgun? Ain't you got something better to do tonight? I know I do."

Thirty minutes 'til Cindy, damn it. I take a breath and put the shotgun back in its rack.

The taller kid juts out his chin. "My daddy ain't lying, officer."

"It wanted to eat us!" the smaller one shouts from behind Ben's legs.

"Don't believe me?" Ben asks. "Look for yourself. But I'm telling you. Take the 12-gauge."

Just what I want to do, traipse through the muck, chasing a giant frog. Probably some goofball kid in a homemade frog costume, sowing his wild oats. But I size up people better than most, and the fear in Ben's eyes is real. Maybe there's something else out there. Something that isn't a frog.

I press my uniform mic. "Dispatch."

"Dispatch, go ahead."

"4 Charles 54, 100 block Riverside Drive, leaving cruiser for a walk around. No assist required."

"Dispatch, clear."

The brush rustles nearby. Ben jumps. His kids burst into apoplexy.

"Why don't y'all sit in my cruiser while I check this out? And don't touch anything," I warn, eyeballing the kids.

Ben and company scuttle into the squad car. I pull the shotgun back out (more to appease Ben than because I think I need it) and get down to business.

The sky turns black as pitch. Drizzle begins to fall. I pick my way down to the river, slipping on wet rocks and tripping over tree roots. The closer I get to the water, the denser the overgrowth. Brambles, thickets, and branches rake my hands and face raw. Crickets chirp, critters scamper, and frogs croak loud enough to wake the dead.

The little bastards are laughing at me.

Lightning flashes and the wind picks up. I tromp through the underbrush, making as much noise as possible, hoping to scare Ben's monster out into the open to get a gander at it.

Two loud *whams* snap my attention back to the road. The cruiser alarm wails, and the light bar strobes, washing the treetops in berries and cherries. Ben and his kids squeal like stuck pigs. I sprint back through the thicket to the cruiser, incurring a fresh batch of cuts and scratches.

Ben hovers, mouth agape, beside my patrol car, his face fish-belly white. The cruiser's hood and roof are caved in. "Where are the kids?" I yell, sliding to a halt and prying open the rear passenger door. They're cowering together on the floor, shaking like a pair of human maracas.

"There was two of them, officer," the little one cries.

The older boy's eyes glaze over. "And they were huge. Huge."

"Two, you say?"

I pull the boys out of the car then do a 180 and stop cold. There, glistening in my flashlight beam, are twin trails of slime, running down the center of the road for as far as I can see. Well, I'll be a son of a bitch, I think, shaking my head. So much for my kids-in-a-costume theory.

The drizzle morphs into a downpour. I'm stuck in the middle of nowhere with civilians and a busted cruiser. Time to call for backup.

I swipe at the bloody scratches on my face and click the mic. "Dispatch."

"Dispatch, go ahead."

"4 Charles 54, requesting backup, 100 block Riverside Drive. Animal complaint unresolved. Cruiser...disabled."

"Dispatch clear, sending backup 100 block Riverside Drive."

"4 Charles 54, clear."

I glance at my watch and curse out loud.

Ten minutes 'til Cindy.

My mind whirs. Who else is on duty tonight? I let out a quiet groan. McCarty and Williams. The last thing I want to do is tell them that a pair of giant frogs squashed my cruiser. I need to wrap this up before they arrive and give them some plausible explanation for the damage.

Ben and his kids wait inside what's left of my patrol car while I follow the slime trails up, down, and around the random curves of Riverside Drive.

Lightning streaks across the sky. Thunder rolls and rain pelts the road. The slime rises to the surface and pools on the asphalt like oil. About a quarter mile up, the slime slick takes a hard left, back into the brush toward the shoreline. Why hadn't I grabbed the poncho from my trunk? A little late for that now, I suppose, trudging back into the weeds, aggravated enough to chew nails and spit rivets.

After several yards of wet scrub and deadfall, the riverbank dips. I lose my footing and fall, sliding all the way to the water's edge. I climb to my feet, wipe the mud off my ass, then scramble to find my gun and flashlight.

But the light's gone dead.

A stillness sets in. Rain plinks against the river. My boots make a sucking noise as I galumph through the muck. The critters go quiet. And so do the frogs.

I back away from the water, retracing my fall and almost trip over the shotgun. When I reach for it, my fingers brush against something slick—not just wet, but gooey. I tuck the 870 alongside my foot, then rake the ground with my hand, finding two separate skins, long and wide—like snakeskin, but much, much larger and fresh. Not dried-out like old reptile shed.

Two deep, loud croaks belch in the darkness. Ben's mutant frogs are close. "Come out, come out wherever you are," I call, picking up my 12-gauge. "Your asses are mine. This ain't fun anymore."

My mic crackles.

"4 Charles 54."

"54, go ahead."

"4 Charles 35 delayed. Riverside Road blocked by fallen tree. Rerouting. ETA approximately ten minutes. Current status?"

"4 Charles 54, scene secure for now. Proceed as able."

"Dispatch, clear."

Good, I think. With any luck, this will be over and done before they get here.

"Enough with the games, damn it. Come out. Now," I shout.

Something bounds behind me in the brush. A sharp squeal splits the stillness. I turn and peer into the dark. Skunk stench instantly fills my nose. My eyes water.

Crap on a cracker. Will this night ever end? There isn't enough tomato juice in the world to wash away that stink.

A huge splash breaks the water near the shoreline. I rack the slide on my 12-gauge and fire a round in the air to let the frogs know I mean business. The bastards scramble and submerge, taking the unnatural silence with them. Mother Nature and the Little Miami sound normal again, for now. Ben's giant frogs are gone. And unless I miss my guess, they likely won't return tonight. I may not have a carcass to show for my efforts but that won't keep me from claiming a well-earned kill.

By the time I take another trip through the skin-eating brambles and reach the road, McCarty and Williams are waiting beside my totaled cruiser, not even trying to hide their laughter. They're taking pictures with their cell phones and posting them on social media. The rat bastards.

"Did you get 'em?" McCarty runs his hand over the patrol car's crushed roof. "I hear you gotta gig those *really big* frogs with harpoons."

Williams chuckles. "From the look of things, I'd say the frogs won."

"Screw you, fat boy," I say. "It wasn't frogs. It was a black bear and I got it right between the eyes. Current carried it downstream. Problem solved."

A muffled, "Bullshit, you say," drifts from McCarty's cruiser where Ben and his kids are keeping dry.

Done with the shittiest night ever, I climb into the back seat of Williams' car and dry off with a towel from his trunk. Williams plops into the driver's seat, centers me in his rearview mirror, and huffs, "Bear my ass."

"You're probably right," I say, letting out an exaggerated yawn. "Nobody would believe that. You can mention the mutant frogs in your report."

I call Cindy on the way back to the precinct and tell her I've been delayed. All is forgiven, but our plans for a romantic night change. After I finish the mound of paperwork this goat rodeo created, she and the kids will join me for a special family meeting.

\*\*\*

Cindy greets me with a kiss as I slide into the murky water of the Little Miami. My dirty, scratched up skin sluffs off and floats downstream like jetsam. A thick green membrane filled with mucous glands takes its place. "That was a close one tonight," I say, eyeing my twin boys, perched wide-eyed at the water's edge. "Ben Foster called in. Seems two giant frogs attacked him and his kids. When I got to the scene, the warty bastards hopped onto my cruiser and totaled it. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

The little smart alecks aren't croaking now. They're huddled side by side, shivering in dread.

"You need to be more careful," I say, scolding them with my four front toes. "We have to keep a low profile. What if Mr. Foster had had his shotgun with him tonight? Think about that."

They lower their combined six pairs of eyelids and slowly hop away.

"It's just hormones, Frank." Cindy splashes me with her webbed green feet. "They're coming into their own. They aren't our little tadpoles anymore."

I flick my tongue at her and kiss the tastiest pair of frog legs this side of the Ohio Valley. "Maybe so," I whisper. "But tonight those toads should be thankful we aren't guppies. Guppies eat their young."

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

H.R. Boldwood, author of *The Corpse Whisperer* series, countless short stories, and finalist in the 2019 and 2021 Imadjinn Awards, specializes in horror, urban fantasy, and speculative fiction. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee and winner of the 2009 Bilbo Award for creative writing by Thomas More College. Boldwood's characters are often disreputable and not to be trusted.

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# Deep Within | Gabriella Balcom

Dev dug a hole, shoveling rich loam mixed with rocks and clay, then buried Leon. Given this remote location, his body would never be found.

As he prepared to leave, Dev heard a sound, glanced over his shoulder, and flinched.

Leon stood there, the soil beneath him churning as worms, larvae, and millipedes poured out. They slithered up his body, covering him head-to-toe.

Dev turned to flee, but Leon tackled him, knocking him to the ground.

More creatures emerged from the earth, swarmed the thrashing Dev, then vanished into the ground.

Now nothing remained of either man, not even bones.

The end.

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

Gabriella Balcom lives in Texas, and writes fantasy, horror, romance, sci-fi, literary fiction, and more. She's had 400+ works accepted for publication, and won publishing contracts for her books, On the Wings of Ideas (Clarendon House Publications) and Worth Waiting For (JayZoMon/Dark Myth Company). Black Hare Press published her novella, The Return. Dark Myth Publications published her Down with the Sickness and Other Chilling Tales. Others pend publication.

Facebook: Gabriella Balcom

# Summertime | Jacek Wilkos

Summertime was his favorite part of the year.

He loved the smell of night summer air, the rustle of trees, the breeze from the lake, and teenagers enjoying the time off.

He was always a people person. He loved to meet new people and play with them.

The season has already started and he's just finished packing for his first trip. He checked his travel bag to make sure the most important things were there – a hockey mask and a shiny machete.

He pulled the zipper shut and set off in search of a group of teenagers thirsty for summer.

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

Jacek Wilkos is an engineer from Poland. He lives with his wife and two daughters in a beautiful city of Cracow. He is addicted to buying books, he loves black coffee, dark ambient music and anything that's spooky. First he published his fiction in Polish online magazines, but in 2019 he started to translate his writing to English, and so far it was published in numerous anthologies by Black Hare Press, Black Ink Fiction, Alien Buddha Press, Eerie River Publishing, Insignia Stories, Reanimated Writers Press, Iron Faerie Publishing, KJK publishing, CultureCult, Wicked Shadow Press.

Facebook: Jacek Wilkos

#### Ears | Ash Hartwell

A scream wakes me. I don't know if it was the first scream, but it certainly wasn't the last.

If the first disturbs my slumber, the second chills me to the core. It echoes through the still night air before dying away to leave a silence far more disturbing than the shriek.

In the distance, voices rise in anger. A disagreement between drunks? Lovers? I strain to hear.

Then a woman's voice, loud and clear. She is cajoling. Pleading. Her exhortations rise in pitch. Becoming desperate.

Frantic.

Panicked.

Running footsteps, followed by a scuffle.

A squeal; cut short.

Then silence.

# Eyes | Ash Hartwell

I stand at the entrance to the alley and squint into the rising sun. The bodies lie halfway down, dark mounds on the slick cobbles.

I creep forward, letting the shadows cloak my advance. There are signs of a struggle. I see an overturned bin, sunlight sparkling off broken glass. Pizza boxes. Red, green, and white.

The scattered contents of a bright pink purse. A torn jacket.

I inch closer for a better look.

He's face down; head smashed while she sits, back against the wall. I see terror in her wide-eyed stare and the deep slash across her throat.

# Snout | Ash Hartwell

The air hangs heavy, trapped between high brick edifices. The rotting trash's stagnant stench fills my nostrils. But even this putrid smell of human decay is not enough to mask the light fragrance of the woman's perfume.

It's sickly sweet, and in its own way is as unpleasant as the trash.

But neither fragrance nor garbage disguises the sweet scent of death and the mouth-watering aroma of freshly slaughtered meat. I inhale the delicious bouquet of blood, letting its metallic tanginess overwhelm my senses.

Savouring the moment.

Salivating, I prowl closer.

The scent grows ever stronger, my hunger ever deeper.

#### Paws | Ash Hartwell

I shudder in anticipation. My insides twist and constrict with the exquisite tension of the moment. The ground feels cold against the pads of my feet and the hairs on the back of my neck bristle.

I crouch beside the man's body, but his flesh feels cold. Clammy.

The cobbles feel rough and uneven beneath my feet as I move to the woman's side.

Reaching out, I run my clawed finger down her soft cheek. Trace the jagged gash in her throat. The blood is thick, congealing. Sticky to the touch.

I thrust my hand deeper.

She feels no pain.

#### Teeth | Ash Hartwell

As I kneel next to the dead woman, my claws tearing at her throat, I know I've changed.

The thrill of the find? Blood lust?

Pulling my hand free, I lick the stickiness from my fingers. It tastes salty. Invigorating. The subtle coppery aftertaste is divine.

An hors d'oeuvre to kill for.

But I'm not sated. If anything, my hunger is growing.

I plunge my hand into the corpse's wound to tear a lump of fatty flesh free, which I devour feverishly.

Giving in to my primal urges, I bite into her tender flesh.

I raise my head and howl.

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

Ash Hartwell is currently writing his third novel. His first Tip of the Iceberg (2017) and his second The Crows of Smith's Booth (2022) both won Best Horror Novel on Critters(.)org. His short stories have appeared in a diverse range of horror and dark fantasy anthologies. Married to Moonraven, a genuine witch, Ash holds an MA in Creative writing from MMU.

Author Website: <u>The Writer's Slope</u> Amazon Author Page: <u>Ash Hartwell</u>

# The Watchers in the Forest | Jim Mountfield

They had many names, all of them emphasising their lack of stature: the Little Watchers in the Forest, the Small Whisperers, the Woodland Goblins, the Dwarfish Ones.

The people of my village had many stories about them too. In some stories, they were harmless, if sinister, fairy folk. In others, they were monsters who in previous times, when they'd been more numerous, had inflicted death, pain and horror all around. I noticed how younger villagers told the stories depicting them as fairies. Older villagers — who long ago, perhaps, had heard these things as historical facts, not fanciful tales — told the stories depicting them as monsters.

I lived with my grandparents in their house at the edge of the village. To me, the house seemed at the edge of civilisation too, because the forest, festooned with creepers and echoing with sounds of wild animals, started at the end of their garden. My grandfather didn't tell horror stories about those creatures like his peers did. No, he studied them. He collected pieces of lore about them, recorded alleged sightings of them, and formulated theories about their origins. He even hinted he had 'artefacts' belonging to them, though he kept these locked in a trunk, so neither I nor my grandmother ever saw them.

Of course, there was one question I kept asking: "Do you think they're out there *now*?" Despite the frequency of this question, he always replied patiently. Maybe he *enjoyed* answering it. Maybe repeating the answer strengthened his own belief in them.

Today, his kindly face wrinkled in contemplation, as if he'd never thought about the question before. "It's possible. Sometimes we don't appreciate how big that forest really is. Yes, some creatures – a small number of creatures, with intelligence – could stay undetected there. By being eternally vigilant, keeping on the move, never remaining in one place for too long..."

He stopped talking, because my grandmother had entered the room. She cooked traditional recipes and depended on the forest, on the nearest parts of it at least, for ingredients such as mushrooms, herbs, and berries. And because her legs were weaker than they used to be, she'd often send me with a basket into it, to gather those ingredients for her.

She didn't approve of my grandfather filling my head with ideas that might make me fear the forest.

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That was why she'd come looking for me. She ushered me away from my grandfather, gave me a basket, and sent me off along one of the forest paths. My assignment today was to follow the path to a part of the forest where a small river flowed by. Wild tamarind trees grew there and, in the shade about their roots, wild ginger plants sprouted too.

I used a stick with a hook at its end to pull down branches, so I could pick the tamarind fruit, and a trowel to sever a few rhizomes among the ginger plants. The area wasn't dense with trees and sunlight filtered down around me. I heard water babbling in the nearby river and birds singing in the surrounding treetops. I felt no fear of the Little Watchers. Surely they wouldn't be in a place as idyllic as this. No, they lurked in the darkness and silence of the deep forest...

Then, kneeling amid the ginger, I noticed new sounds, sometimes burbling like the river, sometimes chittering like the birds, but different from both. I looked towards the river and immediately forgot about the chore I was doing.

Younger trees grew along the far riverbank and past them, partly screened by their thin trunks, were two figures. I saw how small they were and would have taken them for normal children if it hadn't been for the peculiar sounds they were making. I put the trowel back in the basket, and lifted it and the hooked stick, and quietly made my way to a point on the river where some woodcutter had bridged it with a long, flat section of tree-trunk.

Once over the bridge, I tried to position myself where I could see the figures more clearly. But vegetation still stood in the way and I got no more details of their appearance. I just saw their outlines, child-sized but somehow not child-like, and heard their strange language, half-droning, half-piping.

Without warning, they fell silent and moved away from the river, deeper into the forest. I followed them. It surprised me that I didn't feel afraid. Their smallness neutralised any fear – how could they be dangerous? Instead, I felt excited, especially when I imagined the marvellous tale I'd be able to tell my grandfather.

We crossed tracts of flat ground and went up and down slopes of varying steepness. They moved quickly and seemed familiar with the terrain, whereas my feet toiled through the forest's carpet of ferns and orchids, over its spongy dirt and leaf-matter, around its jutting tree-roots. But my legs were longer than theirs and my strides covered more ground, and I kept up with them.

Then they stopped. I managed to stop too, before I blundered into their view. Instead, I hid against a tree-trunk a short way behind them. When I glanced around the trunk's side, I saw them crouching. The trees grew thickly here, which blocked much of the light, and I made out only the curves of their bowed heads and bent backs.

After a few moments' silence, I glanced around the tree-trunk again. This time they were no longer visible. I emerged from behind the tree, approached the spot where they'd been, and crouched too. A small hollow indented the ground there. Groping into it, my fingers encountered at its bottom a hard surface made of wood or metal, though the same black colour as the ground around it. I wondered if this was a hatchway, covering a hole just wide enough for those creatures to drop down.

Something creaked close by and I sprang up again. I heard more creaking, then noises of wood cracking and splintering. The patch of ground I was on started to sink. I realised the hole wasn't just under the hatchway – it was larger, and I was above it. A canopy of branches and sticks covered it, and this had been camouflaged in turn with a layer of dirt and old leaves. The canopy was strong enough to support the creatures' weight. But not *my* weight.

I plunged into the earth, struck a steep, uneven surface, and rolled down it amid a cascade of dirt and pieces of wood. Then I landed on a flat surface and stopped moving. For a time, I lay in darkness, stunned, covered with debris. When my wits returned, I noticed a ragged-edged but roughly rectangular opening above me, filled with shaded light. That was where the canopy had been. I reached back and my hand found a corner, caked in rot and muck. I reached further and found another corner, behind and above the first one. I'd fallen down a staircase — a hard staircase under the filth, one probably made of stone. The countless bruises I was aching from testified to that.

So, once, the opening above had formed an entrance to this staircase...

I fumbled in the debris around me until I found the hooked stick and the trowel. I thought both things might be useful if I had to defend myself. I also discovered fragments of a broken ladder. The ladder, presumably, had enabled the creatures to descend below the hatchway.

Then I noticed a second light ahead, fainter and further away than the one above. Though I was tempted to ascend the stairs behind me and clamber through the hole into the forest again, I decided to stay here a little longer. I imagined my grandfather's delight and fascination when I told him about this escapade a few hours from now... But I should explore and experience more, so I'd have more things to tell him... Besides, I was almost twice the size of those creatures. Could I really be in danger?

On my elbows and knees, I beetled towards the second light. I found myself at the top of a second, narrower staircase. The light wasn't level with me, but came from below, past the bottom of this new staircase. I went down it awkwardly, still on all fours. I suspected that the ceilings here had been designed for those diminutive creatures and I was afraid of smashing my head if I got up.

At the staircase's bottom, though, I saw it was possible to stand. The light radiated high into the darkness without revealing any ceiling. I'd arrived in a corridor of some sort, several strides across. I rose and trudged along it. The light emanated from a burning lamp that was attached to the long wall on my left. It was at the height of my hips – probably chest-height for the creatures. The lamp-flames showed me the corridor stretching away until the darkness swallowed it, beyond the fringes of their trembling, yellowy light.

On the wall beside the lamp was a panel, which I squatted by and studied. Though it was covered in grime, I made out a dense mesh of lines. The lines were of different colours and were horizontal, vertical, and slanted. Sometimes, while they wove between and across each other, they bent and changed course. The pattern made no sense to me, but I wondered if it represented a map.

I turned the other way and noticed the lamp-flames reflected in a row of windows. I went across and discovered how the wall there rose only to my face. When I stuck my hand over the top of it, I touched a flat, debris-strewn roof. I walked alongside it. Every few paces, the windows were interrupted by pairs of closed doors. Was this a terrace of miniature houses? I noticed how, behind a skein of dirt, the walls and doors were made of some smooth metal. Also, a crack of space separated the edge of the floor and the bottom of the houses. I knelt and pushed my fingers into the crack, wondering what was below it.

Then I detected a new odour amid the fusty smells of dirt and mould and the greasy one of lamp-smoke. It had a salty pungency, like that of seawater, but much stronger. I looked up from the miniature houses and realised I wasn't alone. Figures were emerging from the darkness ahead, entering the flickering lamplight. More than the two figures I'd followed down here. Three, four, five... I stopped counting as I saw a whole crowd of them approaching. The lamplight showed me features I hadn't observed in the forest, when the figures had moved too quickly and been partly hidden by its vegetation.

One feature revolted me – their hairlessness. Their pale, rubbery flesh made it look like their creator had fashioned them out of the same stuff it'd used for fashioning worms... or maggots...

The nearest one broke into a run. Simultaneously I screamed and, in panic, swung the hooked stick at it. The hook caught the side of its head and became embedded. The figure stopped running, twisted, and fell, and the stick was wrenched from my hands. I'd begun running myself — and behind me, I heard a sudden, frenzied pattering as dozens of pairs of small feet started to run too. I reached and bounded up the narrow staircase. Mercifully, if there was a ceiling above, it wasn't low enough to obstruct me.

Almost at the top, I felt small hands grasp at my back. I spun round, lunged with the trowel, and struck something. The gleam of the receding light showed me one of the creatures in silhouette, just before it keeled backwards. Then there was a crash of bodies and a cacophony of cries as the falling creature knocked down several more of them on the staircase below.

I ran to the next staircase, the one I'd clattered down originally. I hurtled up it and flung myself out through the hole where the forest-floor had collapsed. My speed never slackened. Away from that nightmarish, subterranean world, I ran, and ran, and ran, until I'd crossed the forest's boundary and was back in my grandparents' house.

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After hearing my account, my grandfather produced a key and unlocked his trunk of artefacts. He removed from it a book. "I'm almost afraid to touch this," he sighed. "It's incredibly fragile. I don't know what fluke of nature let it survive in the forest and stopped it rotting to nothing."

This was a week later. I'd recovered from my delirium and injuries and our neighbours had stopped pestering us – they finally seemed to have accepted my grandparents' story that my trauma was due to being chased through the forest by a massive wild boar.

The book's pages were covered in an alien-looking script. They sometimes contained pictures too, though these were severely faded and their images barely discernible. Nonetheless, as I stared at those pictures, I began to identify things. Bizarre buildings, streets, vehicles... Incredible cityscapes whose dimensions, angles, and architecture I'd never thought were possible.

Then, horribly, I realised that the cities were inhabited by them. *Thousands* of them.

"According to some legends," said my grandfather, "they were so savagely destructive that they declared war on the earth itself. And the earth had to retaliate. It slaughtered them and flattened their cities with massive storms and floods and waves of heat. They sank with their civilisation into the ground, and were buried beneath it, and a new world – ours – grew on top of their graves. But perhaps... Out in the forest, under that forest, a piece of one of their cities remains intact..."

I examined the books' faded pictures more closely. I wanted to see how they looked. "Their faces are hairless in these pictures, but the rest of their bodies have fur. In the forest, I didn't see them with fur."

"Those furs weren't their own," he explained. "In the olden times, it's said they wore the furs, the skins, of other animals."

"What? That's disgusting!"

But then my grandfather, glancing towards the study's doorway and seeing my grandmother approach, raised his hands to signal I should be silent. He drew me close with his long, shaggy arms and hugged me, making it look like we hadn't been discussing anything serious. We'd just been enjoying a moment of familial affection. At the same time, quietly, he extended a leg and with his long, dexterous toes, eased the book from my hand and placed it on the floor beneath his desk, where my grandmother wouldn't see it.

Smiling, my grandmother came forward. She noticed a louse amid the fur on my left shoulder, plucked it out, raised it to her rounded, furrowed muzzle, and popped it into her mouth.

#### **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, Horrified Magazine, The Horror Zine, Hungur, Schlock! Webzine, Shotgun Honey and The Sirens Call, and in several anthologies.

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# **Luck of the Irish** | *Charles Sartorius*

Another Saint Paddy's Day, but Bianca O'Hare wasn't in a party mood. The day after would mark the one-year anniversary of being unceremoniously dumped by long-time boyfriend, Jake Dullaghan. They'd met her first year at Norte Dame and had been an item ever since for almost a decade. The next step inevitable, or so she surmised. Wrong. Bianca's Irish blood boiled every time she thought about it; her favorite holiday spoiled by Jake's text the following day stating it was time to move on. No explanation why, no 'I'm sorry', just a curt dumping. She spent a good portion of that miserable day attempting to contact him via every possible venue . . . nothing. When that failed, she jumped in her Prius and bee-lined to that SOB's apartment across town only to find he'd vacated. Premeditation at its finest. The young woman wasn't stupid. She could take a loud and clear hint . . . right in the metaphorical ass.

Now a year later, she still strained to move on. Had a couple of meaningless relationships in the interim where she eventually did the dumping; thought it would make her feel better being on the other end of things. It didn't; her gloom ran unabated. A few of her girlfriends invited the lonely gal out for some green beer and laughs that evening. But Bianca declined; repeatedly. Feigned a headache and begged off. She was being slightly honest; she had an ache (an awful one), but not in her head.

This year's Irish holiday fell on a Saturday. Made it worse. A weekday would have been preferable as she could lose herself at the office where she toiled as a financial analyst. Operating from home wouldn't work. Without her overbearing boss hovering constantly, she couldn't concentrate on the tasks at hand. Way too many distractions. Instead, she spent her Saturday online randomly searching for interesting themes to peruse. Mostly overseas vacation sites. Yeah, that's what she needed; in a couple of months she'd take a far off holiday; get the hell out of Dodge.

Around dusk, while munching on an energy bar and gazing at pics of Scotland, a random pop-up sprung into view. Annoying pop-ups, but not as annoying as her dysfunctional and unreliable pop-up blocker. She'd done her research and thought she'd procured a rock solid solution to these pesky interruptions. Obviously, she hadn't.

The ad's dancing leprechaun pointed to the script below – a promise of gold, drinks, or luck – your choice. "What the hell," Bianca exclaimed aloud to the emptiness of her cozy apartment (she'd chosen apartment location over size, the opposite of her ex, Jake . . . at least before he moved). There was some fine print on the bottom (as usual) that Bianca ignored (as usual). She clicked on the link, provided the requisite checkmark answers to the *I am not a robot* disclaimer, and found herself on the green scripted site.

Not much to it, really. Just the three mutually exclusive choices as advertised in the pop-up and a promise of delivery within an hour. No further explanations. No specifics regarding the gold, drinks, or luck. Bianca contemplated her options. It'd be nice to have gold; drinks I have, but luck I could also use, she thought. The site never indicated the amount of any alternative, a big hunk of gold would probably trump luck; actually it would be one in the same – lucky gold.

But what if the gold or the luck were miniscule? Then a small amount of good fortune would be better, she surmised. Of course, this was all so silly; she wasn't senseless. She'd be doing this strictly for laughs. Something to get her mind off Saint Paddy's Day and that bastard Jake. She clicked the luck icon. Luck of the Irish.

Almost instantaneously, her computer died. Went blank. Shut down. No amount of effort booted it up again, and she was pretty damn good with computers. Tried everything. What the fuck? She sat there for a few moments, her mind racing, her heart not far behind. Time for plan B. Bianca grabbed her phone. Its dark blank screen told her all she needed to know.

Well, I'll just go across the hall and use Jill's computer. If she's out carousing and probably is, I'll head down the street to the Internet café on the corner; no need for panic, she thought.

Bianca slipped into her Skechers, grabbed a light jacket from the closet, and headed to the fourth floor apartment's only exit. She almost pulled her arm out of the socket when the door refused to budge. Tried again. Result unchanged. Her balcony's sliding glass and all five windows in the same state. Locked tight.

Trapped, she screamed at the top of her lungs while circling her apartment, banging her fists like a jackhammer on each wall. No response. That's when she heard the doorbell ring followed by three quick knocks.

Rushing to her entrance she tried again to pull it open. "Help me! Help me!" she screamed. "I can't open the door."

"You'll have to use one of your three wishes I'm granting you," the voice replied in a distinctly Irish accent. "Otherwise, you'll be captive inside for eternity."

"What are you talking about?"

"I haven't all day, missy. Wish. Now."

"Okay, okay. I wish the door unlocked and open."

"That's technically two wishes, but I'll let it slide as today's a special day."

The door swung open and in stepped a diminutive creature dressed in the green garb of a leprechaun. It was no leprechaun, however. At least none Bianca had ever envisioned. Its horrifically deformed skull appeared to have been sculpted with a workshop vise. Elephant-like skin glistened in the entry's light; a serpentine smile hinted at the sharp fangs beneath.

Bianca's scream was interrupted abruptly by unconsciousness as she fainted onto the floor.

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"Wake up; your beauty sleep is over," cackled the Irish monstrosity. The thing followed up with a sharp slap to Bianca's face as she lay prone on the couch. Bianca's eyes fluttered open as its putrid breath bathed her grimaced face.

"Since you refused to come to, I took the liberty of using your second wish to pull you from a death-like trance. Even so, I had to add a bit of physical stimulus . . . for insurance, you understand."

Bianca could feel the welt rising on her face, fear morphing into fury. "Get out now! I don't want anything more to do with you or your stupid wishes. Out!"

"Can't be done, missy. Did you not read the fine print? Each choice has consequences, one grimmer than the next. You chose the worst of the three . . . as most do. I'm not the piper, but I still must be paid. Slow, agonizing death is the only currency I deal in – you'll be boiled in a pot of melted gold, but not before I pour some down your throat. See? Your choice was the vilest. It embraces the other two options."

"I chose luck. Luck!"

"Aye, you did, missy. And luck you have. All bad."

"Then my third and last wish is to transfer my luck to Jake Dullaghan; he works for O'Malley Aerospace on the other side of town; he's always there on Saturday. Go!"

"But, you can't . . . "

"You have to grant me my third wish. You know you do! The piper will still be paid; nothing's lost here – the choice remains intact. Now get the hell out of my sight."

A slow smile etched across the thing's thin lips. "You're a devious one, missy. A devious one, indeed."

When things reverted to normal in the apartment, Bianca donned a green skirt and blouse, then sent a text her to friends - she'd be joining them after all.

Saint Paddy's Day was worth celebrating once more.

#### **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 short stories and music lyrics. His *The Missing Case of the Missing Case* is published in the *Murder! Mystery! Mayhem!* anthology. His songs, like *A Fart is the Best Response*, appear on Amazon and Apple Music.

# A Precautionary Measure | B. T. Petro

"Ms. Stevenska, I am Dr. Langstrom, the senior psychologist here at Hawthorne Clinic. I have reviewed your file from the past four days. Your sensitivity to light and sound as well as hyperactivity and hair growth have increased significantly. My diagnosis is that you suffer from clinical lycanthropy. But your condition poses no immediate medical harm to you."

"Then why am I restrained, doctor?" I asked.

"It's just a precautionary measure. As it is a psychiatric syndrome, I want to ensure that you do not harm others."

I snapped the straps like they were wet paper.

"Too late," I snarled.

#### **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 Afterdeath | Andrew Adams

My eyes flick open in a sudden burst of consciousness. Where I was before, what I was doing, and to a certain extent who I was, are all murky. There is not much to see outside of myself regardless. Patches of blinding blackness mixed with bright white light are scattered around the arid landscape. A whole lot of nothing, as some might say.

I begin to walk forward in the desert-like environment with no other effective option waiting in my back pocket. Step by step, there is no reason not to at least search for a solution elsewhere, wherever that is. If only I could remember where I was before this moment, it might give information as to what type of place this is now. Walk. Power through. Wondering and what-ifs are about as good as the facts they provide.

I can remember doing *something*, but what? What sort of purpose did I have before, what type of person was I? Amnesia is the worst part, as I can deal with darkness and empty spaces, though not remembering my own history is maddening. *Think...you*. What is my name anyway?

Then it hits me. Sirens and ambulances, I was in some sort of accident. This is death, my journey to the afterlife and a transitory stage where I am trapped between the realms of living and dead. Hopefully. There are doubts, questions, qualms, and discomforts pouring into my mind now, yet none of them offer the answers I seek.

Walk forward. Concentrate. Fight it. Take that vision of the accident and run with it, dive into it until finding something more. Seems to have been a car accident, if anything. In either case, no matter what happened before, the afterlife seems to be sitting more on the side of boring so far.

"Welcome," an unidentified voice speaks from multiple directions.

"Hello," I respond hesitantly, darting my eyes around in confusion to find the person. "I can't see anything...where are you?"

"Apologies, but I am everywhere around you. This space and I have adapted to one another." A shadow figure steps out of hiding from the pools of blackness coating the vacuum, though it appears to be more of an optical illusion than a person.

"I'm afraid I am terribly perplexed and don't remember how I arrived here. It was like I woke from a nap in this...area and had no recollection of what came before."

"Most have the same reaction. The transition period can be jarring, although you will adjust eventually. Or not." "I still don't understand. Or not? What happens if I don't adjust?" I begin to fret.

"What is there to explain? It will all make sense eventually, or it won't; there is no alternative outcome."

Make sense...make sense of what? Frustration begins to boil over with a lack of understanding toward the situation. "I have been putting off asking the main question, but am I dead?"

"You did die, ves."

"Is this heaven? Or...hell?"

"This is neither heaven nor hell," the shadow responds with an air of apathetic wisdom. "Though hell is where you came from before here."

The words tear through me like splintering glass. "Before here? You mean my life?"

"You have not been alive for nearly forty years."

"I...what?" I stammer, sounding like a different person to my own ears. "So there is no heaven for me either?" "You spent many years there as well, yet that time was long ago and occurred even before your walk through hell."

"We are in the afterlife?"

"The afterdeath."

"So this is it, then?"

"This is it," the figure nods. "You died nearly—"

"Forty years ago, yes, I remember how old I thought I was. Turns out that's just how long I was dead."

"That is correct. Your story is now finished and you as a person are finished. How was it?"

Many thoughts rush into my brain, if it can even still be called that. The afterdeath? Life as I knew it being time in hell? Didn't seem that bad at the time... "It was...I just wish I had more time to enjoy my true life, that's all. It went by so quickly, I can't even remember it."

"Most say the same, seems to be a recurring flaw. I hope you take comfort in knowing you are not the first to experience this fate."

"I am still afraid. What happens next? Where will I go now?"

"There is nothing next," the shadow states. "You will simply extinguish like a blown out candle. The flame doesn't wonder where its light went, it simply goes dark when it does. You should be thankful; you lived, you died, you

floated through heaven and stumbled through hell. But it is at an end now, as everything does and everything will. Perhaps even me, eventually."

"Eventually? You won't have an ending?"

"I haven't yet. The thought that I will cease to be is only an assumption, though it is likely." The figure continues to stand seemingly facing me, though in reality it is only waves of light configured to look human. All I see is ripples rolling in the darkness.

So much weight to carry, too much information to process. Last thing I remember was feeling content in life with all the ups and downs, yet now I am told that was hell instead? "There is one thing I still do not understand. Life is finished with the body, but how does death end?"

"That is specific to each person. Yes, death begins when your body dies, though it only ends once the soul extinguishes. In simple terms, that is the day you are no longer remembered in life. For some, that duration could take several generations or longer and few live for thousands of years through death. Then there are those who burn out quickly."

"Only forty years..."

"Yes, you would fit into the latter category. You must not have left many spiritual connections behind." Each syllable the shadow speaks cuts deeply, yet it presents the information impartially.

"I...I can hardly recall my life, all I remember is hell."

"Then you did not make a lasting impression even upon yourself. Tell me, why do you seem to repeatedly squander the precious gifts that are given to you? Life, a one-time affair, yet so insignificant in your eyes that you do not remember living. Heaven, the gift to follow, a paradise so luxurious that your memory forced it out forever. Even in hell, your last chance at forging a lasting impression to continue a legacy, you didn't quite reach four decades. Now you are finished and I sense much sadness."

"I don't...I don't know..."

"Then why mourn your own mistakes? Are you suggesting another entity forced this upon you?" the figure's voice booms. "In life you were indifferent and in death you did not grow. There is no helping you now."

My jaw begins to quiver as my palms sweat within clenched fists. This is too much for a simple human with simple needs. I never asked for much, but never hurt anyone to get it, either. "If I am beyond help...then what is the purpose of chastising me now? I have failed, right? The party is over; what do you want now, to kick me while I'm down? Who even are you?!" I try my best to stand up for myself, though it was never a strength of mine and my chest feels as if it may cave in. The darkness is dizzying without much sight for orientation.

"Would you choose to finally listen if I gave you advice? As I said before, everything ends, even death. And I cannot kick you, as your body is dead and your spirit is on the brink of expiration. That is why this space is black and the small patches of light are fading quickly; we are inside your soul and those areas are how much energy you have remaining."

I jerk my head around in a panic as several stretches of white light fade to grey and only a few more hover. "Once the lights are gone, I will be too?"

"That is correct."

"What will happen to you? Won't you cease to exist with me?"

"I am only a vision here to assist you. Once you reach your conclusion, I will travel on to help others, as I am doing while we speak now. You may call me Telos if it brings you comfort."

"Okay...Telos. I have only one more question and then I believe I will be ready for...whatever happens then. Are you the angel of death?"

"There are others responsible for preserving order in the universe. Some create life, while others facilitate death, yet I only oversee the checkout process, to explain it in human terms. Every story has a beginning, a middle, and then eventually, a final page. I am that last page," the voice states solemnly. "I hope I answered your question."

"As much as it will ever be answered, I'm sure. Alright, I believe I'm ready. There is still so much more I would like to experience, things I would like to know, but I suppose we can't choose our fate."

"No, we cannot, not even me."

I hesitate and then nod soberly. Yes, this is it; the moment I have feared for my entire life, or death, has arrived at my doorstep after dreading it for as long as I can remember, and apparently even longer than that. Random memories of foregone days buzz through before being replaced by another in a dizzying downpour of thoughts. Regardless of how I might feel, there is no other choice and I must go. I am not exactly leaving behind a life of luxury here. "Okay. Let's do this."

"Very well. It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance, no matter how brief the experience may have been." Telos approaches me, though the space has grown to be so dark, I cannot see the figure itself, only feel the shadow encircling me as it places its hand on my shoulder. The touch is cold, yet comforting, like reassurance of my acceptance to travel on. Telos' touch chills me to the bone, burrowing into my soul yet the sensation is welcome, inviting.

Spheres of light escape me, floating from my core and disappearing within the darkness. The shimmers are warm as they flutter before my face, the last reminders of life and death left behind. The urge to shed a tear burns behind where my cheeks should be, though icy tingling quickly replaces what remaining energy I have left. The following feeling could only be described as sweet relief that I didn't realize I craved before, the numbness, contentment, and absence of pain following what turned out to be a tumultuous time in hell...the removal of the thorn at long last.

The metaphysical manifestation of my body goes stiff without further use for it, and in a split second between existence and oblivion, a microscopic moment of complete mindfulness, every question I ever held in the back of my mind is answered in full. Why I was here, where I am going, and what the purpose of being was to begin with.

"Thank you..." I gasp as rapidly moving visions from my life and all the way through the cosmos between my brain and eyes like a rolodex meant to document my entire existence. Yes, my story is complete and I lay down my arms and feel foolish for ever doubting my own direction. Well done, universe. Black light and icy energy expel from my being to become one again with the overseers and the benefactors as my consciousness is cut off.

"You are welcome. I am glad you understand," Telos states. The entity absorbs the remainder of the vacated soul and burns brightly for a second before imploding upon itself and moving on to the next passengers, leaving behind a void where neither light nor sound can escape.

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

Andrew Adams is a whiskey enthusiast, horror fanatic, welder, and lover of all things metal. He is the author of Constructing Entropy and the Symposium of the Reaper series...though this is only the beginning of the depths to be dug.

Amazon Author Page: Andrew Adams Instagram: @andrew adams author

#### **Hunted** | *Nickolas Cook*

The hunter raised the rifle scope to his eye, sighting down through the mountain trees. A fierce, hair-covered, human-like face jumped into focus in the distance. He'd been tracking the mythical beast for days. He pulled the trigger. The face exploded in a spray of crimson. Bits of brains and bone shards rained down. He smiled. Behind him, something growled. He turned to fire at the beast he'd never heard coming. His rifle jammed. The creature lunged, grabbed his leg, snapping the femur with one quick jerk. He screamed. The thing began to drag him away. It would feast tonight.

# The Prize | Nickolas Cook

The sea was violent today, tossing the small craft like a child's toy. Barely able to stay upright, the crew were having a hard time bringing in the long nets trailing behind them. Disgusted, the captain looked at their meager haul. He saw the pile of writhing fish below suddenly lift, then fall again. Something big was under them. Maybe something worth real money. Climbing down into the slippery collection of fins and bulging eyes, eager to discover a heftier prize beneath, he stuck his arm deep into the fish. Something snagged his hand. The captain's 'prize' had sharp teeth.

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

Nickolas Cook lives in the beautiful southwest with his wife and a pack of small dogs, surrounded by mesquites, cacti and wild desert animals. He is the author of several indie horror and noir novels, including the hit mashup, "Alice in Zombieland".

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# Welcome to the Province! | Ursula Rathensteiner

Tom pointed to a tombstone belonging to a certain Robert Graser, highlighting it with the flashlight of his cellphone. A fading black and white picture showed a fairly young man with a narrow face, small, dark eyes, and short, presumably black hair. Maybe it was a shade or two lighter, but his portrait wasn't clear enough for determining his exact hair color. The cellphone flashlight wasn't as ideal as daylight for that either. Under the man's picture the dates framing his life: Born in 1911, died in 1937. "That's him," Tom whispered, his voice trembling slightly, "the Beautician." He had practiced this dramatic effect with his older sister Marie for days.

Together, they had woven a gruesome tale. Marie had come up with the idea of creating their own serial killer to prove to their cousins from the big city that the province had its own dark legends. And, if possible, scare the crap out of them. Despite her 19 years, Marie could be rather childish and mischievous sometimes. And creative. Tom had been hooked immediately, as he was sick of their cousins making fun of their provincial hometown and their allegedly backward upbringing.

Thus, the siblings had special plans for the first night of the traditional family celebrations, to which all lines of the Mayers gathered for at least a weekend of feasting and fun – the very adulty adults' words, not theirs! – in their provincial hometown. Back to the roots, back to family. AKA a boring waste of precious time, as Tom, Marie, and especially their cousins from the city put it. All of them were too old for Barbies, toy trucks and trains, or other games now, so they usually spent most of the time between the feasts in front of the TV. If they couldn't agree on a movie, they chose to be glued to their phones, scrolling through their social media, or watching stupid clips. Boring as hell, too. But not tonight. Marie and Tom would take their cousins on an adventure. "Tonight, we'll show you something you've never expected," Tom had whispered into Tina's ear during dessert, employing an ominous and dark tone. That had only earned him a skeptical look from his precocious younger cousin. His one-year younger cousin, to be precise. He tried to ignore it and turned to Paul, his other cousin. They were the same age, 17. "It will be fun, I promise." Just as an afterthought: "If you are man enough and not a coward. But I guess you'll manage. I am sure young Tina will be brave enough for it."

Tom could see Paul's face falling slightly. He knew he had his cousin by implying a lack of courage, especially in comparison to his younger sister. That's undoubtedly how their dynamic worked. "It will be fun," Paul said with determination. Tina agreed, grudgingly. Tom exchanged a triumphant look with Marie. "It's settled then. We'll leave as soon as the parents are too much into their drinks and conversation to say much."

As planned, all ended up at the graveyard about an hour later, in front of the tombstone Tom and Marie had selected for this extraordinary occasion. The four of them believed themselves to be alone. No surprise there. None of the usual visitors came to the small-town graveyard during the night. Perfect timing for telling scary stories, one could say. The almost full moon helped with creating an eerie atmosphere. A rather fortunate background for their dark legend. Strong winds or even a thunderstorm would have been even better. A screeching owl would have set the stage marvelously as well. But neither the weather god nor nature was on their side. Thus, Tom and Marie had to make do with what they got. Marie stepped out of the way and let Paul and Tina get closer to the grave. They seemed mildly interested, examining the picture on the tombstone. Both had their own cellphone flashlights shining on the small picture of the man with dark hair. "Look at the guy! Doesn't seem scary at all, I know, just some dull nerdy dreamer," Marie said. "But looks can be deceiving and are important in this case. Especially in this case."

"I bet you can't guess why he is called the Beautician." Tom turned to their cousins.

"Really? He could just have worked as a beautician and killed his customers," Tina said, bored.

Marie laughed condescendingly. "It's not as easy as that. And much, much more horrifying."

"I bet." Deadpan. If it weren't for the darkness of the night and the cellphones only lighting the tombstone in front of them, everyone could have seen Tina rolling her eyes. She wasn't impressed in the slightest.

"What was his deal?" Paul asked, his interest piqued.

"The Beautician was an insecure creep, if you ask me," Marie said, nonchalantly.

"He ... well, it's really gruesome," Tom whispered, putting excitement into his voice.

"Whatever." Tina took a step back with an attitude. Paul was still examining the picture of the dark-haired man.

"It is said that the Beautician only killed women he was in love with because of their beauty," Tom explained.

"He himself was very awkward and shy. And not very attractive, as you can see," Marie recounted, setting up the stage for her brother to continue the story and reveal the ghastly truth. Their invented truth.

Tom waited until he had Paul's and Tina's full attention; even his younger cousin granted it to him quite soon due to his narrating gifts. "Maybe the women found him strange or ugly or had other reasons for rejecting him. But that's what they did, what they all had in common."

"And he wasn't man enough to take their rejection," Marie said. "He followed the girls, stalking them for weeks, waiting for an opportunity. And when that arose, he grabbed them from behind and ..."

"Well," Tom's voice was barely more than a whisper again. "He grabbed them from behind. First, he put his hands over their mouths, muffling their screams. As he needed them completely still for his actual work, he also used chloroform on them. But his job wasn't done yet, no."

"The Beautician definitely wasn't finished with the women," Marie commented.

"When he was sure that he was still alone, cloaked by darkness, the Beautician began his actual work," Tom continued.

"With precision, I might add," his sister said from behind. Tina and Paul were listening even more closely now, enjoying the story.

Tom paused, for effect. And clarified with gory details: "When the women's voices were silenced, the Beautician knelt on the floor next to them. Then he started his beautification, as he himself put it. He cut his victims' faces, and carved lines into them, making them gruesome and ugly to behold. The most important part of his work, giving them inner beauty. He let them gain half-consciousness, let them feel the pain and the terrifying alteration of their faces. Then he strangled them. The women were found the next day, dead and hideous."

"Never heard of that story!" Tina interrupted.

"Can't know everything, can you?" Marie chided.

"Well, no," her younger cousin admitted. Paul was still silent, looking at the tombstone, pensively.

"How many women did he kill?"

Tom had a quick answer to Tina's question: "They found five women in total, all had been strangled and had disfigured faces."

"How did they catch the Beautician?" Paul asked suddenly.

"They didn't really," Marie said ominously. She was fast in continuing the story how she and her brother had imagined it. "They didn't exactly find him. They were called to a suicide case and found a letter in the man's house, in Robert Graser's house. A letter addressed to his sister, in which all the women and their deaths were described in grisly detail. The Beautician had wanted to make them more beautiful inside by making them hideous outside. His own literal or twisted interpretation of the saying." An obsession with Dorian Gray might have had an effect on this part of the story too.

"He maybe also wanted to show the world the women's ugly side," Paul mused. Someone was on the right track.

"Could be," Marie agreed, "but we'll never know. At least not for sure. The letter was all the explanation to be had. The police closed the case based on that letter, despite Graser's sister claiming that it wasn't her brother's handwriting. She probably didn't want to believe that her beloved brother Robert was a killer, though. She was actually the one paying a lot of money to the church for his grave and had a tombstone erected later with the picture of Robert Graser. As it's still here, someone seems to continue the payment. But no one knows who."

"Perhaps the Beautician's ghost," Tina joked sneeringly and made funny clawing movements with her hands.

"Maybe. Someone also seems to regularly wipe the internet of information on Robert Graser. You won't find anything. Only some of us townspeople still know the dark story of the Beautician," Marie ended with a convenient piece of information.

A chilly wind had eventually picked up. The four of them called it quits and went back to the house. Their trip to the graveyard had definitely been more fun than sitting at home staring at their phones. As they exited, Paul stopped and listened. He thought he heard something. Footsteps, perhaps? He looked around carefully but couldn't see anything in the near dark besides his sister and his cousins walking a few steps in front of him. He even checked behind them. Nothing. A strange feeling crept up his spine. He didn't want the others to think that he was scared or a nervous coward, though, so he decided not to tell anyone. He kept it to himself, although he still thought that the uncanny noise was accompanying them. It's nothing! Paul tried to calm himself. And it probably was nothing, because they reached the house safely shortly before midnight. Both sets of parents were still up, drinking wine.

After a boring meal, the kids decided to pay a visit to the so-called city center. Due to the lack of anything better to do, they sat down in one of the cafés, enjoying the afternoon sun. They had just gotten their not-so-fancy types of coffee and started chatting away when a young man came to their table. He only looked at beautiful Tina and ignored

the others. The dark-haired guy in jeans and a shabby pullover took a deep breath. "Hello, hi," he stammered, his voice rather high. Another deep breath. "Are ... are you Tinabella from Insta?" he asked eventually.

Tina seemed flattered for a second to have a fan from social media. "Well, actually, I am."

The young man looked satisfied. "Good. I knew I was right. I just came here to see you," he said, more to himself. "I always wait for your pictures. You are so beautiful. Can I buy you something, and we'll have our own table?" he added.

Tina blinked. She looked closer at the young man, from top to bottom. Her eyes got smaller, her mouth thinner. "Thanks, but no thanks. I can actually do quite nicely without some nerdy province knight," she said. The guy looked a little shell-shocked and didn't move.

"Didn't you hear what my cousin said?" Tom asked sharply. "Get lost!" Paul and Marie didn't say anything, feeling slightly uncomfortable, keeping their eyes on their coffees. Tina's fan seemed to eventually get that he wasn't welcome at their table and went away. He took one long look over his shoulder at his idol.

"Stupid creeps! Who do they think they are?" Tina muttered under her breath.

"Well, yeah, he was a little direct and pushy," Marie admitted, "but still ..." She found the whole situation extremely distressing. She didn't like those guys who made such plump passes at her cousin, but she thought that Tina's reaction was at least as disrespectful. To be honest, she even felt a teensy bit sorry for the guy she knew from childhood.

"Who is that weirdo anyway?" Tina still seemed annoyed.

"Didn't Herb or some-such-funny-name go to elementary school with you, Marie?" Tom asked.

Marie nodded, still uncomfortable. "Isn't he the town's IT genius now?" Marie nodded again: "I think so." Luckily, Paul changed the subject then: "How will we survive Day Two of family dinner?"

Paul's bloodcurdling scream woke everyone in the house still sleeping at 8:15 am the next morning. Panicked, he scrambled up from the couch and ran out of the living room; he couldn't look at the empty mattress on the floor where his sister was supposed to be curled up under the duvet. Paul was still in his PJs, clutching his smartphone in his left hand, searching the rooms downstairs frantically. He wanted to call for his sister, but his lips didn't let her name pass them. Marie, holding a mug of coffee, came running towards Paul. "What's wrong?" she asked, worry creeping into her face too when she got a good look at her cousin. "I ... I don't know. Tina. The mattress is empty."

"Maybe she's in the bathroom upstairs," Marie tried to comfort him. Paul shook his head, sadly. Wordlessly, he showed his smartphone to his cousin. His hands were trembling violently, Marie noticed.

"What's the matter?"

Indistinct parental voices could be heard from upstairs. Tom, who had come down the stairs faster than the older Mayers, joined them, blinking his eyes groggily. "Hey, man, it's early," he began and stopped short when he looked at the phone's screen. It showed Tina's profile on Instagram. There was a new profile picture as well as some posts. The caption of the most recent one, following a few images from their graveyard adventure, read 'Miss Tina Gray'. Sickening.

"This can't be real ... It just can't be ..." Marie didn't want to recognize the disfigured face of the young girl in the picture. Face slightly blotched and cut up several times. So many red gashes, on her cheeks, over her eyes, lips, everywhere. That couldn't be her beautiful cousin. No way. "Some stupid online prank?" Tom suggested, hopeful, but uncertain.

"What happened?"

Tina's and Paul's father had reached them now and seen their stricken faces. None of the kids answered. "What happened?" he asked again, louder. "Where's Tina?" Still no answer. Just his son's hand reaching out, showing him the screen of a smartphone. "No ...," he wailed, as he saw his daughter's open social media profile on it. Paul knew exactly what his father was thinking about. Tina had sleepwalked a few times before and could have gone out of the house in the middle of the night without them noticing. She could have become the first victim of the small town's very first real killer and possible legend.

She really could have.

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

Ursula Rathensteiner calls Austria (Europe) her home. She supports other authors working as a ghostwriter or proofreader/editor, mostly in her mother tongue German. She also writes for herself both in German and English. She thinks of herself as a collector of stories (not bones, mind you!): She is an avid reader and passionate moviegoer. And probably a bit of an anglophile.

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# The Tragedy of Gus Gústafsson | Russell Epp-Leppel

The morning sun blazed red over Vopnafjörður Bay, and Gus Gústafsson's head was swimming. Blood pounded in his ears like the waves beating the nearby shore, and an icy shudder passed through his body, for his clothes were soaked with dew where he lay upon the sod. What was he doing here, he wondered.

As he rose unsteadily to his feet, he fought to recall what had occurred the night before. He knew he had been out for his evening stroll along the beach when he saw *something* fall from the sky, and it struck a hilltop only a few hundred meters distant. When he then ventured inland to investigate, he had discovered a fresh crater, but the object resting at its center was unlike any meteorite he had ever seen. The strange thing was crystalline in structure but followed an unearthly geometry, and it glowed in a color he couldn't identify, as though light were refracting through impossible angles. Gus knew not what this queer thing was nor how it could be, but its extraordinary nature seemed to beckon to him like a siren. He could only watch, mesmerized in horror, as his arm reached out to touch the scintillant quasicrystal. A blinding flash followed, then darkness, and now here he was, still atop the hill overlooking the bay, but the crater was nowhere to be seen. Where had it gone? Was it ever there in the first place?

He reeled and clasped a hand to his aching temple as the memory kept repeating itself in his mind. It was incredibly detailed but impossibly strange. What had happened? *Had* it happened? Had it all been some bizarre dream? He cast a bleary eye around, searching his surroundings for any evidence to the contrary. When he found none, another shudder passed through him, but this one was brought about not by the morning chill. This one was born of fear.

Existential dread presented Gus with two distinct possibilities. If his memories were real, then he could have easily been killed by the falling object, but if they were nothing more than a figment of his imagination—which the dearth of evidence now seemed to suggest—how could he be sure that anything was real? Was *he* real? The throbbing pain in his temple certainly indicated as much, and grappling with this philosophical quandary wasn't doing it any favors. Thus, with a weary shake of his head, he cast the gloom from his mind, then stretched, yawned, and trudged back toward town.

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Although Vopnafjörður had been his home since birth, Gus felt upon arriving as though he were seeing it for the first time, looking out through a fresh pair of eyes. The entire place somehow seemed livelier with a youthful exuberance. The colors were more vibrant, and the surfaces less worn. This unexpected freshness caused him to once again question reality.

His pondering abruptly ceased, however, when he realized that it was not the world which had changed, but rather his perception of it. The events of the previous night were a strange and frightening mystery, but whatever they may have been, they had granted him a new perspective. With a reminder of his own mortality fresh in his mind, Gus Gústafsson felt happier to be alive on this morning than he ever had before. He therefore decided to celebrate life in the best way he knew how, and it didn't take long to find someone to celebrate it with.

She was a honey blonde with eyes like hurricanes, and neither an elf nor a troll but attractive in a simple, humble way. The sight of her caused his heartbeat to quicken, and in the space of a dozen rapid pulses he hailed her and introduced himself.

"Gus Gústafsson?" She let out a snigger of disbelief. "That must have created some confusion around the house growing up, having the same name as your father."

Gus chuckled politely but looked away.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize your relationship was a sensitive subject."

"It's not sensitive," he assured her. "It's not existent. I only know the man from a single photograph and what my mother has told me. According to her, he was just a one-night-stand who left me with nothing but his name and his good looks." Gus snorted and rolled his eyes. "Oh, now I'm sorry; I'm blathering on and you probably have no interest in a stranger's life story. Sorry to bore you."

"No need to apologize. It's not a bad story." She smiled and brushed the loose hair from her face. "And besides, Gus is a handsome name, and those looks aren't so bad either. I'm Anna."

"Now that is a pretty name." Gus grinned. "But it's got nothing on your looks."

"Thank you," she said, blushing as red as the morning sun. "Now I suppose it's my turn to bore you with my life story, if you'll hear it."

"I can think of no way I'd rather be bored," he replied with a wink.

"Come on, I know a cozy little kaffihús where I'll tell you all about it."

That was how it began, with coffee. Coffee then turned into a movie; a movie turned into dinner, and dinner turned into a night out on the town with dancing, drinking, a walk on the beach and a snapshot by the old pier before retiring to her home. It was a wonderful day followed by a wild night of joy, laughter, carefree abandon, and uninhibited passion.

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When Gus awoke, Anna was gone. Or rather, he was gone. The morning sun was blazing red over Vopnafjörður Bay, and he was once again lying on the hilltop, soaked with dew, with his pulse pounding in his ears. This time, however, a crater was there as well. The alien object was absent from its center, but by the presence of the crater alone, Gus reasoned that everything which had happened since he last awoke had merely been a fantastically vivid dream. This is what he told himself as he trekked back to his house, rubbing his aching eyes and struggling to clear his head all the way.

Once inside, he headed straight to the bedroom for a dry change of clothes and a warm blanket, but he saw something in the hallway which froze him in his tracks. It was the sole photograph of both of his parents, hanging on the wall as it always had. He'd seen it a thousand times before, but now he could scarcely believe his eyes. How had he never noticed before? The young woman in his father's arms was Anna, and the man embracing her—the man whom Gus had always identified as his father—was him!

#### About the Author:

Russell Epp-Leppel is always exploring his love of science fiction, fantasy, and horror by dissecting narrative conventions and reassembling them in new ways. He lives with his partner and their small menagerie in the Philadelphia area, where he can be found haunting the local woods.

Twitter: @leppeppel

# The Cat in the Tree | Brian Rosenberger

A crowd gathered to view the cat in the tree. No one in the neighborhood claimed the cat as their pet. The feline seemed to be a neighborhood stray. Truth be told, the whole scene seemed somewhat odd to the residents but none could specify why exactly.

One member of the crowd, Bob, recounted a story about his cat, Zemo, attacking a squirrel. Zemo brought the still living rodent into his house. Story over, Bob stumbled his way back to the bar, Happy Hour not over and half price appetizers more important than the cat's fate.

Occasionally, a distant "meow" was heard.

Someone wondered how it got up there.

"Probably hunting birds."

A few pointed out there were no birds. Not a one. The fire department had been called. While the crowd waited, it was determined that's not a cat, as the crowd was devoured or fled in terror.

Survivors determined, that's not a tree either.

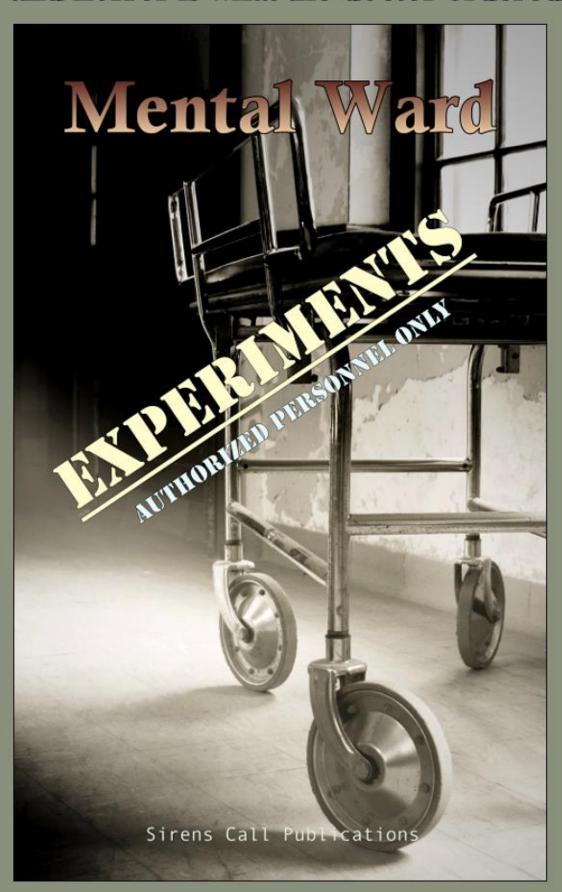
### **About the Author:**

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

**Facebook:** <u>Brian Who Suffers</u> **Instagram:** @brianwhosuffers



Step into a world where sanity is left behind, and horror is what the doctor ordered!



<u>AVAJILABLE ON AMAZON</u>

# Blindly in Love | *Ian Klink*

Jorgen heard her say "I love you, Hans," as she prayed for the friendship in her life. He should not have been spying on her in the church, but he knew she was cheating. That night he followed her.

She slowly walked down the rugged rock path in the foggy moor as her betrothed Jorgen was never too far behind. He was careful to never make a noise to let her know he was following. For having such poor eyesight, she was moving fairly well, only stumbling a few times on the sharp rocks along the path.

Although their marriage would not be for another month, their wedding was all the villagers could talk about. It would be the celebration of the decade said the bread maker, who was making a special cake. Every prominent member of the community was contributing in some form or another. The dressmaker had been sewing for months for her dress, the minister had rehearsed his message for the flock, and the florist cultivated rare flowers in her garden for the altar. Everyone would be there, watching them come together in a union of love, which is why he fumed at her wondering faithfulness to him.

Jorgen had suspected she was having an affair for days, but he did not want to believe it. How could someone from her class be so insolent to someone of his stature from the family the village was named after?

As his mind wandered through this travesty, he let loose of his grip on his hunting knife. It dropped to the ground and broke a twig.

She spun around and squinted her eyes to see better.

He had dropped to the ground, hidden by the tall, wet grass soaking his clothes.

"Who is there?" she asked.

Jorgen found himself holding his breath. He needed to see where she disappeared every evening.

"Hello?" she asked again. When nothing answered she felt assured, turning around to head down the path, her feet kicking pebbles as she walked.

"Just wait," he whispered, grasping the knife through his damp fingers. "When I catch you cheating it's over for us... and you."

The end of the path came to an end in front of the cemetery gates and they moaned in rusted pain as she pushed them apart. The fog had spared this part of the countryside showcasing all of the tombs of fallen villagers through the years. To her immediate left was Ample Yohansen, a former doctor of sorts, and to her right was Michelle Carpenter, a rumored witch at one point but just a skeptic of sorts. She squinted, holding her hands out as she moved past the gates.

He waited a few seconds before entering the cemetery. A crow from far away announced his entrance so he ducked quickly behind Yohansen's grave, fearing she saw him. When he felt safe, he leaned around the grave to see her still walking, almost lost in the dark. "Where are you going?" he softly asked. He slammed the base of his hunting knife on the grave and followed her.

At the edge of the cemetery was a large pond, filled with nasty algae and rotted lily pads. She stumbled her way to the edge of the pond where she stopped.

He came up behind her, held out his knife, and yelled, "You cheater!"

She startled with a scream and turned around. "Why did you follow me?"

"I knew you were sneaking out every night and had to see who you were cheating on me with. I'll take care of you!"

She held out her hands at him to stop. "No! No! I'm not cheating at all! I'm feeding it."

"What are you talking about?"

"I have to feed it!"

Its head poked out first, small for the body Jorgen knew was under the water still. The disgusting brown water dripped off the lizard-like scales, lifting the massive body further into the shallow waters. He had heard of the legends, but seeing them with his own eyes froze him. His mind would not let him register he was looking at a real water horse. "Step away from her!"

"No, please," she begged, squinting enough to see the blade in his hand. "He is harmless."

"They are not harmless. They kill!"

"Not this one! He's my friend!"

Ignoring her pleas, he rushed past her, wielding his sharp knife as the moonlight was reflecting upon it. Before he felt the pain, the beast had bitten down on his arm, ripping it away. He screamed, piercing the harsh skin of the

creature as many times as he could before the blade broke off into its skin. He watched in agony as the handle fell to the ground and as soon as he looked up, the teeth of the beast sunk right into his eyeballs.

She watched in horror as the two things she loved the most in the world battled until one remained, nodding its head in appreciation for the meal before descending back into the bog. "I love you, Hans," she said through squinty, teary eyes.

#### 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 short stories for The Creeps, The Siren's Call, and Chilling Tales For Dark Nights audio cast. Klink shares his talents as a teacher of Computer technology/Multimedia studies in Pennsylvania.

# The Stray | Lee Andrew Forman

The scent of rot permeated the air; I knew I was close. I could almost taste the stench. I took each step with care—silence was essential. My eyes searched the darkness between the trees, looked for any sign of its bodily form. I tried to keep my imaginings to nil, as I didn't want to spoil my initial reaction when my eyes finally witnessed its flesh. I wanted to see the dream for what it was, not for what it could be.

Movement in the brush ahead halted my breath. I listened to the silence that followed with fierce intent. The musky air thickened. But I heard no steps approach.

My heart pounded with a concoction of fear and excitement. I'd been hunting this legend since I was a boy. Those tales told around a fire, or with a few drinks—they stuck with me. They unraveled my focus on all other things. This was what I lived for. To find out what it really was.

Local lore said it might have once been human, an orphan raised by the wilderness. Others said it might be nature herself, risen from the earth to take vengeance upon anyone it could. No matter its origin, the stories said it traveled on all fours, and its nature was vicious and feral. If you think it's close, it's already too late. That's how the stories always ended.

A release of breath shattered the silent night. It was not against the back of my neck. I slowly turned to see what I yearned so badly for. My eyes went wide and took in all the moonlight had to offer. She towered above me, bare-breasted and malformed beyond description—an amalgam of evolutionary paths borrowed from a dozen species. But aside from her eyes and nose, her face was close to human.

She stared down at me as she reared up on her hind legs and let out an animalistic vocalization of aggression. I put my palms up and backed away a step to show I wasn't a threat. She returned to four legs on the ground, her face now level with mine.

She approached, seemingly curious, and sniffed about my shirt collar. Her smell was so awful I could barely breathe. But I was content in that moment. I finally found what I was looking for. A smile spread across my lips as she ran her tongue along my neck.

Then the pain of her teeth sunk in. I heard the rending of my flesh in her mouth as it was torn from my neck. Agony, shock, disbelief, all surged through me in crashing waves. Her front leg pinned me to the ground. My ribs audibly broke beneath the weight.

Gasping for breath and drowning in my own blood, I struggled to gaze upon her one last time before she feasted on my body.

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

Lee Andrew Forman is a writer, editor, and publisher from the Hudson Valley region in New York. Lee has published three books to date, *The Bury Box, Zero Perspective*, and *Fragments of a Damned Mind*, along with numerous short stories in multiple anthologies. He is a co-owner of Sirens Call Publications, a regular contributor to *The Lift*, and writes non-fiction pieces for various periodicals.

Instagram: <u>@LeeAndrewForman</u>
Author Website: <u>Lee Andrew Forman</u>

# I Made My Decision | Shannon Acrey

It was the hottest day of the year, but it was not the reason.

Their sphere, which had kept them protected and shielded from all the cosmic radiation, became their prison too. It is true. They refused to believe that they were not immortal. Forgot they were never in control.

So, one day the Earth just stopped turning.

They struggled to find a clue to explain this unnatural occurrence. The Earth just stopped. Day and night, night and day, there was no change. Under the blasting solar rays, my decision was made.

As the humans scrambled to adapt to endless heat or endless cold—fought to hold back the coming madness—they still did not want to admit they were the ones who had set chaos in motion. Blame was placed on the Earth's axial change, the solar year cycle, an asteroid, carbon emissions, or deforestation! Whatever their theories, all of them were wrong.

They forgot they were never in control because I will always make the final decision.

Their say will never have any power because they will never learn that great civilizations will always crumble and fall, just like the ones before. There is a reason for this. A right of wrongs must be met, a resetting of time to shake up their thoughts. For me to remain fully stopped, what seems like millennia to them, just a blink of an eye for me and the cosmic witnesses.

Foolish humans.

To think you had any inkling of the workings of my nature. My axis is not fixed, my celestial body wobbles. Time cannot be squeezed into a 24-hour period! You cannot force me into the form you see fit!

NO!

I made my decision based on your human greed, your lack of compassion, fighting, killing, and stealing hope from those who tried to hold it. All your senseless actions would feed the Dark Matter. More sinister and far reaching than a black hole, it only had one desire—to consume my once great world.

Like too much blood dropped in the ocean, Dark Matter had sniffed you out and sighed with satisfaction. And so, the hunt had begun. This sinister form crept and circled ever closer to me wanting to feed on my world's contained darkness; too much ugliness and hate had seeped through my ozone layer. The collection of evil had grown and grown until my shields bulged and threatened to break from it.

There was no place to hide!

Dark Matter had found me. It stretched and pressed all around me trying to find my weakness. Its main objective was to feed on the darkness that you humans expelled, to destroy my soul until nothing was left! Nothing but dust.

But I...I refused to let that happen. I have not lived this long to give up so easily. I fought back and did the only thing I knew that would have the greatest impact. I sent my energetic currents deep within my center, straight down to my inner core. And there I stopped my own heart from beating.

I could bear it no more. I. Stopped. Turning.

Time's fluid beauty was now frozen, and you all turned on each other until no one was left.

Dark Matter hesitated; it did not leave. I waited and waited, my spirit in a limbo state, yet I still sensed it. I felt it probe me again to seek out if human life remained to give off any last remanence of darkness. So, I waited and waited. It may have seemed like eons upon eons, but for me that eyelid had not fully closed upon my earthly eye.

I waited.

Slowly Dark Matter started to shift, began to move off in another direction. To find another world to consume. I had sacrificed myself to save it, and now only the stars can hear the silence that pervades every inch of my lands and oceans. Even my skies remain chillingly quiet.

But everyone deserves a second chance, do they not? A resurrection of sorts. Time is never meant to be fixed. Everything needs to shift, to expand. Nothing is meant to stay stagnant forever.

So, perhaps one day I will reset my heart, to move my celestial body once more.

Perhaps, perhaps.

But will humans ever learn?

Perhaps not.

#### About the Author:

Shannon Acrey, from northern 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 multiple motivational poems, one which won a top finalist spot, published in Wingless Dream Publisher, and several horror poems and short flash fiction horror stories published with Sirens Call Publications.

Facebook: Writings by Shannon A.

# The Shallows are Full | Brianna Malotke

Growing up, all of the children in the small town were told to not wander too far in the lake's shallows. Whispered stories, told from generation to generation, were filled with these scaly creatures who lived in the depths of the frigid lake water. Green in hue with wiry limbs, they would pull the children from the shallows and drag them out to the middle of the lake, drowning and feasting on the bodies. Some families told tales where children years and years ago had tempted fate, and had been reckless. After the death of a child, the families would grieve for years to come.

The small kids had ventured to the lake's shoreline and dared each other to dip their toes in, seeing who could go the furthest from the rocky shore. What would start out as a playful, childish game, could take a gruesome turn. For if one lingered just a moment too long, standing there in the creatures' watery abode, they could be taken, dragged under the murky surface, never to be seen again. Children today just laugh and shrug off the stories their grandparents tell them. They're young and modern, they think they're different from the past generations that came before them. And there's always one who doesn't listen to their elders.

The almost demonic-like creatures don't care if you're a good kid or not. Their crooked smile, displaying razor-sharp, slightly decaying, yellowing teeth, will be the last image screaming in your mind as your lungs fill with salty lake water. It will happen so fast; you won't have a chance to cry out or shed tears. Your bones will break and your flesh will be peeled off. Hopefully for your sake the creatures won't take their time, their hunger too great.

The cryptid will wrap its long, bony fingers around your water covered ankles, and pull you swiftly, sharply, far from the shore. One moment you'll be standing there, admiring the sparkling sun along the water's surface and the fresh air, and the next you'll be surrounded by darkness. Pulled deeper and deeper into the lake. The sun's warmth long gone.

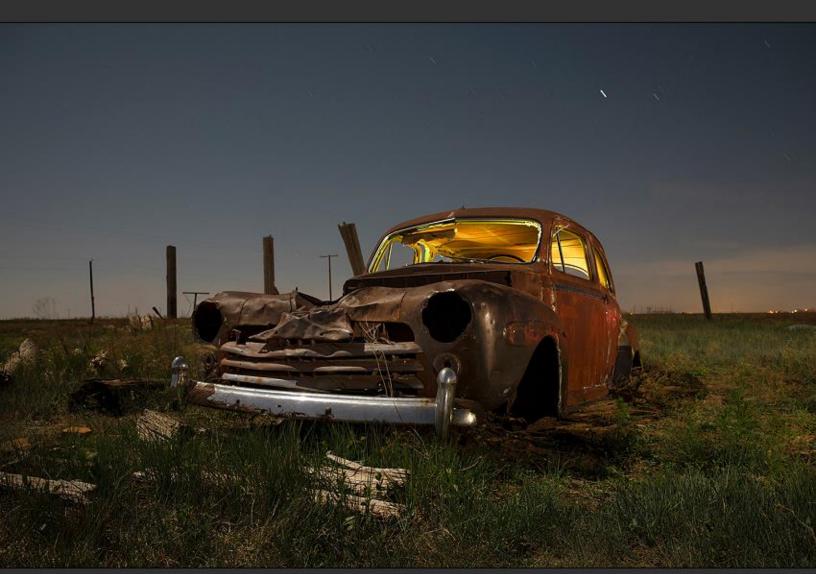
Before you even have a moment to take your last breath – in and out – the briny lake water will replace all of the fresh air in your lungs. No one is safe in the shallows in this old English town, they're full of these creatures. They lie in wait, just beyond, waiting for their next meal. Bravery is not a factor. Strength is not a factor. If you stand just a moment too long in their watery home, they will pounce.

The creatures crave blood, always eager to devour more children. And if you don't heed the warnings of your grandparents, your blood will be mixed in the dark lake water. The perfect, mouthwatering, cocktail for the creatures lurking in the shallows.

# **About the Author:**

Brianna Malotke is a member of the Horror Writers Association. Her most recent work is in *The Nottingham Horror Collective* and *HorrorScope*. She also has work in the anthologies *Beautiful Tragedies 2, The Dire Circle, Out of Time, Their Ghoulish Reputation, Holiday Leftovers,* and *Under Her Skin*. In August 2023, her horror poetry collection, *Fashion Trends, Deadly Ends*, will be released by Green Avenue Books.

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#### **Neighborhood Monsters** | *Paul Lonardo*

I drifted aimlessly among the familiar-faced strangers for as long as I could. I needed to get away from the cacophony of voices and the banal expressions of sympathy offered to me by people who didn't know that I hadn't had any kind of relationship with my father since my mother died when I was nine. That was when the abuse started, the degrading verbal attacks and vicious beatings with belts, curtain rods, golf clubs, anything my dad could get his hands on. Although this cruelty had been there all along, it became much worse when my mother was diagnosed with cancer and placed in hospice. It had stopped a little while after she died, and my father married the hospice nurse who worked at the facility where my mother had been staying. I thought I had put it all behind me for good. If I could have scrubbed it all from my memory, I would have done it long ago.

Finally, I made it to the kitchen and out the back door. Everyone was so caught up in their individual conversations and gossip, no one noticed me slip away.

The fall leaves, still damp with morning dew, stuck to my shoes as I cut across the side yard. The wind had stopped gusting, but the slate sky threatened rain. I turned up the collar of my coat and removed an old pack of matches and a new pack of cigarettes from an inside pocket. I hadn't smoked in a long time, but I needed one now. The first inhalation warmed my lungs as I followed the uneven flagstone path to the street.

I headed east along Tofet. It was the first time I had seen the old neighborhood since I left home to join the service at eighteen, thirty years before. As I looked around, I was amazed how so much had changed. Rooftops that once supported TV antennas now had satellite dishes and solar panels affixed to them. Above ground pools were replaced by Gunite and Fiberglass in-ground pools. Few shade trees remained, but there were a couple freestanding plastic speed bumps in the street to slow down traffic.

Feeling a little lightheaded from the smoke, I considered walking back to the house, but continued on instead. I stopped where the street used to dead end. This was where the new street, Arcadia Drive, forked off from Tofet into a whole new neighborhood where the houses were bigger, and the lot sizes were immense.

At the intersection was a small copse of trees. It was all that remained of an expansive tract of woods that dominated the entire area when I was a kid. Somewhere beyond the brambles and milkweed was a forbidden cabin and a haunted forest playground, a world of dark, hidden secrets where fear lingered and waited. Parents warned their kids about an unnamed monster that lived inside the cabin, and they all believed it. My father had explained to me years earlier that honest-to-God monsters did exist. He said that every neighborhood had one, and that our neighborhood monster lived in the woods at the end of the street, and the shack was where it would lure boys and punish them for being bad. My father laughed through his nicotine-stained teeth as he went on further to tell me that our monster was a formless creature that could hide anywhere in nature, but preferred living inside people, and that once it got inside someone it couldn't come out until the person died, then it would invade someone else. As I got older, my belief in the local legend diminished, but I always kept away from the cabin.

I pulled the half-finished cigarette from my mouth and flicked it to the ground at the edge of the woods. Then I took in a lungful of fresh air and exhaled sharply as I stared into the dimness past the stand of trees in front of me. There was no logical reason for me to go any further. I thought this journey had ended decades ago, but before I knew it, I was wending my way through the heavy underbrush. The mini forest was shrouded in deep shadow. The sunlight was unable to penetrate the awning of branches and leaves overhead, creating the illusion of dusk. Prickly vines and shrubs snagged my clothes, some of the thorns penetrating deep enough to tear the skin beneath, drawing blood. Progress was slow, and I didn't remember the old cabin being this far from the street. I was beginning to think that it had resigned to gravity and had fallen to the ground, or perhaps torn down by the children who now occupied the neighborhood.

Then I saw it.

Remarkably, it was just as I remembered it, even if somewhat smaller than it once seemed, though it didn't seem to have aged the way everything else in the neighborhood had. The walls of the structure were composed of simple plywood with a slump-shouldered, single-pitched roof. About eight feet square, it was little more than a shack, but in the preternatural twilight, it took on a more sinister appearance.

The structure rested on a carpet of decaying leaves and desiccated tree branches. It was guarded in shadow and fortified with the terror of past generations of school children. Seeing it again terrified the child in me so thoroughly that I wanted to run away, but there was nowhere to run this time. I continued to move forward until I

was close enough to peer into the glassless window on the side of the shack. I stopped, unable to see a thing beyond the black square.

I began to tremble remembering that last time I stood on the very spot I was now. I was eleven, having gone out for my last Halloween the night before dressed as a pirate. I'd worn a bunch of old clothes, rain boots, a red bandana, and an eye patch fabricated from a black sock. My stepmother gave me a pair of cheap clip-on earrings and smudged some dark makeup on my face to make it look like I had a couple days' growth of beard.

I stayed out with my friends for three hours, going practically around the whole town with pillowcases until they were half filled with candy. It was around nine o'clock when we called it quits, and by the time we got back to our neighborhood all the front door lights were dark. I arrived home last and found the door locked. I was about to knock when something jumped out from behind the hedges. Before I knew what was happening, my pillowcase was ripped from my hands and a moment later I was struck on the side of the head with it. I actually saw stars. I never knew how painful being hit with ten pounds of chocolate would be, but I was knocked off my feet. When my eyes regained focus, I saw Eric Houston, an older boy who lived at the end of the street. He was wearing dark clothes and a black knit cap on his head that trapped the tangles of his long red hair and pushed them down around the sides of his pimply face.

"Don't tell anyone about this," he snarled. "You hear me, loser?"

Before I could respond, he took off across the yard and down the street with my candy. My face was already swelling as I got up off the ground and went around the back of the house, raising my bedroom window just enough for me to slither through.

The next day I went to school looking like a real pirate from a black eye Eric Houston gave me when he hit me with my own candy. On my walk home, I took the usual shortcut through the woods, following the winding path which took me within a stone's throw of the shack. I could see it clearly through the trees whose leaves were thinning and dropping all around me.

I didn't know what compelled me to step off the path and walk up to the shack that day, but I recalled feeling nothing at the time, not even fear. As I approached the window and peered inside, I saw my pillowcase lying on the dirt floor and candy bars spattered with blood strewn all around it. At the same moment, I became aware that the neighborhood monster was waiting for me. I sensed it lurking in a dark corner. I couldn't see it, but I knew it was there.

Suddenly the pillowcase began to move, and a sudden influx of terror gipped me, burning in my chest like acid. I told myself that it was just a racoon or some other animal rummaging around inside when something came out of the window and touched the top of my hand. I didn't get a good look at what it was because as soon as it brushed up against my skin, I turned and ran out of the woods as fast as my legs would carry me. I was too petrified to look behind me as I raced home, across my front lawn, and into the house. Once in my room, I jumped into bed, shielding myself from all harm beneath the protective barrier of my covers.

The next few days, whenever I looked out my bedroom window, I expected to see some hideous amorphous creature shambling out of the woods toward my house.

I never told another living soul what I saw in the shack that day, just as I never told my friends that Eric Houston stole my Halloween candy. I knew that the neighborhood monster wanted me to go to the cabin alone that day, wanted me to go inside to get my candy. But I didn't go.

Maybe the monster had gotten others to go inside at one time or another, and now, after all these years, the neighborhood monster was calling me back.

Presently, there wasn't enough light to see anything as I peered inside through the dark eye that was the structure's sole window. I drew a deep breath and walked around the side of the ageless shack where the hinged plywood door was located. As I turned the corner, I could see that no more than thirty yards from that side of the cabin the woods ended abruptly. Where once the cabin had rested in the middle of the deep woods, it seemed now as if it was trying to escape, moving closer to the edge of civilization. The distinct line between nature and urban development was stark, punctuated by a marked desecration of trees. In the middle of a massive swathe of naked earth brooded the somnolent bulk of a yellow, steel earth mover, a sentinel of destruction awaiting its orders to complete the next phase of construction on what would soon be a mini shopping plaza.

I realized at once what this represented; it was not the cabin that was vanishing, but just the opposite. The landscape of the entire neighborhood was about to change forever, and the neighborhood monster was being purged along with it.

Facing the cabin door, I approached it slowly. I was prepared to enter, but I hesitated.

What did I think I was going find inside?

I closed my eyes momentarily trying to convince myself that I wouldn't find anything because there was nothing in there to find. I understood that childhood monsters were ephemeral, like youth, and only children could empower them. Adults had their own monsters to contend with, though difficult to identify because they lay hidden, not in old shacks or in sewer drains, but dwelling unseen in the human soul, masquerading behind the deceptive charms and personable guises of relatives, friends, and neighbors. These monsters are not mythical beasts, but real flesh and blood monsters, which makes sense because it's flesh and blood that drives them. Not surprisingly, the targets of these opportunist monsters are often children, so easy to plant the seed of corruption into, and come harvest time the only thing reaped is further abuse.

Maybe, in that sense, every neighborhood did have their own monster.

Behind me, the tractor shot forward with a jerk, snorting a cable of thick, black smoke from the exhaust stack.

With a creak, the cabin door slowly swung inward. It made it halfway on its rusty hinges and then just stopped, revealing only darkness inside. A moment later, a marble-sized ball of chocolate wrapped in purple foil rolled out of the shadows and came to a rest near my feet. I watched as a black, stringy substance erupted from the folds in the foil. The gummy material exuding from the wrapper began to flow out more rapidly, spreading across the dirt floor and collecting in a large puddle. The inky accretion started to bubble and swell, developing like an alien fetus. It gradually transmogrified into the shape of an amorphous creature, approximating the torso of a man and the head of a sightless monster, the anatomy of its face indecipherable. Within the semi-solid oozing mass were bits of hair, bone, and sinew. A swirling mass of digested humanity.

Lying prone, with three malformed legs splayed out uselessly behind it, the monstrosity shifted suddenly and began to drag itself toward me on arms that could not adequately support its bulk. As it sloshed closer, the middle of its face parted, exposing a maw with no gullet from which viscous fluid dripped back down over the cavity, covering it. The thing issued a horrible shriek that caused its entire gelatinous frame to quiver. Its dreadful cry echoed in my head, and I found myself unable to move. It was as if my own skeletal system had dissolved, leaving me an unsupported mass of flesh.

Behind me, the iron machine screamed to full tilt, its bucket raised high.

From the darkness at the back of the shack, I heard my father's voice. "Every neighborhood's got one," he said and laughed.

As the tractor bore down on the shack, the laughter grew louder, and the door opened fully.

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Back at the house, I entered unnoticed, as if I had never left. My stepmother did not say a word about the wet leaves and dirt I tracked in with me, or my soiled and torn clothes.

When everyone else had gone, I gave my stepmother a dutiful peck on the cheek and announced that I was leaving. She nodded and watched me walk out the front door without a word passing between us.

When I got into my car, I peeled the purple foil from the chocolate candy ball. A stringy, dark fluid dribbled down my hands. Driving past the new houses on Arcadia Way, I licked the sticky matter from my fingers until there was nothing left. As I left the neighborhood and got onto the interstate, I tried to recall the sound of my father's voice, but I could not.

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

Paul Lonardo is a freelance writer and author with numerous titles of both fiction and nonfiction books. He is a contributing writer for *Tales from the Moonlit Path*. He has two books scheduled for release this year, *Penny Dreadfuls*, a collection of haiku horror poems, and *Dark Little Things*, an anthology of all new dark fantasy/horror tales. He is an active HWA member.

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# Exotic | Santiago Eximeno

A centaur lies at the foot of the cliff. The rocks that sprout from the sea, to which large black-shelled mollusks adhere, have torn his back and rump. The white foam of the waves pats his broken hindquarters, and from the open throat of what looks like a man a dark bloodstain gushes out, a spill of rotten seaweed on the water surface. The stench of the spilled, of the dead, ascends the cliff between gasps and spreads over the mountain. Madelon, above, leaning over the edge, contemplates the body of the creature. She cannot consider the centaur in any other way but as an exotic and unreal creature, an image stolen from dreams. Her fingers intertwine, writhe, struggle to break free and tear out her hair. She is restrained only by the child who, at her side, looks at the fallen one between murmurs and smiles.

"See, Mom? I told you, he's a centaur," says Pablo.

Her son smiles with the satisfaction of the one who knows he has triumphed, the one who possesses the evidence that certifies his words. All the way from the village to the cliff, he was sure of himself, confident. That morning he arrived home excited, panting, and tugged at his mother's apron insistently. Madelon did not understand his chatter, or she did not want to understand it. At least not until she saw with her own eyes what the child was saying, because it all sounded like insanity, like memories long hidden, like fear. Madelon has left the lentils on the fire, convinced that they would soon return home, to the firmness of its damp stone walls. Now, all is different. A dead centaur, half horse and half man, bleeds to death down there, stabbed by the rocks uncovered by the high tide. From the distance, she cannot see his face, and she does not want to see it. She is afraid of discovering familiar features in it, as if that thing reminds her of the stories of lycanthropy her grandmother used to tell her about on rainy nights. As if he could discover in that recumbent flesh an omen, or worse, a recognition. Because the boy said that he remembered it, that this fabled creature reminded him of someone he has only been able to see in old photographs, forgotten for years in attics, in old suitcases covered with dust.

"Can we go down, Mom? Can we?" says Pablo.

He is eight years old, innocence is still rooted in his little body. Madelon knows that the child cannot understand the aberration that such a creature represents in the real world, in this world. In the day-to-day life they share in the village, with the routine of meals waiting on the fire, with the chickens demanding to be fed, with the goats bleating in the shed. Madelon thinks of her husband, who, like every morning, has walked down to the city and will return in a few hours, hungry, tired of bureaucracy and paperwork, eager to return to his animals. With his family. Madelon remembers that they also own a horse and wonders if everything that has happened has a meaning that she cannot grasp. She searches in her pants pockets for the cell phone she has forgotten in the kitchen. To call him, to photograph him. She feels helpless in this lack of technology, as if the refuge they have consciously sought in the countryside has become a trap.

"Come on, Mom!" says the boy.

Pablo pulls his mother, drags her towards the dirt road, that neglected path that descends to the cove, on the other side of the cliff, from where they could reach the body by jumping over the rocks. Why would they want to do that? The centaur is dead. It will not do them any good to reach him. But Paul wants to see him up close, maybe even touch him. Morbid thoughts nibble at Madelon's head. Her thoughts come back to the food, to the lit fire, to the stone hearth. To her husband, who will soon return home. If he doesn't find them there, he will worry. Or perhaps he will wait for them eating, oblivious to horses with the torso and the face of a man, oblivious to chimeras lying at the foot of the cliffs. The path is steep, Madelon slips a couple of times. Pablo laughs, ignoring the possibility of a fall. The verticality of the path does not frighten him. He runs through the bushes, laughing again. Madelon follows his example, imprecise, in a state of panic that she cannot manage. She thinks the boy is making fun of her, of her fears, of her worries. Blessed, damned childhood.

The breeze ruffles the hair of the mother and son as they bury their bare feet in the sand of the cove. The sea is a haven of peace. They have left their shoes by the shore. Pablo took off his T-shirt and jumped into the water. It's cold, Madelon wanted to say, but she didn't open her mouth. The boy swam to the rocks, just a few strokes. The body is gone, the sea has taken it away. Only the blood remains as a witness, the remains of flesh and bone attached to the mollusks, the hair.

"The sirens have taken him away," shouts Pablo, and Madelon doesn't know what to believe.

The boy comes out of the water and returns to her. He smiles, but he is sad. The magic is gone. What cannot be touched, eventually, is forgotten. Pablo runs to her, to his mother. When Madelon embraces him, she unconsciously caresses his bare back. Terrified, barely able to hold back tears, she feels the bumps, just above the shoulder blades, one on each side, where anyone would expect wings to grow.

#### About the Author:

Santiago Eximeno (Madrid, Spain, 1973) is a Spanish genre writer who has published several novellas and collections, mainly horror literature. His work has been translated to English, Japanese, French or Bulgarian. His last book published in English is *Umbría* (Independent Legions Publishing, 2020) and his last short story published in English is *Intellectual Property* (Tales to Terrify #558, 2002).

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#### The Waters Take | H.V. Patterson

"The Water-Horse took Skye," said Isla, the missing girl's grandmother. "There's nothing to be done. May he choke on her bones."

"I have to look for her," said Marianne, her daughter.

"It's no use," Isla said.

She stared out the window at the loch as Marianne shrugged on her coat and grabbed her gloves. The water was still and cold as the dead girl's heart.

"I told her not to go dancing on Sunday," Isla said. "Not by the loch at night, without even a cross or a bit of the cold iron to protect her."

"There isn't any such thing as a water-horse, Mother. Maybe-"

"Marianne!" Isla turned to glare at her daughter. Something between grief and rage passed over her face. "Didn't my own sister, Cora, go missing? And weren't the only pieces of her we ever found her lungs and heart? Didn't my own father find them, washed ashore?"

Marianne pressed her gloved hands over her haggard face.

"I can't have this conversation with you, Mother. Not again."

Isla had already turned back to the window. If she'd heard her daughter, she gave no sign.

"Her coffin was so light," Isla murmured to herself. "A Christian burial and a full-sized coffin for those mangled bits of her. Tangled up in her fine, golden hair, like fish in a net. No mistaking that hair. That's how we knew they were Cora's lungs and heart. That's how we knew she was lost forever. And when you were just a child, Marianne, there was your sister—"

"Don't!" Marianne said, hands clenched to fists. "Don't talk about her."

Isla didn't say another word as Marianne pulled on her boots and tied the worn laces. She watched a wren swoop low over the water. It trilled before soaring into the clouds and vanishing. Perhaps it was poor Skye's soul, winging away from this mortal coil and all its griefs.

"I'm going now, Mother," Marianne said.

She didn't wait for a reply. The door slapped shut behind her.

"No use crying," Isla said to the cold, empty room. "Every generation, a different girl. Cora. Marnie. Now Skye's dead."

She fingered her worn rosary beads.

"No use crying," Isla repeated as her knees buckled and tears filled her eyes.

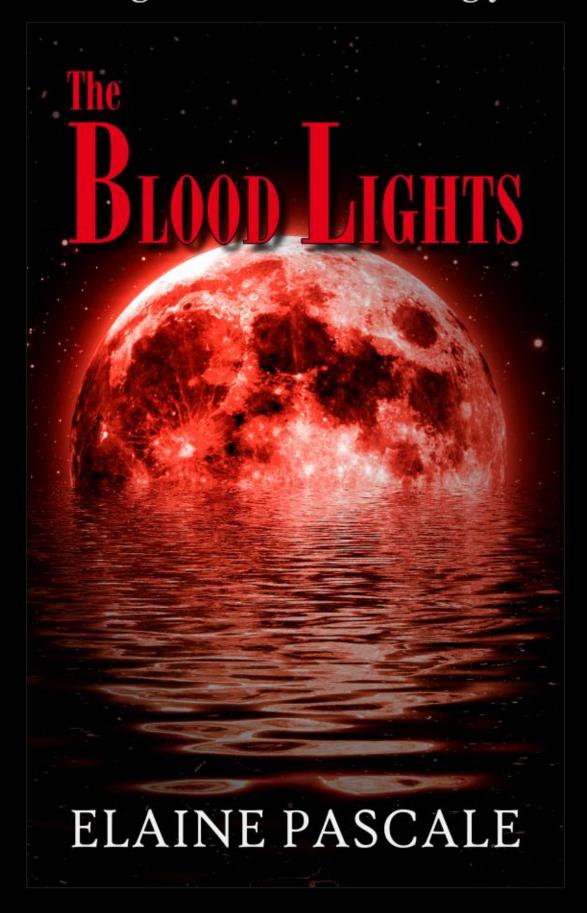
She sank into the dirt floor's embrace, into a lifetime's bleak and hungry grief.

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

H.V. Patterson (she/her) lives in Oklahoma and writes speculative fiction and poetry. Her favorite cryptid is the Oklahoma Octopus! She's a cofounder of Horns and Rattles Press and runs Dreadfulesque.

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The Blood Lights are the last thing you'll see...



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

# Just Round the Curve | J. Rocky Colavito

Five of them squeezed into Denny Nash's beat-to-shit Chevy Cavalier. Sandy Fayne, Mike Gordy, and Jamie Connors were in the back, and Carol Mears sat in the front next to Denny. Mike was between the two women in the back and was using his position to cop feels that they allowed until his fingers got a little too frisky, which elicited a literal slap on the wrist. The three were giggling and play protesting. Denny and Carol, who weren't a thing yet, were a little embarrassed by their antics.

"Hey, no fair; you two are ganging up on me." Mike protested as the two women started to tickle him. They laughed merrily as they ran their wiggling fingers over different parts of his body. He kicked the back of the driver's seat and Denny nearly went off the road into a ditch.

"Dammit, you three, can't you stop playing grab ass for a few minutes? This road is tricky in the daytime. It's night; it's foggy. And we're all a little buzzed. Let's slow things down a little and save the pent-up energy for when you get back to campus," Denny said after he straightened out the vehicle's course on the rutted road back from Taregon's Eye, the strange formation in the forests that overlooked St. Rita's campus. They were on their way back from the midterm bonfire, a regular event to celebrate the mini break that occurred after mid semester exams had been completed. They'd eaten their fill of hot dogs, chips, and s'mores, and quaffed a lot of beer in recognition of, what they hoped, was a job well done. They'd been friends since they met on a welcome to campus tour when they were first-year students, and now formed a regular group, studying, drinking, and road tripping regularly. Mike and the two women who sat with him were a threesome, an open relationship with regular benefits. Carol and Denny just never seemed to get around to connecting as anything more than Platonic friends. They'd both had partners somewhere else when they first arrived, and Denny had been in very deep with his, until he showed up as a surprise and found her sixty-nining with some rich preppy lacrosse player. The breakup had been epic; she chased him down to the public lounge between the dorms in a very flimsy bathrobe, and then proceeded to beg, then bribe, then fall despondent on the floor and grab his legs. Denny stood firm, received a standing ovation from those who witnessed it, and dealt with the blowback stoically. He was slowly coming around, but not fast enough for Carol's taste.

I'm gonna have to make him make a move soon, she thought as she watched his profile concentrate on the road ahead. He's still wallowing in that breakup; it can't be healthy.

"Hey ya'll, what did you think of that project Iacovino assigned for the final. Sounds cool, doesn't it?" Jamie asked from the back seat.

The five were all students in Jayson Iacovino's Cryptid Mythology course, the most popular class on campus. A global foray into Cryptozoology and its many off shoots, it asked students to interact with everything from oral tales to conspiracy theories to hard biological sciences as they investigated and unpacked the place of uncatalogued creatures in cultural development and artifacts. The class had started with the local oral tales about a mysterious creature that supposedly inhabited the area around the campus.

It was called Honkus, and it was a weird cross between a Canada Goose and, according to lore and Iacovino, a Banshee. The campus was infested with the vicious geese; it was said that they often herded late arriving students into classroom buildings, pecking at them to discourage the practice. But Banshees were not to be found. Professor Iacovino theorized that the loud call of the geese had at one point been likened to that of a banshee and the myth had been thus birthed.

"Yeah, something for the unofficial mascot contest; I'm down," Mike said. He was the most artistically inclined of the five of them, drawing cartoons for the campus newspaper since he entered St. Rita. He had already partially filled a sketchbook of ideas for his entry.

The others were less certain of what they'd do; Carol was thinking of cosplaying the creature for the spirit squad and as a potential public relations gimmick to accompany the official mascot, the Fighting Heron, to various functions. Jamie, Denny, and Sandy had no idea what they were going to do. Denny dreaded the project, being a bit more of a skeptic than the other four, and having his academic superpowers grounded in numbers rather than words and colors.

"How many stories have you heard about Honkus, since you've been here, I mean?" Sandy asked as she playfully batted away one of Mike's hands.

"Jesus, like a different one every semester," Carol said. "I still remember the one they told us during the campus tour."

"Yeah, about how it may have been something the Natives dreamed up as a curse on the settlers for running them off their land and giving them the clap," Mike said.

"Would have served them right," Denny said, "lots of indigenous peoples got bum rushed. They have every right to be angry."

"Growing a social conscience suddenly, Nash?" Mike challenged. "What's wrong with settling and developing?" "No, just stating a fact, this whole area was someone else's property and it was stolen at gunpoint. Can't undo the damage, but you can at least admit the acts."

"Easy dudes, this isn't a DEI discussion, what about the stories?" Sandy asked.

When no one immediately spoke up she said, "Ok, I'll start. My roommate freshman year was quasi local, close enough to know the stories, but far enough away that driving to campus every day was cost prohibitive. She told me that, on stormy nights, she could hear something screaming, like a mashup of a goose's honk and a shriek. Whenever her grandfather heard it—he lived with the family—he would grab his walker, load his shotgun, and go sit on the front porch with the gun across his lap and a bottle of whiskey by his side. He'd sit out there all night, drinking himself blind, waiting for whatever made the scream to come for him. All he told her was that hearing the cry meant that death was coming."

"That's interesting, did she tell lacovino?" Carol asked.

"Yeah, I guess, she left mid-semester." She paused.

"Why'd she leave?"

"Her grandfather died, or that's what she was told."

"I take it that there's more to that."

"She came back for her stuff a week later. She told me that he claimed he heard the noise, got the shotgun and bottle, and went out on the porch again. Her parents left him to his own devices since there was no convincing the ole dude otherwise. He was still out there just after midnight—her mother had gone to the kitchen to refill a glass of water—but he was nowhere to be found in the morning. The shotgun lay next to his chair on the porch; the whiskey bottle was smashed, and there were drops of blood leading away. The only things that seemed weird were these long scratches on the porch rail."

"That's a wild one, but I have another, this right from a source's mouth," Carol said. "You all know that local scavenger that comes by the campus with the shopping cart, picking stuff out of the dumpsters and collecting empty cans?"

"You mean Lois? Yeah, everyone knows her; nice enough, never panhandles, smiles and goes about her business. I don't think she's crazy; think she's just supplementing her income off our castoffs. Lots of good stuff gets tossed, especially at the end of the year," Jamie said.

"Well, I bought her a cup of coffee one day and I happened to be wearing a Honkus hoodie. Lois got all freaked and started shaking. I helped her to a bench and got her calmed down. She told me that the creature was the product of something terrible that happened to a group of settlers. There was a measles outbreak in the dead of winter, the healthy locked themselves in the chapel they'd built, and left the sick outside during a winter so cruel it froze the river that goes around campus. The people outside screamed their lungs out for a week; the people in the chapel either went crazy or stopped their ears with cloth. Those driven mad were ejected to join the sick, adding more screams."

"That's horrible," Sandy said.

"No more horrible than what Lois told me; the screams eventually stopped with the first thaw, and, since provisions had diminished, a group was drafted to go and hunt. As they exited the chapel, they saw a pile of bodies, frozen solid. On the top of that pile was perched something so horrible that two of the group died immediately from the shock. The others collected themselves enough to fire on it, but the primitive ammunition had no effect. It unfolded huge wings, craned a long neck skyward, and unleashed a shriek so loud all those in the party were permanently deafened. It flew off into the sunset, shrieking all the way."

"Why was Lois so frightened of something that happened long ago?" Mike asked.

"She said the likeness on my hoodie was very similar to what the surviving men described. Webbed feet, a feathered body with long arms ending in claws, wings spreading twelve feet in width, a long neck like a goose, and a human head obscured by hair wrought from the necks and heads of other geese, each head having a pointed beak full of nail-like teeth."

"Lois has some imagination," Mike said as Denny slowly approached another curve in the road.

"I kinda thought the same," Carol said, "but I didn't want to let on like I was humoring her. She claimed that it was a family story inscribed in the generational Bible that she inherited."

"Well, mine's a little nastier," Mike said.

"It figures, given the teller." Jamie giggled.

"Hush, you, or there'll be a bare-assed spanking in it for you later."

"Ready when you are."

"Anyway, I know this sounds like a campfire tale but I swear to God it isn't. I was out waiting for some friends to pick me up downtown and I went into this dive bar for a drink. It was called Nugget's."

"You mean the one that burned down last year?" Jamie asked.

"Yeah, so anyways, I went in to grab a beer while I waited and I see this gray-haired guy at the end of the bar, plate of denuded wings in front of him and several dead soldiers ringing it. He seems like he's talking to himself, but the only place to sit is near him. I'd been on my feet most of the day, so I sat down and looked ahead while I drank my beer. My peripheral vision showed a young guy, maybe twenties, with a full head of white hair. He saw me looking at him, and he started babbling."

"Well, what did he say?" Carol asked.

"Get a load of this; he and his girlfriend had decided to go camping up in the Eye; it was a thing back then. Camping was euphemism for motel on the cheap. He said they were going at it with her on top when suddenly, their tent was ripped away and Honkus was looming over them. Before the girl had time to scream Honkus had grabbed her up, ripped her right off the guy's dick, and flew off with her. He could hear her screaming as the thing flew off. He lost all his parents' money defending himself from murder charges. He was exonerated when they found the girl's headless body in a place that was inaccessible."

"And now he haunts the local bar scene telling tourists the story?"

"No, he died in the fire, I remember reading that he never moved from his stool as the ceiling collapsed on him." "Spooky shit, Mike. You win the prize so far. Anyone else have one?" Sandy asked.

"I do." Said Denny, who had been silent for most of the curvy trip.

"Do tell, Mr. Chauffeur." Carol said, reaching out to stroke Denny's hand.

"It's kinda new, maybe nothing to it, probably one of those stupid moral didactics that drunk driving groups fasten on to scare kids sober. It supposedly happened on this very road. Car full of drunk kids, coming back from a bonfire, meet with misfortune because they were drunk. One person lived, the driver. He'd been thrown through the windshield. The other kids never made it out of the car. Funny thing though, the bodies . . ."

He suddenly screamed and the tires screeched as he tried to avoid a large object in the road in front of them. The others added their screams as the car careened off the curve and struck a thickly trunked oak tree. The front accordioned and Denny shot through the windshield, the shattering of which decapitated Carol. The whiplash of the impact broke Mike's neck, killing him instantly, Sandy and Jamie were lodged in the front seat; Jamie being speared by the steering column, and Sandy hitting the dashboard hard enough to embed her head in it.

Denny rolled onto his back as he watched the thing he'd swerved to avoid stride toward the car; wings folded against its back. It was ten feet in height, more if it extended its long neck. He watched its toothed beaks distend as it grabbed Carol's body by the head and pulled it from the wreckage. It gave a collective honk of satisfaction as it began to nibble on the body, tearing off bits and pieces until the torso and head were picked clean.

Denny watched as it repeated its feeding pattern on his friends. He pulled himself into a sitting position against a nearby tree and finished his story.

"The cops called it death by misadventure, driver failure to negotiate a sharp curve on the road. They figured that the bodies had been nibbled clean by forest scavengers. They laughed off the driver's story as shock induced, not wanting to believe that a legendary creature caused an alcohol infused accident. But the driver knew better. And, now, so will others." He watched as the Honkus finished its meal, leaving the lower body of Jamie picked down to the bones. It looked upon Denny, let out an chorus of guttural honks, and flew off into the sky, blessing its Judas Goat with a haunting scream.

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

Rocky Colavito is a sunsetting academic transitioning into a horror-filled retirement where, as a person of leisure, he can read, write, and watch scary stuff to his heart's content. He's the creator of Buck Neighkyd, porn star turned occult PI, whose adventures unfold in *Caveman Magazine* and in the novel, *Creative Control*. He's en route, and he's the one they've warned you about.

Amazon Author Page: J. Rocky Colavito

# Beneath the Cypress Trees | Sirius

Abraham rolled the peanut shell around before cracking it between his fingers. The weak seam came apart with almost no effort and the fragile shell shattered in his hand. He fished out the seed and threw the rest towards the stream, where the water babbled over smooth rocks and disappeared into a dark grove of intertwining cypress tree roots.

"Don't litter," Jessie said. Abraham scrunched up his brow.

"I am not littering," he muttered, "it's a peanut shell."

"I think it counts," Jessie picked up a brown paper bag from between his leges and shook it. "Put them in here," he said, "that's why I brought it."

Abraham snorted under his breath and broke open another peanut. "I know you come from Dallas, where they fine you for spitting on the sidewalk, but out here no one gives a shit. There are worse things in this water."

"I know," Jessie said. "Currently, your toes."

Abraham pulled his feet back towards the bank and let his heels sink into the mud. "I should be getting back home," he said. "I need to feed my dog."

"It isn't that late," Jessie protested.

"Sun's down," Abraham said, "nothing good happens after sundown."

"That is what you keep telling me," Jessie's head followed him as he stood. "Although I am starting to think that you are just an anxious sort."

Abraham gave him a withering stare. "I fight monsters," he said, "and you came running to my door because you told me you had the devil in your back yard. I don't think I'm the anxious one."

Jessie waved his hand. "At least the devil is polite," he said. "You didn't even invite me inside."

"I don't let anyone into my house," Abraham shrugged. "It is nothing personal." He looked over at the close-growing cypress trees, wondering what it was about them that had his stomach feeling so unsettled. Their roots were bloated, grotesquely intertwined with dripping tendrils of Spanish moss hanging over the water. In the dark, where there was only the moon and the light from his camping lantern, they glistened like freshly torn entrails. Maybe that was his problem—he just couldn't get his mind off work.

Abraham rubbed his face, scraping his palm along his stubbly chin.

"Stare a little harder," Jessie interrupted his thoughts. "They aren't going to get up and walk away."

"Mmm," Abraham turned his head. "I would put my shoes on, if I were you." He bent to pick up his boots. "You never know what will come crawling out."

"Gators?" Jessie hazarded a guess.

Abraham rolled his eyes.

"In a stream?" He could feel a headache trying its best to form behind his eyes. It always started with the left and then liked to slide across his skull towards the right. If he was lucky, it would not last a full 12 hours, or turn into a migraine. If he was lucky. "Snakes, maybe."

The Spanish moss shivered and a warm, summer breeze picked up. It wove its way through the tree branches and bowed them back far enough to make the wood groan. So many trees bending all at once emitted a low, eerie sound that made the hair on his arms stand up.

Abraham knew when to leave well enough alone. He stomped the ground to get his boots over his heel and picked up his camping light.

"You are about to be on your own," he told Jessie. "If you want a ride back, you're going to have to—"

"I think," Jessie cut him off, "that there is something over there."

"Well," Abraham said, "maybe. I would leave it alone."

Jessie stood up. The light bounced off the tip of his sharp nose as he tilted his head and moved closer to the trees. Abraham took a deep breath, forcing himself to keep a cool head as he followed. He thought about his pistol with its silver bullets, his butterfly knife with a silver-tipped blade, his stakes, his holy water—all in the glove compartment of his truck. He should have known better than to assume he could have one normal summer evening with a fairly attractive man. He could have stayed home with his dog and his Elvis Presley records.

"Jessie," Abraham warned, "don't get any closer." The closer they got to the trees, the tighter his chest became. He was starting to feel light-headed, and the light from his camping lantern was winding down even though the batteries were new.

"Can you hear it?" Jessie asked. Abraham shook his head. Jessie stopped with his bare foot close to the sinking edge of the bank. He leaned in, resting his hand against a wide cypress trunk and holding very still, keeping his head tilted like an owl scoping out prey. Abraham waited behind him, holding his breath. Up close, the trees were not any more welcoming. Their branches shivered overhead, ushering a hushed foretoken over the growing chorus of cicadas.

"Locusts," Abraham whispered, "that is all I hear."

"No," Jessie gestured towards the water. Underneath the trees, where their roots curved into an arch, Abraham saw a flash of color. He raised his lantern, but the battery died completely. It cast the whole stream into darkness, and then he heard a splash.

He grabbed Jessie's arm, digging his fingers into the flesh through his tight plaid shirt. "We have to go," he hissed. Jessie wrenched his arm free and pointed towards the water, shaking his head.

"It's talking to me," he said. "It knows my name."

The muddy bank squelched, and when Abraham looked closely, he saw what looked like a human hand grabbing the side and getting tangled up in the long grass. Except, it was not quite a human hand—the fingers were webbed, and the elongated thumbs ended in hooked talons. A head broke the surface of the water, rising on a serpentine neck that led down into a narrow torso. The creature looked sickly, almost skeletal—and the face was human enough, maybe even pretty—were it not for the pearly-white eyes covered in a thick blue film. Eyes that reflected light like an alligator, even though nothing was shining on its face.

The creature's skull was deeply concave in the middle, like a rain barrel, and the brackish stream water sloshed around inside. It never quite spilled over the edges, despite the fact that the head wobbled on its neck, which was patterned like a coral snake and not at all like human skin.

"Jessie," Abraham breathed. Jessie acted like he couldn't hear him. His friend took another cautious step towards the bank, and the creature crept its hands towards him, as if to reach out and grab him by the bare feet to drag him under.

"I think she is hurt," Jessie's soft voice trembled. Abraham squeezed his arm, refusing to release his hold, and Jessie's foot hovered mid-air—unable to land another step without pulling the taller man over with him.

"It's not a *she*," Abraham racked his brain for what it *was*. He had never encountered anything like this before, but he vaguely remembered a drawing in some field journal left by his grandfather. He tried to remember the word scribbled underneath it. "Muddygid," as soon as it came to him he spoke the word aloud. "It is the goddamn Muddygid. Jessie, for God's sake!"

"What?" Jessie turned his head, momentarily distracted. "What is a—?"

As soon as Jessie broke eye contact with it, the Muddygid opened its mouth and let out a harsh, bone-chilling shriek that sounded like a woman being murdered. It clawed at the bank, trying to pull itself up, its neck bowing and wobbling while the water in its skull sloshed. Abraham put all his strength into hauling Jessie back, dragging the lighter man off his feet and throwing him to the ground a few inches away.

Abraham gripped his camping lantern. Its 4D batteries granted it some weight, and combined with the adrenaline that was pumping through his heart and racing down his arm, he hoped it would be enough. He sprang forward, narrowly dodging a hooked claw that came slicing through the air. He knocked the Muddygid in the head, and his lantern bounced off its temple. The creature snarled and writhed. The stream began to churn, and a massive tail like a bullwhip came shooting out of the water. It shot towards the bank and wrapped itself around Abraham's midsection, the tip stinging his belly. He felt warmth, probably blood, trickle down from the wound. One quick pull had him skidding along the mud, and he dug his heels in to try and keep his balance. He swung the lantern again, this time landing a blow against the creature's raised chin. Its head went snapping backward, and it let out another horrible, wretched scream as the water in the center of its head went cascading down its back.

The creature froze, its raised arms twitching mid-air, and its tail slackened around Abraham's waist. He stuffed his hands down into the coils and pulled it loose, just enough for him to slip out. His stomach hurt like a knife had been wedged into his bowels, but that was something to worry about later—after they were long gone.

Jessie's eyes were as round as dinner plates and he scrambled to his feet when he saw Abraham coming back. "What was that?" he asked.

"Muddygid," Abraham ground the word out through his teeth. He kept walking, expecting Jessie would follow. Thankfully, he had parked the truck close. He had a first-aid kit in there somewhere.

"That means nothing to me," Jessie said.

Abraham took another deep breath. His lungs ached, but now his stomach was numb. That was, somehow, not comforting. "If it had grabbed you, it would have stolen your skin," he said. "It can walk around like that for a while and it will eat your bones for good measure."

Jessie grimaced. "Is it dead?" he asked.

"Does it look dead?" Abraham had never been so glad to see his truck. "I am going to let it have you next time." "It knew my name," Jessie grabbed the passenger door handle.

"That is because you are an idiot," sweat beaded on Abraham's brow and began to trickle down his temple. He clutched his hand over his stomach—mostly to staunch the bleeding. "There is a first-aid kit in here, somewhere. Find it."

Jessie began to dig around. "You should get to the hospital," he said.

"Like hell," Abraham said. "What am I going to tell them?" He started his engine and flicked on the headlights. The frozen Muddygid lit up with brilliant colors—the red, yellow, and black bands of a coral snake ran all the way down its back and to its tail—which still glistened with his blood.

The tail twitched, and the Muddygid's head started to loll. Abraham stepped on the gas.

"Hey!" Jessie fell forward, nearly spilling a handful of bandages onto his lap.

"I will die in my own bed," Abraham said, "but I'll be damned if I get my face ripped off because you are too stupid to walk the other way when you hear your name coming from a tree."

"You are so dramatic," Jessie scoffed and pulled out a jar of salve. He unscrewed it and raised it to his nose, making a face at the smell. "I will bandage you up when we get back to your place, then."

"Right," Abraham said, "and then I hope the devil eats you."

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

Sirius is a lover of glory, gore, and monsters. They are a queer, nonbinary artist living in the hot and bothered South; currently residing in a little spot that has been dubbed 'Halloweentown', North Carolina. They are the writer of The Draonir Saga and the forthcoming Gentleman Demon Series from Curious Corvid Publishing.

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# Three Kinds of Vultures | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

I awaken to the rasping hisses of two turkey-vultures ripping strips of my thigh-flesh! Their bald, red heads glisten in the summer-sun with my red blood.

Drunk again last night—my low-life 'foraging' doubtless legendary—I'm not sure why I'm lying here, in this open field, naked! But, no time now for 'why!'

I scream, "I'm not dead yet, you filthy scavengers! Get off me! My legs aren't rotting chicken-thighs!"

Seemingly deaf to my voice, their curved, sharp beaks keep pulling bleeding cords of muscle-meat. There may not be enough of my quad-muscles left to walk, much less run.

I keep yelling. "I know you chicken-hearts! The black-vultures are meaner—out-of-hell meaner—predators! they are—smart too, but I know their game: They've followed you here to 'the body'. and they're coming for us—yes, us!"

Both 'turkeys' now too full to fly, I suddenly sit up and grab a scrawny throat in each hand—squeezing, so they can't vomit and take flight.

I'm thinking, might as well sample some stringy meat myself.

I bite into each neck, viciously! Arterial bird-blood pulses, spurts!

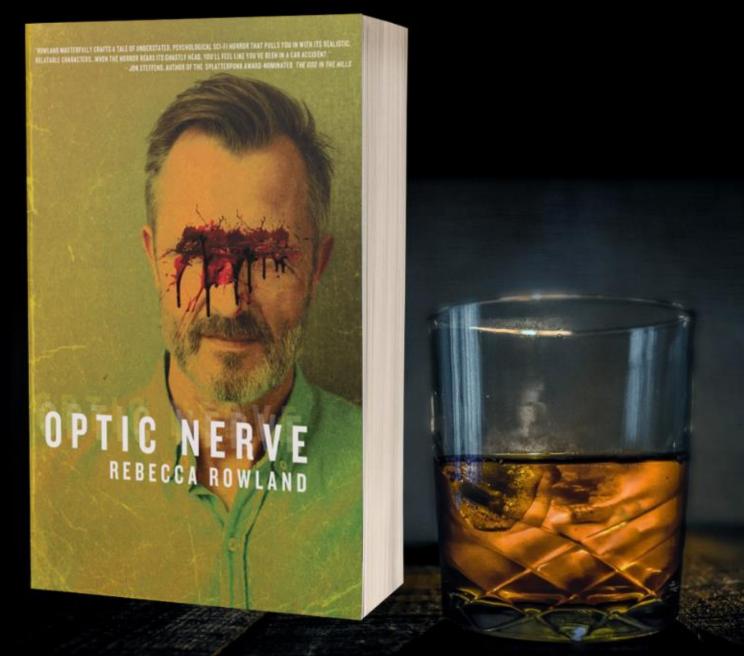
As their life flutters, I also begin to die.

Overhead, the black-vultures arrive—and begin their gruesome death-circle.

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

Will H. Blackwell Jr. is emeritus professor (botany), Miami University, Ohio, living in Tuscaloosa, Alabama where he is now retired as adjunct professor, The University of Alabama. He has fiction in: Brilliant Flash Fiction, Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, Disturbed Digest, FrostFire Worlds, Outposts of Beyond, Shelter of Daylight, Trembling with Fear, and 365 Tomorrows.

# Shawn wanted to cure blindness.



# Now he wishes he could look away.

a sci-fi - body horror - mystery mash-up

Available July 8 in Godless eBook and July 22 in print from



# The Evil Family | Soter Lucio

Marjorie lived in the four bedroom house for just six weeks before the troubles began. Her friends were right. It was too good to be true. Well furnished and ridiculously cheap. Rentals are never cheap. And the landlords are worse. Not so, this one. He was the epitome of saintliness. He even offered transport to move in Marjorie and her children. Of course she accepted. Old people say don't look a gift horse in the mouth. She accepted and here she is six weeks later living in what she now says is a piece break away from hell. And the landlord has since disappeared. The children woke during the night complaining about the heat. It was unbearably hot when it should have been cool.

The milk at breakfast time was sour even though the can was newly opened and had a long shelf life. The children were irritable and not their usual cheery selves. By the end of the day she felt mashed-up like she'd chopped down so many trees or drank so much rum.

It was like that for the entire week.

Then Miss Norma from higher up the hill came calling.

"No, I'm not coming in. Just have one question. Who rented you this place?"

"Mr. Lloyd Bascombe."

"I thought so. This is his brother's place. Don't worry you won't get in trouble. But everybody here is watching out for you."

"Is something wrong with this place?"

"Something is very wrong. I'll come back later to talk to you about that. I wanted to know whose name is on the receipt before I go further."

Then she was gone leaving Marjorie in a tizzy. She spent the entire day worrying over what wasn't said. Her performance on the job being not up to par, she decided to ask for the day off. That will be a strain on her pocket, but she'll be alive to provide for her children.

Miss Norma did come back later in the day. She watched the children fidgeting and suggested they go outside the house and play. The change in their attitude was quite noticeable soon as they walked out the door.

"Let's go inside and talk."

"Yes." She began as soon as she sat down. "It is like this. Old man Methuen Bascombe came from one of the islands when he was quite young. He worked in the construction field. That man worked hard, built this house and got married. He gave his wife everything she wanted but she was not a nice woman. She always had other men coming to the house when he out working. One day he was not feeling well so he came home and found her in the act."

"That sounds familiar!" Marjorie exclaimed putting her hands to her mouth.

"I suppose so. Nobody is faithful anymore." Miss Norma replied looking at Marjorie strangely. "They always get caught. Anyway, he cursed his wife and all her blood relatives. Then he cursed the man and all his blood relatives. Then he cursed the house."

"What was the curse?" Marjorie asked, her stomach churning for no apparent reason.

"Nobody has ever been clear on that. When old man Bascombe was spotted going home, a few of the men went up to his house, unseen of course, to see the bacchanal."

"Yes. Our favourite pastime. And they all said something different."

"Except on one point. That was something about the curses of Moses onto the Pharaoh for not letting the people go."

"I remember a bit about that from Sunday school. There was something about boils and sores all over their bodies?"

"I don't know about that. Never went to church. We pray at home never in some building with a whole lot of strange people."

"And you are the only one to stretch a hand to us."

"All these holier-than-thou people could only macco. No tangible help from them. But old man Bascombe did marry a woman from here. This community I mean. Yet none of them cautioned her about her doings."

"Being from the islands they knew just how powerful he was. They could have warned her."

"Her name was Gertrude Findley."

"Findley? I've heard that name throughout my life. From primary school right through to secondary school."

"What exactly did you hear?"

"In primary school I heard that I resemble the Findleys. In secondary school I was shunned by all until I overheard a conversation between a husband and wife, him telling her to keep their sons away from me because I was a bad seed."

"They did that to you? What a terrible thing to do to a child."

"Well I survived it. It started from young enough so I was able to handle it."

"I've brought you a few items to help you go through this nightmare and hopefully come out the other end with all of you intact. And I mean mentally and emotionally."

"You have some power too?"

"We all do. So here it is." Miss Norma handed her a brown bag with her two hands. "You receive it with your two hands."

"Thank you, Miss Norma. But you haven't told me what's wrong in or with this place. The nights are unbearably hot. Nobody could sleep even with the windows open. And the food just spoiling so fast. I have to buy food every day and eat outside. Can't bring any food inside. At this rate we'll be homeless in no time at all."

"You did not get here with your free will. You were pulled here as if by a magnet. Long story short, you are a descendant of the Findley's. The old man failed to take into consideration that his wife's descendants would also be his descendants."

"So whatever it is, brought me and my children here to suffer?"

"I think they were hoping that the curse would be neutralized. Become null and void. I don't know."

"And the landlord? Who is he?"

"He is your great uncle. He is from the islands. He wants to break the curse. He also failed to take into consideration that you have other blood that is not Bascombe."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll get it eventually. First let's make this place comfortable for you and your children. You'll find instructions in that bag. Follow them to the letter."

Miss Norma abruptly left whereby Marjorie called her children to come inside the house. The crying and fighting stated all over.

"Listen little ones. How about we sleep under the coffee tree tonight? It is a full moon night so it will be nice and fun."

"Okay. Stories? Tell us the one where the mother got rid of the devil by giving someone a pound of salt in the lentils to eat."

By the time Marjorie got to answer they were out of the house with their sheets and pillows.

She followed the instructions and did the job as soon as they fell asleep. Then she remembered something Miss Norma said about her other blood relations. She didn't know much about them either. Seems like the entire family were in cahoots to keep her in the dark. Well no more. She stamped the floor and mentally made a decision. No more of this nonsense. The next day after sending the children of to school she went in search of her fathers' blood relatives. What she learnt shocked her to the core.

Decision made plan of action implemented, there's a new Marjorie in town.

That night they again made themselves comfortable in the gallery. She gave the children some lime bud tea ensuring a sound sleep for the entire night.

The noises in the neighbourhood were so horrendous that night it will be a proverb for generations to come.

The first complaint was quite very early.

"Come in and sit anywhere. I'm getting the children ready for school and I am already late."

"You look like you had a good night's sleep. How did you manage that?"

"I prayed my prayers, laid down and closed my eyes. Isn't that how we all sleep?"

"On a regular night sure. Last night was anything but a regular night. Didn't you hear all that noise?"

"Ok little ones. Off you go. Pay attention to your teachers and remember to write your homework in your homework book."

"Bye Mummy. Bye Miss Glenda."

Marjorie got herself and her guest a cup of coffee and sat herself down on the opposite side of the room.

"Ok you have my undivided attention. What about what noise?"

"There was lots of banging and screaming in and around your house. This house. Are you telling me you didn't hear anything?"

"I'm telling you I didn't hear anything. I slept like a log last night. First good nights' sleep since we got here."

An extremely loud banging erupted from within the house causing Glenda to jump from her seat and seek refuge next to a cupboard. Noticing Marjorie looking at her with a strange expression she asked her about the sound.

"I didn't hear anything, Are you sure there isn't something wrong with your ear?"

Then came a repeat and Glenda didn't scream but squealed and rushed out of the house like the devil was on her tail.

Miss Norma came around later in the day with a cheerful smile.

"I heard about Glenda. She is your cousin. The one who rented you this place is her grand uncle. Everybody is family around here either by blood or marriage. Glenda's side was hoping old man Bascombe would feel sorry for you and release this place from the curse because they want it for themselves."

"Has everybody forgotten how to work and buy what they want?"

"It would appear so. But back to you. You met with your relatives who are not Bascombe?"

"Yes. And they told me a few things. And how to call up a few beings."

"I gathered as much. I know who you called. But I couldn't tell you. So I showed you the way. I am glad I did. Are you happy to have found your other family and to know your power?"

"Yes I am. Thank you very much."

"Don't rest as yet. They'll be coming back for you harder than ever. You see they will never forgive or excuse old man Bascombe because his wife was their blood relation. She could never do wrong. What I gave you will keep the heat at bay, but will not help with those down the road. They bad like crab. So call up more of who your family told you to."

Marjorie gingerly sent her children away for the weekend. She had to keep them out of harms' way. She got some of the coloured chalk that she always kept for no reason, and most of what her blood relations told her to get, she already had in her possession. She made her preparations knowing fully well that the peeping toms were watching and will be taking back what they see.

Using the coloured chalks she outlined the circle within a circle within another circle and wrote a few words with her fingertips within the smallest circle.

As she was told she got an answer from the back of the house. She continued writing within the circles with the bush stalks she was given, each time getting an answer, so she knew she was doing it correctly.

"Marjorie."

She heard her name, but she was told don't stop for any reason She shouldn't even pause or there'll be hell to pay. So she didn't. She went on to do the same in all the rooms in a particular order. The designs were slightly different but all leading to the same goal. She got the answers as expected. Her name was getting called throughout but she paid no heed. When she was done she went to the front door and saw the landlord.

"Yes Mr. Bascombe?"

"I need to check the electric box in the house. I forgot to do that before you moved in."

"It's fine. My brothers checked that and the plumbing. Everything's fine. Anything else?"

"I am kind of tired. Can I come in and rest my feet for a few minutes?"

"Sorry Mr. Bascombe. The house is in a mess. Can't you go rest by Glenda? The walk downhill shouldn't be too difficult. Right now I am busy. Goodbye."

Once back in the house she tried to pick up where she left of but then noticed something was different. The box with the chalk was turned upside down and there were footprints where there shouldn't have been.

"So you're the one who bothered my sleep?"

Marjorie's head swivelled so fast her neck almost broke. There was this lady standing there. Beautiful but ugly with a prominent nose high cheek bones ashen complexion and long straight black hair reaching the middle of her back. Marjorie could sense her anger, though there were no visible signs.

"I am sorry. Who are you? And how did I bother your sleep?"

"All this simmi-dimmi you doing here. What did you expect?"

"Obviously not you." Marjorie noticed and wondered why she was so calm.

"You were expecting that one over there?" And she pointed with her chin to a spot behind her. There she saw what she thought was the devil, with two horns and a tail, just as the priest described him. She stood there openmouthed head turning left then right unable to scream or even utter a word, glancing at the lady who now had white smoke coming from her nostrils and ears, and the other whose green teeth appear to be growing and turning into fangs.

She stooped down and with her head in her hands said "What have I done?"

"You silly woman! You've crossed the boundaries of good and evil." The landlord said in a weakened voice from outside the front door.

"What are you talking about?"

"You've called up the sister of the one who was causing the heat in this house."

"And who is that other one?"

"You missed a point when you came to talk to me so that one came through a crack in the portal."

"So what do we do now?" Getting no answer she went out and saw Mr. Bascombe motionless with blood flowing from every orifice in his body. The angry lady was standing still, apparently unable to move and the so called devil hooves stuck to the ground.

Miss Norma came smiling and watching all with her eagle eye made the strangest comment. "Oh good. They both came up. Now to send them both to thy kingdom come. Amen."

#### **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. Solter loves writing and writing and writing. She's been published by Sirens Call Publications, Weird Mask, and Migla press.

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#### Mesh Mouth | Christopher Sweet

I was positive they were messing with me when my new friends told me about Mesh Mouth. It was what kids did when a new family moved into the neighborhood—first, find out if there were any kids in said family; second, determine if any of those kids are of befriending age; and third, if there are any such kids, screw with them to test their mettle.

It only took two days after we moved into the neighborhood for Ben, Amy, and Killian to come knocking on our door. I later found out the speed of their inquiry had less to do with looking for friends and more to do with the thousands of acres of forest land that sprawled out behind our new home. Apparently the previous owners of the house would let the trio access the woods from their back yard whenever they wanted. There were other ways into the woods but they required lengthy detours from the street we all lived on and would take up precious play time.

So it was that I wound up spending almost every single day of our first summer in that neighborhood playing out in the woods with those three. They were nice to me right off the hop, accepting me into their fold without drama or question. It took a full month for them to bring up the horror that dwelled in the wilderness behind my house.

It was a piping hot day in early July and we'd been trudging through the trees looking for snakes when we came across an old, rusted barbed wire fence. It was bent almost completely to the forest floor in places, making it easy to get over. I'd lifted a leg over it without a thought, assuming we'd just keep going in the direction we were headed.

"Jack! Wait!" Killian shouted.

I froze straddling the fence, raising my eyebrows in question.

"That's Mesh Mouth's territory."

"Mesh Mouth?" I said as I lifted my leg back over the fence. "Sounds like a band my brother would listen to."

Riley was seven years older than me and hardly factored into my day-to-day thinking unless we needed someone older to do something questionable for us; usually providing us with matches or buying us cigarettes when we had the money. He wasn't of age but the lady at the convenience store up the road had a thing for him and sold him whatever he wanted.

Amy slapped her forehead hard enough to leave a red mark. "I can't believe we've never told you about him!"

Ben, her twin brother, blanched at the mention of the name. "I really don't like talking about him. Especially out here."

Now my interest was piqued.

"Who's Mesh Mouth?" I asked.

Ben looked around when I said the name, as if it would summon whoever we were talking about.

"Nobody knows where he came from," Killian said, brushing orange locks of hair out of his bright blue eyes and leaning against a nearby tree. At thirteen, he was a full year older than the rest of us but never acted like it until he had something to teach us, as he did now. "My dad said the Natives used to tell stories about him before white people took over the land."

"Hold on a sec," I said. "Is Mesh Mouth a guy?"

Killian's eyes flashed. "Nobody knows. Most people who see him don't live long enough to talk about him. But my dad said his older brother's best friend was killed and eaten by him."

That's when I figured they were messing with me. They'd played the long con, befriending me and earning my trust before trying me with this local legend. I didn't have anything to prove but I didn't love being the butt of a joke. With the rash conviction of a twelve-year-old, I decided I would get ahead of this one and make sure they knew I couldn't be put on like this.

"And then you'll tell me he hunts and eats whoever crosses the fence?" I said.

Killian shook his head somberly. "He doesn't care about the fence. My old man would kill me if he found out we were so close to it. The barrier is just a warning. Mesh Mouth hunts wherever he wants."

"Well I'm not scared of him," I said, standing up on the trunk of a fallen tree. I turned in the direction of the fence, cupped my hands around my mouth, and hollered, "Mesh Mouth! I'm not afraid of you!" And then after a brief second's hesitation. "Bitch!"

I turned back to my friends with my cockiest grin pasted to my face but felt it disappear when I saw their expressions. Killian's pasty skin had gone even whiter, almost transparent. Amy was chewing her bottom lip. She held one of Ben's hands in both of her own. Her brother was shaking so hard I could almost hear it.

I said, "You guys are actually afraid of it?"

"You're not supposed to speak to him," Amy whispered.

I forced out a laugh but it was drowned out by a far-off, bellowing screech. The cry echoed between the trees and carried over to us from beyond the fence. At the sound of it Killian stiffened and Ben buried his face in his sister's shoulder.

"What was that?" I said, my bravado replaced by cold fear.

"I want to go home," Ben said, voice muffled by the fabric of Amy's t-shirt.

Without another word, the three of us followed Killian back out of the woods.

\*\*\*

I woke in the middle of the night thinking I'd heard something. I held my breath and listened, hearing only the gentle creaks and groans of the house settling around me. My heart jumped into my throat when the bedroom door creaked open a few inches. I was ready to scream when our old tabby padded into the room.

"Lippy, you scared me," I hissed at him.

I patted my blankets to let him know I wasn't opposed to cuddles. He took a few steps toward my bed then froze in place, arching his back and hissing. He darted from my room a split second before the screech came.

It was the same sound we'd heard in the woods. And it was right outside.

I leapt from my bed at the exact moment my window shattered inward. I didn't look behind me. Couldn't bear to face whatever horror I may have summoned.

There came a crashing, splintering noise behind me as I fled my room, running down the hall, and smacking directly into my dad, who caught me by the shoulders. He had a paperback tucked under one arm.

"What was that?" he demanded, looking suspicious and bewildered.

"Mesh Mouth," I said.

His brow furrowed. "Who?"

My bedroom door exploded outward and crashed into the opposite wall.

My dad pushed me behind him. "Go tell your mother to call the police."

"Dad-"

He turned to look at me, presumably to reinforce his command, but he'd lost my attention.

A long, pale limb protruded from my bedroom door. It was a parody of a human arm, as if a child's drawing had come to life. It must have been twenty feet long or more. The hand on the end of it bore long, thin fingers that ended in thick, black, pointed nails. It reached out of my room and planted itself flat on the floor. A second hand joined it and the two limbs stiffened, as if straining against something.

The sinewy muscles in each of the arms grew taught and the rest of the creature's bulk slid out behind them, pulled forward by the appalling limbs.

Seeing it, my mind wanted to collapse.

The thing that emerged from my room was a gigantic, bodiless head, the two arms protruding from its sides being its only appendages. It splintered the walls of my doorframe as it dragged itself out into the hallway. It was hairless and misshapen, like it had suffered all manner of blunt-force trauma in its early development. Black eyes the size of vinyl records glinted in yellowish glow of the hallway light. Aside from these, its mouth took up most of its face. Thin, brown lips surrounded a gaping hole that appeared to have some of my sheets caught in it. I couldn't make myself turn away from it and, as I stared in frozen horror, I saw the thing in its mouth wasn't a sheet at all but some kind of web. Or mesh.

My dad hurled his book at the thing. One of its arms swiped it out of the air in a white blur of motion. Its other arm snaked out and grabbed my dad around his waist, the fingers of its hand easily wrapping around his torso. I heard a dull, popping crunch from within my dad and had to try hard not to imagine which of his bones had just broken. My dad shrieked.

Mesh Mouth pulled him closer.

My dad dug his heels into the floor and reached for the hallway walls, trying to find purchase, to prevent himself from being dragged towards the drooling abomination.

The thing grabbed one of his arms with its other hand and ripped it from his shoulder in a spray of blood, easy as pulling the wing off a fly. It crammed the arm into the webbing in its mouth. The limb became ensnared in the mesh, which wound around it, pressing it down into a bloody pulp.

My dad wailed in terrified agony.

I turned and ran.

I'll never forget the sound of my dad's screams being muffled and then cut short. It didn't take much of my imagination to picture him being crammed into the flesh-rending mesh of the monster I'd called upon us.

I bolted from the hallway, forgetting my dad's orders to get my mom. My mind could only think of escape.

A gagging, retching sound came from behind me and then a gleaming, red mass landed in front of me. I skidded to a stop. A wristwatch was wrapped around part of the pile of gore. My dad's watch. Mesh Mouth had thrown or vomited his chewed up corpse at me.

It was too much. I screamed and plowed through the nearest door, which opened into darkness. I only had a second to realize which door I'd opened before I was tumbling down the ancient wooden steps to our windowless basement. I hit the stairs hard and felt my left leg and then my left arm break. I landed on the dirt floor on my back, the breath punched out of my lungs.

I'd at least been quick enough to pull the door closed behind me. Or Mesh Mouth had slammed it. I don't know which.

I lay in the dark, shaking from the pain of my broken bones, the sorrow at losing my dad, and the fright of the thing still lurking in our hall.

That all happened hours ago.

It didn't take long for it to get my mom. Her screams were cut mercifully short seconds after they started. I hope she was dead before Mesh Mouth devoured her.

He's still up there. I can hear him dragging himself up and down the hallway, making hungry grunting sounds. For a while I heard a wet scraping noise and lost the battle against my tears when I realized it was licking up my parents' remains.

I can't move. I think more than just my arm and leg broke on the way down the stairs. I can twitch the fingers of my right hand but that's about it.

It's so dark down here. And cold.

But I won't have to worry about that for much longer.

Mesh Mouth has finally figured out how to open the basement door.

# **About the Author:**

Christopher Sweet is the author of the horror/magical-realism novel *The Boy in the Canvas* and the horror novella *Something Sweet*. He is a nature hound, an avid reader, a lover of movies, and a fan of almost anything to do with horror. He lives on a river in New Brunswick with his growing tribe of humans and beasts.

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# The Thicket | DJ Tyrer

Dear Sirs,

It was a well known fact of that autumn of 1829 that Thomas Goodrum of Northfarthing Farm and John Stanton of Little Mucham were in disagreement over a certain area of land. What was not so well known in the locality was just how deep the bad blood between them actually was, at least on Goodrum's side.

It seemed that one autumn evening, Goodrum took up his musket and left his farm for the dark Apple Lane — which John Stanton was accustomed to walk of an evening when returning home from the fields, this being quite a direct route — with the intention of shooting his rival dead, thus bringing their dispute to an abrupt end. It also seemed that he had fixed upon just the right thicket by the roadside from which to fire, it being the most beshadowed of all.

However, as it came to pass, he did neither conceal himself in said thicket nor did he attempt to shoot my good friend John: for when we reached that particular spot (myself having met John in the fields while going about my business and offering to accompany him on his way back to the village), we found Goodrum weltering in the road – his face white as a sheet and his musket cast aside like so much matchwood. Obviously, we rushed to his aid (most likely we would have done the same even if we *had* known his intentions for that night).

"Oh, thank God!" the man exclaimed as we reached him. Realising whom he addressed, he took firm hold of John as the latter bent to help him, and addressed him thus: "John, this very night I planned to take up residence in yonder thicket and shoot you down!" We gasped in surprise at his confession. "Yes, 'tis true!" he affirmed, reading the disbelief on our faces. "I was approaching said thicket when I saw it... a dark figure – like a monk – standing in the darkest part of the thicket, beckoning to me... such eyes... and a hand, like that of a dead man... O God save me!" Whereupon poor Goodrum began to sob.

I must admit that as he spoke, I did indeed glance toward the thicket and – just for a moment – I thought that I saw a figure there; though, surely, it was nothing but a shadow. After he had finished his description, neither John nor myself were of a heart to venture an examination of the thicket. Anything which could terrify a man so stout as Goodrum was far too fearsome for us to search out! Instead, we helped carry the half-crazed wight to the village, where my sister tended to his health. After a week, he was fit enough to return to his farm; but I hear that he keeps a brace of loaded pistols and a musket by his bed, and has procured himself three new hounds.

Nowadays, when returning home, the field workers avoid the use of Apple Lane, preferring the longer route of Cherry Street. I, too, am disinclined to use the Lane, except when my needs are most pressing. As to *what* Goodrum saw there, I cannot say – there had been no local lore of a haunting there – though I have heard some in the tavern whisper that it was the Devil calling one of his own.

Your faithful servant,
 Reverend Charles Winstanley of Little Mucham,
 September, the Year of Our Lord, 1832.

#### Lydia's Father | DJ Tyrer

There had always been rumours about Lydia's mother – neighbours claiming they saw her dancing in the woods with things that were not human and other such scurrilous claims – and, it was, perhaps, inevitable that they should attach themselves to Lydia, in turn.

It was said that thunder crashed and the moon turned to blood on the night that she was born. Then, after her mother disappeared, witnesses averred they saw the girl walking in the woods with her or her mother's shade. Then, as Lydia grew of age, the rumours that had clung to her mother became attached to her...

Lydia had always been a wilful and rather spoilt child: Her mother called her 'my little princess' and her father doted on her all the more when her mother vanished. In his eyes, she could do no wrong, even as she spent her childhood pulling the wings off flies and doing worse things to frogs and mice.

The dislike of their neighbours for her only grew as she did.

As her mother had been, Lydia was a beauty and could entice any village lad she desired, only to cast them off like a worn coat.

"You need to learn respect," Goodie Wethers said. "A bit of modesty wouldn't go amiss, either..."

Lydia laughed. "Respect for the likes of you? I have experienced things you could never comprehend. Your sort mean no more to me than an ant."

The Goodwife couldn't help but shudder a little at the thought of how the girl treated ants.

The gossip grew and the calls to do something about her followed.

"She's evil!" cried Goodie Burns.

"Her father was the Devil himself," interjected Goodie Brain, "and, she consorts with his imps in the forest in the most vile of ways."

The Minister nodded his agreement as if he were the gavel at a trial. "If left unchecked, her wickedness will only grow. She must be stopped."

That evening, Lydia reported the gossip to her father.

"They plan to kill me, Daddy. You won't let them harm me, will you?"

"I won't. You know how much I love you. How much I loved your mother. I'd do anything to protect you."

"I know you would, Daddy," she said, hugging him. "Oh, I almost forgot to say that I spent this afternoon honing your axe. It's ever so sharp. Well, I'm off for a walk in the woods. Good night, Daddy."

He smiled. "Good night, darling."

As soon as she stepped out of the door, he went over to where she had left his axe and picked it up. He would go and visit the Minister, put a stop to it all before it started.

#### **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
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# Lip-Locked | Evan Baughfman

The bottle spun. Partygoers cheered.

Who was Estrella, quiet, new girl—exotic, hot—gonna kiss?

The bottle settled on soccer captain, Chase.

Estrella shied away. Classmates pushed them together.

Chase grinned, ready for a good time.

Estrella's jaws split into clicking mandibles. Her face latched onto Chase's.

The boy gurgle-screamed as razor-sharp tongues weaseled down his throat, separating his head from his neck.

Teenagers fled. Estrella fed.

So easy to camouflage on this naïve, young planet!

To return to her homeworld, she'd need more energy. Consume more youthful Earthflesh.

She tossed aside Chase's brainless skull.

Her party had just begun.

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

Evan Baughfman is a published playwright and author. Evan has found a lot of success writing horror fiction, his work found recently in anthologies by No Bad Books Press and Grinning Skull Press. D&T Publishing released his novel, *Bad for Your Teeth*, in April 2023. Evan's other book with D&T is novella, *Vanishing of the 7<sup>th</sup> Grade*.

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# The Season of My Becoming | Tom Duke

My senses are aroused beyond anything I've ever experienced. But though my heart is beating to a new, exciting rhythm, my mind has settled on the delicate crunch of half-dried leaves under feet as I follow the narrow path leading out to the clearing's edge; it's a small, compressed sound that dies in the surrounding woods, yet reaches my ears like an ancient whisper.

For the first time in my life I'm utterly alone, not just out for one of my solitary walks in the woods, the walks that up until today I took while my mother—at least that's who she had always said she was—sat in our cottage behind a small table in the corner, between the fireplace and side window, studying spells and blending potions.

I didn't realize that over the past two years, as I matured beyond boyhood, she'd been crafting a special gift for my eighteenth birthday; and an accompanying story she would tell on that pivotal day.

Today.

\*\*\*

This morning, as we sat on her bed, she placed a small hat box between us and disclosed the truth of our relationship, the nature of my pedigree, and the significance of my eighteenth birthday. She had found me, newborn, near the very edge of the clearing I now approach, in a hand basket, swaddled in wool blankets, with a note that read: Boy to beast. 18 years of blessings and bounty, the final day one of turning, then one soul shall be taken—his or yours.

She believed she could save us both; for unless she took my virgin life on this very day—or was able to arrest my transformation—I would become...something more. Something dangerous.

These revelations at first alarmed and dismayed me. But the feelings quickly surrendered to the excitement of discovery and liberation, as if a cage door, until now closed, was suddenly left open, and the whole world—existence in its entirety—was now laid out before me. Strange and seductive sensations swelled inside me like a restless, undulating tide spilling over into my consciousness.

She said she wanted to keep us safe.

I had never felt safer.

Her confession, that she wasn't my mother, merely a surrogate and a witch—one who had gambled everything on this momentous day—made me feel less a son than something to be kept and tamed.

She removed the lid from the box. Inside, on a piece of velvet so smooth and dark it could have been the surface of a dead, bottomless lake, sat a neckband of golden bronze metal. She lifted it, as if an offering, with both hands. "I have infused this amulet with a binding spell that will keep you calm in adulthood, keep you...normal."

So this was the *gift* she promised, the item she had forged and bewitched when I was out on my daily walks in the woods—the only time I felt almost complete. "These are your woods," she often proclaimed. *Yours alone*, a distant but more dominant voice echoed inside my head.

She was short of her normal confident and calming self this morning. Her upper back was clinched, slightly lifting her shoulders, her elbows tucked close; her fingers trembled along the neckband's smooth curves; and the longer she spoke, the more she avoided my eyes. "Once latched, it will activate a spell to protect us both from your other..." Her voice began to tremble in cadence with her hands. "You know that I love you as my own, and you surely must still love me, as you have so often said."

Her hands had achieved full shake, her face creased with conflict, her eyes darkened with dread. Her voice, now a weak rasp, labored from her throat like a dying breath: "This is the only way we can stay together..."

...then one soul shall be taken—his or yours...

"...if you'll just allow me to put this on you." She reached for my neck with the...

Collar.

She wanted me to trade my nature, my soul, for a collar.

\*\*\*

I reach the exact location where *not-mom* said she had found the infant, me, and stop. Early winter rides the high clouds; the seasonal transitions always invigorate me, especially fall to winter. I glance over my shoulder one last time—the cottage, and all it represents, already fading from memory as a dream dissipates into the ether upon waking. But the woods...so lovely in the waning twilight, are hyper-real, as is *her* blood that stains the front of my shirt and covers my chin.

It's true; I had loved her, because I believed she loved me. But her love was selfish and eager to deceive. I saw it, at the end, in her teary stare. She feared being alone. But what is more, she feared me. Always had. It flowed through her like a virus through blood and had corrupted any love she might have once had for me. Yes, her eyes revealed all

these things. Eyes that in her final moments were unable to blink away the nightmare that was unfolding upon her like a demon's shadow.

I strip and leave my clothes where I stand, urinate on them. Wild freedom breezes across my bare skin, stimulating the fine hairs; and a primal need, desperate to be sated, floods my heart and mind.

The woods smell richer today, the air itself alive with supernatural electricity. I step into them. My woods. Alone.

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

Tom 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. In addition to The Sirens Call, his work has been published in Wyldlood Press, The Horror Zine, Hirearth Publishing, and HellBound Books Beautiful Tragedies III (accepted).

# Dangerous Undercurrents | Ivanka Fear

"Rules are meant to be broken."

I should have put up more of an argument when Calder suggested we ignore the signs. Under normal circumstances, I'm good at both making rules and at following them. It's part and parcel of being a primary school teacher.

But I love the beach. I wanted to gaze out across the expanse of blue lake, hear the rush of white water slapping the shore, leave my footprints behind on the silky sand, and dip my toes into the cool water.

Just one more time.

The yellow tape cordoned off the only access to the beach road, with pylons preventing vehicle access. Not a problem, since we had walked from our residential street to the road leading down to the lake. We were undeterred by the large sign warning walkers not to descend: **DO NOT ENTER.** 

"Jeez, you'd think it was a murder scene," Calder chuckled, pulling up the tape to allow us to duck under. "Crime scene. Do not Cross."

"Well, people have died."

"Because they went too far." Calder rolled his grey-blue eyes. "So everybody gets punished."

I shrugged, my palms upturned. "I don't think anyone really wants to swim in a lake full of bodies, anyway. It's kind of morbid, when you think about it. Why don't we just go to the park overlooking the lake?"

"Come on, Zarya. I know you want to go down to the water. What are you afraid of?" Calder tugged my arm and led me down the walkway, the lake sparkling up ahead. "Ghosts wandering the beach?"

We'd watched too many horror movies the last couple of weeks. Last night's viewing was at his place. Calder and I have been next door neighbors since we were born, and neither of us seemed to have any intention of moving away from our parents and the lakeside town of Siren.

"At least it's not foggy. No ghosts emerging from the mist on the water today." It was intended to be a joke, but the truth was that the memory of last night's film had spooked the hell out of me.

Calder laughed, getting it. He always got me. "No, definitely not ghost weather." He waved his arms up at the blue sky, not a cloud in sight.

Breathtaking. The beauty of the lake was never lost on me. But it was so different from the last time we were here. Bodies on the beach, soaking up the sun. Castles on the shore, kids scooping up sand. Teenagers in the lake, splashing up water.

The water.

The sign greeted us at the bottom of the winding incline. Warning: Do NOT Go in the Water.

It was one of many signs that dotted the sand along the shoreline. But that wasn't the biggest change.

The place was barren. No less beautiful, but stripped of life. "It's such a shame." I pointed to the red print on the banner plastered across The Cove's wooden archway: **DANGER! Beach Closed. Keep away.** Underneath, the sign's lettering once welcomed people.

"A little dramatic, if you ask me," Calder said. "It's not the beach that's dangerous. It's the idiots who can't swim and insist on heading all the way out to the sand bar."

He was right, of course. There was certainly no harm in the two of us walking hand in hand along the deserted boardwalk, watching the gentle lapping of the waves. I squinted against the brightness of the sun, trying to envision the way things used to be.

But where people once strolled, only our footsteps echoed on the wooden boards. The blaring of radios from cars that toured the beach road, replaced with an eerie silence. No boats, no colorful flotation devices on the water, only the cerulean sky above a sapphire lake.

"It's so peaceful," I said. "But sad. There used to be laughter." We stopped in front of the empty playground. The yellow and blue structure, devoid of children, now held only wind-blown sand, as though the climbers themselves were lethal as the lake with the sun reflecting off it.

"Let's walk over to the water. I know you want to at least set your feet in it. Maybe I'll stick my head in." Calder laughed, trying to get my mind off the reason for the abandoned playground.

A wall of rocks stood between us and the water. Heavy machinery had placed them along the shoreline to make it difficult for people to access the water. It was the town's response to the tragedy of the previous summer. But we were young, physically fit, and foolish.

Calder went first, hoisting himself onto a rock, then extending his hand to help me up. We climbed across the rocks, then turned around. The beach shack, its window and door boarded up, stared back at us. All three godforsaken lifeguard towers loomed as sentinels guarding the water. A couple of lonely benches perched in front of the desolate breakwater jutting out to the lake, fallen trees blocking entry, the few trees still standing bereft of leaves, waves crashing against jagged rocks.

And we jumped. Off the rock pile onto the shore. Our sandals tread over and around the sticks and stones, the rocks and driftwood, protruding from the once soft, squishy sand. Seaweed entangled itself around my ankles, but Calder's firm grip kept me upright.

"It's absolutely gorgeous! I want to live here, right here, on this spot, overlooking the lake," I said. "You can build a castle for us, out of rocks and wood and sand, with the seaweed to cover the roof."

Calder brought his lips to my forehead, the corners of his mouth turning up. "Sounds perfect. What about when it storms? What about winter?"

I sighed. "Wouldn't it be nice if it never stormed?"

We walked along for a while, in silence, just far enough away to resist the temptation to wade straight out into the water.

"What's that?" A slab of wood with nails and chains lay strung across a hole as though someone had planted it there with a purpose.

Calder examined it, concluded it was probably part of a shipwreck, and steered me safely away. All I could think of was if the ship sank and that was part of it, where were the people? We advanced closer to the line where water met sand.

"AHH!" I screamed at the sight of bones as we approached the water's edge.

The carcass had been picked bare by the gulls that circled above. It was just nature at work, but the hairs on my arms stood at attention all the same. I turned my eyes away from the fish's remains.

"It's good to know the lake hasn't been entirely abandoned," Calder said. He nodded toward the flock of seagulls to the right of us. My eyes scanned the water where a large group floated on the surface, but Calder nudged me and guided my vision to the much bigger colony on the shore. "But the land division is a lot stronger than the naval fleet. I guess even the gulls are cautious."

"I'm going in." With wild abandon, I let go of Calder's hand and ran to the water. If it weren't for the sign, I might have kept running.

# Beware! Strong current.

Common sense took over. I slipped off one sandal and tested the water with my foot. "It's not that cold." I took off the other sandal and stepped in further. "Ohhh! It is cold. Colder than I thought."

The sand beneath my feet parted, sucking me in deeper, and I lost my balance.

"Gotcha." Calder grabbed my waist, steadying me. "That's enough, Zarya." He led me out of the lake, his water-logged sandals squished as we walked and climbed our way back to the safety of the boardwalk.

As we continued strolling, we came upon THE sign. Everyone in town knew about it. Only few had the guts to come see it for themselves. Calder and I were among the brave.

IN MEMORY A long list of names followed the year. And so many others before.

We stood in silence for a few moments, remembering those who had been lost to the lake.

I felt her eyes on us before I saw her. There was something familiar about her freckled face and red hair.

"Zarya? Calder?" Her face lit up as she recognized us, but neither Calder nor I could quite place her.

We spent the next few minutes chatting about what we'd been up to the last couple of decades. Amazing how you can have a conversation with someone, tell them all about yourself, and not know who on earth you're talking to you.

"I better get going," she finally said. "It's been so nice seeing you two again." She set off down the boardwalk, in the opposite direction we were headed.

"Who was that?" I asked, drawing my eyebrows together, trying to remember her.

"Cordelia," Calder said. "She went to school with us. Moved away in Grade 2, though. Remember?"

I remembered once he told me. He's the one with the great memory. I'd forget my head if it wasn't attached.

"That is so weird." Calder shook his own head as though trying to clear it.

"What is?"

"I heard she drowned last year. I guess I heard wrong."

We turned to watch Cordelia walk off down the boardwalk, but there was no trace of her. Hidden by the beach shack or the rocks, we assumed. Continuing our walk to where the breakwater curved, creating the cove the beach was named for, Sirens Cove, we heard voices as we approached. A sweet, sickly odor wafted up over the rocks separating the cove from the rest of the lake.

"Stop. There's somebody on the other side of the rocks," I cautioned Calder.

He understood. We turned and walked in the opposite direction, following the rocky shore unprotected by the breakwater. Diamonds sparkled on sapphire, like stars fallen into the lake. A whole other universe, just below the surface.

As I turned to Calder to ask him to snap a photo of the two of us, he picked up a pair of sunglasses off one of the rocks. "Someone must have left these here. Expensive. They'll be missing them."

He slipped them on, and looked out to the sun-kissed depths. "Shit! There's someone drowning out there!" Before I could stop him, he dove from the rocks straight into the crest. Gone. Not a sign of him. Only a sign sticking out of the rocks: **Absolutely no diving or swimming.** Only a pair of sunglasses sitting on the rocks.

The moment I slipped them on, in hopes of seeing better against the glare of the sun on the water, I saw him clearly. Arms flailing as he bobbed in the current, struggling to stay afloat. Calder was the stronger swimmer, but he'd kept my head above water so many times, it was my turn to do the same for him.

Disregarding the sign, I plunged into the lake. Through the shaded lenses, I saw it all. The teens on the beach, the sunglasses on the rock, Cordelia and Calder floundering in the starry depths, and more. **So many more.** 

I wanted to save Calder. But when I reached out for him, the others grabbed on to me, dragging me down. I could only hope that one of the kids smoking weed would don the sunglasses and see us. Save us.

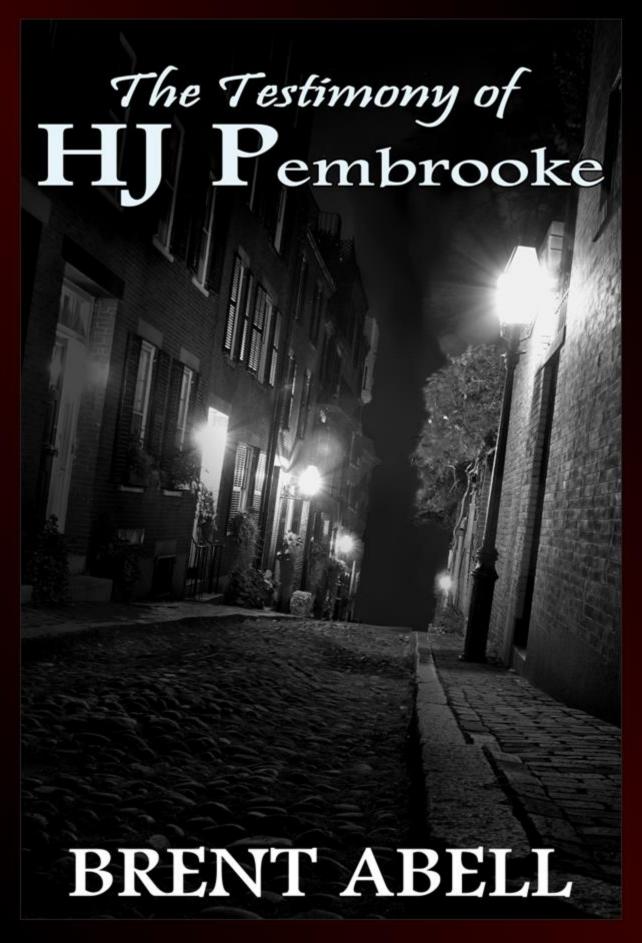
Opening my arms to them all, gathering them together as they wailed, we swam for our lives toward the abandoned shore. Just a little further and we'd be there.

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

Ivanka Fear is a Canadian writer. Her poems and stories appear in numerous publications, including The Sirens Call, Scarlet Leaf Review, Mystery Tribune, October Hill, Close to the Bone, and elsewhere. Her debut novel, *The Dead Lie*, is the first in her Blue Water Mysteries series. Ivanka enjoys watching mystery series and romance movies, gardening, going for walks, and watching the waves roll in at the lake.

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AVAILABLE TO PURCHASE OR BORROW ON AMAZON

# John Karma | Seaton Kay-Smith

When Alison arrived home, her house was very clean. The door was ajar, and the smell of chocolate-chip cookies wafted through the air. With the heat of the day still lingering in the afternoon air, an icy chill enveloped her entire body.

"Hello?" she said, her voice weak with fear, as she slowly raised her trembling hand and pushed on the door, letting it arc on its hinges to reveal the entirety of her house in its immaculate state.

It couldn't be him, she told herself as she stepped inside. He couldn't be back so soon. She'd asked him to leave. She'd asked him to leave forever.

Stepping inside, her feet moving lightly upon the polished hardwood floors, recently mopped, as she made her way from one spotless room to another. Perhaps her kids had cleaned the house, mopped the floors and folded the laundry? Perhaps they had taken out the garbage, scooped the leaves out of the pool and polished the mirror in the bathroom?

Wandering through the house, Alison took a mental note of all the good deeds which had been done, all the clean things, neat and tidy, sparkling like new; each item observed, adding to her creeping dread.

She entered the kitchen and peered into the oven at the golden light emanating from within. Twelve little cookies. Twelve little heart-shaped cookies. The baking paper curling up at the sides, fluttering, dancing in the burning heat.

She was transfixed by them. Her mouth dry. He was back.

She tried to swallow but couldn't. He was back.

Twelve little heart-shaped cookies. The ingredients bought, the batter mixed, the cookies shaped. She saw the dishes in the drying rack. No sign of mess, of their preparation, only the result. He was back. Twelve little heart-shaped cookies.

A terrible thought struck her, nearly knocking her off her feet. Her whole body convulsed with it. She stumbled, pushing her hand against the recently washed walls to steady herself, the kids. Where were they? Why could she not hear them? They were always laughing, screaming; they were noisy children. Apart from the soft whirr of the fan-forced oven, the house was deathly silent. Turning on her heels, Alison left the kitchen and ran, "Peter, Luca!" She shouted as she ran, her throat burning from panic. She neared their bedrooms and poked her head inside. Empty. Their toys away, their beds made, the hole in the wall they'd made rough housing filled with spackle and painted over. John Karma was back, and she had to get out of the house.

"Luca!" she shouted again, "Peter?" Alison ran through the house and out into the yard, checking all the hiding places and alcoves she could think of, anywhere a small child might hide themselves away when trying to evade the grasp of a monster. The back shed, the tree house, the doghouse, which now smelled uncannily of lemons.

Entering her house once more, she came to a skidding halt. The sound of footsteps. Someone was in the kitchen.

"Alison?" The voice was soft, sweet, inquisitive, and strong. There was a hint of confusion and disbelief in it. It accused her of being crazy for feeling how she did. It mocked her for her panic. Called her rising anxiety, cold sweat, and thunderous heart, silly. There was laughter in the words, "What are you doing?"

Alison knew who she would find there. She felt her stomach tighten as she made her grim gallows walk back toward the kitchen. She walked hesitantly, trepidation filling the spaces in her heart that weren't already consumed by terror, every muscle begged her not to continue, but she did. Her feet moving slowly, her mind racing. He was back.

As she turned the corner of her open-plan house and entered the kitchen, he was there, the owner of the horrible voice, John Karma, standing by the oven, now off, the room noiseless in the absence of the fan. He held the tray of still steaming cookies, all perfectly shaped, smelling sweetly of melted chocolate and imminent peril. "I've baked cookies," his hands ensconced in floral patterned oven mitts. "I baked you cookies."

Alison looked at him, standing there, smiling sweetly. His grotesque display of innocence, wide eyes, smooth forehead, his head tilted smugly to one side, a question dancing behind his iris' "Get out," she said, desperate to appear calm, to maintain her composure, as she edged slowly toward the sink until her lower back pressed up against its perfectly spotless granite surface.

"I cleaned the pool," he said, "I de-moulded the shower."

"Get out," she repeated, this time more forcefully. Strength slowly returning to her voice.

John Karma placed the tray of cookies down on the bench, his smile never disappearing, in stark contrast to Alison, whose smile never managed to manifest.

"I cleaned the entire house," he said gently.

"I know." As subtly as she could, Alison moved her hand toward the knife block on the kitchen bench.

"I just wanted to help."

"I know," her hand climbed the block like an itsy-bitsy spider, feeling the wood beneath her fingertips, searching for the plastic of the handles. "Where are the kids?"

Scrunching his face into mock confusion, John Karma tilted his head and smiled, "At soccer practice, I should hope." He laughed a little. The demonic cackle of the self-satisfied. "It's Wednesday."

Relief filled Alison's chest. She had felt the increasingly tight grip of John Karma's presence, slowly crushing her, like she had been caught in an ever-tightening vice, but finally some respite. *It was Wednesday*. This reprieve was not so much a warm feeling, but a removal of the cold one which had occupied her heart since she had arrived home. She could breathe again, it was Wednesday.

She moved her fingers nimbly, she could feel plastic, and in that plastic, confidence, safety, "What else have you done?" she asked with equal parts concern and curiosity. Her fingers gliding up the handle, positioning themselves around it.

John Karma stared at her with his cold helpful eyes. There was nothing behind them. She knew that now. The question that she had seen dancing there, was just a shadow. He was a man *full* of shadows. "I polished the new table in the garage," he said, "two coats. I shampooed the carpet; I made a big lasagne for the week. Some of it's frozen, the rest is in a container in the fridge, ready to reheat."

Alison swallowed hard. Each task completed, a dagger to her heart, "What else?"

"I went through the mail and paid the bills. I posted that package you had sitting by the front-door, and I put on a load of washing. I folded the laundry that was in the dryer too."

Alison noticed that John Karma's eyes had, during the course of his admission, drifted down to settle on her hand which was now wrapped around the handle of a very large knife resting in its wooden block. Alison *had* been meaning to do those chores for weeks, but, between work, the kids and her various social engagements, had been unable to find the time.

His head still lowered; John Karma flicked his eyes up to meet hers. That look again, that look of confusion. It was meshed with betrayal, or sadness. She felt a sudden jolt of guilt. He had been so kind to her, had only wanted to help, had asked for nothing in return. This selfless man, this loving individual, thinking only of her and her happiness. And here she was, ready to kill him.

Alison released the knife and, against her better judgement, parted her still trembling lips, "Thank you."

"No problem. I also renewed your car's registration."

Since she had known John Karma, Alison had been terrified of him. He'd never hurt her, never caused her any pain, had only ever been sweet to her, had only ever helped her with jobs around the house. He'd done everything for her, paid for things, made things, ordered things, cleaned. Thoughtful, generous, there. He had come to her in a dream and remained in her reality. John Karma; the nicest man there was.

Too nice.

For Alison knew. She had known since she'd met him, that one day—perhaps soon, perhaps later—he would be true to his name. One day, John Karma would restore the cosmic balance he had put out of whack with his gratuitous generosity. He would balance out all the good he had done with bad. The scales would find equilibrium, order would be restored. For every good deed, there would be horror, and John Karma had done a *lot* of good.

That was the price that Alison had paid for him. Call it intuition, call it whatever you like, but his kindness would come at a cost.

One day.

She didn't know when; but she knew it would come.

John Karma smiled and offered Alison a cookie. A tear slid down her cheek. The cool of the night had settled over the house and the clock struck seven.

The house remained quiet.

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

With television writing credits on various shows for the ABC and Disney Junior, Seaton Kay-Smith has written for radio, stage and print, and was a stand-up comedian for over seven years. His debut novel, "A Fistful of Clones" was published by Harper Collins: Impulse in 2015. Outside of writing, he is a producer, an actor, and very annoying—according to his cats.

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# The Cat-Spider | K. A. Williams

The contractor had installed the condominium's heat and air system in the basement. Someone's clothes hamper sat on a dryer which thumped along making the area even hotter on this summer day.

My partner, Emmett, had opened the main control panel when my phone rang. I listened to the caller and said, "No sir" and "Yes sir".

I hung up and put the phone back in my pocket. "That was the boss. He wanted to know if we've fixed the air conditioning yet. He's got two more jobs for us this afternoon."

"Why didn't you tell him we just got here?"

"I don't think he cares about the traffic jam we had to sit through."

"Probably not. Hey, did you see that?"

"See what?" I wiped the sweat from my face with a clean work rag.

"It was like a shadow."

"There's nothing down here but us. How could something get in the basement?"

Emmett shrugged, then asked, "What's that over there?"

I glanced where he pointed. "I don't see anything."

"In the far corner at the back."

He headed in that direction and I followed. The basement was illuminated only by a single overhead bulb, but we could plainly see the huge spider web.

"We need to get out of here." I grabbed his arm and pulled him toward the elevator.

A black cat crossed our path, hissed, and puffed up its fur.

"Aw, it's trying to make itself look big. Isn't it cute?"

"You idiot!" I snapped. "It's the Cat-Spider! Do you have anything we can use as a weapon?"

"Uh, in the toolbox. But I left it at the control panel."

The creature was between us and the elevator when it shapeshifted into an enormous cat-size black spider.

Emmett screamed while I was trying to think. I pressed the settings on my headlamp till I got the brightest one.

"Run!" I pushed Emmett forward. We dodged around the spider, which seemed temporarily blinded, and rushed to the elevator. I mashed the button, hoping nobody was currently riding up or down.

After the doors opened and we were safely inside, I quickly jabbed the lobby button. As the doors slid together, a spindly black leg reached in toward us. The doors shut on it, and we backed away from the twitching limb.

"Know any good exterminators?" I asked.

"Who's gonna believe us?"

I pointed to the spider's leg which had stopped twitching.

"Proof." I picked it up with the rag I had stuffed into my back pocket.

When we reached the lobby, Emmett followed me out of the elevator and the doors closed behind us. "Man, that was too close," he said.

I nodded, my heart pounding. Then I laid the spider leg at my feet before we pulled out our phones and googled exterminators.

A pinging noise made us look up as the elevator doors opened.

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

K. A. Williams lives in North Carolina and writes speculative, mystery/crime, romance, general fiction, and poetry. She has self-published ebooks of poetry collections, short story collections, novellas/novels and Kindle short reads. Apart from writing, the author enjoys Scrabble, rock music (especially 70s & 80s) and CYOA games.

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Amazon Author Page: <u>K. A. Williams</u>





WEDNESDAY AND SATURDAYS AT 2 P.M. CST.



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?

# Last Day of Camp | Paul Wilson

Kyle stepped out of the cabin. Everyone's luggage had already been taken to the bus, so he only had his backpack. He felt light. He was perfect. He knew this experience was important—just what he needed—and it felt good to be proven right. He hated he had to fight with his parents to come to Camp Karloff but in the end, they saw his way of thinking. I need to show my appreciation. Heck, he could even help his mom make dinner tonight. And why not? He had been voted best kitchen helper here at camp. He had the badge in his backpack to prove it!

A shrill voice called to him. Moptop—Marty—skidded to a stop, breathing heavy and grinning. That was the mood today it seemed, grins all around. Sweat glistened along his forehead. Kyle was sure Moptop had run all the way here from the Little Creepers cabin, and probably just to see him.

"Hey, Kyle! I hoped I hadn't missed you."

"Naa. I was hanging around, making sure I saw you one last time, little buddy."

Moptop laughed. "It was great getting to know you! Will you write me?"

"Promise. Shake on it."

Moptop's jaw fell, and Kyle knew this was the boy's first handshake. He took it seriously, providing Kyle the old double pump. Then he had to collect himself because tears were coming. Kyle gave the kid his dignity and looked away. He knew what it was like to be embarrassed.

"You seen Molly Bennett yet?"

Kyle grinned.

"Not yet."

"Well, here's hoping! Ooooo-La-La!" Moptop formed an hourglass with his hands. Kyle laughed, then reminded him to be a gentleman.

"Sure thing." Moptop sighed. "Back to school in a few weeks. My dad's gonna work me hard before then. What about you?"

Kyle shrugged. "I'll do anything for my folks. Gotta be the best son I can, you know."

"Yeah. Well. See ya' around, Kyle. You're one awesome dude." Moptop ran for the buses, catching up to some of the smaller kids.

"He loves you," a honey-sweet voice said. Kyle turned and Molly smiled. Her hair was down like he liked. She pranced in and leaned close. A girl had never looked at him that way. Back home he was only forgettable Kyle Braswell. Here he found a better version of himself. He drew on that and leaned down to kiss Molly. He knew he wouldn't see her again and he wanted to be brave. He wanted to give her a good memory.

She returned his kiss and let him cup the back of her neck. She moaned slightly and that sound made him the tallest man at camp. When Kyle pulled away, Molly stumbled forward.

"Wow," she said.

"Yeah."

"You coming back next year?" The morning sun reflected in her eyes. Did he see tears? No, but she was looking at him steadily, seriously, and Kyle sensed love just around the corner, like the whiff of campfire at dusk.

"I hope so. I had to work to convince my parents to let me come this year. I don't know if they would take the same argument again."

Molly never blinked, just gave him a stare he would always remember, like the warm honey of her lips.

"You come back to me Kyle Braswell."

He nodded. He couldn't speak. She slipped a note into his pants pocket. "Read that on the bus home. And you write me. Okay?"

"I will. I promise"

She smiled again, kissed him lightly, and left him standing in the sun, shivering. He couldn't wait to tell his father.

Then the whistle sounded, and it was time to go to the buses.

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There were more friends, more well-wishes, and more promises to write. The camp counselors were monitoring the bus loading and Jeff Bancroft was at Kyle's bus. Jeff gave him a big old hug and said what a pleasure it had been to have him this summer.

"I hope you come back, Kyle. You could be a counselor if you're interested. What grade you going into this year?"

"Tenth, sir."

"Good. Here's my card. You call me next spring. I got a slot I'll hold open for you."

Kyle nodded. His throat felt clogged.

"You got a knack for this. Your parents should be proud. I'm sorry they couldn't come to visiting day."

"Well, they're both really busy."

"I understand. You just keep me in mind. I want to see you again." He clapped Kyle on the back and Kyle boarded the bus before tears could escape. He nodded to his new friends but sat by himself in the back. He rubbed Molly's note and Jeff's card through his jeans.

I gotta come back next year. I'll make Mom and Dad understand again. They'll have to let me come. They have to!

Kyle didn't know how grimly determined he looked. A boy who turned to joke with him did. Kyle's face was so cold, so alien, that the boy quickly turned away.

\*\*\*

The bus deposited him at the head of his road. It pulled away in a boil of orange dirt.

No one was here to meet him, not his father's rusted pick-up nor his mother's station wagon. He had written when he would arrive, but he had also written about visitation day, and they hadn't shown up then either.

Kyle went home, dragging his luggage behind him.

The journey took almost twenty minutes. He stopped in their dirt driveway. Their mailbox was stuffed full of letters. He found ad-circulars, bills, and his own camp letters. Kyle swallowed. He looked at the house. The front door was closed. The sun painted everything apocalyptic red. He swallowed again. Flies buzzed somewhere. He smelled rot. Things died in the woods around the house all the time.

I'm going back to camp . . . I am . . .

Kyle began to cry. He knew why his parents hadn't come to visitation day, but he turned from that knowledge like it was a wasp flying at his face. He dropped his luggage, the mail, and trudged across his yard.

The front door was locked. Just like he left it. Kyle used his key, pushed inside, and the smell hit him immediately. He turned up the AC when he left a month ago, but it hadn't helped.

The bugs had found them of course. Bugs get in no matter what you do. They had that problem back at Camp Karloff.

Flies had laid their eggs. Maggots squirmed in his father's mouth and his mother's eyes. The blood from the axe wounds had dried to black paint.

"It was as good as I knew it would be. I had to go. I had to. I needed to get out of here. I needed it before—"

Before I went crazy.

"I made friends. And, Dad, I got a girlfriend. She kissed me." Tears spilled over Kyle's cheeks.

"I begged you to let me go but you didn't understand. You didn't care. I had to make you see . . . I had to make you." He sniffed.

"I had to."

# **About the Author:**

Paul Wilson lives in a suburban neighborhood much like the one he turned into a horror playground in his novel *Hostage*. He lives with his wife, kids, and two cats. He has worked a spectacular list of jobs including retail district manager, a 911 operator, and the head of a college security department.

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# The Healing Power of Nature | Kevin Bachar

The forest's perfume wafted into the gravel parking lot. The scent of pine dense from the April rains. The deluge kept New Hampshire's springtime in a perpetual state of dampness. Soggy and foggy were the season's best descriptions. A green Subaru, with its hatch up, held the corner spot at the far end of the lot.

Gina Wilson was shoulder to shoulder with her husband Sam at the back of the car. She pulled out a Patagonia raincoat, and swung it onto her shoulders, "Do you really think this is a good idea?" her voice soft and plaintive. Sam wrangled on a backpack, pulling the straps tight, and replied curtly, "Yes."

A mist, twisted by the wind, enveloped them both. It made the day feel colder and caused them to hunch their shoulders against the dankness. Truth be told, Gina always felt this way, weary, and beaten down by forces outside her control.

She was thirty-eight years old, but if anyone in that parking lot were asked, they'd swear Gina was eligible for the senior citizen discount at Applebees.

Sam wasn't much better. He wasn't all grey yet like Gina, but his eyes were sullen, marked with deep shadows that made him look like he was constantly battling insomnia. Which he was, but he wished that was the only thing that ailed him.

The two weren't alone. Their daughter Laura, at the cusp of being a teen, was in the back seat. She leafed through the pages of Seventeen magazine, pining over the photos of K-Pop boy bands that fluttered by. Laura did this with only one good eye, the other covered by a patch. Her angelic face marred by the intrusive black covering.

She lost her eye in the 'accident' about a year earlier and had gotten to the point where she rarely noticed it, except when she passed a window or mirror and caught her reflection. Then she'd wince. No matter what her mother said, she felt hideous.

Laura was down to one good eye, but her hearing was still fine and she couldn't help but pick up whispers from her parents drifting in from the back of the car, "The therapist said it could help burn off reckless energy and that could help us," her father murmured. Laura's mother Gina nodded, trying to convince herself it was true, that this mountain hike would solve all their problems.

Sam tried his best to lift his wife's spirits, "Since none of the other kids come by for play-dates anymore, this gets him out and you know what they say about the healing power of nature."

Gina barely heard her husband's words, they seemed to catch in the mist that was becoming a drizzle. As Sam spoke, Gina's gaze drifted over to the stand of trees just past the front of the car. She spotted her nine-year old son Tommy crouched down by a stream, his red hoodie zipped all the way to his chin. Gina's voice cracked, "Please...", the word hung there, she didn't finish her sentence, she didn't need to, Sam understood.

Tommy's knees pressed into the pine needle carpet at the edge of the shallow brook. He bent over a frog that he corralled with his hands. Watching the small creature bounce against his palms, searching for an exit. It made him giggle.

"Time to go Tommy!" Sam called out. Gina and Laura shifted away from the car towards a trailhead leading into the forest. From where Sam stood, he could see Tommy crouched, his arms moving as if playing with something. "What you got there sport?" The boy laughed out a response, the words spilling out of his smile, "It's a silly old frog Dad! He's hopping mad!"

Tommy stood. Sam's voice rang out again, "We need to head up the mountain, let's leave it be!"

Tommy's fun with the frog was done, with a giggle in his voice he uttered, "Bye-bye froggy." He looked down and waved to the frog, its legs and head cut off, and body still twitching. He wiped the blade of a small pocketknife on his sleeve and folded it, then stuffed it in his pocket.

Tommy gleefully ran towards the trail.

"It's just a drizzle, but it might pick up. We'll be fine." Sam soothed Gina as they clambered out of the forest canopy and onto the exposed tree-less slope of the mountain. It was an ambitious hike Sam had planned. He didn't just want to take a stroll in the park, but a real foray into the wilderness. He thought that both the adventure and the duration would help with Tommy.

Sam led the way. Gina followed, then Laura and Tommy brought up the rear. They were silent as they marched along the brittle scree that marked their path. The only sound was the chipped granite rattling beneath their feet.

But then another sound filled the air. A soft thud.

Gina turned to Laura and Tommy, "What was that?" Laura spoke up, "What was what?" Tommy chimed in, "Yeah, what was what?" The two children seemed clueless to whatever Gina had heard.

A moment later, the soft thud sound returned. Sam was too far ahead to hear it. Gina turned, only to see Laura hiking with her head down and Tommy giving his Mom a shrug as if saying, "What now?"

Gina doubled her gait to join her husband, she decided to give up on the mystery noise. Laura watched her Mom speed up and gain distance just as the third rock hit the back of her jacket, this one thrown with more force.

Thud.

It hurt.

She wanted to turn, to yell at Tommy, to confront him, but she was terrified. Her eye-patch a chilling reminder of what happened when you antagonized Tommy. Laura knew her mother wasn't much use, her Mom was as scared of Tommy as she was. Her Dad was the only one who had any sway over her brother, but Laura had seen that changing as well.

Their missing dog, Chi-Chi, who her Dad adored, was the turning point. The canine's disappearance caused doubt in Sam even more so than when Laura had lost her eye. Everyone called her blinding an 'accident'.

Tommy claimed he tripped and the pencil accidentally pierced his sister's left pupil, but Laura knew what had happened and so did her Mom, but her father didn't want to believe it.

The thought of his son doing something so heinous was incomprehensible. Not little Tommy, his baby boy, his own flesh and blood could never have done that.

To take a sharpened pencil and plunge it into someone's eye with enough force it cracked in half. It had to be an accident.

Laura's father struggled with all the troubling signs. The teacher's complaints, the calls from parents who shared class with Tommy, the scary drawings, all brushed aside. He wrote it off as being rambunctious. He swore that when he was growing up his brother was the same way, "A bit of ADD with an extra helping of restlessness...that's all." But Laura and her Mom always knew it was more, and when Chi-Chi went missing her Dad started to have doubts about his son.

It bothered Laura that her own maiming didn't convince her father about Tommy's evil, that it took a dog's death to do it. But in the end, she was relieved that he finally understood that something was seriously wrong with her baby brother.

Sam spotted the next trail blaze, a blue maker on a large boulder. As he made his way along the trail he thought how much Chi-Chi would have loved to have been there. The white lab was a hiking machine and lived at the heels of Sam.

Even now, to look down and not see the dog made him sad. It also brought on the fear. The frightening thought that Tommy had something to do with Chi-Chi missing, and the horrific realization about his daughter's eye. He didn't tell Gina about finding his power drill with what looked like blood on the drill bit. Sam had tried to shrug it off as rust, but deep down he knew.

Tommy killed Chi-Chi.

Tommy was evil.

The Wilson family turned off the rocky talus and moved into a patch of low pine. The rain was now constant and Gina was beginning to feel it seep through her jacket and against her skin.

Sam stopped and looked confused. "I think the blue trail is that way," he pointed down what looked like a path, but it could have also been a deer trail. "Let me take a look, I'll be right back." He scampered into the forest, leaving Gina and Laura alone with Tommy.

The three were in a little clearing and each went to their own spot along the edge, not talking, just waiting. Gina reached into her pocket and pulled out a few granola bars, offering them up, but there were no takers.

Laura started to pull at her hair, she did that whenever she was nervous. Gina noticed. Tommy reached into his pocket and pulled out the knife he used to butcher the frog. He flicked it opened and threw it at a nearby tree, watching it stab into the bark.

"You shouldn't do that Tommy, it could bounce back and hit you," Gina called out. Tommy pulled the blade out and threw it again, this time with even more force, while adding, "Don't you dare tell me what to do." He didn't turn around when he said it, just blurted it out. His voice hollow and without emotion, the voice of a sociopath.

Laura tugged her hair even harder causing Gina to walk over and throw an arm around her daughter's shoulders. They both had the same thought, "Why did you leave us alone with him...not now...when he has a knife."

Tommy pulled the blade from the tree and turned to Gina and Laura, disdain dripped from his voice, "You two think I don't know, but I do, I know how you talk about me, I hear it all...I know and hate it and hate you both."

The boy stepped towards his mother and sister with the knife.

Sam rushed out of the woods with the large rock in his hand and swung it down with all his force against Tommy's head.

It was fast, methodical, and done without a hint of anger or emotion.

Like taking out the trash or picking up after your dog, it was just something that had to be done.

It would save his family and the countless people Tommy would harm as he continued on his demonic path.

Gina and Laura didn't make a noise, not one fleeting glance of horror or shock washed over their faces. If there was a word to describe their expression, it was relief. No one spoke for a moment. The three looked down at Tommy as his body twitched like the frog. The right side of his skull oozed blood and grey matter. Sam broke the quiet, "The cliff is just through these trees."

He spun his backpack off and pulled out a red poncho. He laid it out neatly on the ground and rolled Tommy's body onto the plastic sheet. "I'll toss him off, collect as many of these blood-soaked pine needles and stuff them into the Ziploc bags."

Laura got to work in a flash, scooping up the forest litter that might have caught a splatter of Tommy's blood. Gina walked back to the trail that led to the clearing, "You were right, no one's out on a day like this." Just then the rain kicked into a full downpour, further erasing any evidence of the 'accident'.

That's what they would claim, it was an 'accident'. Tommy fell off the nearby cliff, slipping at the edge in the rain. No one would doubt them. They would all back each other's story. The tears would be real. The investigators wouldn't know they weren't from the pain of mourning, but of joy as the three recalled the event.

Sam returned from the cliff and no one asked how it went. He rolled the poncho up and stuffed it into the backpack along with the Ziploc bag of pine needles and leaves. They did one more look around, and then the three walked out of the clearing.

They scampered onto the path back down to the parking lot where there was cell phone service. Once there, they would call the police and report the tragedy. As they made their way down the rain-soaked trail, and the chill wind whipped around them, the three finally shared a smile, and all of them believed in the healing power of nature.

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

Kevin Bachar is an EMMY winning documentary filmmaker and WGA screenwriter. The horror film he wrote - The Inhabitant - was released through Lionsgate. If you watch Shark Week, or PBS you've seen his work. He's the idiot in the water with sharks, or crawling in caves filming vampire bats. Through his journeys he's interviewed scientists who've enlightened him, and seen things that have frightened him.

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# Not Exactly the Light of Day | John H. Dromey

Unavoidably stuck for several days in a very small town, a lazy vampire decided to take precautions. Rather than select a victim from the closeknit local population and risk exposure as a creature of the night, he visited a shady doctor to get a blood transfusion.

Money talks. No questions asked.

Soon after the IV was started, the patient began exhaling smoke.

"What did you do to me, Doctor? I'm burning up inside."

"I don't know what your condition is exactly, but you looked really, really pale so I gave you a large dose of vitamin D. The sunshine vitamin."

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

John H. Dromey was born in northeast Missouri. He likes to read—mysteries in particular—and write in a variety of genres. His fiction has appeared in over a dozen previous issues of *The Sirens Call eZine*, as well as in numerous other publications. He's had poems published in *Eye to the Telescope*, *Star\*Line*, the *Dwarf Stars 2022* anthology, and elsewhere.



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#### It's Time to Get Things Started

Sometimes I think this is what I was always destined to become. Since I was a small child, I've drawn close to the darker things in life. I read my first Stephen King book in fifth grade and watched horror films long into the night once everyone went to bed. When we had writing assignments in school, mine usually contained horror or other foreboding elements. Being on the dark side was something I naturally gravitated toward.

I blame my sixth-grade English teacher mostly. She ran a book store called "The Book Nook." We brought money from home and could shop for new books weekly for our free reading period. The books didn't interest me there. I wanted something else, more mature. I talked her into ordering a few Stephen King books for me. She made my parents sign a permission slip, which I understand; SK can be pretty adult for an eleven-year-old. The first two books I purchased were *IT* and *The Shining*. I was off, and I've never looked back.

Over the summer, I wore out the library devouring his back catalog. Soon, I added Dean Koontz and Clive Barker. Classic authors like Lovecraft and Poe soon entered my read pile. Later, as an adult, I was introduced to Brian Keene, Richard Laymon, and Wrath James White. I've never stopped looking for new horror authors to read and try.

My horror upbringing wasn't all based on reading. Horror television is where I spent my weekend nights. I also grew up in the Golden Age of horror shows. We had such classic shows as Monsters, Tales From the Crypt, Freddie's Nightmares, and Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>: The Series. Some nights, we could find Tales From the Darkside and The New Twilight Zone. Each weekend allowed me to glimpse the night's evil and terror.

All of that stuff sticks with you.

In middle school, I started brainstorming ideas for stories and occasionally writing them out. Sometimes, I'd read them when a group of us got together. The feeling of people enjoying a piece I'd written was terrific. But as quickly as it started, it ceased. Graduating high school and going out into the real world brought my creative writing to a screeching halt. I wouldn't write another word of fiction from 1994 until 2011.

I eventually found my way to a small author con in Indianapolis with Wesley Southard (go check out his stuff). He introduced me to the extreme horror, igniting something inside me I thought I'd lost. I quickly typed out a story to read at the open reading on the first night. Don't get me wrong, I was scared as hell, but seeing one of my favorite authors fire up a lighter at the end of my story is something I'll never forget.

After that night, I was off on this journey.

What does it mean to be on this journey?

Well, it means we have places to go together. There is a whole world shrouded in darkness that we can explore. I think that's what writing is about. The craft is our way of creating new myths and legends we can pass on to others. I know I'll never get rich and famous for banging out bloody pulp pieces on my computer, but I can make something we can share.

Why horror? Why not puppies?

I chose horror because of how it welcomed me during my youth. I was always kind of nerdy and picked on by some of my classmates. Horror gave me a place to escape from the others. It made a statement when I entered my sixth-grade English class and tossed a paperback copy of *IT* on my desk. I wasn't like them. I was different. The same thing happened with music too.

Music is also a massive part of who I am and shapes my writing. Not surprisingly, I am a metalhead and love thrash. The dark themes and imagery you can conjure with music are amazing. When I write, I like to have some Exodus, Overkill, or Testament playing in the background. The music helps me focus, while the song speed drives me on through the story or novel. A lot of my work has quick cuts and shorter scenes because of the tempo created by the music. I can throw a good ballad in the mix and write a longer, slower chapter too. It depends on what I'm working on that day. Iron Maiden is my music of choice if I'm settling in for a long writing session.

Now, about those writing sessions...

I can be erratic. Sometimes I sit behind the keyboard and quickly pound out a few thousand words. Other times, I sit there and stare at the cursor, wondering where the words are hiding. I have other issues that contribute, but it leads me to be slower than I would like. I try to keep my space clean, but it's a big desk with plenty of room to stack random things. So, I get distracted easily. I'll type a few lines and look at the various skulls and horror items in the office around me. Because it is hard for me to focus sometimes, it makes writing extremely difficult. It isn't that I don't have any ideas

or don't write; I have to sit and let my head sort itself out. For instance, the new untitled book I'm almost finished with has been spinning its wheels for months, waiting for me to sort my head out enough to complete it. I'll get to it, but my focus issues have stood in the way of getting to the end, which I need to get to because there are several other books I need to write.

Overall, I love doing this. Yeah, I battle with myself to finish things, but I wouldn't change it for the world. I've met many good folks and had many good times on this journey. When I can't seem to find the time to write, the muse gets unhappy. I serve the muse, and she expects answers when she calls. I don't do this for money. I write to get my stories from my head out into the world. For all the readers who have taken this journey with me, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. To all who haven't taken my hand and stepped inside my mind, let's take a trip together, shall we? It's time to get things started in my horror show tonight...

#### **About Brent Abell:**

Brent Abell resides in Southern Indiana with his wife and Drake the Puggle. Brent enjoys anything horror related. In his writing career, he's had stories featured in over 30 publications from multiple presses. His books Southern Devils, Southern Devils: Reconstruction of the Dead, In Memoriam, The Calling, Phoenix Protocol, Dying Days: Death Sentence, Dying Days: Zealot, Death Inc., and Wicked Tales for Wicked People are available now. He is also a co-author of the horror-comedy Hellmouth series. Currently, he is working on a multitude of projects. You can hang out with him at BrentAbell.com for some rum and a good cigar.

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# DRAGONFLIES

BRENT ABELL

#### Chapter 1: Now December 15th 2018

Sarah Pike broke into a run. The man followed her from the Jacobson's house until she turned down her street. She tried to look over her shoulder as she ran, but the man vanished. She came to a complete halt and doubled over. Her breath came in short bursts, and she felt like she was hyperventilating. A chill ran through her, and she gathered up the resolve to finish walking the last few blocks to her house.

Snow flurries danced around her head, and the cold December night was quiet and still. In the distance, a pair of headlights flashed down Fifth Street and turned off onto White Street toward the downtown area. The trees had long since dropped their final leaves, and their skeletal limbs swayed in the bitter wind.

Sarah pulled her coat tighter around her and shivered. Her pace slowed, and she spun around when something crunched on the snow behind her. When she looked to see who or what followed her, she only saw her shadow from the street lights. On the right, a trashcan fell over, and she jumped. Her heart raced, and she wanted to cry, but a small cat bounded out from behind the toppled garbage. It paused long enough to look at her before scurrying off into the night.

"You shouldn't be out here alone," a voice croaked from behind her.

Sarah turned to reply, but once again, the street and sidewalk behind her were empty and devoid of life.

"This isn't funny!" she cried out to the night. Part of her wanted a reply, but part of her welcomed silence in response.

Her feet broke her paralysis, and she continued her journey home. She glanced up at the houses along both sides of the streets. Each abode was decked out with lights and Santa decorations for Christmas. Christmas was her favorite holiday, and she hoped she'd be able to get home in time to enjoy sitting around her family's tree. She would give anything to be there now, a cup of warm cocoa in one hand and a book in the other.

"But then you wouldn't be here with me," a man said. He stood in front of Sarah and appeared from nowhere. He sported a dingy, tattered old gray sweatshirt and the hood was pulled up over his head. It hid his face, but Sarah could still see his burning eyes in the shadow covering his face.

"Who are you? I swear to God if you touch me, I'll scream."

"You have nothing to fear, Sarah. You'll be the first of many gifts to the Master," the man replied.

"How do you know my name?" Sarah asked in shock. She backed away from the man, but he reached out and grabbed her arm.

"I can see all of the town's children," the man said and swung his fist at her.

The punch dazed her, and the world faded to black. In her last lucid moment, she felt like she was being pulled across the cold snow away from her house. She tried to scream, but the pain in her broken jaw forced her into silence. Jagged ice scrapped her back from where her coat and sweater pulled up on her back. Sarah felt warmth on her exposed skin. Blood welled up out of the abrasions and stained the snow and ice below her.

The man stopped and looked down at her. He shook his head and sighed. "Look what you've done. I can't have your little trail leading them to me before the grand work can begin."

Sarah whimpered. The man knelt on the ice and picked her up. She felt his strong arms wrap around her, and his touch made her feel dirty. He threw her over his shoulder and hurried from the street. The man picked up his pace, and her head bounced off his back. The constant motion made her feel queasy, and she wanted to hurl down his back.

She watched the frozen sidewalk give way to the brick pavers of an alley. Her world shifted violently, and her back slammed onto something metal. Stunned, she gazed up at the hooded man. He pulled something from his pocket and placed it over her head. Sarah hated having her face covered, and the coarse hood made her feel anxious. Her breath came in short bursts, and her heart raced in her chest. It hammered so hard; Sarah expected the heart to break free of her body and fall on the ground.

"You need to relax. Where we're going, you can sleep forever," Sarah heard the faceless man say.

Something pricked her in the arm, and she calmed. Her breathing slowed, and the little bits of light she could make out through the hood faded. Sarah's last thoughts were of pondering what kind of car she was being placed into and if she'd be home in time to open presents Christmas morning.

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"Go home, Frank. Seriously, you've been here all day," Chris Collins said. He leaned back in his chair and tossed pencils up at the ceiling tiles. Two of them dangled dangerously close to falling back to earth and putting someone's eye out.

"Shit, Chris, I ain't got anything to do there either," Frank Hill replied. He watched another pencil bounce off the ceiling and fall to the floor. Several yellow pencils were scattered on the floor around Chris's desk.

"You can't tell me the dog doesn't even want you around," Chris said.

Frank sat up in his chair and pushed his cowboy hat out from in front of his eyes with his finger. "You'd be surprised how much that dog gets tired of my company. He really won't like it if I'm home and we get all the snow they've been calling for on the forecasts. Speaking of which, did you ever ask that nurse out?"

"Look, I'm not ready yet, and stop trying to change the subject."

"You can't dwell on it forever, you know."

"Frank, it's only been two years, and the feelings I have are still raw," Chris said, sighing.

In his years being a sort-of-protector for White Creek, what happened to Andi Winters was his greatest failure. He was out of town, and he still placed most of the burden on his shoulders. The town's residents only knew she killed herself, but they didn't suspect the dark forces at play. He left, and the town didn't have anybody to defend it from the evil growing underneath White Creek's surface. The silence from the supernatural activity lately concerned him, but he tried not to dwell on it very often. He preferred to keep his sanity intact.

"I wish I could've been here to help," Frank said.

"I just don't know how she could've done it. I know we had the falling out, but I didn't think she'd go so far."

"Maybe you should take off and go home," Frank offered.

Chris stood up and stretched his arms. "You might be right."

"I'll see if Brad can handle being on patrol alone tonight. I could use a night off myself," Frank said. He reached for his radio, but before he could call Brad, the phone rang.

Frank and Chris stared at each other. Neither one seemed like they were in a big hurry to answer the trilling phone on the dispatch desk. Finally, Frank picked the phone up.

"White Creek Sheriff's Department," Frank said.

"You have to help us," a frantic voice pleaded.

"Okay, what do you need help with?" Frank asked. Chris slipped his coat on and moved over behind Frank.

"This is Irene Pike, and we need help. Sarah, never came home from babysitting tonight."

"How late is she?"

"She should've been home three hours ago, and it's not like her to be late," the sobbing voice explained.

"Irene, give us a minute, and we'll swing by to check it out. Maybe she stopped at a friend's house. It's cold outside, and maybe she wanted to warm up first," Frank said, trying to calm the woman on the other end of the line.

The weak voice on the other end sniffled. "Please hurry, Frank."

"We'll be right there," Frank said.

"Thank you," the voice said and hung up.

"I guess neither of us is going home yet," Chris said.

"Nope, duty calls."

Frank and Chris walked out of the station when the snow started falling again. Frank looked up at the flakes glistening in the soft glow of the street lamps. The town was beautiful at times, but other times it was downright ugly. They climbed in Frank's department Explorer and pulled out into the night.

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The Explorer pulled into the drive at 1465 Fifth Street, and the headlights splashed across the porch, illuminating a man smoking a cigarette. He tossed it out into the yard and crossed his arms. Frank opened his door and stepped out into the cold. His coat was thick and usually kept him warm, but the howling wind cut deep. The man on the porch waved, and his shoulders slumped back down. Even at the distance between them, Frank could tell he was defeated.

"What happened, Rick?" Frank said, walking toward the house.

"Sarah never came home after going to watch the Jacobson kids for a couple of hours," Rick replied.

"What time was she supposed to be back?" Chris asked.

"She should've been home by six at the latest. She went over straight after school and should've been back hours ago."

"Rick, it's only nine," Frank said.

"It ain't like her, Frank," Rick answered.

"The Jacobson's only live a few blocks away, don't they?" Chris inquired.

"Around the corner and two blocks down. Sarah doesn't have a lot of places she can go in between," Rick said.

"Chris and I will take a walk and see if we can see anything," Frank said and turned back to the Explorer.

Chris followed Frank to the Explorer. "You have a flashlight for me?"

"Good thing I always have a spare," Frank said and handed one over the center console to Chris.

Chris looked back at the porch when he heard the door. A woman came out, and Rick embraced her. He held her tightly and stroked her hair. Both looked worn out and beaten. "What do you think, Frank?"

"What I think is that this isn't going to end well."

Frank shut the door and walked to the end of the driveway. "Watch the snow for tracks. It doesn't look like many people have been out since the powder started falling. Maybe we'll get lucky," Frank said, pointing his flashlight toward the ground.

Both men walked closely together, examining the ground around them. They came to the corner and turned onto Locust. Frank looked up at the trees. The snow clung to the branches, and the wind picked up, blowing the falling snow around like a blizzard. He took a deep breath, and the frigid air stung his throat. Frank looked over at Chris, scanning the middle of the street with his flashlight.

"See anything yet?" Frank asked.

Chris looked up and shook his head. "There's nothing out of the ordinary."

Frank grunted and went back to examining the ground. The cold made his knees hurt like hell, but a girl was missing. He took a few more steps when something caught his eye. At the mouth of the alley, he noticed the snowbanks appeared different. His pace quickened, and when he reached the alley, he could see the faint traces of crimson beneath the fresh powder. He felt his knees groan when he knelt on the ground. Frank took his gloves off and wiped the new snow from the red drops.

"Frank, you find something?" Chris asked from the middle of the street.

"Yeah, get over here."

Chris hurried over to Frank and looked at the area Frank had cleared. "Oh, Jesus."

Frank stood and brushed the snow from his pants. "I want you to follow the sidewalk back toward Sixth. I'll head into the alley and see where this trail leads."

"Shit," Chris muttered. He picked up the bloody trail and followed the drops away from the alley.

Frank crept into the alley, not knowing what he'd find. Images of a broken girl raced through his head, and he hoped his thoughts weren't telling him what he'd find. Frank never had any formal training for the gifts bestowed upon him, and sometimes they didn't act accordingly for him. One day, he figured he'd get a grasp of everything, but he didn't plan on it. Old man Helfrich left him the tools, but not the instruction booklet.

Something occurred to Frank when he found the end of the bloody trail and the beginning of the tire tracks. Yes, it ended where the tire tracks started, but he thought it strange there were no footprints around the blood. If Sarah were wounded, her prints would be there, or if she were taken, the mystery person would've left tracks. The absence of any at all concerned him.

"There are things around here without feet, I guess," Frank said.

"Frank, I found drag marks in the snow. It looks like someone dragged the girl and picked her up eventually," Chris's voice crackled over Frank's radio.

"Get to the alley, now. I found tire tracks, but the snow still falling is going to make it tough to get a pattern right." "I'll head back your way," Chris said, and the radio fell silent.

Frank stood and gazed off to the end of the alley. Headlights passed by the alley along White Street toward Main. Frank tried to remember if any of the shops had security cameras he could look at, but he drew a blank. White Creek was considered a relatively small town, and he didn't think a mom-and-pop boutique store would spring for the cost of security cameras. He barely had cameras installed in the jail, but he'd have Brad or Marge check on it in the morning.

"What'd you find, Frank?" Chris asked, entering the alley.

"Blood and tire tracks."

"Holy shit."

Frank turned off his flashlight and took his coat off.

"What are you doing? You'll freeze out here," Chris said.

Frank covered the deepest set of tracks with his coat and shivered. "We need to protect the integrity of the tracks." "Even if you catch your death?" Chris huffed.

"I've faced far worse than a cold," Frank said, rubbing his hands up and down his bare arms.

"I'll get back to the Explorer and get the emergency blanket out of the back," Chris said, turning away.

"We need to get Justin over at ISP to get over here with the state's mobile unit, too."

"I hate those guys," Chris said, walking off.

"Me, too," Frank echoed and stayed behind to keep watch over the tracks.

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He never meant to return to the scene so quickly, but he had to see Frank Hill for himself. His Master warned him of the sheriff, and he wanted to see if the Protector would be a worthy opponent. In the driving snow, the sheriff appeared older and more fragile then he imagined. Deep down, he held a hatred for the man. The urge to rush the man and choke the life out of him filled his mind. He pounded on the dashboard and fought to keep the primal scream buried in his throat.

Still, something about the sheriff was familiar. He swore he'd met the man before, but each time he tried to pull the memories out of his brain, he drew blanks or what little he could recall was full of holes. The only thing filling him was his hatred. He spent what felt like an eternity in the dark, and the light shunned him during the day. The Master called him home, and now he draws breath again, but he doesn't remember being dead or if he ever actually died.

The deputy returned to Sheriff Hill with a blanket and handed it to him. He searched through his fragmented thoughts and couldn't find any recollection of the nameless man. The blade in his pocket called to him for blood. The man wondered if it would only be satisfied with Frank Hill's life-force or if it would be sated with the other one's blood.

He must be patient.

The Master told him to wait. He ordered him to hold the anger inside him against Frank Hill. The Protector had to suffer first. The man agreed; Frank had to feel the same pain he felt. He didn't know what the grudge was between the Master and Frank, but he wanted the same result.

Frank Hill would know the dark before he would be allowed to kill him. He knew when the Master released him of his vow; he'd make Frank pay with his blood and soul for every sin and every deceit.

It would be a jolly good time, indeed.

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Frank made the call to Rick Pike and gave him the necessary information while he waited for Chris to contact the ISP. He wanted to tell Rick in person, but the situation with the driving snow left him in a less than ideal position. Chris stood across from him and got the ISP on the line to bring in the crime scene unit. He wouldn't usually admit it, but he wished White Creek had kept its police department. In the long run, it didn't make sense for the county and the town to pay for both a PD and sheriffs when the population didn't warrant it. Honestly, he didn't agree when they split the PD off, but he missed the few years he could share the burden of policing the town and county.

Once he calmed Rick down, he leaned up against the privacy fence around the King's home on the corner where the yard met the alley. Chris strolled over to him and turned his phone off.

"Justin said they'd be here in about twenty," Chris said.

"Can't be soon enough," Frank quipped.

"Rick, going to be okay?"

"For now, I guess. He feels like she's still alive, but Irene thinks all we'll find is a corpse."

Chris shivered. "Damn, that's brutal."

"Well, nobody ever accused her of being human," Frank said.

"That's pretty brutal, too."

Frank looked around again. Something made him feel like he was being watched, and it made his skin crawl. The snow blew fiercely, creating whiteout conditions. The wind whipped through the alley, and the jacket covering the tire tracks flew a few feet away. Driving snowflakes fell into the tread marks erasing the evidence left behind. Frank rushed over and tried to cover the remaining tracks with the blanket on his shoulders, but the damage had already been done in a matter of moments.

"We don't have anything now," Frank muttered.

"Should we call off Justin's crew?" Chris asked.

Frank looked up and shrugged his shoulders. "No, maybe they can still get something out of this if the damned wind and snow would calm down."

Chris shoved his hands deep in his pockets and observed Frank work. The sheriff closed his eyes and chanted quietly. The words sounded like gibberish to the untrained ear, but each syllable held power. Frank didn't waste a breath or word. He lifted his head to the night sky and opened his mouth wide. His breath rolled out into the air, and the winds ceased. The driving snow halted, and Frank doubled over.

"God damn," Chris muttered.

"No God there, son," Frank replied. His voice sounded weak and exhausted.

Chris opened his mouth to reply but thought better of it. He closed it back and shook his head slowly.

"Good boy," Frank said. He smiled up at his deputy and winked.

They waited in silence for the next twenty minutes for the ISP crew to arrive.

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Perkeo shut the lights off to Telly's and locked the door behind him. The night had been slow, and he closed up early, knowing the snow and cold would keep the usual drunks at home. If they came around looking for some suds, they'd have to hit Picker's Liquors. The wind cut through his heavy red plaid coat, and he felt it in his bones.

"Crap on toast, it's fucking cold," he muttered.

He trudged across the lot to his Mini-Cooper. The snow piled up on the small car, and he dragged his sleeve across the top, clearing the frosty mounds. The key fob beeped, and he heard the doors unlock, but when he lifted the handle, the door remained tightly shut.

"Damn ice."

Perkeo tugged harder on the door, and it finally budged. Sighing, he climbed in and started the car up. The heater didn't take long to blast him with air as hot as the breath of Hell. The fog under the thick frost layer on the windshield made its retreat while the frost turned to slush. Finally, he turned on the wipers and pulled out of the lot onto the road back to town.

The snow stopped, and Perkeo relaxed. He hated driving in the winter, and the snow horizontally blowing across the fields made him extremely uncomfortable. He also felt better driving toward town and away from Helfrich's Hollow. There were the whispered tales of murder, madness, and ghosts attached to the wooded area around his bar, but since he didn't grow up in White Creek, they were only tales meant to frighten others around autumn campfires.

Still, the woods affected him. If he needed to go out to I-69, he drove into White Creek and then out to the interstate. It was the long way around, but the Hollow gave him an uneasy feeling. Perkeo also avoided being out near it in the dark.

The tires slipped and drifted on the icy road. He drove slowly to avoid ending up in the fields beside the road. The drifts looked tall enough to keep him on the road, but trying to get unstuck out of a mountain of snow didn't sound fun to him. His mind wandered for a moment, and something white danced across the road. Swirls of snow crossed from one field to the next, and Perkeo couldn't see the road any longer.

Something screamed outside in the dark, and Perkeo slammed the brakes. The Mini slid a few feet before stopping. Panting, Perkeo unhooked his seatbelt and threw open the door. Out in the night, he didn't hear anything else. A few branches swayed above him, but nothing else stirred. Looking around his car, he noted how close he was to sliding into a drift. He tried to squeeze between the car and the pile of snow, but there wasn't enough clearance. Shrugging his shoulders, he circled back around to the driver's side and saw the coat on the other side of the road.

"Oh, shit."

Pulling the phone from his pocket, Perkeo turned on its flashlight and rushed to the coat. Blood splattered the white coat, and a pair of red gloves sat next to it. Perkeo frantically searched around for a body but didn't see any. Crimson trails soaked the pure white of the snow and led off through the field and disappeared in the darkness before the woods.

"There's not much hope in this situation right now," Perkeo uttered and backed away from the coat. "Shit. Shit. Shit."

Perkeo fumbled his phone and dialed Frank's cell phone. When he ended the call, he felt like the woods were watching him. He climbed back in his car and waited for Frank to arrive.

\*\*

Eric Dean awoke to the sound of the wind howling outside his window. His roommate snored, dead to the world. Yawning, Eric sat up and stretched his arms above his head. Something hit the window, and he got up to check it out. Eric pulled back the thick dorm room curtains and gasped. His breath caught in his throat and a chill raced through him.

A dragonfly beat its wings and hovered outside in the winter night. Every few seconds, it would fly into the glass and hit its wings on it like it was knocking to come in. Eric stared at it like it was a dream. He pinched his arm to make sure he was awake and not still trapped in a nightmare from his youth from which he'd never awake.

No, the dragonfly was real, and he wasn't dreaming.

The memories of ten years ago flooded back and destroyed the walls he'd carefully constructed around his emotions. The man, the knife, the deaths, and the dragonflies were all buried to time.

Now, he remembered everything.

Something terrible was happening in White Creek, and it was time for him to return home.

\*\*\*

Frank waved off Justin Grayson as he finished taking Perkeo's call. The state police investigator threw his hands up in the air and walked back to the other two men examining and taking pictures of the tire tracks. It brought some levity to a serious situation.

"Wait, Justin, come back over here," Frank called out.

Justin turned and tapped his foot impatiently on the ice. His hands balled up into fists, and he placed them on his hips. Frank thought Justin looked like a mother about to scold their child. Finally, he hung his head low and came back toward Frank.

"What? Do you think I'm some dog on a leash and at your beck and call or something?" Justin said.

"No, but I think we may have the body."

Justin's expression deepened, and he shook his head. "Sorry."

"It's okay, but we need to get there fast. Do you want to ride with us and leave your boys here?"

"Sounds good, I'll let them know," Justin said, turning away.

Frank followed Justin and retrieved his coat. It was damp when he slipped it on. The sleeves stuck to his shirt, but it provided more warmth than the emergency blanket. He made a mental note to upgrade the blanket the next chance he had. He didn't like the idea of someone freezing to death on his watch.

"We got something?" Chris asked.

"Perkeo may have found something out by Helfrich's Hollow," Frank answered.

"Shit, nothing good ever happens out there," Chris said.

Frank headed to the Explorer and climbed inside. Chris got in the passenger seat and looked at Frank. Both knew what the other was thinking. They knew they'd soon have to call a worried set of parents to tell them their daughter isn't coming home tonight, or ever.

"Justin is going to ride out with us."

Chris sighed. "Great, like we didn't get enough of him here."

"Please, just get along with him."

"He can be annoying, Frank."

"I'm sure he feels the same about us country folk," Frank joked.

Justin opened the back and hopped in. "Okay, let's see what we got."

Frank drove off without replying. He knew what they were going to find, and he really was getting tired of finding bodies out on that road.

\*\*\*

Frank's power over the snow didn't last long. By the time they reached Perkeo's Mini on the side of the road, the snow had blown horizontally across the fields, creating a near-whiteout condition. He couldn't remember the last time a winter storm had been as bad.

Carl... the winter I had to take Carl out was the last time it'd been this bad.

Thankfully, Chris and Justin rode in silence the entire trip out to Helfrich's Hollow. He wasn't sure if he'd be able to take the constant snark the two usually threw at each other. Frank loved his job, but when the big ISP boys had to be called in, he knew it would only be a matter of time before the two laid into each other.

"You two have been unusually quiet," Frank said, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

"Gravity of the situation," Chris quipped and kept his eyes focused in front of him.

"Yeah, what he said," Justin chimed in.

Frank sighed, and the children in the Explorer grew quiet again. He hated thinking of them in such a manner, but they fit the bill. He slowly made the drive past the township limits and out into the county. Once he entered the fringes of the Hollow, he felt the air shift. It grew more ominous and oppressive. Something lurked out in the Hollow nobody in the town could even conceive of in their worst nightmares.

"I see Perkeo," Chris said. He pointed to the car parked on the side of the road next to a large snowdrift.

"Well, I hope he didn't touch anything. It's going to be a bitch trying to pull any kind of evidence in this storm anyway," Justin moaned.

Frank slowed the Explorer, and it came to a stop a few feet behind Perkeo's Mini. "You boys play nice, or I'm going to have to whip some asses."

The two men glared at each other but nodded as a moment of understanding passed between them.

"Yes, sir," they both said in unison.

Frank grabbed his hat and set it atop his head as he stepped out into the night. He heard the other doors open, and he watched Perkeo exit his car. The bartender waved his arms in the air like he meant to flag Frank down, but he already had the sheriff's undivided attention.

"What did you find?" Frank called out.

"I hope I didn't find a body," Perkeo snorted. He pointed to the snowdrift, where a sleeve was barely visible under the blowing snow.

Frank, Chris, and Justin approached the coat cautiously. Kneeling in the snow, Frank tugged on the exposed sleeve, hoping it came out of the drift freely. At first, it didn't budge but finally broke loose from the ice, binding it to the ground.

"Did you see the red around it?" Perkeo asked.

Frank studied the ground around the drift and shook his head. "I don't see anything."

Chris squatted down and wiped the fresh powder off from around from where the coat was. The ground beneath was as pristine white as the snow on the top. "Are you sure you saw something red?"

"I know what I saw," Perkeo replied.

Justin walked to the backside of the drift and studied the mound. A strange symbol emblazoned it. To him, it appeared to be a pentagram, but the angles and the lines were all wrong. They seemed to be distorted like a kid had drawn it.

Frank noticed Justin's face go slack, and he stood back up. "Everything okay?"

Justin's mouth moved, but he couldn't find the words to express what he felt gazing at the symbol.

"Justin, are you okay?" Chris added.

"Look at this," Justin said. His voice sounded flat and emotionless.

Frank hurried around the back and saw the symbol for himself. "Everybody get back. I want you all to get back in the vehicles...now."

"Frank?" Chris began to question him and stopped.

Frank glared at the three men. "I said now, damn it." His tone sounded severe and sharp. He immediately regretted it, but the others needed to back away.

"Anything we can do?" Perkeo asked.

"Yeah, get to the fucking cars," Frank hissed.

The others jumped into action and hurried to the vehicles. Frank sighed and returned his attention to the strange symbol on the snowdrift. At first glance, it reminded him of a normal pentacle, but it held a more sinister sway. In the same manner, some would profane a crucifix; it appeared to be a sacrilegious take on a pentagram. The angles and juts of the central lines were off in a manner that made the observer uncomfortable. Frank thought about the symbols and such he'd studied in the books of lore and magic left to him from Jeb Helfrich, but he drew a blank trying to match it with an image he'd seen perusing the ancient tomes.

Something snapped in the woods, and Frank turned to the Hollow. At the edge of the tree-line, he saw a figure standing in the blizzard. The shape was black in the night but had a slight illumination to it. Frank reached out with his mind trying to touch the strange apparition, but the only thing he felt was cold and oppressive.

The blizzard grew more intense, and when the white-out conditions died off, the figure had vanished. Frank stared at the tree line, hoping to catch another glimpse of the mysterious person watching them. Something buzzed past Frank's ear, and he swatted at it. He tried squinting to get a better look at the woods, but the thing buzzed him again. This time, when Frank waved his hand at it, he struck it, and he saw it was a dragonfly.

When Frank saw the dragonfly, he dug in the snowdrift, knowing he'd uncover the body of a dead girl who'd gone missing a few hours before.

\*\*\*

By the time the Crime Scene boys from ISP arrived and took Sarah Pike's body away, it was after one in the morning. Frank's eyes stung from exhaustion, and he felt like dying in the driver's seat while he waited for the crime scene to clear. He sent Chris home before the cavalry arrived because he'd need him to run the show later in the day. Justin had to stay due to the ISP guys being with him, and he would be responsible for the body.

A knock on the Explorer's window startled Frank, and he thought his heart would jump out his chest. The symbol left him feeling scared, and he yearned to get home and study it. He turned to the window, and Justin gave him a thumb up. Frank nodded and waved off the man. His work was officially finished. Justin would take the body to the morgue and hang around town for a few days waiting on the autopsy results. Frank was glad the morgue had moved from the basement of his offices to the basement of White Creek General. It belonged in a hospital anyway and not in a sheriff's post.

He sat with the engine idling for a few more minutes and watched the ambulance and ISP cars drive off toward town. Frank couldn't take his attention off the Hollow. When he arrived, the air felt oppressive and dark. It weighed on him like nothing had since the encounter with the entity possessing Carl Volker. The energy the figure gave off was weaker than the one he'd trapped with the binding spell, but it concerned him the same.

Yawning, Frank drove off to the house where he'd sit for a while and try to figure shit out instead of sleeping like he needed to.

"It's going to be a long day," he muttered to himself and yawned again.

# Chapter 2: December 17th

Eric Dean parked in front of Donut Hut and smiled. The aroma of the freshly baked loaves of bread and donuts enticed him to exit his Mustang and float along the sidewalk in through the glass doors. Once inside, he gazed down to the old oak floor and let the memories wash over him. It felt good to be home, but something about it seemed different. The feeling nagged at him, and he couldn't put his finger on exactly what didn't sit well with him.

"Eric Dean?" a voice sounded out from the backside of the counter. "Is that you?"

Eric shoved his hands in his pockets and guffawed. "Yes, Mrs. Mayberry."

A head popped out from around the wall separating the counter from the kitchen. She looked exactly as he remembered her, except now her hair held court to more gray, and the wrinkles around her eyes were more profound; but she was still an attractive woman. She flashed her smile at him, and it was the same one he'd seen so many times in the past. He couldn't help but return it and laugh.

"My, my... how long has it been?" Mrs. Mayberry asked. She exited the kitchen wiping her hands off on her apron. The old blue apron was tattered and covered in flour with touches of chocolate frosting.

"Eight years, Mrs. Mayberry," Eric answered. When he said it, he couldn't believe it'd been that long since his family left town.

"How are you doing?"

"Well, I'm a junior at Indiana Tech, and I'll have a degree in film production," Eric said.

"Oh my, are you going to move out to California?"

Eric leaned over the counter and grinned. "No, I plan on staying around and trying to get an independent film movement growing in the state. Hollywood isn't the only place to film, you know."

"Where else do they go besides the coast?" Mrs. Mayberry questioned.

"There is a huge movement in Atlanta for filming. They've had some of the biggest movies and TV shows film there. If I can't make it work here, I'll probably head there to try my hand in the business," Eric explained. He could tell by the expression on her face the information he'd given her blew her away. He figured at her age, Hollywood was all she knew of the film business, so he understood her reaction.

Mrs. Mayberry opened the glass door to the donuts and pulled out a glazed yeast donut. "Here, you go," she said and handed it to Eric. "Now, tell me what brings you back to this little hole-in-the-wall town?"

Eric took a bite and chewed slowly, thinking about his answer. "Honestly, I'm not really sure. I will say it is your donuts, however."

The bell above the door rang, and a family entered. They wiped the snow off their boots on the mat and moved past him to the counter. Eric backed away and let the family buy their breakfast and pile back out into the cold winter's day.

Mrs. Mayberry coughed and sat down on the stool behind the counter next to the old-style cash register. "Was your daddy the reason you all took up roots in the first place?" she asked with the same smile to hide the sharp tone of her question.

Eric felt uncomfortable in the bakery now. He looked blankly at her. She smiled her bright smile, but her eyes held malice and a hint of anger. "It had more to do with us living in the place where I almost got killed by a serial killer, but yeah, I'm sure my father had something to do with the decision."

Her eyes softened again, and she winked at him. "It's okay hon, and it wasn't anything you did wrong."

"Well, I got to get going," Eric said, looking at his watch. "What do I owe you for the donut?"

"Nothing," she replied and stood up from the stool.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, you go and get settled back in for however long you're home for," Mrs. Mayberry said.

Eric turned to leave when he realized he had to address her question in full. "The truth is, when your father kills the man who kidnapped you, people look the other way for a time. After the dust settles and people let their lives return to normal, they start to see him as a killer and not a father handing out justice. No, all the stares and whispers got to him and my mom. They got to him so much, and he killed himself three years ago. My father left a note apologizing for failing me. No, he didn't fail me; he did what he knew the justice system wouldn't do. Now, goodbye, Mrs. Mayberry."

"I'm sorry, my child. Please forgive an old gossip hound," she pleaded with him.

"You're fine, Mrs. Mayberry. Honestly, I don't blame the town for how it feels. Look, I'll be sure to stop back in for some of your donuts and to talk about that town gossip you're so proud of," Eric said with a wink.

Agnes Mayberry was still laughing and waving when he left the store and took off into the crisp winter air.

\*\*\*

Frank didn't stir until well after noon and then only because Drake had to go outside. The puggle bounded up on the couch where Frank had passed out a few hours before. He frantically licked his owner's face. Frank coughed and lightly rubbed the dog on the top of his head. He wanted to be angry with the dog, but he could never be mad at the thing.

"Okay, okay, I guess you need to go outside, huh?" Frank asked. He gave Drake a light push, and the dog bounded off his lap and shot off to the back door. Frank slowly got to his feet, and he heard every last one of his joints groan in protest to both the act of moving and of age.

Drake yelped, and Frank opened to the door for him to run outside. The dog tore through the opening and rushed to his favorite spot in the fenced yard. With the dog taking care of business, Frank picked up his phone and saw he had a long litany of missed calls and texts. They ran a good mix from Justin, Chris, and his other deputy, Brad Masterson.

"Well, shit," Frank muttered and flipped through the missed texts to see the autopsy had already been completed, and they needed him to come to the morgue immediately. Sighing, Frank lifted his arm and took a whiff of his pit. He pulled his face back quickly and wrinkled up his nose. He made a note to take a shower before he went to White Creek General, but first, he had to wait for the damn dog to come back inside.

\*\*\*

The man awoke in the makeshift shelter shivering in the frigid air. None of the materials he used to construct his home held out the cold, blustery wind howling through the wetlands. He couldn't remember what drew him to the location, but something seemed familiar about it. It reminded him of something out of a dream or nightmare.

On his way back, he dumped the car he used to dispose of the body near Helfrich's Hollow. The girl's blood stained the seats, and he didn't have time to clean it up properly if he were to keep the timetable he was on. Killing the girl felt good, and he experienced what being alive again could be like.

He didn't light a fire to warm himself. The stranger allowed only his hatred of Frank Hill to warm him on the inside. It was a rage burning deep in his guts and radiated out of him, oozing from his pores.

Outside he heard the serenity of nature. Snow continued to fall from the previous night, and the birds chirped in the barren trees surrounding him. His shelter sat nestled in a thick cove of trees along the large pond's banks in the middle of the wetlands. Even in the winter, a thick green blanket of algae covered the lake. During the summer, the algae grew thick enough for children to try to walk on.

It gives the stranger an inner peace. The solitude also makes communicating with his Master easier. His voice comes in on the breezes and winds. The hidden words tickle his ears and fill his head with thoughts, not his own. It gives him ideas about ancient evils and demons. The voice tells him how to summon them and how to become more powerful.

He doesn't want power.

He wants vengeance.

The Master tries to talk to him, but he knows what he must do now. He knows he must continue the bloodbath and wait for the real evil in White Creek to rise after years in exile. He didn't think his Master even knew of or understood what the cursed grounds harbored in White Creek. Maybe his Master served one mightier than himself.

Maybe his Master would one day serve him.

He cleared his cluttered mind. The thoughts betraying his Master filled him, but he forced them away into the black place in his head where his other memories were locked up tightly. He still had no recollection about who he was or how he came to be the agent of death he currently served as.

Outside, the howling wind caused the bare branches to scratch across the makeshift shelter. The way they caress the walls made the stranger's ears perk up. In each pass of the branches against the shelter, he heard his Master's voice.

His Master wasn't pleased.

The one who escaped me has returned.

The stranger blinked in surprise. "Who has returned?"

The Dean boy.

"Is he a threat?"

He could be our undoing.

"You fear him?"

His survival left the old ritual incomplete. His blood is needed to seal the new covenant.

"I will bring him to you, my Master."

Do not delay. We must do this before Frank Hill realizes what is happening. He has been lulled into a false sense of security concerning the old ones trapped here. It is time for him to find out his teacher only gave him part of the story. "Thy will be done."

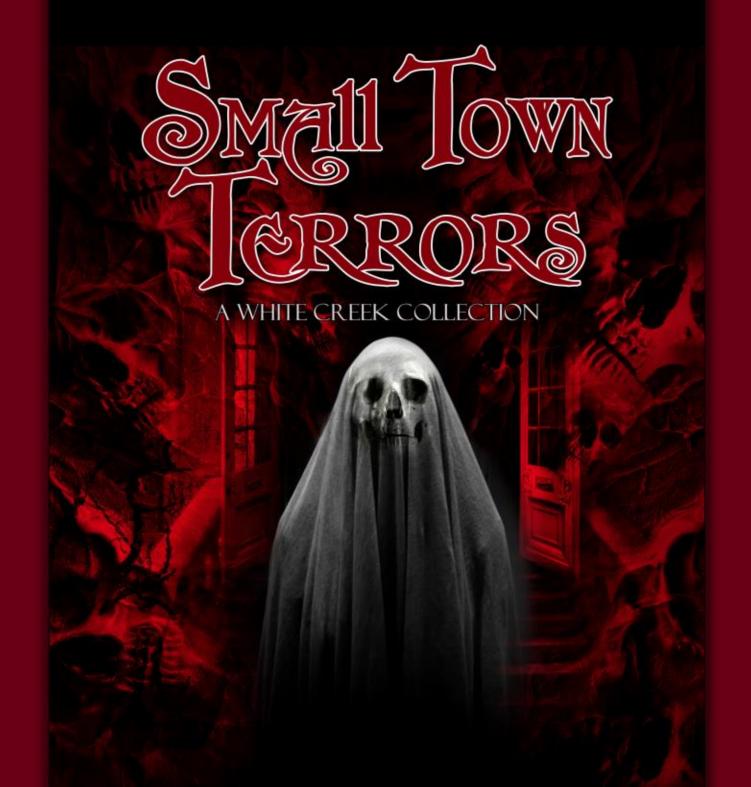
The voice in his head went silent, and he bit hard on his lower lip. Blood beaded on the broken skin and smiling, he ran his tongue over it. There was power in the blood as well as in names. When his Master invaded his mind, he learned his true name and now would bide his time until the moment to pounce presented itself.

He smiled. He could be a very patient man.



Dragonflies, by Brent Abell – A White Creek Novel!

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BRENT ABELL

### **PAYMENT**

Now

A chill ran down Danny King's spine and chased the last bit of warmth from the scotch away. His head pounded from the booze and the breeze blowing across the bay reminded him of his trips to the island with his father and grandfather when he was a boy. He had little idea the water and the island they traveled to so many years ago would be his destiny years later.

The island, the water, oh how I wish I could take it all back, he thought and took another long pull from the bottle. The burn ignited his insides and he took a drag from the cigarette hanging from his lips.

Behind him on the rocky hill, the beams from the lighthouse cut through the approaching fog. The horn called out its nightly wail to those in the bay bringing their fishing boats in from another day. When the lights struck the rolling fog they vanished, devoured by the oncoming murkiness. Danny could make out the ships racing back to the docks disappear as the mysterious vapor caught them from behind. In his head he swore he heard their dying screams and the guilt of everything happening around him weighed more heavily on his soul.

The last drop of alcohol ran from the bottle into Danny's mouth and he chucked the empty container over the ledge. He heard the glass shatter on the rocks below as well as the waves hitting the shore, pulling the shards out into the bay. He snorted and stifled back a laugh, his life broken like the bottle and now the end quickly seemed to be bearing down on him.

The island; the place haunted his dreams and consumed his life for the last ten years. It took his family, his career, and his life. He didn't blame Nancy for leaving him a few years ago. He'd become a crazed alcoholic nutcase. She'd finally had enough the night he held her by the throat and babbled on about the spirits of the past and how he was their gatekeeper. Now the island threatened to take the town he held dear. White Creek sat in the path of the cloud coming to claim him, to make him pay what was owed.

\*\*\*

Ten Years Earlier

"This is the last time we're bringing you out here Danny," his father said patting him on the back.

"We think you're ready to take your place in the family line," Danny's grandfather exclaimed proudly and lit another cigarette.

They led him through the trees until they came across an ancient stone wall. Within the crumbling stone were three cracked and moss covered tombstones. A small opening in the wall was the only entrance into the cemetery.

"What's this?" Danny asked and squinted to read the dates etched on the old markers.

"These are our forefathers. They helped to found White Creek and we are in their debt. Our family has been tasked in making sure the stones stay unbroken," his father answered.

"The markers?"

"No, the walls. Should they be broken, it is the guardian's role to pay," his grandfather said and turned away.

"Our time is finished, we've guarded this sacred land for two generations and we're tired," his father stated and hugged him.

"What do you mean?" Danny questioned.

His grandfather came up and placed his hands on his shoulders. For a moment, their gazes locked and he saw something in the old man's eyes he'd never seen before: fear. The moonlight cutting through the treetops illuminated his face and the lines etched across his cheeks and forehead were more pronounced.

"Danny, since the town's beginning, folks have been tasked with doing things they never thought they'd have to do. Our family is one of the five guardian clans in the town. Each family has to protect the resting places of our ancestors to keep what they did, contained," his father explained.

"What did they do?"

"They had to protect themselves and ensure the town's survival above everything else. These markers are just for show. Out there, in the water is where their bodies rest," his father explained.

"Then why do they have the stones here Dad?"

"Three men left the town to search for help the first winter after the original founders arrived. Once they were clear of the shore, a dense fog rolled in and they were never seen again. A diary left by one their widows, spoke of the screams they heard within the fog and how it retreated to the island once the unholy cries ceased."

"The fog came here?"

"Yes son, it came back to this spot. From what was handed down, when Josiah White and the expedition came to find out what happened here, they found the town abandoned. Nothing looked disturbed, but they found water all over the houses and shelters. They didn't find another soul. They did find the diaries of a few settlers and it led them here. What happened next, nobody is sure of. Whatever is here is bound by the markers of the three who departed and the wall around them. All we know is that our sacred duty is to safeguard the wall and the markers. If they were to break or fall, the consequences would be dire indeed," his father said and took one last drag from the cigarette he'd been slowly puffing on.

"It is time Danny," his grandfather said.

Grandfather, father, and son all looked to one another. Danny backed away and stepped toward the entryway into the cemetery. His father and grandfather each placed a hand on his shoulder and a jolt shot through his body. Blue lightning arced from their fingertips into his flesh. He felt it flow into his pores and the electricity raced up his nervous system. Clinching his eyes tightly shut, he waited until the sensations in his body ebbed.

Slowly, he opened his eyes to a new world. The blue light he saw when his kin touched him surrounded the tiny graveyard and a whitish-blue haze blazed from the three tombstones within the ancient walls. All the trees and plants glowed in the dark. Danny blinked and furiously rubbed his eyes trying to rid his vision of the haunting hues.

"See the island as we do son. You are now the guardian and nothing is allowed to pass the barrier of the cemetery walls except for you and whoever you choose when the time comes. We pass it down through the generations and you don't have to guard alone my son," his father said and walked into the middle of the graves.

"Then why don't you stay with me?" Danny said as tears streamed down his face.

"I'm dying. We both are and that's why we brought you here, to pass along your birthright. You are now the guardian and protector Danny. Remember, we'll both always love you," his father answered as he turned to the cemetery's entrance.

Danny watched his grandfather enter the cemetery and stand next to his son. A dark pool began seeping up from the soil around the pair. Holding hands, the two men sank into the murky water within the cemetery walls leaving Danny alone and confused.

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#### Two Days Ago

He knew something was wrong when he saw the boat tied to the tree near the landing point. The locals knew the island was off limits and respected the sanctity of the place. The burial places around the area for the founders of White Creek were held in reverence and not to be trifled with. Local legends spoke of demons, sorcery, and witchcraft; but most laughed it off as superstition and hearsay.

Most people were wrong.

Danny knew better; he was charged with protecting a part of the town's heritage and someone had come to the island, violating the balance.

Someone threatened everything. Someone risked tearing down the barriers. Someone risked dooming them all. He pulled his small boat to the shore and stashed it behind the rock formation by the wooded island edge.

When he cut a proper trail five years ago to aid him on his treks back to the cemetery, he never imagined others would dare set foot on the island and use it. Tossed aside at the trail head he spied three beer bottles and a jacket. Walking toward the trail head, he bent over and picked up the jacket, a White Creek High letterman's jacket. Turning it around, his guts churned when he read the name emblazoned across the back in bright red letters, *KING*.

Damn boy, you should've known better, he thought and stormed off on the trail to the cemetery. Behind him, he swore he heard the bay roil and the waves crash harder against the island beaches. He also thought he heard... them.

His island eyes kicked in and everything took on its ethereal hues as he felt the energy pulsing through the land and the life on it. Every step closer to the clearing where the old stones laid made him anxious. A shift in the air already weighed on him. In all the years he'd been on the sacred ground, he'd never experienced the atmosphere as heavy and charged as it was now. Surveying the trees and plants along the trail, the normal blue and white colors were darkening and swirling around. Reds and blacks replaced the island's aura.

Whatever they've done, they've awakened it.

Danny broke into a run. In the distance he heard the laughing and the passionate cries coming from the clearing. A breeze began blowing across the island bringing the stench of weed, booze, and youthful lust. A humming reached his ears and he knew the land was charging itself, preparing to attack.

Six generations of King's had guarded the sacred island and on his watch it was going to all come tumbling down. His pace quickened and off in the distance, ahead of him on the trail, he swore for a moment he could see his father and grandfather and both hung their heads low, unable to look him in the eyes. Shame filled Danny's soul - shame and fear.

Danny scared the teens when he came from behind the row of pine trees. He smelled the salt water close around him on the cold island breeze and his heart skipped a beat when he found four teens fornicating on the old stone cemetery walls

"Get down now!" he roared charging toward them.

The guys quickly backed up and pulled their pants up. The girls dropped down to the ground searching for their panties and pushing their skirts down off their hips.

"Damon! What the fuck are you doing?" Danny screamed.

"Dad... we... ah, yeah," Damon stammered. Defeat filled his voice because he knew the shit was going to hit the fan.

"And the rest of you! What would your parents think if they knew you were out here of all places and doing what you're doing? Come on, let's hurry, your folks are probably worried sick," Danny shouted and began to motion for the kids to follow him. The air shifted and he realized they didn't have much time.

Danny's pace increased the closer they came to the shore. The air began to reek and cooled until he saw his breath fan out in front of him each time he exhaled. Once they cleared the woods, his heart sank. The boat was torn apart and scattered along the shore. Planks littered the sands and the rope that once secured it to the tree was shredded. He shot a fast glance to the rocks and saw his boat still secure and hidden.

There's not enough room for all of us, he thought.

The girls screamed when they saw their boat's wreckage. One of them rushed over and grabbed a splintered piece from the rocks and shook her head in disbelief.

"Now what are we going to do!" she cried.

Danny looked out at the bay and froze. Damon started to step toward the water, but his father held him back.

"What, Dad? Let's get the hell out of here, you've scared Peggy and Hannah to death and you're freaking me out."

Then Damon saw it: three heads bobbing off the shoreline. They were black in the evening light and small red dots shone from them. A wave crashed on the rocks and the heads drew closer to the five standing on the island.

"Dad?" Damon asked, his voice full of fear.

"We have to go back," Danny whispered.

Damon's friend Kyle shook his girlfriend's hand off his arm and ran to the shore. Tossing his shirt to the ground, he stepped in the water.

"Kyle! Get back here!" his girlfriend Peggy screamed.

"Kyle, come back!" Damon shouted.

"It's too late son," Danny muttered and stood transfixed on the boy running out into the cold water.

Kyle rushed into the foamy surf and jumped into the froth. His arms broke back above the surface as he started to swim to town. Each stoke took him further from the island and the others could only watch and hope he reached the mainland.

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He pushed his arms as fast as they could go and kicked his feet with all his might, but he didn't think he was getting closer to the docks. The beams from the lighthouse cut through the growing fog and when he turned his head to breathe, he saw them. Kyle counted three heads in the water and they all glared at him.

Oh, Jesus. They saw me.

Suddenly, his chest seized up like a giant fist squeezed him tightly. Pushing through the pain, he drove his arms and legs to swim faster. Gasping, salt water splashed into his mouth and he choked on the taste.

I've won three swim titles, I can do this! He thought and focused on the shore.

The water began to thicken around him. He felt like he was swimming in a pool of Jell-O and each stroke became harder and harder. Fear pounded through him and the one place he could always find solace from the world was quickly becoming his enemy.

Opening his eyes to gauge his location in the bay, he found the fog had devoured the town and when he snuck a peek behind him, he realized the island had vanished too. He stopped and treaded water trying to get his bearings.

"Damon! Peggy! Hannah!" he called out as the waves lapped at his mouth. Salt water quickly filled his mouth and he spat it back out.

Nobody answered and even the lighthouse's horn had fallen silent.

"Shit, shit, shit," he muttered.

Deciding on a direction, he began to swim again. Something brushed past him in the water and he slowed. It felt like Peggy's fingertips running up his thigh when they made out, except it made him feel cold all over. Picking up speed again, the sensation happened a second time and lingered longer around his ankles. Panicking, he gave his arms and legs everything he had. His body sped through the black, further into the fog. Something grabbed his foot and he jerked to a halt in the water. Dipping beneath the surface, he pushed back up and fought for air. Three sets of red dots appeared before him.

A second tug took him under and he twisted quickly around, freeing himself. Before he could break the surface, water filled his lungs. He tried to cough, but he swallowed more instead. Kyle flinched as more hands took hold of his feet and yanked down—hard. Opening his eyes and looking upward toward the surface, he saw the shore getting further and further away.

They pulled him down for what seemed like miles. Tiny bubbles flew from his nose and he tried to hold what little breath he had left. His lungs seized and hitched one last time. Opening his mouth wide, it erupted in large bubbles and the last thing he saw was his final breath rocketing to the surface.

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Danny knew once the fog rolled over Kyle he was gone. He looked over at his son and the two girls. Damon wrapped his arms around Hannah's shoulders and Peggy fell to her knees weeping loudly. Out on the water, the fog dissipated and Kyle was nowhere in sight.

"Come on, we have to get back to the cemetery," Danny said and rushed to the trail head.

"What are those things Dad?" Damon asked as the other three rushed to catch up to him.

Huffing, Danny stopped and turned to his son, "Don't ask what you don't want to know the answer to, son."

Damon reached out and shoved his father. Danny flinched in surprise and stared at his son.

"Why are you taking us back to the cemetery?"

"Because we have to make things right, now come on," Danny said and ran.

Within a few minutes they found themselves standing before the crumbling stone cemetery walls. A blue haze surrounded the three markers in the middle. Danny stepped closer to the entrance and the closer he got to the entryway, the muddier the ground became. He looked at the ground within the walls and saw it was becoming more and more saturated. Damon, Peggy, and Hannah stood by in silence and watched more water seep up from the ground around the graves.

Danny pulled a book from his pocket and frantically flipped through the pages. Finding the correct page, he skimmed the words looking for something, anything that would call off the dead men. Sighing, he closed the book and hung his head low.

"Dad? What is it?" Damon asked. He stepped closer to his father and started to feel uneasy. The look frozen on his father's face chilled him. He'd never witnessed a look like it on his father before.

"Over behind the third tree, there are some shovels. I want you to grab them and then we need to get to work," Danny answered. His voice sounded distant and despondent.

Damon rushed over behind the tree and found a large metal box. Flinging open the top, he found two shovels and a pick axe. Grabbing the lot, he hurried back to his father and the frightened girls and tossed them on the ground. They made a wet smacking sound when they hit the mud and began to sink. Water pooled around the tools and Damon backed away.

Wetness seeped into his shoes and an electric jolt shot through his system. Images flashed in his mind and he yanked his feet back away from the water. Shivers racked his body and his face fell slack.

"Damon, are you alright?" Hannah said and put her hand on his shoulder.

"NO!" He screamed and pushed her hand away. Suddenly everything on the island seemed... different.

Danny stood back and watched the scene. He knew what had transpired, what the water did to him. It showed him the truth about his family's legacy. It showed him the price to be paid. He wondered if he saw the island and the water like he did or if it only gave him a quick glimpse into his future or into his bloodline's past. He'd have plenty of time to teach him everything he'd need to know about the island and the history he was now tied to.

"Hannah, honey? I need you and Peggy to come here and help me dig in the cemetery," he said flatly and took up the pick axe.

Hannah slowly bent over to grab a shovel, never letting her eyes leave Damon. Peggy followed suit and took the last shovel from the deepening puddles on the ground.

"Put your hands in it," Damon ordered.

"Put them in what Damon?" Hannah asked. Her tone sounded weak and beaten.

"In the water! Put them in there now! I can't be the only one it talks to," he cried out.

The girls knelt down and placed their trembling hands in the brown muddy pools. They held their hands there for a few moments and pulled them out again. Damon hovered over them waiting for a sign they saw the horrible visions he faced, but neither looked shocked or repulsed. Both girls looked like nothing had happened.

"We need to dig in front of the three stones before the water rises in the cemetery," Damon said and walked through the gateway. The girls followed and Danny stayed back to watch.

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The wind whipped harder through the trees and the deepening water chilled the three teens to their bones. Each gust cut through their jackets and every muscle burned from their labor. The hole before the markers grew wider and deeper with each shovel of dirt, but the dark water quickly seeped up from the soil to fill it in.

Hannah stopped, on the brink of exhaustion, and gazed into the black pool she stood in. Images swam through the ripples in the mirrored surface. Faces pushed up through the ink-like liquid and bared their teeth. Most opened their mouths in silent screams and faded back into the dark pools. Hannah stepped back and felt for the grave marker behind her. Her mouth hung open, but no words spilled forth.

Peggy noticed as Hannah slowly covered her mouth, her eyes widening as she gazed into the pool. Quickly, Peggy dropped her shovel and rushed to Hannah's side.

"Hannah? Hannah, can you hear me? What is it?" Peggy asked as she shook Hannah's shoulders.

"The water, in the water I saw them," she mumbled and pointed to the large pool in the shallow hole they dug before the markers.

Peggy knelt down and looked into the black muck filling the hole. The surface remained smooth as glass and she reached her finger out to touch it. Her finger slid into the pool and it caused a small ripple to form and move to the other side.

"Hannah, there's nothing here," she said.

Hannah screamed when a hand shot from the pool and latched onto Peggy's arm. Peggy tried to yank it back, but the arm tugged on her and pulled her in to her elbow. Screaming, she tried to roll away from the hole's edge and a second arm reached out and grabbed her leg.

Damon watched with a bemused smirk on his face. He'd seen the path, the righteous way he needed to take. He glanced at his father who stared at the scene with the same knowing look plastered on his face.

Hannah snapped out from her daze and grabbed Peggy's free hand and tried to pull her free. The water roiled and a column shot up and writhed in the air like a tentacle. Hannah gasped at the watery appendage and Peggy's hand slipped away from her. Swinging wildly, the tentacle smacked Hannah in the face and she stumbled backward, falling to the increasingly soggy ground.

The two hands dragged Peggy closer to the pool, her face stopping inches from the surface. Her reflection glared back at her with blazing red eyes and even though she didn't smile, one crossed the reflections lips revealing a row of sharp pointed teeth. From the corner of her eye, she spotted Damon step up beside her.

"Damon, I can't hold on much longer! Help me!" she pleaded.

"Here," Damon responded and swung the pick axe.

The pointed tip smashed into Peggy's skull. Hannah winced from the dull thud it made when it struck her friend, piercing her brain. Peggy's eyes crossed and a river of blood began flowing from the hole in the top of her head. The hands tugged on her and Damon let go of the pick axe's handle. Peggy's lifeless body slid into the inky pool and vanished beneath the surface.

"What have you done?" Hannah screamed at Damon through the sobs tearing through her body.

"Payment baby, payment," he responded smugly.

Hannah stood up and steadied herself on the markers. Damon reached his hand out to her and smiled his 'All-American' boy smile at her. She felt her guard go down and rushed over to hug him, the whole evening a blur in her head.

"Oh Damon," she muttered and let him wrap her in his arms.

"We have to pay baby, that's the nature of the beast. We all have to pay for the town," he whispered in her ear and gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

Next to them, the water swirled and the faces raced to the surface. Dozens of them broke through and then dove back into the ichor. Damon saw the parade of the forefathers... and pushed.

Hannah felt like she was falling backward in slow motion. She'd felt safe in Damon's arms even after what he did to Peggy; she craved the comfort at the moment. She felt weak and used watching his lips form a maniacal grin... a knowing grin. Closing her eyes, she splashed into the pool and felt the multitude of hands grab her and pull. Her back struck the bottom, but the hands tugged harder and she felt her body sink into the ground. Opening her eyes to take one last look, she saw Peggy smiling beside her... then Peggy opened her mouth revealing her razor teeth.

Hannah tried to scream, but the black sludge filled her mouth, silencing her forever.

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Danny stood by and watched as his son raised his arms in victory. He'd never been more proud of the boy.

I wonder if it's my time to go and leave him in charge, join my father and grandfather.

He noticed the water didn't dissipate after the sacrifices were offered to the founders. The fog began to pour from the cemetery and fill the space within its walls.

"Damon! Get out of there now!"

Damon saw the tendrils of white mist creep around his ankles. The cold he felt from touching the wispy fingers broke his paralysis and he ran for the gateway. He saw his father and ran over to him on the edge of the clearing.

"Dad, what is that?"

"It should have gone away! We gave it three lives for three of the tethered souls," he said in disbelief.

Then it hit him like a ton of bricks, Damon had violated the sanctity of the cemetery and the markers within. He had to pay also.

Danny gazed upon his son and he felt the island call to him to pay the owed amount. Damon stood before him, his only son and heir to his legacy. In his mind the island's aura shifted to an angry red and the fog bank forming around the markers began churning.

"Damon," Danny whispered, "I have a boat hidden on the shore. When I say go, we run as fast as we can to get it and get off this fucking island."

Damon nodded.

"Go."

Father and son tore away from the clearing and ran down the path as fast as they could go, neither one looking back to see if the fog gave chase. Branches swatted them and left welts in their skin. Water seeped from the ground and they both began to slip in the mud. Staying focused, they looked forward and saw the rock formation where the boat lay hidden.

"Damon, quick let's get her in the water!"

They both picked up the boat and ran to the shore. The waves increased as they dove into the water. Danny pushed Damon over the side into the boat. Staying in the water, he swam toward the town pushing the boat out of the shallow area surrounding the island.

Damon looked out and saw the three heads in the water. "Dad, quick, take my hand!"

Danny reached up and took his son's hand and pulled himself over the side.

"Thanks boy," he said huffing from swimming against the crashing waves.

Grabbing the oars, they paddled and never looked back.

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Now

Danny heard Damon snore and mumble something under his breath. The town had been on edge since the other night and Danny knew it was his fault. Sensing the spirits anger, he also felt them give him the opportunity to make amends and pay.

In his mind, he heard his father and grandfather plead with him, but their spectral voices fell on deaf ears. Some people had already left town and only a few families here and there remained. The fog rolled closer to the docks and he could hear the cries of the damned souls trapped in it. Occasionally, a face would show through; sometimes it was Kyle and in others, it would be Hannah or Peggy he was staring at.

Still, he sat and drank.

Damon sat down beside him and gazed out at the fog creeping across the cursed water.

"This is my fault Dad," he said and buried his face in his hands.

"No, it's mine and mine alone."

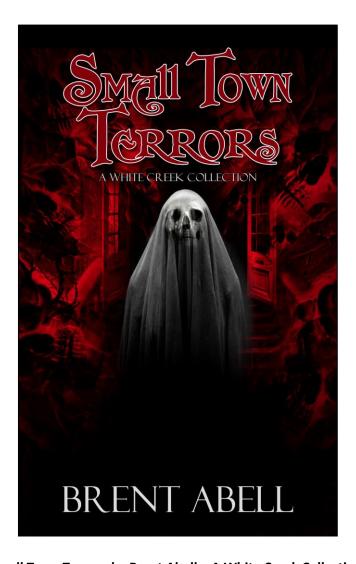
"But I killed them and gave them to it," he managed to say between sobs.

"We all pay a price in this town Damon. The cursed ones paid theirs like we all have to pay ours. We all have to face responsibility for our actions, son."

Damon stood up and looked over the rock face cliff down to the docks and the water. The bay usually experienced little waves from the current, but they tore through the docks and crashed into the fishing boats anchored down tossing them like toys in a bath tub. He stepped out further and felt the cliff give a little beneath him.

The rocks behind him crunched and Damon turned around to see his father standing there staring at him.

"We all have a price to pay," he muttered and reached his hands out.



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Mike Lera's Corridor of Horror

**Featured Artist** 

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Brent Abell

#### **Featured Books**

Dragonflies & Small Town Terrors

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