

The Sirens Call



Winter 2022

issue 60

*A Dark Fiction
& Horror Zine!*

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

*Mike Lera's
Corridor of Horror*

*Featured Artist:
David Paul Harris*

*Featured Project:
Strong Women -
Strange Worlds*

*Featured Author:
Kristi Petersen
Schoonover*

*Featured Book:
'Bad Apple'*

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Table of Contents

Fiction

- 
- pg. 04 - A Tale of Christmas | *K.A. Johnson*
pg. 07 - Pale, Pale, Heart | *Linda Lee Rice*
pg. 09 - The Door | *Andrew Adams*
pg. 13 - Trichotillomania | *L. Pine*
pg. 14 - A Bell in My Heart | *Nicole L. Nevel-Steighner*
pg. 17 - The Revelation | *Gregory L. Steighner*
pg. 22 - Hero's Return | *Aaron Grierson*
pg. 23 - When Children Feed | *Devin J. Meaney*
pg. 24 - A House to Match My Coat | *Sonora Taylor*
pg. 26 - Revenant | *Claire Loader*
pg. 26 - Lost Pets | *Andrea Allison*
pg. 27 - Crimson Grove | *Nicholas Paschall*
pg. 36 - John | *Kathleen McCluskey*
pg. 37 - Salted Beef | *Nick Searle*
pg. 39 - The Ex-Christmas Tree | *Corinne Pollard*
pg. 39 - Dead Centre | *Corinne Pollard*
pg. 39 - Conscious Casket | *Corinne Pollard*
pg. 39 - Led Away | *Corinne Pollard*
pg. 40 - Chad | *Gabriella Balcom*
pg. 41 - The Feast of a Lifetime | *Gabriella Balcom*
pg. 43 - What the Ocean Knows | *Kristi Petersen Schoonover*
pg. 46 - Red Bird on Cherry Lane | *Tina Swain*
pg. 48 - The Other Me | *Charles Sartorius*
pg. 50 - Dinner with Mama | *Evan Purcell*
pg. 51 - Ded Moroz | *Aaron Grierson*
pg. 52 - Baby Shoes | *Aaron Grierson*
pg. 52 - Tribute Tower | *Maggie D Brace*
pg. 54 - A Dragonfly's Gasp | *Melissa R. Mendelson*
pg. 55 - Track Seventeen | *Mary Parker*
pg. 57 - Play it Loud | *Joe Giatras*
pg. 61 - Exhibition | *H.V. Patterson*
pg. 61 - Cheaters Never Prosper | *H.V. Patterson*
pg. 61 - Stranger Danger | *H.V. Patterson*
pg. 61 - Nightmares for Sale | *H.V. Patterson*
pg. 62 - Locomotion | *Casey Shelley*
pg. 63 - Intruder | *Miracle Austin*
pg. 64 - Deathbed | *Naching T. Kassa*
pg. 65 - The Anniversary | *Gerald Hayes*
pg. 67 - The Oldest One Alive | *Radar DeBoard*
pg. 68 - Dark Energies | *Claire Loader*
pg. 69 - Summer's End | *E.E. King*
pg. 74 - The Forbidden Fruit | *Soter Lucio*
pg. 76 - Love Me, Someday | *Maxwell I. Gold*
pg. 78 - Release of Beauty | *B. T. Petro*
pg. 80 - A Christmas Feast | *RJ Meldrum*
pg. 81 - The Rain Man | *Aaron Grierson*
pg. 82 - Just a Matter of Time | *Gloria Bobrowicz*
pg. 130 - Red Light | *Mark Walker*
pg. 136 - The Godmother Ship | *A.M. Symes*
pg. 138 - The Playroom | *R.A. Clarke*
pg. 139 - My Lost Teddy | *Andrea Allison*
pg. 140 - Twinkle, Twinkle | *Kellee Kranendonk*
pg. 143 - The Faire Chlaidh | *Jim Mountfield*
pg. 146 - What We Have Become | *Linda Lee Rice*
pg. 147 - A Toast to the Demonic | *Christopher Collingwood*
pg. 155 - Fox Hill | *Meg Smith*
pg. 158 - It Could've Been Worse | *Gabriella Balcom*
pg. 159 - Whispers | *Ty A. Bechel*
pg. 161 - Last Flight of the Demeter | *Jeff Durkin*
pg. 163 - Vending Machine | *Aaron Grierson*
pg. 164 - Mirrors | *Derek Austin Johnson*
pg. 168 - The Red Deer | *Stephen Howard*
pg. 169 - The Overthrow of Charms | *Robert Mayette*
pg. 174 - Riverwalk | *Kathleen McCluskey*
pg. 174 - Allan | *Kathleen McCluskey*
pg. 175 - The Ivory Phone | *L. Stephenson*
pg. 176 - The Christmas Guest | *Gabriella Balcom*
pg. 177 - Babble | *Phil Keeling*
pg. 178 - Congeries | *DJ Tyrer*
pg. 180 - The Deal | *Fariel Shafee*
pg. 181 - Twelve O'clock High | *Tom Koperwas*
pg. 183 - Her Only Choice | *Shannon Acrey*
pg. 184 - Guilty by Association | *Kendal Lou Dickson*
pg. 187 - Foolish Fire | *Sidney Williams*
pg. 189 - Together Forever | *Fariel Shafee*
pg. 190 - Chelsea | *Tiffany Price*
pg. 191 - Colder | *Brian Rosenberger*
pg. 193 - Two Scoops of Violence | *Ashley Cooke*
pg. 196 - The Cellar | *Frederick Pangbourne*
pg. 200 - Lester and Miranda | *Annika Johnson*
pg. 203 - The Woman in the Black Dress | *Linda Lee Rice*
pg. 203 - Strange Palate | *Patrick Winters*
pg. 204 - Wednesday at Huang's | *Patrick Winters*
pg. 204 - Bright and Bold | *Patrick Winters*
pg. 204 - Black Magic Treehouse | *Patrick Winters*
pg. 204 - This House is Not a Home | *Patrick Winters*
pg. 205 - Béaldubh Lough Hotel Brochure | *Ken McGrath*
pg. 206 - 392 Days | *Christopher Hivner*
pg. 208 - Wings of Freedom | *Erica VanBuren*
pg. 210 - Three Keys | *Gerald Hayes*
pg. 211 - When the Silver Fell | *Nina D'Arcangela*
pg. 212 - Mine | *Jennifer Shneiderman*
pg. 214 - Wishing Time Would Stop | *Radar DeBoard*
pg. 124 - Waiting for You | *Lynn Ruzzo*
pg. 215 - Voices in the Winter Night | *Kerry E.B. Black*

Table of Contents

Poetry

pg. 85 - End of the Line <i>Andrew Kurtz</i>	pg. 107 - Ossuary <i>Mariel Herbert</i>
pg. 86 - In the Mirror <i>Brian Rosenberger</i>	pg. 107 - Aurum <i>Mariel Herbert</i>
pg. 86 - The Long Winter <i>Brian Rosenberger</i>	pg. 107 - Fairy Dust <i>Mariel Herbert</i>
pg. 86 - The Forecast <i>Brian Rosenberger</i>	pg. 108 - Nocturne Beyond Sound <i>Will H. Blackwell, Jr.</i>
pg. 86 - Ghost House <i>Brian Rosenberger</i>	pg. 109 - Beloved <i>Lynn White</i>
pg. 87 - Restless <i>Tinamarie Cox</i>	pg. 109 - Feed The Flames <i>Lynn White</i>
pg. 88 - Witching Hour <i>Jerome Berglund</i>	pg. 109 - Shrouded <i>Lynn White</i>
pg. 88 - Revenants <i>Jerome Berglund</i>	pg. 110 - The House on Drunkards' Hill <i>John Villan</i>
pg. 89 - Becoming <i>Amy Zoellers</i>	pg. 111 - a dark abyss no light would break <i>Linda M. Crate</i>
pg. 91 - Wake-Up Call <i>Ngo Binh Anh Khoa</i>	pg. 111 - each time it made her happy <i>Linda M. Crate</i>
pg. 91 - For Eternity <i>Ngo Binh Anh Khoa</i>	pg. 111 - fortune did not favor the brave <i>Linda M. Crate</i>
pg. 92 - A Vampire's Lament <i>Ngo Binh Anh Khoa</i>	pg. 112 - you have no authority here <i>Linda M. Crate</i>
pg. 93 - Krampus Comes <i>Corinne Pollard</i>	pg. 112 - revenge was a rather tasty dish <i>Linda M. Crate</i>
pg. 93 - The Way of It <i>Nina D'Arcangela</i>	pg. 113 - Jack The Ripper <i>G. Richard Evans</i>
pg. 94 - stone cold truth <i>Eliana Vanessa</i>	pg. 114 - Kiss me deadly <i>Max Bindi</i>
pg. 94 - new moon <i>Eliana Vanessa</i>	pg. 115 - Death-thought <i>Max Bindi</i>
pg. 94 - Genevive <i>Eliana Vanessa</i>	pg. 115 - Death Poem <i>Max Bindi</i>
pg. 94 - untethered frustration <i>Eliana Vanessa</i>	pg. 117 - The Pest House <i>Meg Smith</i>
pg. 94 - Skullball <i>Eliana Vanessa</i>	pg. 117 - The Night Garden <i>Meg Smith</i>
pg. 95 - The spidermoose <i>Mathias Jansson</i>	pg. 117 - The Sea Grass Jester <i>Meg Smith</i>
pg. 96 - The Box <i>Christopher Hivner</i>	pg. 117 - Bright Bleed <i>Meg Smith</i>
pg. 97 - Aquamarine <i>Christopher Hivner</i>	pg. 118 - Year's End <i>DJ Tyrer</i>
pg. 97 - I Will Meet You <i>Christopher Hivner</i>	pg. 118 - Examination <i>DJ Tyrer</i>
pg. 98 - Stalker <i>Miracle Austin</i>	pg. 118 - Haunted Honeymoon <i>DJ Tyrer</i>
pg. 98 - Medusa's Death <i>January Bain</i>	pg. 119 - Your Friend on the Other Side <i>Renee Cronley</i>
pg. 100 - Rek-Cocci Stirs <i>Scott J. Couturier</i>	pg. 120 - Lying Awake <i>Annie Zamparelli</i>
pg. 101 - Amongst the Sargasso <i>Scott J. Couturier</i>	pg. 120 - Thomas is hiding <i>Goran Lowie</i>
pg. 101 - To the Wolves <i>Scott J. Couturier</i>	pg. 121 - I am nightmares <i>Goran Lowie</i>
pg. 102 - Reflection In Blood <i>Scott J. Couturier</i>	pg. 121 - Swimming in the Changeling Sea <i>Goran Lowie</i>
pg. 102 - Twin Hungers <i>Scott J. Couturier</i>	pg. 123 - Brainstorm <i>Lori R. Lopez</i>
pg. 103 - The Innocent and the Blessed <i>Alex Grehy</i>	pg. 124 - Darkness Sails The Pewter Skies <i>Lori R. Lopez</i>
pg. 104 - The Scribe's Torment <i>Christopher Collingwood</i>	pg. 125 - The Gondegone <i>Lori R. Lopez</i>
pg. 104 - A Marionette may Cry <i>Christopher Collingwood</i>	pg. 126 - come the maniacal <i>Lori R. Lopez</i>
pg. 105 - Screams to Soothe You <i>Christopher Collingwood</i>	pg. 127 - Doomscroll <i>Lori R. Lopez</i>
pg. 105 - Idle Threats of the Butterfly <i>Christopher Collingwood</i>	

Features

pg. 30 - Mike Lera's Corridor of Horror <i>Short and Powerful - A Side Door to Filmmaking</i>	pg. 83 - Featured Artist <i>David Paul Harris</i>
pg. 149 - Featured Project <i>Strong Women – Strange Worlds</i>	pg. 08 - 0031_Untitled
pg. 219 - Featured Author <i>Kristi Petersen Schoonover</i>	pg. 25 - 0064_Untitled
pg. 221 - Featured Novel <i>Bad Apple, by Kristi Petersen Schoonover</i>	pg. 47 - 068_Basement
	pg. 60 - 0036_Untitled
	pg. 90 - 074_Hunger
	pg. 106 - 0092_Infected
	pg. 135 - 0061_Untitled
	pg. 160 - 0072_Untitled
	pg. 173 - 0034_Horror Challenge
	pg. 186 - 0065_Untitled
	pg. 202 - 01_Untitled
pg. 226 - Credits	pg. 213 - 0035_Aneurysm

Genevieve had just finished stringing the colored Christmas lights around the edges of her room. She wished her parents had allowed her to keep them up year-round, but her mother told her they were something special, only for Christmas time.

"Marvelous, chica," came a voice from behind her.

The voice startled her, almost causing her to fall off the stepladder. Gen looked behind her and saw Cassie holding a duffle bag.

"God, you scared me," Gen said.

"You shouldn't leave the front door unlocked if you don't want people to come in," Cassie said. "What's up with that anyway? Why would someone who's always as paranoid as you leave the front door unlocked."

"So you could come in," Gen said.

"Then it worked," Cassie said. "I'm excited. You've never had me over for a sleepover before."

"You know what my parents think of you."

"They are such..."

"Watch it," Gen said. "They are my folks."

"Sorry. Anyway, I can't wait for you to see my favorite show."

"What is it?"

"It doesn't have a name. It streams live every Friday on OnlyFans."

"Porn? Really, Cass?"

"No, it isn't porn," Cassie said. "There isn't just porn on OnlyFans. It's a horror show."

"Horror show?"

"Ya, this guy, you never see his face, stages serial killer attacks live on the air. The show is brutal."

"You like some fucked up shit, Cass!"

"Shut up, girl, you're gonna love it!"

"It's Christmas weekend. Your so-called serial killer is probably hanging out with the fam."

"He promised a live show tonight, and I gave us a shout-out."

"A what?"

"I posted that we'd be watching from your house."

"You told some rando fake serial killer about us?"

"Ya, but..."

"What the hell, Cass! What if he comes here and kills us!"

"Damn, you overreact, girl!"

Gen loved Cassie. She was the yin to her yang. Gen knew she got too high-strung about life, and somehow Cassie was always able to ground her. Gen's parents weren't as big a fan of Cassie as she was, though. They didn't like that Cassie smoked, had a septum piercing, and had a streak of pink hair on her otherwise dirty blonde head. They felt Gen could do better for her friends, but as long as Gen continued to make the honor roll, they had promised not to bug her about it.

Gen was thrilled when her parents said Cassie could stay over for the long Christmas weekend. They'd left this morning on a ski vacation in Vale, and Gen hadn't wanted them to know she was nervous about staying home alone. She'd expected a fight about Cassie staying over, but they had said yes without a second thought.

Rando serial killer program or not, Gen was glad that Cassie was staying over. No matter what, they'd have a great time; they always did. Somehow, when they were together, time flew by, and the real world's troubles were forgotten.

Cassie threw her bags on the floor of Gen's room. They had the run of the house, but Gen's bedroom would be home base for the weekend. It was the only part of the house where Gen felt at home—it was the only part that reflected Gen as a person. Plus, since they were going to be away, Gen's parents hadn't decorated for Christmas, so the lights she had just hung in her room, and her Charlie Brown Christmas tree, were the only festive decorations in the house.

Gen came down the stepladder and saw Cass had opened her laptop, which was booting up.

"What are you up to?"

"I'm bringing up the page. You never know when he goes live. Sometimes it is early. Sometimes it is late."

"Okay, I'll go pop us some popcorn."

"Put some extra butter popcorn oil on it."

"You betcha."

Gen went into the kitchen. Her parents' house always felt so sterile to her. They believed in minimalism when it came to decorations. But, decorations weren't all that her parents didn't believe in. They also didn't have a microwave. She pulled out their hot air popper and dumped some kernels in. The sound of the heater fan running drowned out everything.

After the bowl was filled, Gen drizzled the popcorn oil over the top. She started to put the bottle away, then stopped and poured some more over it. Cassie loved the stuff. She went back to her bedroom. The warm light from the Christmas lights gave the room a homey feel. She remembered she hadn't lit the Yankee Candle Christmas Eve scent candle she'd picked up. She loved its smell and lit one every Christmas. She noticed that Cassie was frowning when she entered the room.

"Why so sullen? Your program canceled tonight?"

"No, um..."

"Um, what?"

Gen glanced at the screen, and she dropped the popcorn bowl on the floor.

"What the fuck, Cassie!"

"It has to be a coincidence."

"That's the back of this house on the screen."

"It could be the back of any number of houses, Gen."

"No, I know what the back of my house looks like! So why is it on the screen?"

"This is my program. It already started."

"Why is the back of my house on it? I thought you just gave a shout-out?"

"I may have given him the address, too."

"You what?"

"Others have done it before."

"Are you fucking stupid?"

"Look, I'm sure it's just a prank."

"I'm checking the locks."

"Okay, I'll come with you."

Gen rushed through the house, Cassie trying to keep up behind her, to the back door and checked that the deadbolt was in place.

"I'm going to go check the front door."

The lights suddenly flickered, then went out.

"What the hell have you done, Cassie?"

"It isn't like someone would actually go out and murder people and put it on the internet. Maybe he just fucks with people, films their reactions, and then they set up the fake kill shoots after they sign a release and turn it into a program."

"Sure, you keep believing that. It's live streaming, remember? I'm going to go find my cell phone and call the cops."

"You left it in your bedroom next to mine, but you're completely overreacting."

Gen heard the sound of breaking glass.

"He's in the house."

"That was just the sound of breaking glass. Something could have fallen."

"Wake the fuck up, Cassie! The internet maniac is in here to kill us!"

Gen, before you fly off the handle, let's go back to your room and check the live feed. We can see if he is in the house, and if he is, we can call the cops."

"Fine!"

Gen ran back through the house. Cassie had difficulty keeping up with her in the dark and unfamiliar territory. Gen groaned. Cassie saw the computer screen was frozen on an image of an axe going through a utility conduit.

"Why is the video frozen?" Cassie asked.

"The router lost power when the house did."

"So, why is the computer still on?"

"The battery."

"Can you fix the internet?"

"Not until the power goes back on."

"I can bring OnlyFans up on my phone."

"I'm not waiting for that, Cass. I'm calling the cops."

"Gen, just fucking stop for a minute. If you call the cops and there isn't a sociopath in your house, your parents will find out, and I'll never get to come over again. Just give me a minute to bring up the guy's feed."

"Fine, Cass. But you better be right. I'll double-check the front door while you bring up the site."

Gen grabbed a flashlight and headed out the door before Cassie could say anything.

Cassie was trying to get the site to come up, cursing out the slow 4G service at Gen's house, when she heard Gen cry out from somewhere in the house. Cassie fumbled with her phone, trying to get the flashlight to turn on, and rushed out of the room, trying to remember how to get to the front door.

Cassie found Gen in the living room, more from finding light from her flashlight than from actually remembering the house's layout. Gen was kneeling on the floor. Cassie saw that Gen was cleaning up shards of a broken vase.

"This vase was broken," Gen said.

"See, it wasn't a homicidal maniac bent on killing us. Aren't you glad you didn't call the cops now?"

"Ya."

"Let me help you clean that up."

Cassie bent over and started helping Gen get the glass off the floor, feeling relieved it was just a vase. Gen had begun making her paranoid. She noticed that her phone was playing the video again and glanced at the screen.

She saw Gen and herself kneeling on the floor. Her heart skipped a beat. She looked up and saw a dark figure standing across the room from them. She raised her phone off the floor, so the flashlight caught the dark figure.

"Fuck, Gen!"

"I'm getting the glass cleaned up."

"Gen! He's here!"

"Who?"

"The fucking internet psychopath!"

Gen looked up and saw a figure dressed in all black wearing a GoPro around his forehead illuminated by Cassie's cellphone flashlight. She couldn't make out any features. He had some form-fitting nylon mask over his head, and it looked like he had darkened the areas around his eyes. He had a black shirt with a collar that went up his neck, and she could see the sheen from black elbow pads. He wore black gloves on his hands. His pants were black with the same shine showing knee pads, and black combat boots completed the ensemble. He held a black-bladed knife with an olive handle in his right hand.

Gen let out a scream and found herself starting to hyperventilate.

"If this is one of your pranks Cass, it isn't funny!"

"No. It's real."

He started slowly advancing across the room. Gen was surprised she hadn't heard his combat boots making low clumps on the hardwood floor at his entrance. Had he watched her the entire time she cleaned up the vase? She felt her chest tightening, and her vision started going foggy. This was not the time to have an anxiety attack. She felt Cassie grabbing her arm and pulling her up. She stumbled forward, letting Cassie guide her. Her anxiety attack was so bad she felt like she might faint.

Gen felt hands on her other arm and felt herself being pulled in the other direction. This pull was more forceful, and the grip hurt her arm. She heard Cassie cry out.

"Gen!"

Cassie felt herself losing her grip on Gen as she tried to pull her to the front door. Cassie looked back and saw that the man had grabbed Gen. She saw his free hand moving around Gen's neck, then suddenly, he released her arm. Cassie saw her moment to get Gen away from the man and yanked on Gen, realizing what the man had done too late. She saw red lines forming on Gen's neck and blood starting to run down them. The man had wrapped a garrote around her neck, and she was helping him strangle Gen by pulling her away. Cassie let go of Gen's arm, but Gen just fell limp, her body being held up by the wire around her neck.

The man released the handles of the wire, and Cassie ran to the front door. She struggled with the chain over the door, finally freeing it. Without looking back, she opened the door and rushed out. Her feet hit the walkway and skidded out from underneath her. The melting snow of the day had frozen to an ice layer on the walkway, which caused her to slip. She fell back onto her ass, causing searing pain as it connected with the concrete and ice.

She heard the crunch of his boot on some crusted snow and tilted her head back. He was standing right outside the door. Cassie tried to lean forward and crawl away through the snow. The rigid outer layer of the snow broke, causing her hands to fall into the soft snow below. The coldness of the snow was causing her hands to ache. Cassie felt something on her head and then was pulled up partially to her knees by her hair. She looked up and saw the dark blade of his hunting knife and felt the sharp pain as the edge was pushed against her throat. She felt a weird sensation in her throat as the blade cut through the skin, then found herself falling forward into the snow when he released her hair.

She tried to cry out for help as she lay in the snow, feeling the frosty bite on her face, but no words came out. She heard the door to Gen's house close, and then she blacked out.

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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Pale, Pale, Heart | *Linda Lee Rice*

I had loved him with all my being, with a ferociousness that I could not begin to conceive. He was mine from the moment I saw him, strolling down the street, coat tails blowing in the wind. He looked at me, nodded, and I knew I was lost.

As I cast my eyelashes down demurely, (after all, I wasn't the slutty type,) he winked as he strode past. My heart melted as I knew he was the one I've been waiting for.

I followed him that day and for many days afterward, trying to catch his attention, my new love. He frequented bars and taverns, playing poker, and drinking heavily. THOSE types of women draped across his lap as I peeked in the windows.

I knew he was better than that, being seduced by the whores and prostitutes, it wasn't his fault. He just didn't know that I waited patiently for him to notice me again.

At last, I followed him to an alley as I wanted to speak to him about our passionate love affair. But wait! Who is that with him and what are they doing in the alley? The wench from the tavern is kissing him where I want to kiss him. He's not pushing her away but laughing that teasing laugh.

My knife is sharp as I slash the wench's throat, a crimson smile dripping blood. Wait, my love, don't look at me in such horror! DON'T PUSH ME AWAY!

Too late my knife rises and falls again, this time cutting out his deceitful heart. Stabbing it as many times as he has phantom stabbed mine. I lay it on the patch of wildflowers as the frost covers his pale, pale, heart...I turn away.

Once again, I stroll down the street looking for my new love. He was mine from the moment I saw him, strolling down the street, coat tails blowing in the wind. He looked at me, nodded, and I knew I was lost.

About the Author:

Linda Lee Rice has had published poems, stories, and articles under the name of Linda Lee Rice/Linda Lee Ruzicka. She has always enjoyed the way words can take the reader to another world, time, and place. Linda lives in Central Pa with her husband Bill. They have a cat named Sookie Sue and one named Kit Kat plus a big goofy dog named Chase.

Facebook: [Linda Lee Rice](#)



The doorway speaks. Julianne tries her damndest to ignore it, yet the sound is constantly nagging regardless. Ever since she moved into this house a few months ago, the seemingly ever-present white noise coming from behind the door has been a daily fixture of her experience.

Every so often, Julianne gives into her most morbid curiosity and opens the door, which immediately greets her with showers of black and white tidal waves of light. She knows the voice of consciousness within her mind, the one she has grown to trust implicitly over her many years of life, would certainly steer her in the opposite direction of this vertically-standing black pool, yet the call is...welcoming?

Of those handful of times when Julianne's curiosity crossed over the line of interest and into irresistible temptation, she walked through the doorway and eventually exited believing she had been gone for hours, yet in her understanding of space and time, the clock on the wall reveals she had only been absent for mere seconds. While inside, she claimed to have seen untold atrocities of suffering and indescribable evil that left her feeling quite sick and traumatized, for a while at least. Before long, the call from the doorway grew too strong to ignore and Julianne would once again oblige her compulsory desire to walk through it.

Today is one such day where she has been able to accomplish nothing besides pace through the house and attempt to distract from the noise in any way possible. Perhaps she would be better off by just...walking through the doorway again? This time very well may be different than the last half-dozen, possibly even pleasant?

Clearer heads prevail, and Julianne forces herself to walk out and sit in her front yard, where she nervously sips a cup of tea to settle the nerves.

"Good morning!" Jerry, the next-door neighbor, calls out.

"I believe it is afternoon now, but good morning nonetheless!" Julianne replies with masked irritation as Jerry saunters over into her yard.

"Sorry about that," Jerry replies, blushing. "How are you, Julie? You doing okay?"

"Oh sure, nothing too bad. Actually, would you happen to have a minute to come look at something inside? It won't take long." This may be the best opportunity she will get to convince herself she hasn't gone insane.

"I'd love to!" Jerry exclaims. "I mean, yes I would love to help if I can."

"Great, I sure hope you can. Follow me upstairs and have a look at this door. It creeps me out."

Jerry and Julianne walk inside and to the door in question, the door which has dominated her thoughts for most of her time living here. The vibration in the room is inescapable, although Jerry seems inexplicably unaware of such an energy change.

"This door here?" He walks up to it and jiggles the handle. "It's locked, Julie. Is that the problem, you need help opening it?"

"No!" Julianne shouts unexpectedly. "Sorry. No, that isn't the problem, I have the key over here. It's what's behind it that terrifies me. I don't know what to do anymore."

"What like...a ghost?" Jerry smirks slightly.

"You're going to tease me?"

"I'm not teasing you. I'm here, aren't I? Just hand me the key and I will take a look around, hopefully that will give you some peace of mind."

Julianne hesitates, but ultimately grabs the key from her pocket and holds it out hesitantly. She feels bad willingly putting someone else through this torturous experience, especially when that someone is as kind as Jerry.

"Julie, you have to let the key go," Jerry says, grabbing the other side of it and lightly tugging.

"Huh?" Julianne looks down at the key in both of their hands, although her knuckles are entirely white.

"You have a death grip on that key," Jerry laughs, "you need to let me have it so I can help you, okay? You don't look well."

Julianne laughs nervously, suddenly aware of the cold sweat enveloping her body. She relinquishes the key and stands still, awaiting whatever fate that may be for both of them in the room.

Jerry holds the key up to his face and turns it around a few times, inspecting it. "How odd, I'm surprised nobody has changed the lock after all this time. This looks like an old skeleton key, I wouldn't be surprised if it was a hundred years old." He looks over at Julianne and gives her a reassuring smile, then inserts the key into the door with a metallic click and pulls it open.

An intense sense of dread overcomes Julianne as the entire atmosphere of the room changes in a severe pressure shift. Breathing becomes markedly more difficult, the air is cold, thin, and musty. The screams of thousands of

years' worth of horrors shred through silence, while Julianne remains catatonic. She wishes to reach out to Jerry and prevent him from running headlong into such repugnance, until he steps his front foot inside it. A smile forces its way out of her face as she imagines Jerry walking into the darkness and losing his way back forever. She fantasizes about him facing endless suffering, the pain of every loss ever experienced all at once, and it makes her grin.

"Julie, Julie, wake up!" Jerry is shaking her awake while she lays on the...floor? How did she get on the floor?

"I'm awake! I'm fine, really. What happened?"

"I was in the closet and talking to you, then I heard you hit the floor," Jerry answers with concern.

"Closet? You didn't see anything inside that door? Nothing weird?" Julianne sits up in a hurry and nearly passes out again.

"Take it easy, you're really pale. No, there's nothing in there, just an empty closet. Why, what do you see?" Jerry stares at Julianne, concerned.

"It's hard to explain, but maybe I'm not actually seeing anything in there either? I don't know anymore," she says, dropping her head down in her hands.

"Are you sure you are alright, Julie? Maybe you shouldn't sleep in here for a few days, the energy or something could just be bad for you. I wish I could have been more helpful, but I just don't see anything out of the ordinary. I'm sorry."

Julianne nods desperately, accepting defeat. Little does Jerry know, the ubiquitous pull from beyond this door does not end by simply walking through another. Nowhere in this house is safe.

"I locked it back up, the key will be here on your nightstand. Take care, Julie. You have my number, please call if you need anything at all, okay?" Jerry walks by and heads downstairs as Julianne remains on her knees, feeling utterly crushed under the weight of her own existence.

It took a fair amount of effort, but Julianne was finally able to force herself to sleep after hours of drifting back and forth. She tossed and turned, drowning inside the creations of her unconscious mind without being able to provide even a hint of a barricade to these intrusive thoughts.

Discordant rumblings speak to her from a faraway place, sounding as if the voice was whispering directly into her ear. Julianne bolts upright in bed with her heart pounding out of her chest and sweating profusely again. The door, which she and Jerry surely locked earlier that day, is now ever so slightly ajar. Soft and inviting blue light peers into her bedroom, that must be why she woke up! Of course, that light is too bright to sleep in the same vicinity while it is illuminating the room like that, so she gets up to shut the door and goes back to bed. Satisfied that the discomfort nagging her all night has been neutralized by shutting the door again, she falls to sleep quickly.

"Julie. You have to wake up, Julie. Look at me."

After a brief fifteen minutes of peaceful sleep, Julianne hears someone in the room coercing her back to consciousness. Upon realizing she lives alone and that nobody should be in her bedroom at this hour, she jumps awake to find a shadow-laden figure standing at the foot of her bed, obscured by the blinding light from behind it, although this creature looks familiar.

"Jerry? What the hell are you doing in my room in the middle of the night? Did you open the door?" The door behind Jerry is now fully open, providing the light that hides his face still.

"I did. I just thought maybe you would feel better if we walked through that doorway, you know...together. Let me help you." Jerry offers his hand to Julianne, assisting her to sit up in bed.

"I don't understand, Jerry. Why are you HERE, though? How did you get in my house?" Julianne stammers while getting out of bed entirely.

"The front door was open, you must not have locked it after I left earlier," Jerry explains.

"The front door was open? Why did you even walk over here and try it?"

"Don't get upset, now. I'm here to make you feel better." Jerry reaches his hand out again in a show of support.

"You're lucky I'm not more upset, Jerry! Although...I don't know, I feel less and less angry by the second. I'm so exhausted, I almost can't even remember why I was angry in the first place." Julianne sits back down to catch herself.

"Easy there. Don't worry, like I said, I'm here to help. By the time I leave, there won't be a single thing wrong with you," Jerry says with a smile, leaning forward far enough to finally reveal his face. "Take my hand and let's have a look at this doorway."

"I'm so scared of it. I don't want to look, Jerry, I just want to shut it and go to sleep. I haven't slept well in months, ever since I moved in."

"That's why I'm here. I walked through that door and came out just fine! All we have to do is face it together and you won't ever fear it again. Would I lie to you?" Jerry smiles again.

“Well, I guess not. That would definitely be out of character for you,” Julianne says, grabbing Jerry’s hand and following his lead toward the wide-open door. “I have to tell you though, I have been through multiple times before, and each time only gets worse. The things I’ve seen, unspeakable things.”

“You’ve never been through with someone, right? There’s nothing to worry about, Julie. I also saw something in there earlier that should explain everything.” Jerry begins walking to the door, slightly dragging Julianne to encourage her forward.

As she approaches, the paralysis of fear forces her to pull back against Jerry’s hand, stop dead in her tracks and shake from head to toe. “I can’t...the screaming, so much pain...”

Jerry continues to smile at her and steps one foot through the doorway, tugging on her hand to encourage her through. Julianne forces one leg to move forward, then the other before finally realizing she has stepped through the threshold once again. This time, though, the surrounding area is dark and desolate, only lit by the blue light from this side of the door. Jerry’s smile fades as he points to a spot on the floor behind Julianne.

“What?” She asks as Jerry shakes his arm to accent whatever point he is trying to make. Julianne turns around to find two bodies lying on the floor, one female and the other male. The female is decomposed, appearing to have been dead for at least a few months. How could this have been in her closet all this time?! The male is freshly deceased.

All the terror Julianne has been dreading for so long floods her senses as she realizes the bodies are hers and his. She turns in search of immediate answers just in time to witness the living Jerry dissolve to ash and crumble into a pile on the ground.

Julianne runs for the exit, but trips over her own dead foot on the floor and falls flat on her face. Looking up in desperation, the radiant blue light begins to fade as the door slowly creeps and then slams shut, echoing through this vacuous chamber. Isolated in a room of infinite darkness, lying next to her own rapidly aging cadaver, Julianne finally breaks down and weeps. She weeps out of fear, she weeps out of months-long frustration, and she weeps for Jerry, whose death she directly caused.

After an indeterminate amount of time, impossible to tell in this environment, Julianne rises to her feet and brushes her front side off. Straight ahead from her position, which her body was pointing toward when she fell, is where the doorway previously opened. Seeing no other options on the table, she marches back that direction in hopes of running into a door in the pitch black.

Not knowing how far she has travelled or for how long, Julianne is certain the journey this time around has been much shorter than the last. Perhaps the door is only visible when someone opens it from the bedroom the way she did? That could take months or years even, which would be an indeterminate amount of time if the two sides don’t run parallel.

And so, with no way to return from where she came and nothing else to do, Julianne decides to sit down and think. She turns back to face where her dead body remains, and sees a microscopic light in the distance, this time appearing red.

“Well, it may not be the same doorway back to my bedroom, but it beats sitting around and waiting for something to happen,” Julianne speaks to herself contemplatively. She begins to walk the path laid out for her toward the next doorway, now suddenly walking downhill at a steep decline, and hoping for the best.

About the Author:

Andrew Adams has been a horror fanatic since becoming fascinated with the genre through film, and he recently graduated from writer to organized author. Adams is a metal enthusiast, film fanatic, and lover of the occasional bourbon. He has several books written and waiting to slither out into the world, whenever the void should call for them.

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His name is Sherman. Author, tea lover, serial killer.

Constructing Entropy



Andrew Adams

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

The itch was back.

She sighed and shut off the shower, grimacing when she stepped over the lip of the tub only to feel another sharp, burning scratch. She wrapped her towel around herself, trying not to give into the feral urge to dig her fingernails inside, tearing at the flesh until nothing was left but numb relief.

The persistent irritation was absolute. It worked its way deep inside the most sensitive of places. It was not the fiery, hot pain of infection or inflammation but a dry prickling, like shards of fiberglass. It was the sort of irritation that suggested something foreign had intruded.

The culprit was probably a wayward hair, washed down her back in the shower and finding its way between her legs before burrowing inside.

It demanded attention, no matter how much she grit her teeth and denied it the satisfaction of acknowledgment.

"For fucks sake."

She gave up. Mind over matter was for diet trends or jogging, not an itchy crotch.

She draped her damp towel over her shoulders and began to carefully feel around.

As she suspected, her searching fingers wrapped around tangled strands of loose hair. With a sigh of relief, she pulled.

The hair resisted, budging only slightly. And behind it, something deeply rooted slid forward a few centimeters.

She froze.

She took a deep breath and pulled again, this time with hesitation.

With each tug, the itch increased, scraping along fragment by excruciating fragment. She was pulling handfuls of loose, foreign hair and each one brought with it the sensation of being lacerated with glass. The severity of the pain outweighed the absurdity and dread of the situation she had found herself in. Something buried inside her belly was now unraveling like a coiled snake, and she could feel it steadily slithering forward with each yank on the wads of dark, matted hair she had now wrapped around her palm to maintain a grip.

As the last few mucus-clotted strands of hair tumbled out like spider legs, the itching stopped. Something smooth and slick trailed behind, gripping the hairs by the roots.

Beads of warm fluid trickled down her legs. Thick gelatinous globs, the color and texture of petroleum jelly, splattered onto the tile floor.

She kept pulling.

It was a compulsion. No more resistible than peeling off a scab or yanking out a loose tooth. She had to do it, no matter the consequences.

A blank face stared up at her from between her legs, glistening with frothy slime. It was limp and boneless, as hollow and flat as a rubber Halloween mask.

There was no turning back now, no matter how much this phenomenon horrified and disgusted her.

Its shoulders followed with little resistance, then the arms, the torso, and finally, its legs and feet.

It fell to the bathroom floor with a soggy-sounding flop, like wet clothes. It lay there in a coiled heap, an empty flesh suit that permeated a hot, musky smell. She was reminded of a holiday inflatable or a stuffed animal that had been vacuum sealed into a bag for easy shipping.

Her legs were trembling, and her insides felt the way her gums did after a trip to the dentist—scraped and tender. Her eyes and nose were streaming, and her skin was moist with cold sweat and steam from her shower.

They stared at each other, red, watering eyes looking down at hollow sockets.

A sob bubbled out from between her lips.

"Oh... god. It's me."

Shaking, she crumpled to her knees. Two naked versions of the same person sat there on the cold blue tile. One fully formed, upright, and solid—the other an empty hide devoid of bones and meat.

The empty skin lay there without soul or basic thought.

And then the limp fingers twitched.

About the Author:

Inspired by the works of Jan Svankmajer and Jim Henson, L. Pine is partial to the perfect blend of horror and humor and has a penchant for the peculiar side of media. They focus on painting and creative writing in a valiant effort to carve out a living that will justify their Bachelor of Fine Arts degree.

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The ting of the bell above the door reverberated through Tessa; as a new set of travelers filtered through the door of the Chester Inn. The charm of that bell had solidified her attraction to this quaint place. So warm, as everything was at first.

She signed into the front computer and took their names. The Quigley's. They seemed a sweet couple. A toddler stood between them; his arms barely long enough to reach his mother's hand.

"You're all set." Tessa said, smiling across the counter, "Room 15, two flights up and to the left. Adam will escort you."

"This is such a lovely place. I love the Tudor style." Mrs. Quigley commented. "It is our first family trip. Your Inn came highly recommended."

Adam swung around the counter and gave Tessa a quick peck on the cheek.

"So glad we got a good rating," Adam said. "Tessa is the lady of the manor, so to speak."

Mrs. Quigley smiled and turned to her Mister, "Look dear, these two run this place together. Could there be anything cozier?"

"It's been in my family for over 100 years." Adam tossed over his shoulder, hoisting up their bags. "Follow me."

Tessa watched her husband in his proud glory escort the adorable family to their room.

"Cozy." She whispered under her breath and skulked out from behind the front desk.

Coming to stand beside one of the wide windows near the front door, she sighed. It was indeed a lovely place. What a shame, it was tainted by old ghosts.

Tucking a piece of her long dark hair behind her ear, she imagined what her life would have been like had she gone back to London, rather than taking a room that one rainy night at the historic Chester Inn.

Her friend Clarice had recommended their circle of hens venture out to the country for one last weekend before her wedding. Clarice had found the perfect man and wanted to share her happiness with anyone that would listen.

She had fallen in love with the Inn the night Adam Chester escorted her up to her room. Stoic portraits lined the hallway of all the Chesters that had come before him. One portrait, in particular, caught her attention.

"I love to work with oils. Who is that?" She'd asked, looking back at her, a likeness that could pass for herself.

"That was my wife, Maggie," He'd responded. "Wasn't she beautiful?"

"If I say yes, does it make me a narcissist?" Tess chuckled.

"No." He smiled, "Not at all."

He'd bought her a drink later that night, Clarice having invited him along to the local bar with the gang. Over that drink, he'd explained to her how Maggie had wandered one night onto the moor and had gotten all sorts of turned around. Not found until the next morning, she'd succumbed to hypothermia.

The second Mrs. Chester hoped she wouldn't be done in so easily. There had been talk about the two of them. Adam and Maggie used to fight incessantly in front of the guests. On that particular night, she stormed out and never returned. She understood that part, having left the London Royal Academy of Art for a quiet life in the country. Disappearing from one's old life did have advantages.

Clarice found their sudden, keen love affair creepy. What was the difference? Maggie was gone. Adam was a sad, lonely widower and she filled his life again with love and laughter.

That was almost a year ago. The first six months were heaven. The last were not so much. There was an unspoken distance between them. Adam had become odd, staring at the portrait of Maggie for several minutes at a time. Many nights Tessa could hear him leaving their room on the sneak. Having followed him one night, she'd found him downstairs in the lower corridor. The door to a tiny room locked solidly behind him. Just what was he hiding down there?

Tonight, she vowed to make her way in.

The second wave of help had arrived, relieving Tessa of her counter duty.

"This place is booked solid for the next three months," Anne said, clicking away at the keyboard.

"Adam never lets me look at the books." Tessa sighed.

"Oh, before I forget," Anne said, bending her lithe figure to retrieve a cardboard box. "This came for Adam. Do you want me to put it downstairs in his study?"

"His study?" Tessa asked.

Anne shrugged. "I generally just put them by the door. Would you care to take it instead?"

Distracted by the bell, she turned from the conversation. Startled, she recoiled a bit.

"Hello, Tessa," the visitor said, his mouth set into a grim line. Tall and blonde, his American accent seemed a bit jarring.

"Roy." She half whispered, gripping the counter. "Yes, Anne, would you take the package? I'll handle this one. He's an old friend."

She ducked out of the way, perhaps sensing the tension between them.

"An old friend?" He smiled and clicked his tongue. "Tessa, I think we can do better than that."

"It's Mrs. Chester." She said, tapping her fingers on the counter. "I wouldn't think an old place like this would be up your aisle."

"Maybe I've been shopping in the wrong aisle?" He smirked. "There's a pub just down the road. Join me for a drink."

"I can't leave the desk. We are quite busy."

"That perky brunette that just hopped off an errand will do. Once she returns, we will go. Don't invite Mr. Chester, either. I want to talk with you. Alone."

"Whatever you have to say to me Roy, you can say here."

"That was some nasty business of you Tessa. You took off on me with no regard at all. Not even a fancy handwritten letter for which the British are so famous. Just a step and fetch the girl to gather your things."

"Really Roy, you didn't think I was going to stay with you after school. We had nothing in common besides sex."

"How acute of you, Tessa. Didn't I help pay your way through most of your last semester? Which by way, you never finished. You were five credits shy of an MFA. Now you're here, standing behind a computer ringing in guests."

"Adam treats me with respect. He doesn't suffocate me."

"Doesn't he?" Roy asked, shaking his head. "Just look at this place, would you? It is like a museum. We used to make fun of people like this. Now you have become one."

"Please leave." Tessa hissed. "You aren't welcome here."

"Great," Roy said, holding up his hands. "I'll go. There are about ten places just like this one within a five-mile radius. This one looks the most stuck up though. Congrats."

As he slammed the door behind him, the bell shook nearly off its hook.

She slept fitfully that night, dreaming of Roy's sudden arrival and of Maggie's portrait. She woke with a start. Adam was not beside her. Downstairs, she thought. She must make her way down to that little 'study', as he called it.

There was no creeping down there. She quickly made her way. Noticing a light under the door, she heard him almost humming or perhaps chanting something. In an attempt to make out his words, she crept closer to the door.

"Who's there?" He bellowed as the boards beneath her feet groaned, giving her away.

"It's Tessa." She stammered. "I was looking for you. Why don't you come back to bed?"

The door slowly opened as she stood there, almost as if she were waiting for an invitation. The scent of the incense wafting out lulled her. She gasped suddenly, as he jerked her by the arm into a dimly lit room filled with candles. There were numerous symbols painted on the walls. Through the shadows of the room, she guessed the outline of a small altar that sat at the front of the room.

"You like?" Adam asked, shoving her several feet in front of him. "I know you have been curious. This is where I enjoy my hobbies. Spell casting, rune reading, and shortly necromancy. Well, at least a form of it."

The corners of his mouth formed a vicious smile, as he moved towards her; closing the gap between her and the altar. How cruel his face had become. It seemed that of a stranger.

"My Maggie was not fond of my hobbies. She said I was letting them consume me. I only wanted her to accept my interests, Tessa. It is so important for your spouse to be understanding. You can only hide the innate parts of yourself for long. I know you've been curious as to what I have been doing down here. The snooping and pestering of staff is truly beneath you."

"You've gone mad!" Tessa yelled, attempting to get around him. "Let me out of here. I don't like the room!"

"Soon." He whispered, taking her by the shoulders.

"I love the way the sunlight plays against your hair," Adam said, kissing her on the temple. "For you, there rings a bell in my heart. Do you remember me telling you that?"

He stood behind her at the vanity as she brushed her silken strands. Their reflection in the mirror was that of a loving couple, sharing an early morning together.

Placing down the brush, she extended her arm, her gaze coming to rest on her ring finger.

"Your mother's engagement ring. I wasn't special enough to fetch it. Yet... This girl is wearing it."

"This girl's name is Tessa." He said, peering over her shoulder. "It will serve you well to remember it."

"I liked Maggie better." She sighed. "Look at these nails, would you? So tacky."

"She was an art student." He smiled, caressing the back of her neck. "I thought you'd be pleased."

"That explains the nail varnish," Maggie said, cocking back her head.

"Last night was amazing." He cooed before pressing a gentle kiss against her lips.

She rose almost too quickly, escaping his proximity.

"Careful there, darling." He said, pushing her back down. "One might think you lack appreciation for your husband, as I've yet to hear a thank you."

"Thank you." She hissed, staring at herself in the mirror.

"May I remind you, my dear, how long I waited to choose the right one? Tessa's reflection bears a striking likeness to your own."

"Perhaps we shared other things in common?"

"Such as?" He asked, cupping her shoulders and raising an eyebrow.

"Such as....the misery of being married to you." She uttered, rotating in the chair to face him squarely; relishing at his ashen appearance at her admission.

"I didn't get lost on those moors, Adam. I chose to hide from you. I would rather have succumbed to the elements than spend one more night in your bed. Poor Tessa on the other hand has had to endure many a night in your bed. This body needs a rest, wouldn't you say?"

"You wouldn't have done that." He snarled.

"Wouldn't I? I wanted to die Adam. Yet, you couldn't even give me that. Your suffocating, narcissistic ways made you so blind that you ruined this poor girl just to bring me back. You can put me in anybody and I will still feel the same. I hate you!"

He covered his ears and shook his head. "No! No! You don't mean that."

Rising, she tossed the chair aside. "This is my Inn Adam. I've earned my place. That being said, get out of my room!"

"It isn't true. You love me!"

"That's your ego talking again. I persuade you to seek some self-reflection. You tried to convince me that all my distrust of you was unfounded. Gas lighting, I believe is the term my therapist used."

"I gave you back your life." He cried. "I love you!"

"You love yourself." She chuckled, walking towards her closet. "I'm glad you kept my things. It makes me sick that you let her wear my favorite bow blouse."

She took to foot and made towards town. The crisp autumn air caught her hair as she took a deep breath. A manicure would give her time to think. She needed to deal with Adam. Even in death, she couldn't escape him.

A black Triumph TR7 pulled up to a screech beside her.

"Tessa!" An attractive blonde-haired woman with an American accent smiled up at her from the driver's seat. "Going into town?"

She had to think fast, this might be her golden ticket.

Leaning down into the seat, she purred. "Who's asking?"

"Don't be cute. You used to love tooling around with old Roy on an autumn day."

"Well, Roy, I won't say no to a ride into town. Let's do some shopping and a late lunch"

"You should treat." He said as she slid into the seat next to him. "You've been a total brat."

"Have I now?" She asked as he put the car into gear so fast that the bow on her blouse blew back and smacked her in the face.

Roy didn't take much convincing. Some shopping and a few drinks and she'd found her way to his apartment in no time. How lucky was Tess? Roy was worthy of attention.

Wearing his shirt, she poured them both a drink.

"Make mine a double." He said from the bed. "I've worked up a thirst."

Clinking the ice into the glasses, she glanced up at him.

"We need to do this more often." Roy smiled. "Maybe we should meet again tomorrow?"

"Or the day after and the day after as well?" She smiled. "I want to leave him, Roy. Are you prepared to help me make that happen?"

Three weeks into their affair, she and Roy finalized their scheme. She would venture out once again onto the moors. Adam would stupidly follow her, repeating the exact motions as before. This time, however, she would return.

The announcement in the paper shocked all their friends. He had died just like his beloved Maggie. It was too precious. The afternoon of the wake, she'd closed the Inn so that just she and Roy could stand together at her favorite window. She admired Roy's style and his love of art and poetry; all of the things that Adam found so banal.

"We did it." She said with a smile.

The door of the Inn opened with a creak. No other sound permeated the air. The hook above was empty.

Confusion filled her face, as his hands moved to her shoulders, one of them at her throat, the other holding what looked like No... it couldn't be. How had he done it?

"For you Maggie; there rings a bell in my heart."

"Adam!" She gasped as he dropped the vessel to the ground with a clink and slowly extinguished the life from her.

About the Author

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

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The Revelation | Gregory L. Steighner

"You can't leave me, Sam. I need you here." Standing in front of her desk, John pleaded. His bright red tie clashed with a tweed sports jacket. At least she had convinced him to stop wearing bow ties.

"It's not personal," Samantha, answered. Despite his horrible fashion sense, she would miss working with him "I might convince the commissioners to increase your salary."

"It's not just about the money. Allegheny County has room for advancement. I feel trapped here."

"Oh, please." He scoffed, almost rolling his eyes at her. "You want the city life. Escape from this rural backwater."

She sighed, "Yeah, that's part of it. I'll also be closer to my family."

"You can't blame yourself for your brother Brian's suicide."

"It's hard when you can see the problems in other families, but are blind to your own. I'm trying to reconnect with my own."

"I can't argue with that," He nodded acknowledging his defeat, but with a flip of his wrist landed a folder on the center of the desk. "I have a parting case for you."

Should she challenge his last move? Her fingers tapped the red folder. "I already shifted my cases to Krystal."

John pulled up a chair and sat down with his arms and legs crossed signaling that it was a difficult case. "It's the Saltis kids."

Samantha leaned forward, flipping open the folder; she began slowly, "Okay... Did Krystal suspect something wrong during the welfare check?"

"She described the kids' behavior as jittery and unfocused. They seemed distant during the interview. They didn't like answering questions."

She held up a newspaper clipping, "Having your parents dying horribly in a car accident would do that. They have no immediate family to claim guardianship. That means foster care or the youth home. You want me to do a follow-up?"

"You have the knack for finding things out. If there is a problem with the kids, we need to know before Kingston makes a ruling. I don't want to deal with him after you leave."

The siblings were ordinary teens. Unfortunately, in her experiences ordinary often covered up terrible things. The chair moaned as she leaned back thinking about the case. The younger sibling, Julija, sported a haunted face in every file picture. That in itself wasn't unusual for teen girls, but one picture stood out to Samantha. The girl's emerald eyes held an eerie gaze.

"Okay, I'll do it," she said. "I'm here until the end of the year anyway."

John stood up, "Thank you, I know you will sort this out."

"Yeah, my knack for discovering the worst in people," Samantha waved him out of the office.

Before he left the office, John said, "You made a difference here, Sam. These kids are lucky to have you."

"I know." She scrutinized the second set of files involving the older sibling, David. His series of photos impressed a happy and active teenager, until the last, most recent one. That had prompted her to take the case. The way he presented himself broadcasted the same doubt in his eyes as his sister.

Located in the Laurel Highlands, Munro County retained its rustic identity. A small county sandwiched between larger neighbors, it felt like a setting of an old Hammer film. Especially in mid-November, when barren trees and gray skies dominated the landscape. Except after a snowfall, Samantha found driving the curvy roads relaxing. The Saltis family homestead was located on the far-end of the county, near the borders of Fayette and Somerset counties. The village of Stoneground was a loose association of houses, each one squirreled into its forested sanctuary. She paused at the bottom of the long gravel driveway. Slowly her SUV conquered the drive, approaching the elderly Victorian that stood like a tower in the wilderness.

After parking, she collected her notes, phone, and bag. A quick touchup of eyeliner around the eyes, she loved how the coloring blended with her ebony skin. The crisp air greeted her. A flock of crows cried out as she climbed the stairs to step on the veranda.

She noticed scratches along the front door and covered windows. Before she could knock, the door opened revealing the waifish Julija.

"Hello Miss Mayweather, welcome to our home," The teen addressed Samantha almost too sweetly. "Please come in."

"Thank you," Samantha noted the girl's outfit, an oversized dark green sweater paired with a short plaid skirt and over-the-knee leggings.

"David, our guest is here," Julija said, leading Samantha into a parlor. Standing beside the fireplace, David looked at them with a disinterested smile.

"Hello, David," She noted his attire, a black high-collared sweater, and pants covered by a semi-formal jacket. Such dressiness was indicative that they were putting on a show. Nevertheless, their manner of dress was constant in the pictures on file.

Julija joined him as he spoke, "To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit?"

The room had the feel of an antique shop, well-kept with only the large flat-screen television and sound system being out of place. "We're required to do these checks during the determination process."

"They're going to take us away from home. We'll be separated," Julija touched her brother's arm. His eyes narrowed into a glare.

"I believe we're doing quite fine, Ms. Mayweather." The anger in his voice thundered across the room.

Unfortunately, the chances of finding a family capable of taking the pair were highly unlikely. Perhaps in a larger, more affluent county that could be possible. "We're doing our best to help you. These welfare checks are for your benefit."

As David stepped away from the fireplace, his hand bumped Julija's arm causing it to flinch. "I turn eighteen next February; I should be allowed custody of my sister."

"That's for the court to decide, David. Until then, we have to deal with the situation at hand. I'm going to inspect the house. Afterward, we'll go over the particulars."

The siblings exchanged nervous gazes followed by a simple head nod as David spoke, "Of course. We'll show you around."

Samantha found herself jealous of the homestead, its modern fixtures blended into the late nineteenth décor. The tour ended in the library, it displayed the unique Saltis flair.

Julija broke away towards one of the shelves to skim a row of books with worn covers with her hand, "Mom and Dad made us read these books. History, art, math, the sciences, and they tested us on all of them until they were satisfied."

"Yes, your guidance counselor spoke highly of your scholastic achievements." Samantha looked over the books on the shelves nearest to her, "I see that they didn't forget literature."

"It's ingrained in our family. Dad's family emigrated from Lithuania." David said proudly, showing off a herald on the wall. A shield decorated with three ravens under the sun and moon.

"Technically, David and I are now the Count and Countess of a ruined castle in Lithuania." Julija chirped in, prideful, "The Countess Julija Aisling and her brother Count Dáibhí Jurgis Saltis.

David looked annoyed, "Our parents insisted on giving us names from Ireland or Lithuania. Of course, I got the unpronounceable ones, so I just go by David George."

Curious, she asked, "Are you from Irish nobility as well?"

"Nope, just humble peasants." One of them answered, but Samantha wasn't sure which one as her attention turned to several books scattered on top of a rust-colored desk. The largest was open to pages inscribed with strange symbols and letters.

Picking up one leather-bound book titled, Signs and Symbols of Hermetic Sorcery by the Duc de Richleau, Samantha realized these weren't the kind of books found in a common bookstore. She commented, "Interesting reading."

David approached the desk, gently returning the book. "Our Dad was a historian; he collected old books and manuscripts."

A sudden commotion at the window drew the siblings' attention. Julija darted towards it and looked out at a barren tree packed with ravens and crows. Their cries in tandem shook the windowpane. She whispered, "He is coming back."

Before Samantha could ask, David crossed the room, "You need to leave. Now."

The urgency in his voice filled the space. Their demeanor turned grim as they stared at the birds. For a moment, Samantha felt that they understood the animals. Samantha marched over to the siblings determined to know. Samantha touched Julija's arm causing her to flinch.

She attempted to scurry off, but Samantha blocked her escape. "Pull up your sleeve."

The teen gave a defiant stare, but David spoke, "It's okay."

She pulled up the sleeve, slowly revealing a dull red scar that ran the length of the arm.

"My God, what did you do to her?"

"David did nothing." Julija protested, shoving the sleeve down. "It was a Nosferatu, Vukodlak, a vampire that scarred me."

The ravens' cries drowned out Samantha's laughter. "Okay... I'm taking you both into immediate protective care. First, we're going to go to the hospital to get that looked at."

"It will heal by morning," Julija said, walking with David to a bookcase.

David pushed to the side, sliding the case open to reveal a collection of weapons. "That is if we survive the night."

A loud bang came from downstairs, followed by a chalkboard shrill. Samantha winced at the sound. "Is that a bear?"

"We told you what that is."

Samantha watched the siblings sort through the collection of swords, daggers, and firearms. Julija picked up a large crossbow and skillfully armed it with a bolt. "Fresh pinewoods bolt to the heart will immobilize it."

The scratching began to climb, slowly itching upward. "No., no, no... Vampires don't exist."

"They do, as do we," David said, stripping off his clothes.

Overwhelmed, Samantha barely had time to protest before he was completely naked and began to spasm. His body twisted into another shape, black feathers erupted from the skin; arms turned to wings, and feet into talons. She collapsed to the floor, trembling at the sight of this hybrid. David's features were recognizable among those of a raven. His coal-darkened eyes stared down at her.

"We're Ciardhubh, people able to transform into ravens." Julija helped Samantha to stand. "It is part of our mother's heritage."

"Like werewolves?" Samantha managed to stutter out.

The girl's face soured, "No. We're more intelligent, stealthier, and elegant."

A ruckus erupted from the trees as the birds scattered. A slow pounding along the wall drew closer to the window. A black shadow of a clawed hand inched across the glass. The shadow rapped the plane repeatedly, summoning its long bony source.

David moved between them, his clawed feet tapping against the hardwood floor.

"It wants me," Julija whispered.

"Why?"

The girl sighed while aiming the crossbow, "My young blood. There is power in our blood. I haven't gone through the first change. It killed Mom and Dad as we tried to escape. It almost got me last time."

The clawed hand hesitated, disappearing upward in silence. Samantha felt cold sweat dripping down her face as her heart beat painfully against her chest. She remembered watching horror stories with her family, enduring her brothers teasing long into the night as they reenacted scenes. Listening to Grandpa Ed tell stories about demons and monsters across the world. Never once was she afraid, until now.

It came from above the window, showing its gruesome chalky elongated head in front of the window. Black veins pulsed as gleaming fiery eyes hidden in hollowed sockets scorched at the prey. Its warped elvish ears snaked along the skull that ended at the jaw with protruding rows of spiked teeth that would terrify sharks.

The instant it broke through the window, Samantha sunk into chaos. Julija fired the crossbow, hitting the vampire in the shoulder. Hurt, it lunged at the girl. David attacked clawing into the chest but it wore a heavy overcoat that protected it. The vampire backed away slightly, which brought Samantha into its view. It sneered at her as a hand swiped at her. Samantha slammed into the floor, fading into a dark haze.

A throbbing pain brought Samantha back. She slowly rose from the floor into the shadows. Next to her was David, his limp body returned to its human form. Julija and the creature weren't in the room. Cautiously, she crawled over to the boy. His torso bled from gashes, but he still breathed. He managed to look at her.

"It took her to consume her. You have to stop it... It'll come for us next."

Gently Samantha rested his head down. A stretched-out scream echoed from below. She took in a deep breath, focusing first on the terror nearby and then on the weapons cache. Ignoring the pain, she managed to reach the cabinet. Amongst the weapons, she found a Bowie knife similar to her brother Brian's favorite collectible. A twin to the one he used. It felt right in her hands, so she left to follow the sounds.

Samantha crept down the stairs, guided by a faint glow from the parlor. Sneaking a peak around the archway, she saw Julija hanging by her feet as the vampire clawed symbols on her milky skin oozing blood. Its hyena chuckles exaggerated the gruesome ordeal that sickened her, but it focused on the girl. Its hands stroked her skin, scooping up blood for it to drink.

She exploited its distraction, charging the beast with a knife at the ready. She closed in for the strike when it spun to seize her neck. Cold fingers pierced her flesh allowing it to taste her blood. Samantha's arms went limp, yet her hand remained strong. It stared directly into her eyes, a sense of contempt flowed around her as its grip tightened.

Samantha almost gave in but remembered that she never gave up on any of her charges. With a sudden burst of resolve, she plunged the knife upward going under the ribcage. Its shriek ended as the blade cut through to the heart. Together they collapsed to the floor. Panting for air, Samantha caressed the girl's cheek. Then she kicked the vampire's face, it didn't flinch.

"I'm going to help you out of this terror." Samantha stood up to free Julija.

Samantha finished the wall tree by crowning it with a silver star. Julija gave her as a token of their new relationship. John came into her office all smiles, "Kingston has approved your fostering the kids. Congratulations."

She limped back to the chair. It groaned mournfully, "I'm glad."

"I'm happy you decided to stay. There is still a lot of work to do here."

"You're right about that," Samantha said, thinking about what the kids told her about the other creatures lurking in the area. David explained she was part of their world now. A place of dangerous shadows inhabited by beings of folklore roam, some good, others malevolent. She accepted this new reality of her job becoming a mission

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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The lads dig his grave. The grave for the Hero of our time, lost to the annals of malpractice, a victim of the common cancer. The procession was long, alight with the passionate wails and supplications of hundreds of mourners beneath the oranges and reds of changing leaves. The Rabbis whirled so many jokes you'd think they were speaking in tongues. Half a day, it takes. The sallow corpse paraded in full regalia one last time, as tribute.

As the autumnal sun sets the citizens nestle into hearty homes, distracted by succulent food and potent drink honouring the last wake. Our Hero is finally laid to rest within the crest of Harbinger's Hallow. Isolated, save the rambunctious fools charged with digging this grave as penance for adolescent misdemeanors.

Now these lads are young, impetuous. Children guilty of little more than amateur curses and poorly painted murals of their elders. But, in a land without a Hero, everyone must pay the price for safety and peace. Digging beneath a gnarled willow tree, try as they might, they'll never know if anyone is watching them work through the cool darkness. Someone is.

They joke about how the Hero is stiffer now than ever, and one day he'll be nothing more than a sad boner. These boys milled aimlessly during the procession. Driven now by the promise of a sweet feast, they dug quick and neat. Around the hole they secure the crane, as they were shown, and firmly reminded of, a dozen times. Strapping the coffin in, the unlucky lad who lost the tournament of noughts and crosses began cranking. Jerkily the coffin sank, proceeded only by the clanking of a poorly oiled winch.

As the Hero was nearing the bottom, one of the older lads spat in the grave, uttering a curse of bile. The others thought twice before spitting their own bile upon the Hero's case. Even the lad working winch, though he had to contort his arms in order to keep hold on the crane.

None of them ever worshipped the *prick*.

They laughed heartily as they buried him, cider-fuelled spit crossing after nearly every shovelful of dry earth 'cause it'll help the grass grow. The moon rose as they smoothed over the plot, casting an eerie glow upon the Hallow. In a final act of defiance, they each punch the soil and crush the decorative gourds left to guard the burial site. Work done, they leave the grave covered in a series of knuckled imprints in place of a headstone, spattered gourd guts sinking into the soil. With a collective nod they turn and retreat, homeward.

But these lads are young; they don't know better; tales spread by mothers and wet nurses ignored. Tales of eternal sentinels who watch over the hearths of good folk. Respectful folk who want nothing more than a safe home and prosperity. In those tales is the disregarded wisdom that these lads are ignorant of.

They don't know that being a Hero comes with power.

Don't know that the ignorance of youth won't save them from fate's sickle, ever harvesting bounties beyond grain.

Don't know that under the moon, as they descended the hill, there came a thump.

Thump.

Thump.

About the Author:

A gamer, lover of autumn, its dark histories, and horror media, Aaron Grierson's work often blends folk elements into society's love of technology. He is a First Reader for Flash Fiction Online and former Senior Articles Editor at The Missing Slate. Always hungry for more literature, references and puns inevitably sneak into his musings. Previous publications appear in The Missing Slate, Marisa's Recurring Nightmares, and are forthcoming in Polar Borealis and Polar Starlight.

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The nameless thing writhed with malignant intent as its many appendages caressed my shivering and distressed body. Its numerous eyes glistened in the low lighting of my bedroom as its many teeth gnashed in its many mouths, each one as gaping and cavernous as the abyss. The stench of necrosis permeated the air bringing forth a gagging sensation like no other, rancid like week old flesh left out in the sun.

My thoughts began to swirl. *What the hell is this abomination? How did it get in here? What does it plan to do?* My rapid mental pacing did not garner an answer, nor did I have the ability to speak. Each second felt like an hour as I counted the saliva drips oozing from its mouths, and all I could do was gasp as its tentacles licked at my torso like a kitten lapping up fresh milk.

Just as I thought it couldn't get worse, the thing started to pulsate. The sound of its heartbeat quickened in pace, slowly but steadily rising as it eventually climaxed reminding me of a cross between tribal drums and machine gun fire, each beat ringing out like a blast of audible vomit spew. I could only muster up the internal strength to mumble three words. "Mother of God".

Then, with blazing quickness, its tentacles wrapped me in a hug of death, tugging this way and that way as if multiple boa constrictors were competing for the same boar. I struggled to breathe as my body was being crushed to oblivion, and just as I was lapsing out of consciousness, the thing spoke.

"Feed my children."

Its voice was purely serpentine, and it was emitted not from its mouths, but seemingly from the atmosphere within my bedroom as a whole. The thing released its grasp on me slightly and I breathed in deep, half choking on large gulps of pungent air. The tentacles were no longer tugging at me and they were now holding me in place, leaving me to dangle in the air like a codfish on the end of a fisherman's jig line. With some struggle I managed to question the monstrosity. "What do you mean?" but it only repeated its first utterance.

"Feed...my...children."

I swayed in an almost catatonic stupor as the thing pulsed. Its heartbeat started to diminish in quickness, and by now its tentacles were not writhing, they were rigid and frozen in place for some ungodly reason that was at this point unknown to me. After a moment, the thing started to squirm again and what happened next I will remember forever, the pure horror etched grotesquely within my mind. The tribal sounding *lub dub lub dub lub dub* continued at a steady pace, and as I swayed, its many mouths started to veer into each other, slowly becoming a grisly and contorted mass of one. Its teeth retracted and re-grew all in one spot, giving the appearance of a fang-toothed void that could surely only be the maw of a spawn from the depths of hell. Then, in a bellowing rage, it spoke in a guttural tone louder and more maniacal than before.

"FEED...MY...CHILDREN!"

From its mouth came what seemed to be a massive tongue, covered in what I could only guess were egg sacs. Each sac, about the size of a grapefruit, vibrated and hummed along to the beat of the creature's heart..., 'dancing' almost rhythmically as if they were performers on some sort of freakish and outlandish stage. The thing's eyes rolled back into its head, mottled and milky white like demonic orbs of the damned. Then came the needle.

Growing from the back of its throat a 'needle' like no other I have seen before penetrated the blackness within the monster's jaws. Like a bone siphon, it stretched forward, its tip like an elongated syringe birthed from the infernal regions; sharp as a comic's wit and more menacing than bull sharks in a blood frenzy. I let out a whimper and prayed for my saving grace, but no God nor angels came to my aid.

The needle grew closer and closer to my neck and I could only plead and moan as the tentacles held me in place, each moment bringing forth pure terror as the sweat beaded from my body and my hair stood on end—my own heart almost racing out of my chest. I closed my eyes and waited for a slow death, but just as the needle was about to penetrate my jugular, daylight

I sat up in my bed, consumed with panic and alarm unrivaled at any other point in my life. I looked around for the creature, but there was nothing but clear blue sky outside my window, my cat casually grooming himself as he relaxed on my bedspread, low purring coming from him at extended intervals. The sweat that covered my body was soaking through to my mattress and my heart was still thumping as if I had been running a marathon in my sleep. Calmness soon washed over me as I figured it had all been nothing more than a dream, a ghastly one which I hoped to never live through again.

Shaking my head, I put my feet to the floor so I could get up and start my day. My phone had multiple missed messages and it seemed as if I had been called in to work early, but due to the extreme terror I had just lived through that

was the least of my worries. All I wanted was a hot black coffee and a cigarette as long as a pencil but first, I had to wash up. The odor of sweat in my bedroom could be likened to a locker room or the aroma of an unwashed *ne'er* do well who hadn't showered in weeks.

I soon went to the bathroom and brushed my teeth and gave myself a quick 'hooker's bath', washing the important parts of my body as I still contemplated what the hell brought on my night terror. My dreams were usually peaceful and such nightmares were an uncommon thing for me but again, I was just happy that it was over.

As I was leaving the bathroom, something caught my eye in the mirror. At first I thought I was seeing things, but on closer inspection I realized there was a small puncture hole in my neck. As I realized the severity of this horrid truth, a serpentine voice could be heard pulsing through the atmosphere.

"Thank you!"

And at that moment...I realized I may never sleep again.

About the Author:

Devin J. Meaney is the beloved author of many reviews and shorts that nobody actually reads. Within the nine hundred years he has been on this planet, he has been a cart boy, a scrap metal dude, a traffic control technician, and was twice the world's coolest dishwasher. He also has a beautiful young daughter whom he loves very much!

A House to Match My Coat | Sonora Taylor

Debbie held the tips of her coat in her fingers. It was her favorite, a bright yellow coat with gold snap buttons. She'd worn it every day since she received it for her birthday. She awoke in her coat, took all her meals in it, and wore it to bed. She sweated in it in summer and held it tight to her chest in the winter. She loved its golden color so much that she wished to be forever bathed in yellow.

One day, the longing for a world of yellow made her heart grow sick. She looked at the brown, dirty walls in her bedroom, the grey sky outside her window. She smelled dinner cooking and imagined the dull green of her mother's stew, brightened only by the grey and orange tip of her mother's cigarette as she smoked at the table.

Debbie brightened at the thought of the cigarette, then darted to her mother's room. She stood on tiptoe and brushed her fingers along her mother's dresser until she felt what she sought: her mother's box of matches. She ran back to her room, struck a match, and dropped it against the wall.

A small orange flame flickered, then crawled up the side of the wall like a fiery worm. Debbie watched in awe as the wall burned from brown to yellow. She let out a cry of glee, then ran out of the room. One by one, Debbie made each room the same: a golden, flaming yellow where once it had been dull.

She tossed one last match into the kitchen. Her mother swiveled at the sound of Debbie giggling. "What are you--"

Debbie stopped her question by tossing a match onto her mother's dress. A dull, drab shade of faded periwinkle, not nearly as beautiful as her coat. Her mother screamed and batted at her dress to douse the flame, and in doing so, caught the back of her dress on the flame of the gas burner.

Her mother cried out, and Debbie ran out of the room. She saw the hall and stairs ablaze, the fires she set in the other rooms spreading. She ran outside with a grin on her face, then turned and watched as the house became engulfed in yellow. A house to match her beautiful coat.

About the Author:

Sonora Taylor is the award-winning author of several novels and short story collections, including *Little Paranoias: Stories*, *Without Condition*, and *Seeing Things*. Her work has been published by Sirens Call Publications, Cemetery Gates Media, Tales to Terrify, Camden Park Press, and others. Her latest release *Someone to Share My Nightmares: Stories*, is now available. She lives in Arlington, Virginia, with her husband and rescue dog.



Silence hangs slack in the rafters. It is of this she is most afraid; the pause between grunt and scrape, her heart pitching like an unsteady boat, threatening to drown her in the darkness.

She can feel each breath in her throat, pain in her knees as she pushes harder against the wooden door, against what? She had seen only his fleeting form, woken from dream to nightmare, pupils wide to the midnight pitch.

Night sounding with his laboured march—had she hastened him to her? Fear enough to draw his putrid body up from where it lay, where she had placed him—her fingers raw, back still aching—each stone set down in vain hope, the manner of his living would not define his death.

It is the duty of each Christian man to make a good death.

There had been no time for absolution, no chance to wash the years from heavy skin. And now he was here, dragging his body through the twilight space, the threshold between the living and the dead.

"I know you're in there Alice." His voice slides under the wooden slats, muscles taught against their heavy frame, scraping. "Give me a wee drop, won't you Alice. My throat is awful parched."

She digs her heels into the cold floor, pushes hard against the straining wood, but her strength is no match for him, the door inching open, the stench of him forcing through the gap. "Come now Alice, let me in."

A final thrust sends her staggering, his bloated form silhouetted in the open doorway, embers from the dying fire casting tiny flickers to his lips, his teeth, gums pulled back in a leering smile. She closes her eyes, but he does not come to her. Instead, jerks his body toward the barrel of ale tucked beneath the lintel.

"How little death has changed you." She whispers as she watches him, draws in her shaking hands, makes to the store of rushlights, the earthen jar of fat, places it to smouldering coals.

"What are you doing, little poppet?"

Before she can answer he is upon her, the full force of his hand slamming into her cheek. Dazed, she can barely see the jar, fingers searching blindly in the coals, pain searing, she lifts her arm, smashes the jar to his face. Shards fall as he stumbles, her own hands quick, she ignites the bundle of rushlights, throws them towards his lumbering figure, scrambles from the house as his clothes take flame.

He does not scream or writhe. Skin ablaze, familiar features melt into themselves—burning down until she can no longer see his eyes, his face, his frame crumbling like wood to the waiting floor.

She hasn't the strength to stand, crumpled like a blanket, eyes fixed to the smouldering heap. His bones white in the greying light, promises herself—when the sun eventually rises, she will bury him this time for good.

About the Author:

Claire Loader is a New Zealand born writer and photographer now living in Galway, Ireland. Her dark fiction has appeared in various publications, including Harbinger Press, The Ginger Collect, Massacre Magazine and Dark Moon Digest. She is a Forward and Pushcart Prize nominee and this year sees her collective poetry anthology *Pushed Toward the Blue Hour* published by Nine Pens Press.

Lost Pets | *Andrea Allison*

Lost pet flyers painted every pole in town. We've never had so many animals disappear all at once. The few left are kept under watchful eyes hidden away. I drown my sorrows in a loose meat sandwich from the new local diner. Yum! I wonder what the secret recipe is.

About the Author:

Andrea Allison currently writes and resides in a small Oklahoman town. Her work has appeared in Trembling With Fear, The NoSleep Podcast and Drabbledark II Anthology.

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Delia jogged into the forest, smiling as she listened to her mother's cry to be careful. She was going to play with the fairies, they would keep her safe! Running over upturned roots and thick underbrush, Delia's slipper-clad feet barely touched the ground as she sprinted past the tall Elms, moving deeper into the Worley Woods. Streaks of sunlight breaking through the thick canopy became fewer and fewer the deeper into the Woods she ran, until she reached a moss covered, sunken grove that seemed to be in perpetual twilight, glints of sunlight from high above flickering like stars in the night sky.

Standing on a boulder overlooking the grove, Delia slid down to her rear, folding her arms around her knees as she stared out over the expanse of crimson that covered most of the grove; blood-red flowers, their petals wide and rich lined the forest floor like a thick carpet. Staring out over the peaceful scenery for a few moments, Delia reached into the small sack she'd slung over her shoulder as she'd left home today. Pulling out a biscuit, hard and cold from the time that had transpired between breakfast and now, she tossed it idly into the air a few times, catching it only to study the crumbing edges.

The flowers rippled, like the surface of a pond you threw a rock into, as the quiet calls of far-off birds fell silent. Delia smiled, looking down at the sea of red expectantly.

"It's okay," she said, catching the bread in one hand, "it's just me. Come on out."

A faint buzzing, like the wings of a bee, fluttered from several points beneath the red petals, glittering points of light glowing from beneath the darkened leaves.

"I brought food again," Delia said, holding up the biscuit high in the air.

A faint wind blew over the vale, a slight coppery scent filling the air that Delia savored; it smelled so familiar. The shepherds' daughter could never place where she had smelled the slightly sweet scent before, but the flower's fragrance was something she had smelled before. It was sweet, it was salty... it was something she couldn't put her finger on.

A small head breached the bed of flowers, black and shiny as if moist from morning dew. The head held one silvery eye and a pair of pointed catlike ears, devoid of fur. Instead strands of tar seemed to connect the ears to the head, which stretched and pitched as the ears rotated atop the misshapen head. In the perpetual twilight of the grove, Delia could see dozens of glimmering eyes hiding beneath the flowing red petals, watching her.

Winding her arm back, Delia pitched the biscuit out over the grove, smiling as the tar-like Fae buzzed into the air with glistening wings, stretching out three-fingered hands to catch the biscuit, which was half its size, midair. The creature gave a flash of sharpened fangs as it bit into the bread, fluttering slowly back into the foliage below, rending off a piece of crispy bread which it noisily chomped on. Arms stretched out, tiny, yellowed bones visible beneath the holes in the tar as they elongated, tearing off small portions of bread as it came within reach. Slowly, the black fairy sank in the sea of crimson once more, the petals parting and flowing around him like the ebb of the tides.

Pulling another biscuit from her sack, she broke it in half and hurled it across the grove, giggling as another of the twisted little creatures leapt into the air. She entertained herself for a few minutes, unloading bread into the grove to the waiting maws of the ravenous sprites, until she came across a strip of cold bacon.

Eyeing it carefully, she pulled it out and sniffed it. She could feel eyes roaming over the strip of meat, practically hear mouths salivating—the sprites were obviously intrigued.

"The stories all say you can grant wishes. Is this true?" Delia asked, finally bringing up the subject matter after weeks of visiting the small folk. She'd discovered the vale a month ago, almost falling from the circle of mossy boulders that surrounded it. She'd dropped her honeyed treat into the grove while regaining her balance, the lemon bar disappearing like a drop of water into the sea. She'd almost gone after it until she'd heard the little creatures eating it just below her.

Now, after weeks of feeding them, she wanted to know more about them.

"Answer me or no more food." She threatened, holding the bacon over the lip of the boulder, dangling it enticingly.

Angry chatter echoed from beneath the red tide, until one lone voice remained. It was thick and heavy, with its words sounding like the bending of wood in a storm. "Food. Wishes for food."

"Alright," she said, tossing the bacon out lazily, smiling as three separate sprites leapt out, and tearing into the bacon mid-air while violently scratching at each other with inch long talons. She watched the buzzing forms tumble back into the flowers, their wings clacking angrily, before she continued. "You know of my family, right?"

Hisses and clacks rose from the flowers, the voice finally emerging once again, "Yes..."

"Good. Then you know we struggle to make ends meet. The sheep produce just enough wool to clothe us, and their meat is just enough to keep us fed. Between the animals we raise and the herbs we sell from the forest, we can barely pay our taxes. And now my father has fallen ill."

The voice, hoarser this time, rasped, "Food?"

Delia grunted irritably and fished out another slice of bacon, holding it above the red field, the wind blowing softly through her hair, carrying the copper-scented pollen with it. The chattering rose in tenor. "I want silver, silver and gold. Enough to pay for the medicine we need to make my father better. Give me this, and I'll continue feeding you as I have been."

She threw the bacon down into the flowers to punctuate her statement, smiling as she heard the tiny beings scrap amongst each other, jockeying to get a slice of the salty meat. Scraping her slipper along the mossy boulder, Delia looked down to watch the flowers pitch back and forth, rippling chaotically until the meat was gone. The flowers swayed gently from side to side, their wide blossoms waving over the tiny black fairies.

"Can you give me what I want?" Delia asked, pulling out her last strip of bacon.

"Lower a basket... lower a basket and give us food... you get what you need..." The voice clucked, the sound of rustling leaves telling her that her forest friends were moving back and forth beneath the crimson petals.

Pulling out the roasted leg of lamb and three biscuits, Delia shook her sack empty of crumbs before looking over the edge. "I'll lower my sack; you just fill it up."

Sliding the satchel through her hands, she slowly began to lower it into the crimson sea of flowers below her. Resting on her knees as she did this, she could only marvel at the countless flowers that seemed to move of their own accord, swallowing up her satchel as she lowered it the few feet from where she sat. She felt a few tugs on the material, heard the clattering voices and the clacking wings... the flower's scent was almost overpowering, flooding her senses with the coppery odor she could not place.

Slowly, she felt the bag grow heavier. Heavier and heavier, and heavier still. Shifting it between her hands, she heard the clinking of metal on metal, the sliding of coins against the fabric of her bag. The clattering voices fell silent as she began tugging up the satchel, grunting as she did so. The bag was so heavy now!

Smiling as the edge of her sack broke the surface of the red petals; her smile grew wider when she caught sight of the hundreds of silver coins weighing it down. Hefting it up to her and over the edge of the boulder, she heaved a sigh before laughing. Grabbing a biscuit, she threw it out over the grove in thanks before plunging her hands into the bag of coins. Each coin was thin but heavy, with a worn face embossed on each one, etchings around the edges in a strange language she couldn't make out.

Shifting her knee, she was surprised to see the boulder beneath her bore a similar symbol beneath the fuzzy moss. Dropping the coins back into the satchel, she scraped away a few feet of moss, to reveal a myriad of unidentifiable sigils. They were carved around the lip of the grove, at the edge of the boulder; beneath them were crude engravings of fairies, not like the ones in the vale before Delia, but with butterfly wings and childish grins. Taking out one of the coins, she flipped it over to examine the raised features of a regal looking figure. The sigils on the other side of the coin looked like the ones forming a ring around the grove, the carved stone twinkling merrily as the carvings were inlaid with metal.

"Food..." the voice hissed, catching Delia's attention. "Food for treasure!"

"Oh, yes... here, the main course!" Delia said, grasping the leg of lamb and tossing it out into the vale as far as she could. Spinning in a lazy arc, a dozen black tar fairies leapt from the ruby forest floor, latching onto the leg, and dragging it down into the depths below.

"Why is there a ring of fairy writing around your grove?" She asked, one hand cupping the bulging sack of silver in her lap.

The voice didn't answer at first, but after a few moments of gnashing teeth and noisy chewing, she got her answer. "Cage... keeps us here."

"You're caged? Who would do that?" She asked, outraged that her friends were imprisoned. Fairies were supposed to live in the forest freely.

The voice crackled as it answered. "We did... end fighting with others, go into hiding... shhh... keeps them out while keeping us in."

"Oh," she said, moving to stand up. "Well then I'll leave you to your meal. Thank you for the silver!"

The fairies hissed low, moving amidst the flowers as she stood over them. "Meal isn't over..."

"Well, that's all the food I brought. I'll bring more next time, I promise!" She said, grabbing the slings of her satchel.

Lifting the satchel up as she pushed herself to her feet, Delia grunted from the weight on her back before hearing fabric ripping. Before she could react, the back of her sack split wide open, pouring the coins back into the vale below, the silver coins clinking together as they hit the boulder and bounced about wildly. Spinning, Delia made a mad grab at some of the falling coins, dropping to her hands and knees to scoop at some as they fell below.

"No!" She screamed, her hands grasping only air. The satchel over her back stirred, catching her attention. She screamed once more as she heard the buzzing of wings from behind her, catching sight of one of the one-eyed Fae launching itself from her sack, two firm handholds on the back of her dress as it flew over the edge of the boulder, clattering loudly.

Delia wobbled from her precarious position, slapping her hands onto the mossy boulder's side to try and brace herself against the miniature creature's tugging. She felt secure too, at least until her blue eyes met the silver ones beneath the petals.

Leaping with savage hisses, three fairies buzzed up from their vermillion cover, their three fingered hands grasping onto her forearms. Their skin sizzled against hers, searing tar blistering over her pink flesh like water over hot coals. Their grips sank into her arms, drawing blood, causing her to scream in agony as they pulled her over the side.

Landing amidst the flowers, Delia quickly found herself overwhelmed by the scalding creatures, each one hissing and clattering the same word.

"Now the meal will begin," the voice said as the fairies closed in on her.

Their teeth bit into her flesh, tearing it away in long stringy bits, while claws pulled away muscle. Delia screamed and thrashed, the scent of her own coppery blood filling the air... mixing with the same odor of the flowers. Howling madly, she struggled to stand, to knock the hungry pests away; but she was feeling warm, as if she were going to sleep. The pain was slowly fading away as her eyes blinked wearily, her head rising to breach the crimson canopy above her.

Fresh air! She tried to take a gulp of it, but she found she couldn't breathe. Looking around, she tried to scream as instead of a sea of flowers, she was surrounded by a sea of bloody faces.

"They got you," One head rasped, sounding dejected. It was that of a young boy that had gone missing a few years before.

"Of course, they got her!" Another head hissed, this one that of a handsome teen.

"They always get us..." A few heads said in unison, blinking back tears of blood that were welling at the corners of their eyes.

"We'll just have to warn others, like we warned her." The boy said, turning on a stalk made of chitinous bone. It cracked and popped as he twisted, snapping as he turned to face Delia. "Now you see the grove for what it is. Hopefully, our smell will keep away the next person unlucky enough to stumble by."

Delia wailed, her voice dying on the wind as the fairies below wormed their magic over her, changing her appearance from that of a talking head on a spine to that of a beautiful red flower. Delia spread her petals wide, opening the bulb of her flower, coughing out the stench of blood for all to smell.

Her blood, which would hopefully warn away the next child to stumble by the Crimson Grove.

About the Author:

Nicholas Paschall is a horror/fantasy author based out of Texas, where he lives with his wife in a comfortable crypt. First published in 2011, he has several novels and is in a few dozen magazines and anthologies.

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Insights on the Art of the Short Film



Are you a storyteller wishing to put something on film? Is there an inner filmmaker in you who desperately yearns for an audience to view your work on a big screen?

This being a horror movie column, chances are, there are many of you who would like nothing more than to create a really cool horror film that would scare people out of their underpants. Something YOU wrote, YOU produced, YOU directed.

And yet, if you've never stepped foot on a film school campus or in a screenwriting class or have never even seen a movie camera or clap board up close, you're likely asking yourself, "Where would I even begin?"

Two words: Short Film.

One of the most practical ways to begin a film career, regardless of genre, is by way of a short film – made by YOU. Whether your goal is to one day make a two-hour feature, a 10-episode series or just present something to your friends and fam, the benefit of creating a short film or films is to visually showcase your work in a more timely and financially feasible way.

The following items have helped me to achieve success in the art of short film making that I hope can assist you as well. Please note, this article does not include instructions on how to *direct* a movie or how to *write* a screenplay (those are entirely separate articles), but rather, offers basic tips and suggestions to the novice *executive producer* or *producer* wanting to finance and create a short film.

Mentoring

First and foremost, I strongly recommend seeking out and finding a *mentor* before embarking on your short film project. A main go-to 'coach' successfully established in the film industry who can give you step-by-step direction and details on doing the same, sparing you from learning things the hard way on your own. This will prove especially crucial with such things as assembling a film crew and having to know specifically which 'hats' you would need on your project, exactly what each of these roles entail, a ballpark figure on each of their rates, etc.

Networking Groups



Alongside finding a mentor, becoming part of a *networking group* is as equally important. While there is no set way to finding a good networking group, the best ones are usually by word of mouth from someone you know well (perhaps your newfound mentor can oblige). This group should be a 'family', a circle of tight members eager to help each other. I've

found that my networking group (I'm actually part of two) is extremely valuable when it comes to specific and practical needs I may have or asking questions about things I know zero about. I've also seen a huge difference in people I've hired within my networking group than from those I've been forced to find outside – sketchy, flakey and sometimes 'scary' individuals I want nothing to do with ever again. This is why most people in the film industry have always preferred working with close friends over and over again – people they know and trust. A word of caution with networking groups, though – make certain it's a community of *action*. Your group may have strong bonds and relationships, however, the last thing you want is a cluster of artists sitting around talking or dreaming together about getting their projects done – without ever really getting their projects done!



Money/Budget

Should you spend sixty to a hundred thousand *out of pocket* to make a short film? No.

Do you need to spend *any* money at all to make a short film? Absolutely.

If you want a 'watchable movie', something that's of quality and visually engaging, a certain degree of time, effort and yes, *money*, will need to be spent. Yes, there are those who shoot entire short or feature films on iPhones, *aaall* by themselves – for no cost! And while there may be a decent plot or premise involved, the directing is usually poor, the acting is terrible, the sound is off, the picture quality is substandard and the lighting is awful (for openers!), and it would likely be viewed by someone bed stricken with nothing to do but watch crap. Of course, this doesn't mean you sell your home or dig into your IRA to make an awesome short film. But know this – a good movie doesn't just include a good script; it involves a good *crew*. You would do well to invest in one.

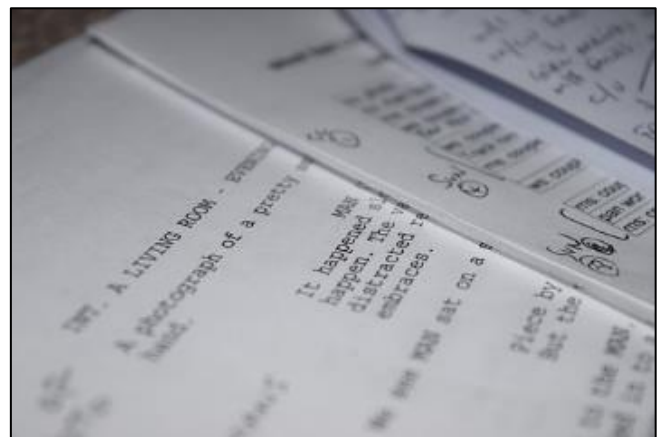
"So how do I get money?" you're probably asking.

A short film can cost anywhere from \$5,000 to \$15,000 to \$50,000, depending on what sort of film you're making. Horror films entailing special effects can be particularly pricey. Again, before reaching into your own purse or wallet, it's best to first explore *other* options.

Here's a few resources you should be aware of for obtaining money for your film.

Grants and Contests. Like paying off tuition, it's always nicer to fund your project with the help of grants and cash awards. *Film Freeway*, *International Screenwriters Association* (ISA) and *Movie Bytes* are a few platforms that regularly announce organizations providing grants and prize money to emerging filmmakers via screenplay competitions, submission letters and other petitions.

Film Schools. One great way to create a short film is by submitting your screenplay to film schools and students. Many of these cinema classes search for outside scripts, some posting these requests online, wanting fresh new material to work with and to learn off of – at zero cost to you! And while there are those who frown upon a student directing their story, you'd be astounded at the 'ripe apples' within these institutional 'trees'.



Crowdfunding. A lot of filmmakers tend to shy away from crowd funding. Understandably, since the last thing we want to be is that "Sorry to bother you," telemarketer guy, or that neighbor or cousin who's always trying to recruit you into his fortune 500 company. However, there are crowdfunding platforms that have proven helpful and sound, offering innovative strategies, techniques and ideas for the

average 'non-sales' person to obtain money for their film. A couple of these platforms I recommend are *Seed & Spark* and *Indiegogo*. Bear in mind, crowd funding takes a lot of work, organization, and dedication, regardless which platform you use - almost like having an additional job. The results, however, end up being worth the stretch.



Production Companies. I'm sure the ideal situation for most of us is to waltz right into a production office, whip out our script, and BAM - we get our fifteen grand to make our short film! While this just doesn't happen in the real world, there *are* small production companies out there that make short films and are looking for scripts. These companies may range from a large corporation to a wealthy businessperson or retiree with money to spend. But regardless of the source, acquiring their cash almost always involves having a connection or rapport with them. And the places to meet such people can vary. Someone digging your posts on social media, for instance. Or a fellow you sat next to at your friend's wedding. The trick is to keep your eyes and ears peeled and your radar set to who and what's around you.

Self-Finance. Should you choose to self-finance your short film, I strongly advise bringing on an *accountant* or someone of the like, at least for a detailed estimate on what you will be spending. Someone sharp, reliable, straight forward and who knows the movie business thoroughly. And I get it - not everyone has a spouse, cousin or nephew who fits this bill and can offer their services for free (This is why a networking

group is important - a place to find such a professional who might not charge the average rate). If unable to find or hire an accountant, there are a variety of software programs for movie budgeting, from free Excel-based budget templates to the more expensive *Movie Magic* (which offers student discounts). Your best option depends on how big your budget is, how much money you want to spend, how much time you have to learn the program and whether this is a one-off or if you plan on self-budgeting more projects. A lot of independent producers recommend *Showbiz Budgeting*. It costs about \$400 and is easier to use than other programs.

Prep Time

While the time to plan for a short film can vary, the standard is usually three to four months one should allow themselves to prep. This may seem like a long period, especially if planning a two-minute short with just one actor. But you need to factor in such things as assembling your production team, organizing your equipment, auditioning actors, scouting and securing locations, costume designing, script development, insurance costs, union paperwork (if using SAG actors), plotting out scenes, crafts and services (food) and other key elements that take time to process.



After Filming, Now What?

So you've spent four exhausting 12-hour days shooting your short film. Everything, for the most part, went smooth. Your director and cinematographer worked together beautifully. Your tough yet efficient Assistant Director made darn sure everything got done in a timely fashion. You managed to get everyone paid and, thankfully, there were no accidents or incidences that could have cost you

dearly. You're now finished with your film, right?

Not quite.

You've now just entered – the Post-Production zone.

Sadly, this is where a lot of new filmmakers fumble the ball within the field goal range, thinking “The hard part's over, let's take it easy,” and end up sitting on their project without it ever getting completed. Yet there are still a number of essential tasks needed to be done during post- production.



Editing. Your director and Director of Photography (DP) might have shot for you footage that could potentially earn your film a Best Production award at a festival. However, if not properly edited, it will fall flat. Hiring a good editor – one who is not only keen and passionate about their work, but also on board with yourself and your director – stands as part of the backbone to getting your movie done, and done right!



Sound. While you might have had a great sound person during shooting, often times your sound quality may still come out poorly in spots during your editing stage (sometimes almost entirely). This is

when sound mixing must be applied in post-production. What both audiences and filmmakers tend to overlook is a film's sound quality, whether it's an actor's voice or someone treading through the grass. Sound plays a significant role for a film, keeping an audience engaged and in that world, and therefore should be executed with excellence.



Music. For any film, horror movies especially, music is key! Depending on your budget, you have two options in adding music to your piece. A least expensive way is to purchase music off platforms such as *Artlist.io*, which licenses music to filmmakers from indie artists at reasonable rates. Your other option is music scoring – original music by a composer made specifically for your film. Whatever you choose, make sure your music is profound and rich with meaning – something that will stay with the audience forever.



Coloring. Color correction (used to fix, balance and naturalize color in footage) and/or color grading (used to change and stylize colors) can also be glossed over during post. Beginning filmmakers on tight budgets can even 'go cheap' and settle for mediocre 'easy-to-use software', thinking, “What's the big deal – it's just coloring.” Considering that proper coloring establishes

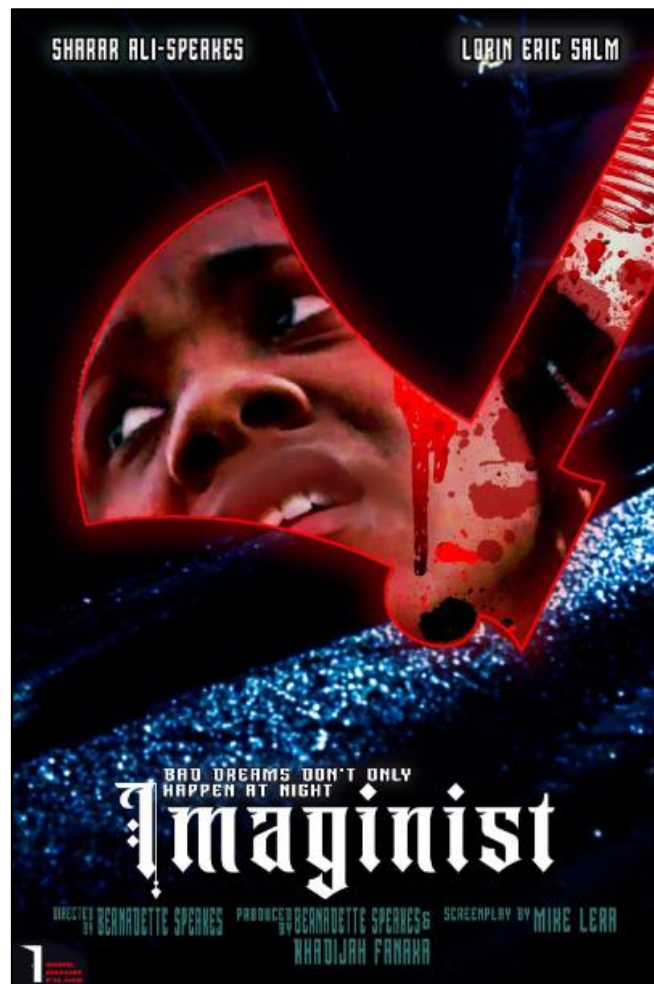
style, ambiance and atmosphere, helps set the tone and moods to create a movie spectacle and ensures that the video has a more contiguous feel to allow the viewer to focus on the story, I'd say it is a really big deal!

ADR/Pick Up Shots. Retrospectively speaking, it is extremely important that you and your crew are on you're A-game and do your absolute best during initial shooting/production – almost as though you're handing in your product the next day! However, mistakes can happen, new scenes can be written in, accidents can occur or the weather can change, and thus, there is sometimes a need for 'pick up shots' (reshoots or added scenes) or perhaps ADR (Automated Dialogue Replacement) during post-production. It's these moments a producer must reassemble their cast and crew once more, recommit to having a mindset of excellence toward their film set and mentally echo the words of Gary Ryan Blair, "Finish strong!"



Ok, your film is officially completed. Yay! Now time to show to the world?

Well, not quite...again.



Promotion. The famous phrase 'If you build it, they will come' cannot be any more untrue. You can build and create something awesome, bursting with power and energy. But if no one is told about it, if no knows about it – no one will come.

Unless your goal is to show your short film to a small group of friends in your living room, promoting and previewing your movie stand as the most essential parts upon its completion if you want as many 'eyes' as possible on your amaaazing work! Posters, photo stills and artwork are phenomenal ways to promote your film, whether it's telling folks about its premiere at an upcoming horror festival or announcing its release on a streaming platform. One of the best ways to promote is by creating a one-to-two minute *trailer* or *teaser*, you and your editor coming up with something intriguing, fun and thought provoking that will nab your audience and spur them on toward this incredible viewing experience! And please - utilize social media to the T! I can't tell you how many artists I see shooting themselves in the foot by not using or misusing social media. When used correctly, social media can be an invaluable tool in strengthening and

nurturing a fan base from within your fold. Rather than posting your lunch, pets, rants and raves, share your film's exciting trailer on your Facebook wall page. Display those cool, colorful photos and stills on Instagram. Show and brag about your film's Official Selection awards and Laurels on Twitter. Share about your spectacular cast and crew on Linked In. And do this as consistently and as courageously as possible, right up until your movie is presented!



I'll end on this note: *Learn*. Learn as much as you can during this challenging, yet rewarding experience as a beginning filmmaker – especially from your mistakes (and you WILL make them). From finding and selecting actors during pre-production to developing shot lists with your director in production to sitting alongside your editor during post-production. Learn and take copious notes from just about every job position within your crew, forging yourself into a more versatile, stronger producer and leader on future projects.

Now, as they say in film land – go make a movie!



About Mike Lera:

Mike Lera is a Los Angeles-based author, screenwriter and journalist whose horror fiction can be found in over a dozen anthologies, including *All Dark Places 2*, *Horror USA: California* and *Rod Serling Books' Submitted For Your Approval*. He has also published with such prominent magazines as *Famous Monsters of Filmland* and *The Literary Hatchet*. Having written and produced several short horror films based on successfully published stories of his, Lera has found equal success in both the film festival and streaming service circuit with his screen work.

When not scaring people, Lera scavenges comic/martial art/horror cons for anything to wear, hang, tac, shelf and add to his geek shrine.



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John awoke on the battlefield in a daze, the right side of his body and face took the brunt of the explosion. He struggled to sit up as his right arm had been severely injured. John looked down at his hand and it was covered in sand and blood. The sleeve of the camo jacket was dried and suctioned onto the skin of his arm. He flexed his fingers and made a fist, over and over he did this and his arm seemed to be functioning. The soldier looked across the barren battlefield, dust swirled in playful funnel clouds as it made intricate patterns on the desert floor. He tried to focus on the horizon but it was blurred. His depth perception had been compromised. He touched the right side of his face and winced. He felt that his right eye had been damaged in the latest incursion. John closed his left eye and looked around. The vision in his right eye gave out a red aura to everything he looked at. John rubbed his eye with his left hand and tried to refocus. The vision in his right eye did not improve.

He stood and shook the sand off of himself. The warm desert breeze pelted him with sand grains. John put his arms over his head and stretched. A giant yawn along with a sigh came from him. John touched his toes and picked up some sand. He let it fall between his fingers. He bent his legs and did a few squats. He kicked his feet out in front of himself. His legs seemed to be unharmed in the fierce fighting. John began the search for the rest of his men. He looked across the barren landscape. Where had they gone? There were no corpses, no signs of life as he scanned the never ending red carpet of the desert. He thought to himself, *Those bastards have taken the dead. God only knows what they are doing with them.* He closed his eyes in an effort to search his memory of where his men may be. He realized that the head injury impaired his ability to remember. He struggled to recall anything from his past; his name, his country, why he was here. He knew that he was in a war but for what side and why eluded him.

John walked along the deserted and damaged highway, he could see in the distance a bombed-out restaurant. The wind started to pick up, John turned his head towards the sky. A large sandstorm was coming his way. Off in the distance he could see the wall of crimson sand coming his direction. He thought that his best bet was to get to that building and find some safety. He began to jog towards the shelter. John stopped about a football field from the building. He flattened himself out onto the sand and crawled. He crept towards the building. The wind began to howl. He had to get into this shelter. He wanted to be certain that no enemy was hiding in the restaurant. He would not know a friend from a foe but anybody found in this building would have died. He aimed his rifle into the building and inspected the interior. He walked around the exterior peering into the doors and windows. He was at the back of the building; this is where the bomb had exploded. There were only smoldering embers left. The damaged building smelled of diesel fuel and gunpowder but no casualties were visible. He needed shelter and needed to attend to his wounds. He slowly entered into the building from the bomb crater, his rifle raised and ready to fire. He wanted to find the bathroom, hoping that the water was still usable. He kicked open the door with a slam; his rifle up and aimed into the room. The room was empty. He made his way over to the sink and looked into the mirror. He stepped back, aghast, as he did not recognize the reflection. He thought that what he was seeing was because of his head injury. He closed his eyes and looked again. He was taken aback at what he saw. He shook his head, not believing what he was seeing. He pulled off his shirt and his arm came off with it. He gasped then screamed from fright. There was no pain, only a leaking of red fluid from the jagged stump, John thought his blood looked a bit thin. The smell of hydraulic fluid permeated the air. John stood in the bathroom confused and looked at his arm in the mirror. He thought that this was some kind of cruel prank from the enemy. They were trying to make him believe that he had just pulled his arm off. He thought to himself, *LSD? Agent Orange? What is making me hallucinate?* He pulled at the corner of his right eye and the skin on his face began to peel off. He stepped back in shock. He kept digging at the corner of his face near his eye. He then pulled and pulled at the edge of skin near his hairline. His skin peeled all the way off. He dropped his discarded face onto the vanity. He stepped back and looked at his face. It was surreal. He looked back into the mirror. A metal skull greeted him. He pushed on his damaged eye and with a squirt of fluid onto the mirror his eye disintegrated. Behind his blue eye was a red light. He looked at the stump that was once his arm and began to feel around the edges. He sniffed the fluid coming from what was left of his arm. It was definitely hydraulic fluid. He knew that this was no hallucination. This was really happening. He was a cyborg. Who made him? Why was he created? What was this battle about? He backed up onto the wall with a thud and slid down. He sat there not believing what was happening.

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.

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The poor rancher William Salinger solemnly paced the porch of his farmhouse. He doused the weather-stained boards in kerosene as he strode back and forth along the face of his homestead, ensuring that every last drop was swallowed up by the thirsty wood. His eyes were momentarily drawn to a thicker liquid that pooled out from under the storm door. The gory puddle appeared glassy in the silver light of the full moon.

The sickness had begun with the cattle. Salinger found the first on the outskirts of his modest grazing lands a mile from his family's dilapidated home. The cow had a bloated corpulence, its swollen stomach nearly brushed the ground as it wavered on spindly legs. Salinger could count rigid notches along her spine and grimaced at the bony hips that protruded skyward, in sharp angles. The skin on the poor creature's face was drawn taut, her eyes bloodshot and glassy. Salinger moved to comfort the distressed animal by stroking her nose. As he passed his hand down the jutting brow, the cow's nostrils flared in discomfort and Salinger felt an unpleasant sensation, a sponginess he could only relate to the feeling of a damp loaf of bread. He pulled his hand away and found that a sticky sheet of flesh had peeled off with it. The animal shrieked, her eyes bulging in pain and terror. Salinger found the flesh clung to his hand with membranous phlegm as he tried to wipe it away. Disgusted, he mercifully ended the pitiful creature's life with a heavy blow from his shovel, caving in the softened skull like a rotted pumpkin.

After dinner that evening, Salinger ruminated on his predicament while puffing his customary evening pipe on the front porch. His three children slept peacefully while his wife wrote a letter to her family back home in the candle-lit dining room. Salinger's family had no idea how dire their circumstances had become. If they knew, perhaps they would have better understood his decisions as of late.

Over the last few years Salinger had been living under the thumb of the bank. The returns on his cattle were not enough to put food on the table, and the upkeep of his failing ranch was putting him in a deep hole. Much of the equipment he used was ancient, lent to him by kind hearted neighbours while his own sat in the barn in various states of disrepair. His children were still too young to be of much help, nothing more than mouths to feed in their early years. They should thank whatever disease had saved that cow from the market that afternoon, it had put meat on their plates! The flesh smelled rancid and had an unpleasant discoloration, but after cooking it well, William found it preferable to the meals of mouldy potatoes and worm-eaten onions which had gotten them through the long winter. His family needn't know about the sick animal, and the smiles that graced their faces as they ate was all the justification he needed.

The distant hoot of an owl interrupted his thoughts. He peered into the night, and under starlight he thought he spotted the night hunter gliding effortlessly across the land. The winged creature circled back around, its attention drawn to something in the field. Salinger lost interest and took a final draw from his long pipe and retired for the evening, his secret buried with the cows flayed carcass on the southern border of his land.

A few days later, Salinger noticed that some of the other cattle were beginning to show distended stomachs similar to the first. Salinger cursed. He could not afford to lose any more of his herd. He tried to drive the animals out of sight of the farmhouse towards the long abandoned sheep paddock while he figured out what to do. The cattle formed a clumsy line and shambled on wobbly knees towards their destination. Salinger noticed fetid sheets of mucousy skin sloughing off from the friction of their bulbous bodies rubbing together. Not long into the march, the animals began to collapse, their atrophied legs unable to bear their bulk any longer. The air was rife with agonized moans that were more akin to the croaks of bull-frogs. By the next evening, all 21 of the Salinger cattle were bloated masses, littering the expanse of his property. Those that survived croaked unnaturally in the cool air of fall. The sound was maddening and Salinger dejectedly packed away his pipe, unable to enjoy his evening smoke on the porch.

When the sun rose upon the next day, Salinger set off into the nearby town of Brighton to send an emergency telegraph to the county medical examiner for assistance. Salinger was a prideful man and made vain attempts to conceal his financial struggles. Even so, he had accrued debt at many of the local businesses, and the bank could offer no further loans or extensions to the poor rancher. He would not go to his neighbours, nor did he expect they could offer more anyway, having already given him much of what they could spare. He was forced to trade in the only wealth he had; two sides of beef, coated in salt to hide the gangrenous flesh. That afforded him 25 rounds of ammunition suitable for his large calibre rifle, and a tin of kerosene. He shrugged off comments concerning his unwell appearance and returned home.

Upon his return, Salinger immediately set about his grim business. He fired round after round into the softened skulls of each and every ghastly mutation on the property. The mass extermination of the croaking behemoths brought

no comfort to the Salinger family, who wouldn't even touch their evening meal, a side of salted beef! He could see the worry on his wife's sallow face. He noted that she seemed to have lost weight along her limbs, despite eating better in the last week than they had in years. His youngest son's distended stomach punched out from under his ribs, similar to hungry orphans he had witnessed on past travels to larger cities. Salinger looked down at his own plate, and found that he too had lost his appetite.

That night Salinger sat in his familiar chair on the porch and struggled to light his pipe. In the silver moonlight, dark mounds marked his property like tombstones. The night air dragged the stench up from the crude graveyard and Salinger was glad for the acrid smell of tobacco. A fluttering from the nearby ravine drew his attention away from the sight. The silhouette of a large bird in flight was less than picturesque against the background of the full moon. Salinger disliked how the bird fluttered in jerky flaps, as though orchestrated by a clumsy puppeteer rather than gliding on the evening breeze. He noticed the unpleasant plumpness of the bird, and flinched at the sudden wet impact as it collided with the house just feet from him. The bird fell to the porch floor to his right. Salinger was able to identify the now motionless creature as an owl by its long and dirty talons. He wondered whether it had survived the impact when it rolled over into a slumped sitting position and wavered drunkenly. Salinger drew a steady pull of smoke as he rose from his rocking chair to investigate. The owl thrashed, getting to its feet in a hurricane of loose feathers. It emitted a guttural croak that startled Salinger, causing him to fumble his pipe, which clattered noisily to the ground. The owl's head swivelled and its eyes met Salinger's, twin ochre fires burned menacingly. In place of a beak, dark fluid oozed out of a ragged maw. The wretch took two unsteady hops before vaulting into the air with a deep croak. It munched clumsily against the railing of the porch as it took unsteady flight. Salinger watched as the creature descended on one of the shadowy mounds on the lawn. A moist suckling could be heard coming from the pile of diseased flesh.

Salinger felt heat rushing up his chest and had a sudden, unpleasant sensation that he could taste his own throat, which he found oddly spicy. Curious, he bent to pick up his pipe when he noticed a discolouration on the mouthpiece. He wiped at it with his sweat stained shirt and saw that it left dark streaks behind. Salinger placed the pipe back in his mouth, biting down to hold it in place. As his teeth clicked on the mouth piece, he felt a soft squelch, as though he were biting into an orange. The pipe fell from his mouth again. With a shaky finger, he rubbed along his gums and felt his teeth give way under the pressure of his touch. He slowly removed his finger and saw that it was covered in dark bile. Salinger moaned and was struck with a dreadful realization as he returned his gaze to shadowy mass and listened to the sound of suckling in the night.

Later that evening, the poor rancher stood alone in the moonlight on his kerosene soaked porch. He watched the tobacco in the end of his pipe curl into bright embers as he inhaled, the matchstick still burning in his hand. His thoughts were with his family, who lay piled in the kitchen on the other side of the storm door. He could still hear the rappings of his rifle as he fired his last rounds into the backs of their heads. The bullets had torn ragged holes through their hideously softened skulls releasing a gush of tar like blood into the throw rug that had once been a wedding gift. Salinger wished his grotesque sides of beef would have bought him another bullet, but all the same, he screeched a croaky cry as he let the match fall to the ground.

A short time later, the county medical examiner attended Salinger's ruin with a Brighton police escort. The charred remains of five human bodies were recovered from the house and carted back to town. What they couldn't figure out was the gurgling puddles that appeared spontaneously on the Salinger grounds. The examiner collected a small sample of the viscous mush before heading curtly back to town. His office had received a distressed report of a boy in town who was suffering some kind of food poisoning after dining on a side of salted beef.

About the Author:

Nick Searle is a small fish in the ocean of literature, but he is ambitiously working towards becoming a contributing horror writer. When he is not studiously writing by candle light in a cavernous basement, he loves spending time outside with his partner and two children in Manitoba, Canada. He is enjoying his 31st trip around the sun and serves as captain of Mavericks Rugby.

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The Ex-Christmas Tree | *Corinne Pollard*

The fir tree stares.

The golden baubles dangle limply; they have lost their Christmas shine. The plastic holly lies on the branches in a spiral, following the silent rainbow lights. I haven't switched them on since that day.

The dying tree stares. I can not leave nor get rid of it due to the snow rising past my window sill.

The bag below holds the mushed up human manure. I keep it moist as instructed while wishing the snow would melt faster. We've been together for days and I no longer want to be stared at by my ex's remains.

Dead Centre | *Corinne Pollard*

The Fun Maze was an annual freebie; it appeared at midnight with no one claiming credit for its resurrection. The hedges bled crimson leaves, smearing unsuspecting guests. The misguiding red-bricked path wove around, lit up by isolated candles.

The flickering scarecrow in the dead centre of the maze was the goal, but no one could find it. It peered over the hedges, grinning bloodily with crows squawking on both of its shoulders, flapping feathers of black and white.

No one was victorious, but Theodore was missing. The mayor's cocky, chewing-gum-obsessed first-born.

No one saw the scarecrow's grin dribbling salmon pink.

Conscious Casket | *Corinne Pollard*

Boots crunched above, snickering in a high pitch as my eyelids tore apart.

"Looks like Ephraim J. Saul wants a drink."

My name was mispronounced, which was more infuriating than the trickle of alcohol. It seeped under and into my casket. I never touched the poison when alive.

The man pounded above, dancing or trying to, while I scratched and wrenched back the wood with my one-year-rotted fingernails. Grassroots crumbled between my phalanges as I dragged myself out.

Slurring words about celebrating the dead changed to screams as I snatched his boot. I will not forgive this drunken alarm clock.

Led Away | *Corinne Pollard*

The player twiddled his fingers over the wooden holes.

The children sang, clapping with joy, except Otto. He stared out at the endless saltwater, mesmerised. There was no breeze to flutter the sails or agitate the waves.

The distance was widening further. Otto knew that it would be impossible to flee back home, especially as he didn't know how to swim.

The player snapped his fingers. Otto jumped.

"My rats sing. Sing, boy."

The children echoed him, giggling, cross-legged, and chained. Their foggy eyes never flickered.

Otto's prison guard blew his pipe. Louder than before.

Fog crept in. Otto sang.

About the Author:

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

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

Chad sat on the edge of the bed and reached for his phone, checking to see what time it was. He briefly checked his new messages, sneered, and didn't bother to answer them. The voicemails he ignored altogether.

When the naked woman behind him ran a finger down his back and nibbled at his ear, he turned and planted his mouth on hers.

A couple hours later, he pulled on his briefs, jeans and t-shirt. No one was outside when he peeked through the blinds, but he cautiously poked his head out of the hotel door and looked around. Still seeing nobody, he grinned at the woman who'd followed him, gave her a lingering kiss, then stepped outside and shut the door behind him. He walked down the sidewalk to the empty house a block away where he'd left his car, and climbed into the driver's seat. Smirking, Chad started the car, backed up, and drove down the street.

As soon as he saw the female thumbing for a ride on the side of the road, he slowed and licked his lips. Her tight tank top barely covered her breasts, and he thoroughly enjoyed the sight of her mini skirt and red stilettos.

"You're lucky I'm here," he told the beauty after lowering the passenger window. She studied him without comment, but when her eyes flashed and a small smile crossed her face, he took it as encouragement. "I'll be glad to help you get home. Do you live nearby?"

"Yes," came the low, husky reply as she slid into his car. "Right around the corner."

He drove in the direction she'd indicated, but saw nothing ahead of them but a thick forest. "This can't be right."

"Oh, my place isn't far," she assured him. "It's just through the trees."

Once he'd parked on the edge of the woods, the woman got out of his car, stumbled, and began to limp. "Let me help you," Chad offered, sliding his arm around her narrow waist. He was close enough to ogle her chest without being noticed. Together they walked into the forest and soon came upon a cottage.

"Come in." The woman opened the door, and Chad eagerly followed her inside. "How can I ever repay you," she cooed, fluttering her eyelids like an old-time movie starlet.

"Oh, I'm sure we'll think of something."

"Make yourself at home." She paused before adding, "You know, you haven't asked my name."

"Ah, what's your name?" Chad glanced at the large bed in the corner.

"Ria. But I've been called many names through the years, including Justice and Vengeance."

He heard her words but mentally shrugged them off. Truthfully, he couldn't have cared less about anything she might have said, including what she called herself. His interest lay elsewhere.

As she kicked off her heels, his heart rate sped up. She unzipped her skirt and let it fall to the floor, revealing a red thong underneath. Then she blew Chad a kiss, and he chuckled.

Ria left the room for a moment, and he was quick to disrobe in anticipation.

A soft footstep sounded from behind him, and he turned to see her standing there. She grinned, but her body slowly morphed, taking on the hard sharpness of stone and slicing edges. Chad found himself staring at what looked like a gargoyle.

"What the...?" He rubbed his eyes.

"You think women are only good for one thing," Ria said in a conversational tone. "You take advantage of your position at work to try and get what you want from them. You pursue them and pick them up every time you can, in every place you can, and there's no end to your callousness. One after another, you use them and discard them, all while making pretty promises. You even talk about love, which is something you know nothing about. Of course, you're usually careful to remove your wedding ring first."

He glanced down at his hand for a second. Hours before, he had removed his ring and stuck it in his pocket, and now he put his hand in there, too.

"While you were out cheating on your wife, she went into labor," Ria continued, her eyes never leaving his face. "She called your cell phone. Many times, in fact. Finally, she had to leave your one-year-old daughter with a neighbor, since she has no family and you weren't around. The hospital called you several times, too, when your wife had complications. I healed her and she and the baby are both fine—no thanks to you."

The gargoyle woman reached out with a long claw and swiftly cut an 'A' into Chad's bare chest. Shock and confusion overwhelmed him, but he gasped when he saw the letter and felt the sting of the wound.

Speed blurred the woman's movement when she slashed out again and this time opened Chad's stomach. He choked, looking down at his own blood and intestines spilling from the open gash. A rising, shrieking moan escaped him.

Ria grabbed his intestines and bit one section in half. The remaining loops swayed back and forth between them. She chewed for a moment, then hummed. "This needs a bit of something." Grabbing the salt shaker off the table beside them, she sprinkled the contents on his entrails and took another bite. "Now that's just right." She smacked her lips.

Chad grabbed his stomach, trying to stuff his parts back inside and hold himself together. No matter how hard he tried, though, he was unable to move his feet. The gargoyle woman hissed and rammed her claws into his upper chest, filling him with agony. Ever-so-slowly, ignoring his screams, she cut down through his flesh and ribs to reveal his heart.

"Please," Chad begged. "Please don't."

"Don't what?" she asked, raising one eyebrow. "Don't cheat on you? Don't stab you through the heart? Don't kill you?"

"Please don't kill me. Please, please," he babbled. "I'll do whatever you want. I won't ever cheat on my wife again. I swear. Just let me go." When Ria grabbed between his legs and held his sex organs in one clawed hand, he screamed, "No! Please!"

He sighed with relief when she let go. But he wasn't expecting her to slash at his member before holding it up in front of his face. Chad's eyes bulged from their sockets, and he shrieked while the woman sneered.

Ria made no sound as she watched the blood run from Chad's open chest, stomach, and mutilated groin. His eyes had glazed in shock and pain, but he repeatedly mumbled pleas for help and pleas to be spared. It wasn't long till he slumped to the floor.

Popping what she knew Chad had considered his best feature into her mouth, she chewed and swallowed. "How disappointing. That really needed some garlic."

The Feast of a Lifetime | Gabriella Balcom

Mary hacked the chest open with a hatchet, biting into the heart savagely. Blood sprayed everywhere.

Eyes gleaming, Jenny reached into the chest cavity, scooping up some to drink. It trickled down her chin, but she just laughed.

"This is *exhilarating*!" Mary crowed. "We should've done it years ago."

"What a great way to celebrate the holidays," Jenny replied.

"The best."

After devouring the remaining organs, the women eyed the second body.

"I did mine." Mary licked her lips, proffering the hatchet. "Now it's your turn to do the honors."

"With pleasure." Jenny immediately used it on her husband's body.

About the Author:

Gabriella Balcom writes fantasy, sci-fi, horror, romance, literary fiction, and more. She loves forests, mountains, and back roads, has had 307 works accepted for publication, and was nominated for the Washington Science Fiction Association's Small Press Award. Gabriella's books, *On the Wings of Ideas* and *Worth Waiting For*, resulted from her winning publishing contracts. Her novella, *The Return*, is also out; three others pend publication.

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Some monsters you can't outrun.

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

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



THE SHADOWS BEHIND

KRISTI PETERSEN
SCHOONOVER

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

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

The heart-shaped stones Mavis usually found in the tide were cracked in half.

A cold eel wormed through her heart; the stones were how her dead husband told her he still loved her.

Each day outside their beach house, she walked shoeless in the rocky band coughed up by the surf, every jabbed arch, twisted ankle and stubbed toe reminders she was being forced to soldier alone. Then she'd spot a shaped stone, like an obvious wink, and for one blissful moment, it would quell her despair.

She stooped to retrieve the halves. The other hearts in her treasure chest were whole and alluring: opaque white that felt salty; pink granite, bright when wet but pale when dry; plain gray worn smooth, something so ordinary whittled by the sea's hands into something lovely.

But these fragments, they stank of rotten fish and were the fungal color of spoiled egg yolk.

"What does this mean? What are you trying to say?"

Mavis wasn't expecting an answer, was surprised when she swore she heard his voice, deep and sonorous, even though muffled and unintelligible beneath the slush of tide and clip of wind.

"Frosch?" *Frog in the throat*, it meant. Her nickname for him, as he'd always been a man of few words.

She turned around, and there was no one there. The only footprints were the ghosts of her boots.

Perhaps her worried Salem friends had been justified. 'You're spending too much time alone up there', they'd said when she'd refuse yet another social invitation. 'Maybe you should consider selling the place.' Where else did they expect her to be? They didn't understand. They couldn't know what it was like to walk around with a hole, to feel there was no point in getting out of bed every day—but she couldn't express that; they'd cry 'Intervention!' and pump her full of pills because they'd assume she was going to kill herself instead of *The love of my life just died, gimmie a minute*. She'd learned, after many months, that she didn't need her other life, so she'd sold their affectionately restored Federal Street saltbox instead.

Cape beach houses weren't cheap. They'd toured several homes in their price range, but had known 1938 Sea Wrack Trail was the one when their stroll along its shore yielded several heart-shaped stones. Even their low-ball offer had been accepted; like the wreck of the *Eastland*—despite hundreds dying trapped in its hull, it was righted and refurbished as a Navy training ship—the property had a tragic history. An old man taken by hurricane, a rip current drowning, and a writer who'd suicided; the ocean could be cruel. She and Frosch hadn't let that bother them; the prior owners had been desperate only because they'd lost everything in the crash. The cottage was her and Frosch's escape, their Octopus' Garden. A place of s'mores and Chianti at the fire pit, thrilling to the June dusk mating peents of the woodcocks, cozying with books against throw pillows embroidered with phrases like 'sandy toes & salty kisses'.

Not that there weren't unsettling moments. Sometimes, when Frosch was out fishing, she'd sense a whisper, spot a shadow, or find a wine glass knocked off the table or their just-made bed mussed. Still, it was the shore. The old cottage was a patchwork of renovations, late afternoon sun had an uncanny golden cast, and winds gusted suddenly.

While the neighborhood had few year-rounds—it was mostly vacation rentals—she liked that, especially in late spring, before the season started. From the roof deck, she could peer down the long street of dark, hulking house shapes; there was no light pollution, so the stars were clear, and so close she felt their brilliance. This place had a haptic quality, too; she could tactilely recall Frosch's coarse beard against her cheek and his gray chest hair tickle her nose, smell his coffee-whiskey scent on the bed sheets, hear his footfalls and even feel his thickness when she satisfied a sexual urge. The only thing she couldn't physically do, it seemed, was see him, and sometimes that longing was so intense her eyes actually ached.

The Tuesday before Memorial Day, she found three split hearts—all that same sickish fungal color. But this time, they were amuck in sea foam, like gobs of sputa the shade of dead skin flakes. She'd always been amused at people's pride in painting rooms sea foam green. The real stuff was not even close to that hue.

She plucked the pieces. As she made her way towards the wooden heart on a steel rod that marked her path over the dune, she was struck by the sudden appearance of tangles of washed-ashore eelgrass, bright India green and the texture of freshly washed butter lettuce. It ribboned down the line where surf met sand, and she didn't know why, but it struck her as a long strand of cursive writing. While walking along it, she fancied she could see letters: M. V. A.

Wait.

She was seeing letters. Letters that spelled out a word.

Letters that spelled out her name.

Mav.

Mav. Mavis was her given, but only one man in the world called her Mav.

Frosch.

Her breath caught and wind roared in her ears. She looked around the beach. A marooned catamaran; a forest green beach chair on its side; a supine crab, its yellowed underparts eaten away by God knew what. But no one else.

"Hello?"

Her feet shocked cold and wet—the tide had lapped over her.

Shit. She turned and stepped out of it.

Another drawn-out line of eelgrass.

sandy toes salty kisses

She burst into tears of joy. "It is you!"

Several minutes passed. Then, another wash, further down the beach.

I never left

She hadn't been this overjoyed since the day they got engaged, since their wedding day. My *God* this was exciting! He was really here, and he was really talking to her! She had to call someone and share! First she had to get her camera. Get photos. To prove it.

She started moving towards the path again. "I'll be right back!"

Ahead of her, another lengthy snarl unspooled on the sand.

don't go stay with me

Anyway, who would she call? Her former Salem neighbors? They'd insist she'd finally lost her mind.

"I've missed you so. Much!" She kneeled next to the words and let everything spill from her, how she cherished the stones, how she could feel him with her, how, desperately, she wished she could see him. "Is there any way you could show yourself to me?"

She waited; waited until just after dark.

There was no response.

It was, though, the beginning of many conversations on the sand. She went mid-morning and stayed until dusk. She brought coffee. She picnicked. She even poured champagne into two glasses, emptied his into the swell. Sometimes he'd warn her of trouble, like she needed a repairman to look at the gas range. But most times, she'd ask a question or tell a story, then count the wave crashes until an answer or response came ashore.

"Was it scary to die?"

no

"What is heaven like?"

here with you

"Remember when we watched *Let the Right One In* and I was so terrified I couldn't be alone for days so you didn't leave my side? I bet you don't miss that!"

I watch you

But every time she would ask to see him, she would get no answer, just a polite shift in conversation to something else.

In the house, she hearkened for the faintest whisper, welcomed the occasional shadow, chuckled at the playful knocking of wine glasses and rumpled bedding. She picked up the half-heart rocks, and even though they stank, treasured them as much as her whole stones; she even got a separate box to put them in.

Then, one night, as a storm was rolling in, the eelgrass spelled out:

I want you

She recognized that this would be terrifying for anyone else, but she knew those words were Frosch's way of asking for sex. That night, she felt his thickness inside her more powerfully than ever, and she allowed herself to cry out his name.

The next morning, a pebbly fluff cottoned the hardwood floors.

Their half dozen 'sandy toes & salty kisses' pillows had been knifed.

In the dining room, their framed wedding picture was shattered, the images of their faces poked with holes; in the kitchen, their wine glasses were little more than shards.

The true shock was in the sitting room. The chilly sea breeze fluttered the sheers as it whistled through the broken windows. Her treasure chest was splintered. Someone had hurled her whole heart-shaped stones through the panes; her collection littered the garden. The box of stinky halves was untouched.

She hadn't heard a thing.

She didn't know whether to be hurt, or scared, or angry. What the hell had happened? At the beach, she wasn't sure what to say at first. I'm sorry? What was she sorry for, exactly? They'd never quarreled when he was alive, so she couldn't imagine his death would've changed that. "Frosch, I... why are you breaking things? Are you mad at me? I mean... last night was... amazing. Wasn't it?"

She waited. One crash, two crashes. Three, four. Then the familiar skein of eelgrass.

leave

The response stunned her. "What do you mean?"

leave our house

"I just found you again. I'm staying right here."

it is time to move on

"To where? Stop this. You need to stop hurting our home. This is where we belong."

One crash, two crashes. Three, four.

you don't understand

He'd never said anything like that before. "I don't understand what?"

no longer want this

"We took a vow!"

only until death

Her insides tore: He was right.

"How can I fix this?"

Seven crashes this time.

you can't

She went numb.

Those had been his last words to her.

It'd been the night of a Harvest Moon; Frosch had insisted it was a good omen. Normally, she didn't mind that he fished waist deep when others cast from the shoreline, but that was during the day. She had a bad feeling about him doing it after dark.

"Predators come in at night."

"I've never had a problem." He'd jimmied into his bulldozer-yellow waders. "Sharks bump ya first."

"Just for tonight, can you fish from the beach?"

"Better catch." He'd winked and kissed her. "Back in two."

She'd eyed the sand dollar wall clock and noted to expect him at midnight.

Midnight came.

He didn't.

Twelve fifteen. She'd anticipated the clatter of his metal bucket any minute.

Twelve forty-five. He'd lost track of time, that was all.

One fifteen. If he said two hours, he usually meant two hours.

One thirty.

She'd found him on the beach, weak but alive, his legs gone, blood running into the surf like spilled ink. His mouth moved, and she put her ear against it, quelling her own sobs just enough so that she could detect the whisper,

"...you... can't... s..."

He never finished. He was gone.

She sat there with his head in her lap. Until the cold had drilled deep into her marrow. Until the tide returned and the sand collapsed beneath them, the undertow threatening to drag them both into the sea.

Now, another bundle of eelgrass repeated the message:

you can't change this

leave

It was like Frosch was dying all over again.

Something knocked, hard, against her boot.

Halves of heart shaped rocks, stinking and that foul color of rotten egg yolk. She hadn't found a whole one—pure white, brilliant pink, gray worn smooth—since this business had begun, and it hit her that this is what things were, now. Instead of her husband's warm body, kind words, and laughter, she had the cold sea, eelgrass ripped from its roots,

and the anxious counting of the waves in between responses that eventually, each day, stopped coming. Maybe, she thought, she should leave. This was no longer their escape, their Octopus' Garden. This was just another place that love had abandoned, haunted by what used to be.

"Okay," Mav said. "Maybe... you're right. I'll think about it. But... if this is the end, then, I want to see you. Please. Just let me see you, just one more time."

She waited.

NO

It was a vice in her chest.

"Why?" It wasn't really a word, but an unintelligible sound, full of loss and rage, like an animal who's lost her mate.

The wind bit Mav's cheeks as she collapsed onto the sand, felt its damp press through her jeans. A piping plover flirted with the tide. She hugged her arms and waited, but there was no response. Every hour, it seemed, the putrid halves of heart-shaped rocks rolled up next to her.

She refused to touch them.

The day's heat waned, and the uncanny gold of the sun darkened. She felt the first nip of night when she saw it—finally—a rope of green ribbons, trundling in the burgeoning waves. The surf coughed it onto the beach and receded.

She struggled to her feet, towards the message that stretched across the sand.

I am not who you think

About the Author:

Kristi Petersen Schoonover's stories have appeared in many publications, most recently *Generation X-ed*, *Horror Library Volume 7*, *Wicked Creatures*, *Crow & Cross Keys*, *Dancing in the Shadows: An Anne Rice Tribute Anthology*, *Out of Time: True Paranormal Encounters and Dead Stars & Stone Arches*. She holds an MFA from Goddard College, is founding editor of the journal *34 Orchard*, and is a member of the New England Horror Writers and the Horror Writers Association.

Website: [Kristi Petersen Schoonover](#)

Red Bird on Cherry Lane | Tina Swain

No need for binoculars today, the feathers exuded a crimson that verged on black against the snowfall. There was no reason for her to be so close. There was no reason for her to be here at all, she had no song, no partner, nest, or appetite. The one characteristic she maintained was a pattern. If she stays settled overnight on a chosen parcel, life as they knew it ceased to exist. She was the purveyor of sadness, spreader of death. Her beauty was astonishing.

I have silently witnessed her design for 3 months and said nothing about it as my street has diminished to almost extinction, silently penning about my subject like an analyst. The treetop examiner had become the observed and I think she has finally noticed. Knowing what she is capable of, am I the only one to notice? How many other's notes have been disregarded as fiction, the ravings of a lunatic? If this is what death appears to be, she has set her gaze upon my expansive oak. I hear her wings pulsate like a heartbeat, then nothing but a hush, and know soon the siren's song will saturate the calm like a familiar melody and there is nothing I can do about it.

About the Author:

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

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I've always loved old houses. Growing up in Irvine, California, however, generally meant cookie cutter domicile construction... and our home was no exception, nestled deep in the heart of southern California's Orange County. The OC. It was only during summer vacations to Mom's hometown in Seminole, OK, was I exposed to houses actually older than me (and my grandparents for that matter). Several of Mom's family members lived in ancient (at least from my perspective) homes with creaky floorboards, musty odors, and whispers of bygone eras. I enthusiastically absorbed all of it, deciding—at the ripe old age of nine—I'd buy something similar when I grew up.

But life got in the way as it usually does; my now ex-spouse hated old, so our first—and only—home was a new build in yet another sterile OC master planned community. Yuck.

Divorced from the ball and chain five years later, I left her the home (and pretty much everything else except our pit bull, Parvo), accepting a position congruent with my degree and work experience at a landscape architecture firm in the Portland, ME area. It was about as far away as I, Colin Rasmussen, could get without leaving the country. Quite a move as I'd never been east of the Mississippi.

The company agreed to put my canine and me up in a local hotel for three months (if needed) until suitable living arrangements could be made. I subsequently procured the services of a realtor, Lucinda Kramer, providing her my requisite parameters. On weekends she showed me older homes (and only older homes) for sale in the area. The third week was a charm, a quaint three-bedroom (circa 1899) in an established wooded suburb.

About six weeks later, early fall, Parvo and I moved into our new digs and began life as Maine Yankees (without the accent, of course). The twelve hundred square-foot home's ample treed backyard provided my dog with abundant space to roam, explore, and mark—a much—improved life for him versus the previous residence's claustrophobic concrete rear patio. Proudly marketed as a low maintenance backyard by the developer.

As I relaxed on the rear wooden deck that first Sunday of occupancy, sipping a steaming hot cup of freshly brewed morning java, I noticed Parvo digging frantically in the back right corner of the yard beneath an ancient twisted tree.

"Parvo; stop that!" I yelled. Not heeding my commands, the stubborn pit bull continued to frantically dig under the shade of the fall-tinted leaves.

I quickly leapt out of the lawn chair and toward the dig site issuing directives that fell on deaf ears. About the time I arrived, Parvo had ceased digging and began barking, looking up at me expectantly, tail wagging.

"Bad dog, Parvo; bad dog." It was then I noticed a peculiar box lying at the bottom of Parvo's excavation. About the size of a ten-ounce box of cookies, its bluish-silver case was inscribed with the words, *Time Capsule*. I reached down into the hole grasping the box; it was much lighter than expected, seemingly almost floating out of my hand. "I'll deal with you later, Parvo," I scolded, turning toward the house. "Maybe I can teach you to cover up the holes you dig." The expression on the pit bull's homely mug told me that wasn't happening. Ever.

We hurriedly passed through the home's back door into the kitchen; as I pulled out a chair beneath the dining nook's table, I noticed the box had no visible seams. "Odd," I muttered under my breath. I sat there for a good minute, attempting to open the object—still discerning no seam even after close scrutiny with a magnifying glass retrieved from a kitchen drawer directly behind the table.

As I turned the mysterious box over and over in my hands, a funny beep appeared to emanate from its insides. Startled, I dropped the weird metal-like thing abruptly on the table. I couldn't believe my eyes as I watched the container slowly open across a seam somehow missed. At that moment, Parvo yelped, running full speed out the doggie door and into the far reaches of the backyard.

I hesitantly peered inside. It contained three items, two of which I had no clue as to what they were—one about the size of an ink pen; the other configured into the shape of a standard smartphone. Like the box, both were constructed of the same bluish-silver material and seamless. No observable buttons/controls/markings were present.

The third object pulled from the container was a tightly folded piece of what I initially assumed was paper. As I held it in my hand, it began unfolding itself like magic. Before I knew it, I was grasping an eight and a half by eleven-inch document constructed of nothing I'd ever felt before—a smooth metallic texture, slightly cold to the touch. I perused its message.

Colin Rasmussen,

I'm generating this note in almost forgotten script form. The handwriting is your own.

Gasping, I let go of the paper. *What the hell is going on here?* It floated like a feather onto the table, script facing down. To my utter astonishment the backside was a photo of me, as I appeared at age nine, smiling and waving ... in 3-D,

dressed in some oddly futuristic garb best described as an aluminum foil-like toga. With a shriek I sprinted out the back door, joining Parvo in the yard, who'd stopped yelping, but shivered sporadically.

After about ten minutes, I gathered the courage to return inside, curiosity trumping fear. I couldn't say the same for my dog; Parvo remained resolutely outside. I sat down at the table, flipping the strange document over and continued reading where I'd left off.

This is a time capsule from the future—your future. I'll not go into detail as to how, you would never understand in your current state. To put it succinctly, you've (I've) been sent back to this era to ensure the present (your future) isn't altered. Another traveler from a rogue nation has been commissioned to do just that; you've (I've) been provided the weapons to ensure she doesn't complete her task. If the mission fails, life as I (you) know it will cease to exist in my present (your future) time ... for Earthlings and every other creature in this galaxy. The complexity of the situation is beyond the scope of this letter. Just know it's extremely dire.

Field research indicates that roughly ninety percent of those sent back to this time period cannot remember the mission, who they were (are), or how to utilize the provided weaponry. In these cases, false memories implanted in the mind prior to the voyage is the only barrier against insanity. You'll know your status by sundown; if you can't recall by then, I suggest you (I) run; hide in some obscure part of the world; try to make a life. There are others like you (me) and hopefully one will recall enough to complete the mission, but I pray it's you (me). The evil one won't care if you (I) remember or not; she'll obliterate you (me) just the same.

Sincerely,

Colin Rasmussen / September 11, 2501

I re-read the note three times in more or less a stupor. "This has to be some kind of cruel joke!" I screamed to the walls. No reply—the walls silently agreeing with me, I was crazy—mad as a hatter. Instead of contemplating the situation further, I immediately opted for the cowardly Plan B, pulling out Jack Daniels and self-medicating the remainder of the day. Maybe not the best idea for catalyzing memories of the future, but so what? After a while I cared not. Parvo, however, did, refusing to venture inside even when tempted with a healthy portion of last night's leftover pot roast. Instead, he settled behind that old twisted tree in the corner of the backyard.

Hours passed at an excruciatingly slow pace. Facing a drunken sunset, I staggered to my bedroom, the deadline for futuristic memory revelation about to expire. Even with the room spinning, I drifted off into an uneasy slumber replete with horrific nightmares of a recurring galactic apocalypse.

I awakened suddenly early Monday morning, the alarm clock buzzing incessantly through my aching head. *I'll be calling in sick today*, I told myself, eyes still closed. As I slowly fluttered open my lids, she came into focus, a tall woman dressed in that now familiar aluminum foil-like toga standing at the foot of my bed, a smartphone object (similar to the one in the time capsule) clutched in her left hand.

"I arrived here just before sundown," she roared. "After I finish my business with you, I'll change into some period specific clothing. There are others to tend to before I can begin my true assignment; I'll need to blend in with these primitives."

I screamed my lungs out of commission, frozen in fear.

Just as she was aiming the device at my head (a sardonic grin on her face), the canine came barreling at her from behind, mouth fully open, eyes ablaze. Jumping up on her shoulders, Parvo wrestled the baffled assassin to the floor, her screams muted as the pit bull locked its vice-like jaws into her neck. I shrieked again briefly before passing out, the copious amounts of ingested alcohol far from being out of my system.

An indeterminate amount of time later, I awakened to Parvo's slobbering licks sliming my face. I hugged him fiercely, my head throbbing. "Was it all just a drunken phantasm, Parvo?"

As I right angled up, the pool of liquid crimson at the foot of my bed provided the answer. The sole evidence of yesterday's horror. No corpse, no box, and no note ... no anything remained but a terrorizing memory I'd never shake.

I looked at Parvo and said, "Could it be that even with all the incomprehensively advanced technology five hundred years in the distance, it was the jaws of a lowly pit bull that saved the galactic future?"

Parvo, incensed I referred to him as *lowly*, wasn't talking.

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* has recently been published in the Murder! Mystery! Mayhem! anthology. Songs, such as *Sideswiped*, appear on conventional venues like Amazon and Apple Music.

Dinner with Mama | *Evan Purcell*

Mama raised me. She raised me from the dead. It was kinda painful.

I didn't remember what stuff was like when I was dead. I'm sure things were all glowy and nice. It's probably best that I didn't remember.

I just remember waking up. In the mud. Alone.

I pulled myself out of the ground. It was a good thing that a part of my nose was gone, because I probably smelled bad.

"Hello!" I called. "Hello?"

I didn't hear anything. Not even an echo.

It took me hours to walk back home from the cemetery. I got lost twice. The neighborhood changed a little since I died. There was more graffiti.

It was hard walking that whole way. My knees and ankles kept making crack noises.

When I got to my house, my heart felt warm and good. This was my house. This was a safe place. And then I remembered that Mom and me had this big, awful fight right before I died. She was loud and shouty. She was always so mad that I hung out so much by the train tracks.

I was a little afraid about knocking on the door.

But then I did. This was my home.

"Mama," I called. "Mama? It's me. It's Delilah." I slowly opened the door. It creaked. I didn't see her, but I heard a few noises from the kitchen, like a gasp and a crashing plate.

"Delilah? It's really you? You're back?"

I nodded, but of course she didn't hear that so then I shouted, "Yeah, it's me!"

Mama ran into the living room. She looked at me and smiled. She didn't even recoil. I'm sure I looked gross and green and dotted with missing bits, but that didn't matter to Mama. She grabbed me, picked me up, and gave me a bear hug. It hurt my bones, but I didn't tell her that.

"I never thought I'd see you again," Mama said. "I didn't think this would work. I'm so sorry you woke up by yourself. I'm sorry you had to dig yourself out."

"It's okay," I said. "It didn't hurt." Well, maybe a little.

Actually, besides a little pain, I didn't really feel anything. At all. Why didn't I feel anything? Why didn't my heart swell when I saw my mama? When she hugged me, why didn't I hug her back?

"I saved all your stuff," Mama said. "You can take a shower and then wear one of your nicest dresses to make you feel good. You're only back for a day. This spell will only work for a day, so I think you should wear your nicest dress. The one with polka dots."

"Sure, Mama."

Mama ran off into the kitchen and gave me enough time to shower, comb my remaining hair, and put on my dress that she liked so much. The water was real hot. And I tried not to brush my hair too hard, because pieces of it were falling out. I knew I looked gross. But I didn't want to look too gross.

After I put on my dress, I looked in the mirror. I didn't really scare myself, so that was a good thing. I wasn't as green as I thought, and my eyes were only a little yellow. Mama wouldn't be too scared of me.

But that wasn't what I was really worried about. I wasn't really worried about Mama. I was worried about me. Why wasn't I happier to see her? Why wasn't I happier to be here? Why did I feel so empty?

When I walked back into the living room, I felt that the air was warmer, but I didn't smell anything. I think I was supposed to smell something. I think I was supposed to say that it smelled real good.

"Mama? What's that smell? It smells real good."

Mama couldn't tell that I was lying. "It's your favorite," she said. "Meatloaf. You love meatloaf."

That's true. I did. But I probably couldn't taste anything anyway. I could barely move my tongue. "Mama?" I said.

"Yes, honey."

"Thank you. I'm glad we could have one more night together."

I sat at the dinner table. Mama put a big plate of steaming meatloaf in front of me. It looked very warm and very good.

"Well?" Mama said. "Are you gonna eat?"

"Yeah," I said. I started eating. Like I had expected, I didn't taste anything. I couldn't taste anything. I could barely chew. I ate three bites before Mama asked, "Do you like it?"

"Oh yes, Mama. It's real good."

"You know, Delilah, I don't have you back for long. So I want to make sure you're happy. And I want to say I love you."

"I love you too, Mama," I said. But I didn't really feel that. I just felt blank and a little achy.

"Good," Mama said.

So I ate a little more. I didn't know if it was my imagination, or if I was trying really hard, but I think I started tasting some of the spices. I tasted a little pepper. I tasted some of the ketchup, too.

At first, we just ate in silence. But then we started talking about everything that had changed since the day I died. Mama started Pilates, whatever that was. She was dating a nice dentist man named Rick. All my friends graduated third grade and moved on to fourth. My cousins went camping for the first time. And everyone was missing me lots.

Mama asked me if I remembered what it was like to be dead, and I said, "No, but it was probably great. Once I go back there, I'm sure it'll be nice and fun." This made Mama happy. It made me happy too, saying it out loud.

And it was real funny too, because the more I ate, the more I could taste my meatloaf. The more I could feel it on my tongue. It was spicy and good.

"Mama, I lied to you before. About the food. But I can taste it now and it tastes delicious."

"That's good," she said. "Thanks for being honest."

Pretty soon, I ate it all up. And I felt warm and full and I didn't feel hollow anymore. I knew that Mama loved me and I loved her back. It probably wasn't because of the meatloaf, but it might have been.

"Okay," I said. "I'm ready to go back to the cemetery now."

Mama didn't look at me for a long time. She stared at her plate. It was empty too. Finally, she looked up, she made her mouth smile real big, and she said, "Okay. I'll get the car keys."

We didn't talk a lot on the drive to the cemetery, but we didn't have to. When we got out of the car, Mama held my hand and walked me back to my grave.

"Thanks," I said. "Today meant a lot to me."

Mom didn't say anything. She just gave me another hug. A big, warm bear hug. And this time... This time I felt it.

About the Author:

Evan Purcell is the creator of Mashed Up, a horror anthology podcast. He writes the Karma Tandin: Monster Hunter book series for young readers. He also travels the world, working with young writers everywhere from Bhutan to Zanzibar.

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Ded Moroz | Aaron Grierson

Running, I search for the way out of the Old Wood as the sun sinks prematurely. I cry out, collapsing beneath a horrid gust of wind, knees crunching into the snow. I shudder in sobs, huddling beneath a great pine. I wipe the tears on my wool mitts.

Time passes as I lay incapacitated, finally spotting an old man in a great blue robe which glimmers. He smiles, extending a massive blue mitt and I reach up to meet it. The smile widens as my arm stiffens, like ice.

"You should have listened," he whispers gravely.

The world quiets.

Baby Shoes | *Aaron Grierson*

Baby shoes lay on the marble countertop, still packaged. Beside, the receipt juts backwards revealing a purchase date of last winter. The kitchen is clean, but dim, lemony fresh scent twisting into copper. The wooden table has been set for one, TV dinner cooling steamlessly.

The pool of blood is still moist, knife blade beneficently pointing towards the sink. Drip, drip, drip catches the toddler's attention, who crawls toward the counter's edge, peeking slowly to gaze at the epicentre of the earthquake. A giant has fallen still, limbs twisted without intention. The baby babbles unaware, applauding the grotesque performance.

About the Author:

A gamer, lover of autumn, its dark histories, and horror media, Aaron Grierson's work often blends folk elements into society's love of technology. He is a First Reader for Flash Fiction Online and former Senior Articles Editor at The Missing Slate. Always hungry for more literature, references and puns inevitably sneak into his musings. Previous publications appear in The Missing Slate, Marisa's Recurring Nightmares, and are forthcoming in Polar Borealis and Polar Starlight.

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Tribute Tower | *Maggie D Brace*

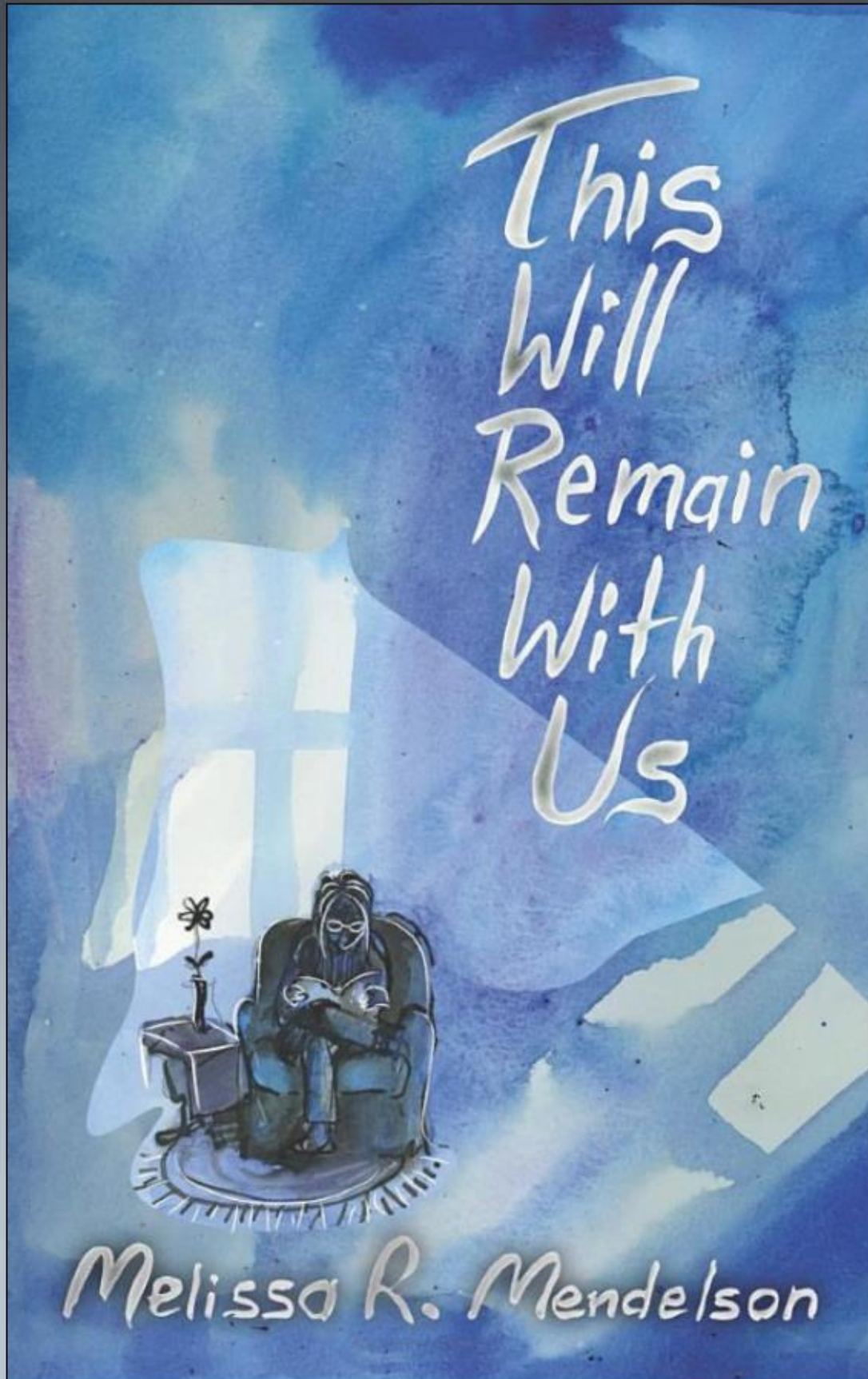
Tucking her hand under his arm, he escorted her towards the confessional. She made to enter through the penitent's curtains, but gripping her hand tighter he unlatched the priest's door, led her in, fumbling with a latch on the back wall. The girl pulled back as a musty aroma wafted out. Peering in, she spied a series of circular stone steps leading upward. As if sensing her hesitation, he placed a guiding hand on her shoulder and propelled her up the steps. She mentally began to count each stair. This tower seemed to have no landing, and no windows. It was impossible to tell how high it went. She had already counted to fifty several times, and realized they had already climbed at least four hundred steps. The calf muscles in her strong legs began to burn and beads of perspiration dripped down the nape of her neck. She tripped on a protruding stone, pitched forward and scraped her shin on the next stair. She let out a whimper of pain as the sure hands of the priest righted her and insistently pushed on her shoulder to reconvene their ascent. Finally reaching the summit, he shoved her spent body through an open portal. A great slavering maw of gnashing sharp teeth, row upon row, leading to a cavernous tunnel descended on her. The door slammed behind her as a slice of sharp tooth embedded in her shoulder blade just below where the priest's insistent push had been. She felt herself slowly lifted up as another set of teeth grabbed her torso, and yet another her thighs, yet she felt no pain. She began a free fall down the gut of the beast as the priest wearily began his descent. The beast would be satisfied till next year.

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 remains a humble scrivener and avid reader



*There was no Normal waiting ahead.
There was only the Frontline.*



Available on Amazon

His finger pushed the button. The bottom of the bed raised up. He cursed under his breath, pushing the other button. The bottom of the bed fell back. He slammed his hand against both buttons, and the bed shuddered. He slumped back, exclaiming his frustration with one word. "Fuck."

"Language." A nurse with red hair walked over to the bed and pushed a button on the side, raising the front part up. "Better?" She adjusted his pillow, sliding it down toward his back. "Dinner will be coming soon."

"Is he?" The little boy stared at her, and she flinched. "Is he coming? I've been waiting all day."

"Why don't you enjoy the good news that you got today?" She patted his head, but he pushed her hand away.

"I want him."

"I'm here." A tall man wearing a long coat walked into the room. In his hands was a fedora hat, and the boy laughed when he saw it. "What's so funny?"

"Could you put the hat on?" He watched the tall man place the hat on his head. "No, your real head." His smile faded as the tall man removed the hat, once again holding it in his hands. "You're no fun." He looked over at the nurse. "You can go." He watched the nurse with the red hair step away. "Don't forget what I said," but she didn't answer him.

"Shouldn't you be happy with your good news?"

"Not yet." He watched the tall man pull up a chair near the bed.

"Why not?" He placed his hat near the boy's foot but noticed the look on his face. He moved the hat over to his lap. "You should be thrilled, and I don't know why you asked for me. You have no need to confess now."

"But I must confess," the boy said. "You see, I can't live with the truth. You need to take it from me. Please."

"What kind of truth are you so desperate to release? You're just a kid."

"I'm not a kid. I'm almost twelve."

"I'm sorry. My mistake, but you are so young. Most don't call on a dragonfly to take the truth from them until they're much, much older."

"But I did something terrible," the boy whispered. "Something that I don't want to live with."

"So, tell it to me then."

"Do you have ears?" The boy stared at him. "Are those your real ears?" He pointed at his face.

"Lean close, and whisper your truth. I will take it from you."

He did as the dragonfly said. He leaned in close and whispered his confession. He couldn't tell if the dragonfly reacted to his words. There was no expression on his face.

As he leaned back in his bed, the dragonfly said, "I don't believe you."

"I'm telling you the truth. Can't you tell that it is the truth?"

"It feels like the truth, but it doesn't make sense. You made your older sister walk into traffic and get hit by a car?"

"Killed by a car," he corrected him. "And yes, I did."

"Why would you do that?"

"Because I didn't like her, and she always gave me a hard time. I had enough and told her to walk into traffic, and I hoped she got hit by a car. And she did."

"Coincidence," the dragonfly said. "See? You have nothing to confess." He pushed his chair back and stood up. "Enjoy your good news."

"I've done other things," he said. "I made a boy, a bully at school, stick his finger in a pencil sharpener, and he nearly took his finger off. I told a bus driver that it would be great, if we went ice skating, so we skated on the ice going to school. And we almost died."

The tall man sat back down. "You sound like a master manipulator." There was nothing nice about how he said that.

"I'm just an apprentice right now. Do you believe me?"

"Yes, I do, and something tells me that you won't stop there."

"No, I won't, but I don't want anyone to know what I am. Just you."

"Why?"

"Isn't it obvious?" He leaned closer, staring into the dragonfly's face. "What do you really look like?"

"Why do you want me to carry this truth?"

"Is it true that if you tell a lie, you die?"

"Yes, so why do you want me to carry the truth of what you really are?"

“Green Jell-O,” he yelled out.

Now, the dragonfly looked confused. “Green Jell-O?”

Suddenly, the nurse with red hair buried a syringe into the dragonfly’s neck. He struggled under her grasp, but she was too strong. And she ripped the syringe out.

“I don’t want you to carry the truth about me.” The little boy leaned close to him again. “I want the truth to die with you.”

The dragonfly struggled to speak, grasping at his throat. His face melted off and splashed against the floor. Yellowish-green eyes stared at the boy in front of him. A sound emanated throughout the room, and then the dragonfly slumped back into his seat, his wings rose and then fell down.

“What was that sound,” the nurse asked.

He smiled and said, “A dragonfly’s gasp. Now, dispose of that. I want to enjoy my good news. Alone.” He watched the nurse pull the dragonfly from his chair and drag him out of the room. “I have the rest of my life to plan out.”

About the Author:

Melissa R. Mendelson is a Horror and Science-Fiction author. Her short stories have been published by Sirens Call Publications, Dark Helix Press and Transmundane Press. Her short stories have also been featured in several publications on the website, Medium. She is currently working on finishing her Horror novel, *Ghost in the Porcelain*.

Track Seventeen | *Mary Parker*

Gage Michaels woke with a splitting headache. His mouth was so dry his tongue felt like a heavy block of sandpaper. His eyes burned to the point that he hesitated to open them. He grimaced and the stretch of his lips sent scorching pain through his chin. He raised a shaky hand and found his bottom lip was doubled in size; the tender skin split at least an inch. Somewhere in the distance: a low hum. He slowly opened his eyes against the throb in his temples.

He’d had many mornings like this. If you could call it morning—the blazing sun through the blinds signaled late afternoon.

This is the last time I party that hard, he promised himself.

It was not the first time he’d made that promise. He knew it would not be the last. His words were hollow, meaningless, arid like the desert in his mouth. Nothing meant anything to him anymore except the roar of the crowd and the heat of alcohol as it scalded the canker sores on his cheeks. He needed the adoration of the fans, needed the iron tang of blood on his tongue.

Gage gingerly reached out and searched the coffee table for the bottle of water he’d left there the night before. His neck would be stiff all day from sleeping on the couch. His fingers found the plastic ridges and he brought the opened bottle to his parched lips, careful not to hit the swollen side.

The water filled his mouth, strange. Before he could register the foreign taste, a soft chunk fell against his tongue.

Gage sat upright and spit the object into his empty hand.

It was a fingertip.

He quickly looked to the bottle of water, the plastic streaked with caked on blood—nearly empty, the few ounces of water were pink. Three more fingertips rested at the bottom. The fingernails were painted bright blue.

Gage’s mind reeled as he remembered the girl. What was her name?

He’d picked her out of the front row: young, petite, dyed black hair and two lip piercings. She wore platform combat boots with fishnet stockings and a black tulle skirt, a tattered shirt for his band knotted under her breasts. Her fingernails were painted bright blue. Her eyes were the same otherworldly blue, shadowed in black and gray glitter.

He gave her a guitar pick and winked at her as they left the stage before the encore. As they chugged water and wiped sweat from their foreheads at the side of the stage, he told his tech to give her a backstage pass. He’d taken her back to the hotel suite, two six-packs under his arm. He’d never asked her if she was old enough to drink. It didn’t matter.

Gage knew exactly what he was going to do with her.

What was her name?

He sat the bottle of water back on the coffee table and walked to the bathroom mirror to look at himself. The harsh fluorescent light accentuated the lines years of alcohol and drugs had burrowed into his forehead and the corners of his eyes. He wore only boxers, his meticulously toned abs splattered with blood. The tuft of blond hair on top of his head was matted red. His lip didn't look as bad as it felt. He ran the faucet and cupped his hand to drink some water.

She'd hit him with the television remote—that's what had cut his lip.

Once they'd gotten buzzed, smoking and drinking, he'd gotten her top off to reveal the black lace bra underneath. Gage told her to lay on the bed and she happily obliged. He went to his suitcase and looked at her over his shoulder.

"I've got some new toys for us to play with."

He smiled at her and got the tone just right: honeyed mischief. She smiled back and licked her lips as he stripped down to his boxers.

Gage strode confidently to the bedside, the knife resting against the small of his back, cold and crisp against his skin, held tight in his waistband. He bent down and kissed her deeply, one hand cradling the soft flesh of her face, the other gripping the knife. Then he brought the blade into her thigh, right above the knee. She screamed and grabbed for the gaping wound as he pulled the blade away. The panic in her eyes was electric. He let out a guttural roar and threw his arms out, the triumphant pose he often took on stage. In that moment, she grabbed the remote and swung it at his face with all the force she could muster, splitting his lip.

She gingerly got up from the bed and limped to the door as fast as she could. She didn't get more than a few steps, her fishnet tights slipping on the tile floor.

"You bitch," he spat, and pushed her into the wall.

Her head cracked against it with a sickening thud. She fell to the floor in a heap. Gage rolled her over and saw her eyes had glazed, staring back at him, empty. Blood started to pour from her scalp. Her skull had cracked. Gage slit her throat and watched the crimson line emerge. He bent down and used the tip of the knife to pry her eyeballs from their sockets. He massaged the orbs in his hands, reveling in the rage as he imagined how he would sing about this later. His mind began to rattle with prose and theatricality. He knew exactly how he would sing about this beautiful girl.

He'd be backlit in blue. The same blue as her eyes.

Gage walked to his suitcase and retrieved a small pair of shears. He took her fingertips one at a time. The snap of bone was like the dead thump of a snare drum. A melody sprang from his throat, delicate, like a lullaby. Gage hummed and mumbled to himself in an indistinct singsong as he mutilated her corpse.

Blood had pooled on the tile floor. He stepped into the puddle and stomped his bare feet to a beat only he could hear. Sparks of crimson painted his ankles with each stomp. The music thundered in his ears, a gory symphony only he could compose.

He outstretched his arms again: I am the megastar, the idol. He could hear the roar of the imaginary crowd below him, always below him.

Martha. That was her name.

Somewhere, a distant hum like the reverb of amplifiers pulled Gage from his memories.

Gage retrieved his cell from the coffee table and dialed his manager, who answered on the first ring.

"Gage, I've been waiting for you to call me all morning. You must be down at the lobby this evening; we've got an overnight flight."

"I've done it again," Gage whispered.

"I know. You've got three hours to write it all down and get out of there. I'll have it taken care of." The line went dead.

Gage sighed and picked up his acoustic guitar from its revered spot next to the bed. She'd be the final track for his new album, each song a demented love letter to his women of the road. Since he'd adopted this creative format five years ago, his band reached a level of success they'd only dreamt of. Their last two albums had each gone to number one. Multiple arena tours across the globe gave him plenty of inspiration.

This album would be the longest one yet—Martha was track seventeen.

About the Author:

Mary Parker is a horror author and poet from Southern Illinois. A novella, *The Endless Hallway*, and a deliciously dark anthology, *Sweet Nightmares*, are available now in paperback and eBook.

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

As Tommy Knight's car pulled up to the record store, he thought of Lennon and Cobain. Tommy was certain he belonged with them—one of the *greats*. It had been a long time since someone had called him that though. When the band first took off, he was young and fresh, everyone wanted a piece of him. Fans camped outside the ticket box for days when he came to town. His music held the top of the charts hostage, occupying the sets of disc jockeys all over the world. Then, the songs lost their heart. 'Same old shit with a different melody', they said. The world's infatuation with him faded as fast as teenage love, and overnight, he became something worse than a *hack* or a *has-been*. He was forgotten.

Over the years, he convinced himself that wasn't the end. He knew there was a future where he was on top again, a day when the world fell back in love with him. The days mounted though, and suddenly those days turned into years. Time was running out when an old song whispered in his ear, "*No one loves you when you're old and gray, but everyone loves you when you're six feet in the ground.*" After that revelation, Tommy decided he had one chance to resurrect his dream. All true legends die young after all—that's immortality.

The price of immortality was half of everything Tommy had. The other half, which should be plenty if they weren't reckless, would go to his wife and three children. The money would carry them through the rest of their lives in the event that his plan did not work. If it did work, the profits would feed his family for generations. It was a good deal in his mind. They would live comfortably, and he would join the long list of legends ripped away too soon.

After the news of his death broke, the world's heart would ache for him. The radio would blast his songs all week and everyone would play them loud, like they were meant to be played. Eventually, they would devour the unreleased pieces he left unfinished—the ones he crafted to foreshadow his untimely death. It didn't matter if they were good or not. Those songs were sprinkled with the magic of a question: *What could have been?* His name and genius would be synonymous again, and he'd finally take back his dream. All Tommy had to do was sign his name for the man in black.

When his driver opened the door, Tommy stepped over the curb outside the store. The partially illuminated sign above the entrance that read, *CORDS*, made it clear to him that the store was on life-support. It was the kind of place where a member of the *B-team* hosted signings, a last ditch effort at enough publicity to make another month's rent. These days Tommy wasn't even a *B-teamer* though.

A single file line that didn't even wrap around the building awaited him. His fans waited patiently with their records tucked under their arms and their posters rolled into neat tubes. When he started toward them, they clapped at him as if he'd just parred the ninth hole. The ones who didn't react, Tommy knew well. *Autograph poachers*. They flipped through their phones or checked their watches, waiting like it was a job to do—just something to finish a collection or flip for a few bucks on the internet.

It was nowhere near the mania his presence once conjured. The sight of him used to generate screams that could be heard for miles. Grown men waved t-shirts with his face on it like flags of surrender. Women grabbed him as he walked by, a barrage of pens and records hitting him at every turn. Thinking about that kind of hysteria was like remembering an old drug he'd quit. He longed for the high, the exhilaration of being the center of the world. *Soon*, he told himself.

Tommy waved to a woman who took her young son's hand and waved it limply in his direction. A few others yelled hello, but most of them just got their pens and markers ready to go. Only a few of them seemed genuinely excited to see him. As he scanned each of the faces, he spotted the man in black.

The man was an ordinary figure, someone who could blend in and disappear in a larger crowd. In the sparse line though, he stuck out like a suspect in a lineup. Dark round rimmed glasses covered his eyes, their wiry frame clinging to the bridge of his hooked nose for dear life. The black hood around his head swallowed his face like a snake's half digested meal. A long bushy beard covered his cheeks. With a record secured in his armpit, he shoved his hands into the pouch of his sweatshirt, and Tommy knew exactly what they reached for.

Tommy had met the man once before. They made a deal in a parking garage a few blocks from Tommy's house, one that was consummated with two suitcases full of cash and a copy of the first record his band, The Knights, ever recorded. Tommy thought his end of the bargain was more than generous. After all, it offered more than money. It included a ticket to fame too—to forever be known as the man who shot rockstar Tommy Knight.

As Tommy moved along the line, he found it strange how unafraid he was. He pounded on death's door—begging to be let in—and he couldn't be happier. There would be pain, but a fleeting moment of sacrifice was well worth the after-life he was heading toward. He hoped he'd be able to see it, or at least hear it. Whether as an angel or ghost, he wanted to lie back and *turn up the dial*, play the world's love for him like a great record—loud, so that every inch of the universe could hear his swan song. He imagined his songs being sung by crowds that had gathered to mourn around the world, all of their voices blending together into one beautiful melody that was just for him.

The woman with the child was still flapping the kid's hand around. Tommy went to them and laughed at the relief in the kid's eyes when his mother let go to get a picture of Tommy with her phone. The boy's face twisted with puzzlement as he eyed Tommy like some distant relative he was supposed to know. The mother motioned for her son to step closer and his cheeks went crimson when Tommy put an arm around him for the photo. *Take a few*, Tommy thought, *those pictures are about to be worth a hell of a lot to the media in a few minutes*. When the mother was done, she handed Tommy a record. He took it, and stared at the last album his band released before the other members decided they didn't need him anymore. *Bastards*. When he signed it, he made sure to run the marker over each of their faces.

Tommy handed the record back. "Take care of that one," he said, and winked at the boy before he made his way down the line.

He took his time. He even made small talk with some of the people he made out to be *true* fans. One woman told him that she listened to his music on the way to and from work every day. He thought the media might interview her when they arrived on the scene.

All along, the man in black waited patiently. He stayed still until the moment Tommy finished signing a t-shirt for a young woman ahead of him in line. Only then did the man's hands begin to fidget within his sweatshirt. He staggered his feet like a boxer as Tommy drew close. Tommy was only steps away when a young man jumped between them, his face popping into Tommy's line of sight like a game of peek-a-boo.

A mess of curly brown hair was plastered to the young man's head like a helmet. His face was pale and his lips were pursed so tightly that all the pink had vanished. He seemed sickly, but his eyes told a different story. There was bright light in each of them, and he stared at Tommy like someone caught in the midst of a daydream.

Tommy knew that look. He had encountered it thousands of times during his years at the top. This was the first time in a long time though. It filled Tommy's stomach with warmth and he stood up a little straighter. He smiled at the young man, and that was when he noticed the record clutched tightly against his chest. It was Tommy's first record, the one that had catapulted him to fame like a shooting star.

Tommy held out his hands, and after a moment, the young man unclenched the record and let Tommy take it. Tommy ran his fingers along the smooth surface of the cover. They danced over the picture of him and his three bandmates. They stood with their backs against a brick wall, and stared at the camera with a confidence that Tommy knew now was naive. Tommy could tell the record was an original. It was probably very close in the evolutionary line to the one he had given the man in black. The record was special. So was the young man—a true fan.

"Who do you want me to make it out to?" Tommy asked.

The young man's face wrinkled and twisted as if he wasn't sure whether words or vomit crawled up his throat. He curled his hands into tight balls and steadied himself. "Scotty," he spit out with the elegance of an out of tune note. Then his lips relaxed into a thin smile that allowed the blood in his face to flow again.

Tommy took out his own marker and slid the point along the record's sleeve. *Play it loud, Scotty*, he wrote. Then he signed his name and even dated it at the bottom so anyone who saw the record would know immediately how special it was. Tommy was certain that particular record would be worth a fortune some day. Something told him that it would never be sold though. This record was worth more than money.

Tommy handed the record back to Scotty and said, "Play it loud." He patted Scotty on the shoulder and walked away.

"Mr. Knight!" Scotty called out. Tommy turned and saw Scotty grinning ear to ear, hugging the record again. "Your music saved my life," Scotty said. Then his face quivered. He shut his eyes tight, determined, and blurted, "Thank you."

Tommy stayed still, his eyes fixed on Scotty. He wasn't sure exactly what Scotty meant by that, but he thought it was the best compliment he had ever gotten. Tommy had a feeling of peace that was better than any

high he had ever experienced. *What better way to go out than that?* Tommy nodded at Scotty as if he understood, and then went to the man in black.

Standing before the man in black was like meeting the Grim Reaper himself. The man had no reaction. No smile or frown. He was all business as he pulled the record out from under his arm and offered it to Tommy. He took it, and signed his life away on the cover.

"Is this all you need?" Tommy asked. The man nodded. He took the record back and Tommy left him.

As Tommy moved away, he heard the sound of sneakers shuffling on pavement. Then there was a metallic click, followed by screams and panicked footsteps as people scattered. Tommy closed his eyes, tilted his head toward the sky, and smiled.

"Mr. Knight!"

The gun exploded. The screams grew wilder. A stampede of fleeing bodies circled Tommy as he waited for the end. He hadn't felt a thing. No pain, and no blood. It all happened very peacefully, he thought. He stayed still amongst the chaos, imagining that at any moment the lights would go out for good—they never did though. After a few minutes, Tommy opened his eyes. Most of the people had made their way to the parking lot for the mall across the street. The ones who were still there stared at him as if he were a ghost. He patted his chest and stomach. No holes or gashes. He was still very much alive. Something was wrong. He turned around and saw someone lying face down at his feet.

Blood pooled around the body and filled the cracks in the asphalt. Tommy shook his head. "No," he whispered. He looked over the parking lot and caught a glimpse of the man in black fleeing amongst the others. He held the record, the gun clutched in the other hand, as he sprinted toward a running car waiting for him in the lot across the street. In a matter of seconds, he slammed the door and sped off. Tommy never saw him again.

His eyes fell back down to the body. It was a man. Blood had covered most of the record that laid beside him. Tommy dropped to his knees and saw the inscription. *Play it loud.*

"Mr. Knight," Scotty said. His voice gurgled as he forced the distorted words out like bad reception. He tried to raise his head and blood spilled between his teeth as he spoke. "Mr. Knight, are you alright?"

"Why did you do that?" Tommy asked. He looped his hands under Scotty's arms and turned him over so he could lay on his back.

Scotty coughed violently. He sucked in through blood stained teeth that made him look like a vampire after dinner. His chest inflated and emptied rapidly as he fought to speak. "He was going to shoot you. I stopped him," he said.

"Why?" Tommy asked.

"The songs," Scotty said. "They'd be lost."

"The songs would still be here," Tommy said.

"Not the ones you haven't written yet," Scotty said.

Scotty's head fell slowly to the side. His eyes rolled back but a hero's smile remained on his face even when he passed. Tommy took Scotty into his arms and held him until the paramedics arrived.

For the next month, Tommy spent all of his days in his old studio. He sat in the booth and stared at his own reflection in the window pane that separated him from the control room. Immortality had slipped away. On the bright side though, Tommy felt a new song coming—maybe even an album. He picked up his guitar and let his fingers dance over the strings.

About the Author:

Joe Giatras is the author of *The Ghost Writer*, published in the anthology *Between the Cracks*, as well as *What I Have Done*, *Watching* and *The Nowhere Man* from issues 38, 39 and 59 of the *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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Exhibition | *H.V. Patterson*

Lia's hungry eyes darted listless around the museum. Same old art. She yearned for something different. She turned a corner and saw a new entryway leading down a dark hallway. DO NOT ENTER read a sign above the entryway. Lia entered anyway.

The hallway led to a gallery filled with life-sized statues of people so intricately carved they looked ready to step from their plinths at any moment.

"Ah good," said a smooth voice. "The newest piece has arrived."

Pain hit Lia. She convulsed, arched her spine, opened her mouth in a silent scream.

The exhibition gained a new statue.

Cheaters Never Prosper | *H.V. Patterson*

"Jake, stay after class," said Mrs. White.

Jake slouched in his chair, scowling, as the other kids filed out.

Mrs. White shut and locked the door behind them.

Jake slid lower. So what if he'd cheated on a spelling test? Spelling was stupid.

Besides, he needed to pass. He couldn't disappoint Mom.

"It's your third strike, Jake," said Mrs. White, shaking her head sadly. "You've brought this on yourself."

Her face distorted and fell away like a cheap halloween mask. Beneath it, a mouth surrounded by razor sharp teeth opened. She was tearing into Jake's throat before he could scream.

Stranger Danger | *H.V. Patterson*

"Are you lost?" the woman called from her van.

"I can't find my sister!" wailed the girl, shivering.

"Get in," said the woman. "We'll look for her together."

The girl slid into the front passenger seat. There was a creepy man sitting in the back. He and the woman exchanged glances.

The woman locked the doors. They drove in silence.

"There she is!" the girl suddenly yelled.

The man opened the van door, and another, smaller girl climbed into the van.

"Yay! You caught dinner!" said the smaller girl.

"Dibs on the lady," the girl said as her tentacles emerged.

Nightmares for Sale | *H.V. Patterson*

Nightmares for Sale reads the girl's sign.

"What kind of nightmares?" you ask.

"The scariest!" the girl replies, dimpling as she smiles.

You hand the girl a five and she shoves it into her plastic purse.

"So, where are my nightmares?" you ask.

"You'll get them when you're sleeping," she says. "No refunds!"

Later that night, you're plagued by nightmares. Closing your eyes, even for a minute, is agony. Drugs do nothing to ease the terror. You spend the rest of your life searching for the girl, but never find her. You bought the nightmares, and they are yours forever.

About the Author:

H.V. Patterson lives in Oklahoma and writes speculative poetry and fiction. She's been published by Sliced Up Press, Not Deer Magazine, Horror Tree, Dread Stone Press, Shacklebound Books, and Etherea Magazine. Kelpies are her favorite folklore creatures. When she isn't writing, she hikes, bakes, sings, does puzzles, and watches horror movies. She promotes women in horror through Instagram, Twitter and her website.

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Twitter: [@ScaryShelley](#)

It was always the same: an endless cycle of tables to be set, meals to be cooked and beds to be made. At forty-three in 1951, you couldn't ask for more than a white-picket fence and first place children. As expected, Margaret Scott was always in bed by ten o'clock, but took note that every night at twelve, the haunting roar of the train made its way through her small coastal town. She found it so strange, the way it travelled while the rest of the world slept safely in preparation for tomorrow. She realized that she would never know where its journey began or would end but understood that this organized town could never be the destination.

At her weekly bridge tournament, Margaret had enough. It wasn't the fact that the cards were dealt in the same monotonous order, or that the conversation topics were restricted to recipe swaps and local domestic failures. It was when she accidentally caught a reflection of herself in the glass door of Esther Lemming's China cabinet—an emotionless wife who gained permission to sit around the same square table, with the same tamed women and in the same constraining clothing that she despised last week. Against her best taught efforts, instinct took over and she rose from the table, creating a state of alarm among her fellow and eerily content housewives.

"No!" she shrieked while turning to race for the door.

"Ladies, what in the world has gotten into Margaret lately?" asked terribly confused Mrs. Lemming "other than the extra pies she has clearly been indulging in".

"I think she's going mad," suggested Glenda Litch, who had always been envious of Margaret's blonde hair.

Having heard these unsparing comments on her way out the door, Margaret decided what she needed to do. Questioned on her early return, she falsely informed Mr. Scott that the tournament had ended early. Taking her place in the kitchen, she peeled the potatoes, concocted the stew, and set the table. She bathed the twins, put them to bed and ironed her husband's suit—all the while with her lips curved into a menacing grin, thinking of her plan for later. At ten o'clock they crawled into bed.

"Goodnight, Honey," Mr. Scott drowsily mumbled through a kiss, flicking off his bedside lamp.

"Goodnight," Margaret responded and something about her voice was different.

Hours of restlessness passed, but she finally heard the familiar rumble in the distance. Slowly turning to ensure the unconsciousness of her husband, Margaret removed the bed sheet and placed a perfectly groomed foot on the wood-panelled floor. The ticking wall-clock interrupted the silence with its indication that it was almost midnight, but she didn't care. Inching toward the window, she placed herself on the seat in front and brushed the lace curtain to the side. The rumbling grew more prominent while a set of eye-like lights appeared amid the mist and that's when she saw it. For the first time, its slithering movement down the track, like a snake in search of its prey. It seemed to go on forever, with absolutely no regard for its interruption of the sleeping, tranquil community. Margaret thought it was beautiful.

It was at this moment that her trance was broken by the appearance of a figure in front of the train tracks. In the darkness, she was only able to visibly confirm the presence of a shadow—skeletal thin and roughly seven feet in height—with its gaze focused attentively on her position in the window. She knew that alarm should be the natural reaction to the presence of this unknown being, but it calmed her to know that she wasn't alone in her desire to experience the passing of the train. Once it had passed, she noticed that the figure had also vanished into the darkness and an overwhelming feeling of emptiness consumed her. She was alone with the silence again, while the surrounding world slept soundly.

For the first time since childhood, Margaret felt free—like she had something to look forward to. With the introduction of this new ritual of rebellion, her days no longer seemed to blur dully into the next. Every night at 11:58 pm, she travelled from the safety of her bed to the window-seat, where she would view the slithering of the train for the duration of its trip through her town. For the past month, Margaret noticed a change in the dark figure that successfully appeared every night as the train passed. She had noticed it making its way closer to her location in the window. With its original position having been quite near to the tracks, it was now found standing on the sidewalk only a meter away from her home. She couldn't see its eyes but was aware that its gaze was always directed upward at her location in the third story window. It was as though it were wondering why she was willing to risk remaining awake at this hour yet stayed concealed within the safety of her home. Margaret began to feel as though it were taunting her.

Eventually, the thoughts of the nightly excursions to her window-seat were no longer enough to keep a smile on Margaret's face. Now when she cooked dinner, bathed the twins, and ironed her husband's suit, she grew angry while picturing the scornful gaze of the shadowed figure. Why does it have to ruin everything?

"What was that honey?" her husband asked, a look of concern owning his face.

"It's...nothing," she responded to Mr. Scott, forcing her cracked lips into an excessive grin.

On June 10, 1951, Margaret was sitting in her window-seat watching the train pass. The black figure joined her, but this time it had taken position directly on the tracks. Looking closely, she realized that the figure was extending an abnormally long finger toward her in an inviting manner. It was testing her. She knew what she needed to do.

Margaret Scott was pronounced dead by suicide at 12:01 am. She was found on the train tracks by a passerby, described to be exceptionally tall and dressed in black.

About the Author:

Casey Shelley is an author and teacher from New Brunswick, Canada. She's been writing horror ever since she learned to hold a pencil. Her work has appeared in various publications, including the Telegraph-Journal, Fog Lit Journal Vol. III and Academy of the Heart and Mind. When she isn't writing, Casey can be found near the ocean with her fiancé, Brandon, and their dog child, Zoë.

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Intruder | *Miracle Austin*

Diesel couldn't resist the heavy, licorice scent of her blood, which jump started his cravings once more that night.

It forced him to retreat to his natural instincts—habits most would classify them as.

Her sugary aroma escalated his flight up to the seventy-seventh floor. Her sheer, emerald curtains danced in the air of her open bedroom window.

He perched himself on her windowsill for over five minutes—watching her and listening, in case someone else was inside her apartment.

Placing one foot down on the floor and then the other, he glided in slow motion towards her.

Two empty wine bottles sat on her dresser as she slept in her oversized bed.

Everything was exposed, most importantly, her pulsating neck.

He dragged the end of his polished, pinky fingernail up her spine, splitting her skin apart and taking in deep breaths to taste her blood in the air.

Bending down, Diesel plunged his thick fangs into his prey.

As he started standing up, he felt a piercing pain inside of his chest.

Glancing down, a shimmering, onyx stake with a golden finish at the top poked out of his heart.

The stolen blood dribbled down the sides of his mouth as blood flowed from his startled heart.

Rolling out of bed, she gathered to her feet quickly to shove him down with her hands.

She drove the stake further in, until it penetrated the floorboard.

Climbing up close towards his ear, she whispered, "I couldn't resist your rotting stench—pacing back and forth under my window."

About the Author:

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

Instagram: [@MiracleAustin7](#)

Twitter: [@MiracleAustin7](#)

Death waits for Erick Mossburn. She paces outside the heavy oak door of his bedroom, her tread slipper-soft, waiting for someone to allow her in. When his visitors enter and exit the room, he glimpses her pale face.

The heady scent of oxygen fills his nostrils. He cannot move his arms. As for his legs, they ceased to function years ago. Thin, almost skeletal, they lay motionless under the sheet. He couldn't run even if he wanted to.

Two visitors enter the room, and through the open door, death becomes visible. Yesterday, she was a teenager called Dina, her face slashed and unrecognizable. Today, she is a woman, her eyes blindfolded—no, bandaged. They bleed through and beneath the cloth. She wears a parka and a black dress. The door closes on her.

The visitors to his room must think he's sleeping. They whisper, but the sound carries to him.

"How is he today, doctor?" the woman asks.

"The same," the doctor says. He scratches his greying beard.

The woman, his niece Matilda, nods her head. She dabs at her eyes before the mascara can run. "Can you...can you make him more comfortable?"

The doctor nods.

"He's such a good man," she says, a choke in her voice. "Everyone in town loves him. When his parents died, and he took over their restaurant business, no one believed he would succeed. Many made fun of him. He wasn't bitter though. He worked hard and gave back to the community. They learned what a great man he is."

The bedroom door opens as Matilda's husband, Justin, enters. Mossburn's eyes widen as Death adopts a new visage. The rotting corpse which had once been his father, glares at him and bares its teeth. The door shuts as the ghost reaches forward.

"Matilda," Justin says. "Jill's here."

A chill creeps over Mossburn's skin at the mention of his daughter's name. He tries to rise, but strength flees. He raises the fingers of his left hand instead.

"Oh, I knew she'd come," Matilda says, wiping away an ink-colored tear. "I knew she couldn't stay away. Couldn't hold that grudge forever. She has to say goodbye."

Mossburn grunts, trying to attract attention.

"Jill hasn't been the best daughter," Matilda says to the doctor. "She was always rebellious. After her school friend, Dina Anthony died, she became positively insufferable. She deserted Uncle Erick at the age of eighteen and hasn't been back since. Perhaps, she's learned her lesson now." She glances up at her husband. "Well, don't just stand there, Justin. Bring her in."

Justin nods and scurries from the room like an obedient squirrel. The doctor follows. Matilda turns toward Mossburn's bed and smiles.

"Oh, Uncle Erick, I'm so glad you're awake. Jill is here."

"Don't..." Mossburn says. He licks his dry lips and cracking lips. "Don't let her..."

Matilda approaches. "What was that, Uncle Erick?"

His parched throat allows him only one more word. He voices it as loud as can.

"Alone."

"You want to be alone with her? Oh, certainly. Certainly. We'll all leave when she comes in."

Mossburn cannot shake his head nor wave a hand. The chill reaches from his skin to his bones as Jill enters the room.

The girl he knew is thirty now. And though she wears a sad smile on her lips, her blue eyes are hard as ice.

"Father," she says, her voice choked with tears. She comes to him and seats herself on the bed. Her cold hands take his.

"I'll leave you two alone," Matilda says.

Mossburn groans and waves his fingers in protest, but Matilda crosses the room toward the door. He shuts his eyes as she exits. The minute she is gone, Jill's melancholy smile fades.

"You see, father? You're not the only one who can act."

He cannot answer. Cannot plead.

"Can you see them now, father? That chain of ghosts you drag behind you? The faces used to be familiar. I don't recognize most of them now."

She rises to her feet, heading for the door. He clutches at her, but his fingers are too weak.

"I started seeing them at eighteen, when you murdered Dina. She told me no one would believe me. That it would only get me killed. But she promised to call me back someday. I wish she would've called me sooner."
Her fingers touch the doorknob.
In his mind, he screams.
She opens the door.
Death enters wearing many faces and treading on silent feet. The bandaged woman, Dina, and all the others grip him, pulling him from the earth.
Jill grins as they bear him away.

About the Author:

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

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The Anniversary | *Gerald Hayes*

Four in the morning was much too early for Michael to rise, but he couldn't sleep. He had been restless when he went to bed the night before, and sleep didn't come easily for him. Rather than staying in bed, he stood up and, in a semiconscious state, ambled to the kitchen. He made a cup of coffee and moved to the dining room. In the darkness of the early morning, he drank his coffee while thinking about the events of the past two years.

"You're up early."

Michael looked up and saw Laura, his wife, sitting on the couch in the adjacent living room. Michael grabbed his coffee, walked toward her, and sat on the couch a few feet away.

"Couldn't sleep. Lots on my mind. You know what a lousy couple of years it's been."

"At least you have your health." she joked.

"Sometimes I wish I didn't. Just fade away. Be with my loved ones."

"Don't talk like that!" she demanded. "You have too much to live for. You scare me sometimes."

"I know. I'm sorry. The kids are young and needy. My boss is old and needy. This house is somewhere in between and always in need of something."

Laura sat for a minute, looking into Michael's sad eyes. She replied "And don't forget me. I'll always need you."

"Thanks. I'll never forget you. You know that."

"Today's our anniversary. I know you remember that," she added. "It's been two years."

"Yes, I know. I still wish I could have been with you that night. Things would be different now. A lot different. I shouldn't have let you go to the party without me."

"You can't change the past, honey. Just the future." She paused again for a minute, and then said, "You look tired. Go back to bed."

Michael stood up and walked toward the bedroom. He turned to watch Laura, mesmerized by her beauty. Between yawns, he replied, "I'll see you soon. I love you."

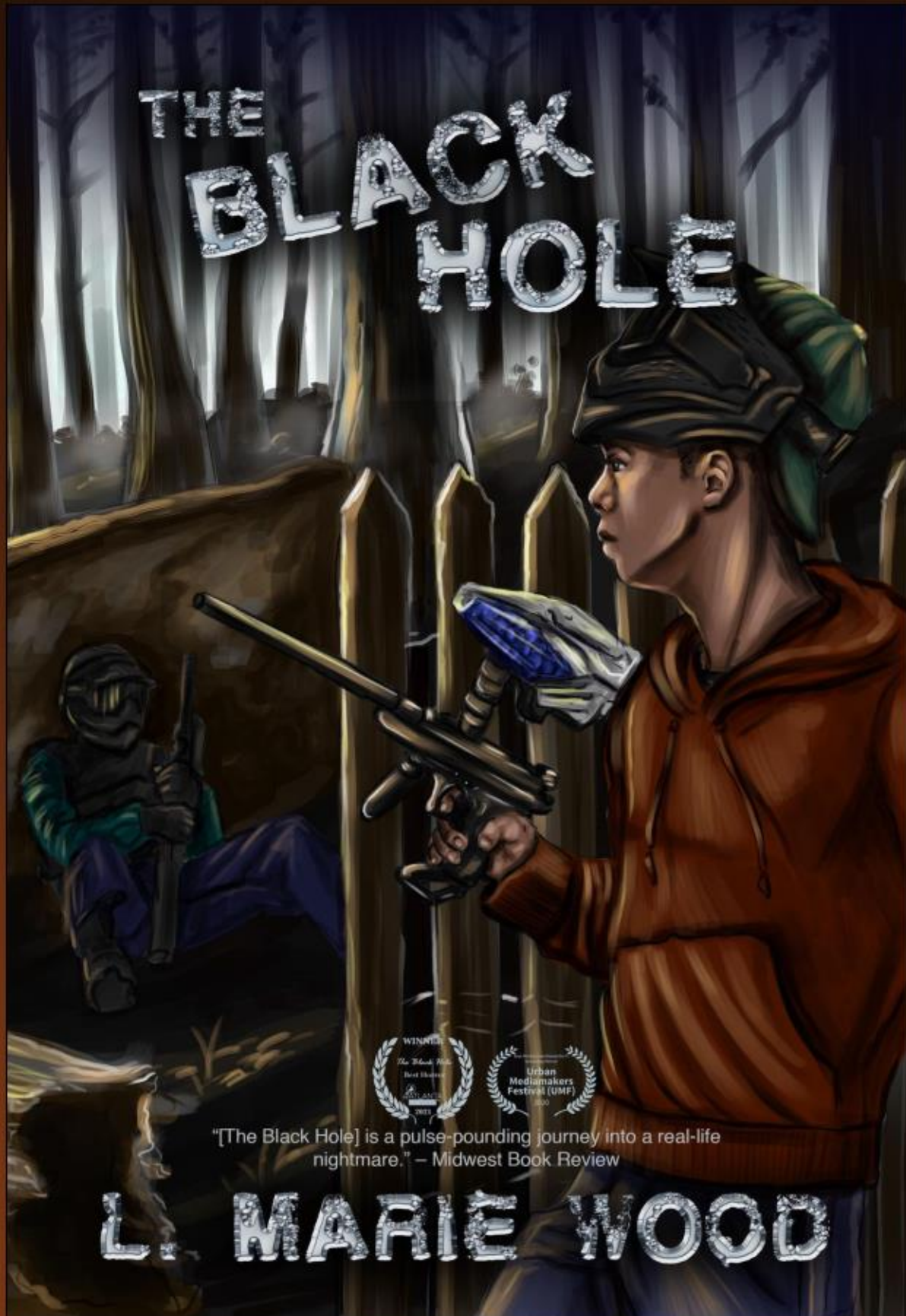
Michael climbed in bed, and in a few seconds, he was fast asleep.

About the Author:

Gerald (Gabby) Hayes is a writer, and photographer. He is also a traveler, explorer, and wanderer. Born in California, he has spent his life moving from place to place, for business and for pleasure, not always in that order. He lives in Colorado and owns a consulting business, which gives him plenty of opportunities to travel, write, and make photographs.

Blog: [Travels with Gabby](#)

*A pulse pounding journey into
a real-life nightmare.*



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Isiah couldn't take his eyes off the TV screen as the reporter continued to regurgitate the same facts he had already heard. He sat in complete devastation as his mind started to wonder what this meant for the world. A loud buzzing noise took his attention away from the TV and towards his phone.

"Hey Alvin," Isiah weakly said as he answered the phone.

"Are you watching the news right now?" Alvin immediately asked.

"I am," Isiah replied as he shook his head, "I can't believe she's gone."

"Me either," Alvin solemnly said, "I knew it had been a couple of years, but I didn't think it was going to be this soon."

"Forty-two," Isiah sighed, "That's a hell of a long life."

"Do you know what this means?" Alvin asked.

"What?" Isiah paused before answering, "That the whole world is going to be reeling from this for the next few days."

"That," Alvin took a few moments before spitting out, "And the fact that you're now the oldest person on earth!"

Isiah stared down at his free hand and observed the wrinkles and white body hair that ran over it. He coughed for a moment before sternly saying, "That's not a good thing."

"Don't take it so seriously," Alvin tried to be an optimist, "This is a big deal! You're the oldest person in the world. That's huge! I think we should celebrate."

Isiah immediately objected, "Now's not the time for celebrating and you know it. The next few days should be spent in mourning."

Alvin sighed before saying, "I'm tired of being sad, Isiah." He paused before explaining, "I hate how everyone I know is stuck in an endless loop of depression. Everywhere I go, people aren't smiling. No one is talking to each other. It's like everyone is a zombie."

"What do you expect?" Isiah rhetorically asked. "Our parents got to live into their fifties. They lived long lives. We don't get that," he shakily spat out, "They say the next generation's life expectancy is supposed to be twenty years less than ours." Isiah looked out his window at the cloudy sky and said, "There's nothing to be hopeful for. We're at the end of our rope."

"But we're still alive!" Alvin protested, "We still have a chance to at least do some of the things we want, and I want to do them." He sounded a little forceful in tone as he said, "We're going to celebrate you becoming the oldest person in the world, because that's a huge thing. I don't care if we're all going to die in the next few decades and so on and so on." Alvin's voice got a little louder and more energetic as he said, "We've been living our whole lives thinking about the future. All that time, and we forgot how to live in the moment. So tonight, I'm gonna come over with a bottle of top-shelf brandy and we are going to live in the moment."

Isiah couldn't help but chuckle at his friend's determination. "But Alvin," he feebly said in protest.

"No buts!" Alvin energetically shouted. "We're having a good time tonight and there's nothing you can do to stop it."

"Okay, fine," Isiah said with a small laugh, "You've convinced me. I'll have some fun tonight."

"That's what I like to hear!" Alvin cheered. "I'll be over around five," he said in a more conserved tone.

"Sounds good," Isiah replied, "I'll see you then."

Isiah ended the call and sat on his couch for a moment just thinking about how lucky he was to have a friend like Alvin. He took in a deep breath as he placed his hands on the couch cushions so there was more leverage for him. Isiah strained the muscles in his arms as he put all his effort into standing up. He let out a long sigh as he made his way toward the bedroom. His thirty-nine-year-old knees were already aching after a few steps. He decided not to focus on the pain and melancholy for once and go along with what Alvin had said.

As he shuffled through his bedroom towards the master bathroom, Isiah tried to think about the last time he had actually felt happy. There honestly hadn't been much to be optimistic about. Every new generation was aging more rapidly than the last, and no one knew why it was. Scientists had pointed the finger at the climate and people's diets, but they couldn't give a definite answer. He had even heard his friends give their own ridiculous ideas on what was causing their acceleration towards the grave.

Isiah had come up with his own theory on the matter and it was, simply put, that it was humanity's time to end. The average life expectancy for his parents had been fifty-two, while his generation's was thirty-six. Half of the next generation wasn't even expected to make it to twenty-five. Now that people were aging so much faster, normal functions of the body didn't work anymore, most notably childbirth. Everyone's aging was so rapid that a pregnancy just wasn't feasible or safe. The fetus would age so quickly that it could be carried to term in less than three months. That was far too much strain for many to bear, and that was exactly how his wife died.

Perhaps, it was the passing of his wife that had left Isiah feeling hopeless for so long. Nine years and some change was a long time for a person to be left alone with their thoughts. Isiah's mind would always cycle through his own failures and mistakes before turning to the unfortunate path that humanity was taking. There had been so many guesses as to how it

would end for the human race, and most saw them going out in a great war or by using up all their resources. It was kind of funny to think that humanity would go out with a whimper, as they would be wiped out from simply aging at an unsustainable pace.

Isiah looked at the wrinkled lines on his face in the bathroom mirror. He shook his head as he splashed some water onto his visage. There was no need to contemplate on such desperate things. He had spent the past nine years thinking about the end that would come in the near future, but tonight, he would live in the present. Isiah would drink and have long talks with his old friend. It may have been a strange thing that they were celebrating, but at least they would finally have something to celebrate. That was enough of a special occasion for Isiah to slap on a little bit of deodorant and actually freshen up for the first time in months.

He turned and left the bathroom with a smile starting to form on his face. Isiah walked past a picture of him and his wife, like he had hundreds of times before, but something made him stop. He brought his focus to the picture of him with his arms wrapped around his beloved. Isiah sensed a warmth start to grow inside of him and he finally began to feel good for once. Suddenly, the feeling caused a stinging sensation in his chest. He immediately grabbed his chest as pain erupted near his heart. Isiah didn't have to be a doctor to know what was happening. He hadn't expected his family's history of heart problems to catch up with him, but that's what was happening. Isiah dropped to his knees while he struggled to breathe as the stinging sensation grew worse.

Even with everything that was happening, his mind drifted off to the fact that he was the oldest person on the planet for the moment. Isiah forced out a chuckle as he gasped, "Well, that didn't last long."

He fell forward and his head slammed against the wall before his body slumped to the ground. Isiah took in a few more jagged breaths before he closed his eyes, and just like that, two of the oldest people in the world had died on the same day.

About the Author:

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

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Dark Energies | *Claire Loader*

The cat doesn't speak but I know that she sees him, feels him. The way she bristles and moves, stalks about the house as if chasing a mouse. She threads with purpose, settling then for a familiar corner, his usual chair.

I don't disturb her when she is resting, dark energies best filtered without interruption.

There is a reason the Egyptians revered cats, why their statues haunt temples and crypts. She holds nothing special in her kneading paws—all cats born with an innate sense, a beacon, the ability to hunt the things we cannot see.

She jumps down from the chair, moves slowly from room to room, settles on my bed, head hard against my pillow.

I shudder, wondering what she feels there, what it is of him that remains.

About the Author:

Claire Loader is a New Zealand born writer and photographer now living in Galway, Ireland. Her dark fiction has appeared in various publications, including Harbinger Press, The Ginger Collect, Massacre Magazine and Dark Moon Digest. She is a Forward and Pushcart Prize nominee and this year sees her collective poetry anthology *Pushed Toward the Blue Hour* published by Nine Pens Press.

Kate and Michael had come to the beach for the entire summer. Three months stretched out before them endless as the tide that painted white ribbons of foam on the sand. A diving pelican crashed into the waves as if someone had dropped a small rock out of the sky.

They stood hand-in-hand breathing shallowly, motionless, made temporarily mute and still by the glory before them, but only for a moment. Then they kicked off their shoes and socks, leaving them behind like the discarded skins of cicadas clinging to the tall, golden grass that lined the beach. Never looking back, they raced toward the crashing sea, laughing hearts beating in time with the tide and with all of creation on this perfect first day of summer. It was a summer that would last forever. They knew it by the way the sand crept in between their toes like the rough, adoring tongue of a family dog.

Somewhere, in a distant world, the townies stocked empty shelves with shiny packaged goods, filled their freezers with bags of ice and waited. Their parents prepared the Summer House, unpacking their suitcases, putting food in cupboards, ordering propane, and doing all the boring, unimportant things grownups did.

It was a strange beach, full of odd mounding stones that formed a wavy line right where the high tide washed against the shore, darkening each grain of sand. The mounds had once been sand themselves, hardened into rock by the centuries.

That very first day when they ran breathlessly down to the sea, daring the waves to catch them, Kate thought she saw first one, then two, then three, then dozens and dozens of boys, each standing in front of a stone mound, flickering in the mist that had risen from the meeting between sea and shore. But it had only been a trick of light, an illusion of the rising shimmering heat, of salt and surf and too much sun. Because when she blinked and rubbed her eyes, the mist and boys were gone, vanished into the foaming surf.

"Did you see..." began Kate turning to Michael, but he was playing tag with the tide, screeching with laughter as the chill waters nipped his toes.

"This coast has history," Father had said. "It was home to an ancient people, and you can still find artifacts on the shore and in the woods."

"Arrowheads?" asked Kate. She loved searching for treasures, carved stones, odd rocks, delicate seashells, and almost any kind of feather. Whatever she could find, which in the city wasn't much. Michael preferred books, magical lands that would not dirty his feet, scratch his thighs, or make him itch, but only mark his imagination. He lived in a world apart from other boys, a place of gods and monsters, of dragons and enchantments. It made school difficult.

"There might be arrowheads," Father said. "Or small round stones that they used to place on the graves of their dead to make sure they didn't rise from the earth. They feared ghosts and worshipped a wild god of sea and woods, a kind of Pan."

"Pan?" asked Kate. "A frying pan?"

"No silly," said Michael. "Pan was a god with goat legs and horns who played a bamboo flute. No one could resist his music."

"It is said they stole children from other tribes, and buried them alive, under bridges and beneath crossroads as a sacrifice to their god. In exchange, he left them alone and kept their children safe."

"Are kids buried under our street?" asked Kate.

"Perhaps we should go out tonight with a shovel and see... Ah hahahaha...." Father's voice rose into a maniacal chuckle.

"Jonathan," Mother said. "Don't scare the children."

"I'm not scared," said Michael, but he shivered despite the heat.

Now they forgot ghosts and history, arrowheads, and dead bodies. They played chase with the tide letting the cold waters tug their toes, before running backwards screaming.

"Look," said Michael, poking his big toe into the damp sand, so that the grains dried, making a lightened circle around each foot. "It's as if each step I take turns the earth into diamonds."

Kate poked her toe in too. "We're rich," she cried. "I'm turning everything into diamonds!"

"It's how they will know that we are the King and Queen," Michael said. "All the people will follow the shining footsteps and crown us, Rulers of the Beach."

They marked solemnly down the shore, tucking big toes into sand, so caught up watching the creation of diamonds they didn't notice the boy standing in front of them until they saw ten naked toes wiggling at the edge of their circle of light.

The boy was four or five years older than Michael, his ragged cut-offs were frayed and faded. His bare chest had been tanned the same deep bronzed color as the wet sandstone dunes. Ocean breezes tousled his sun-whiten hair. And his light brown eyes were tawny, almost golden, flecked with tiny grains of darkness, like bugs in amber.

"I'm Tom," he said, holding out a salt-rough hand.

"I'm Kate and this is my brother Michael."

"Come play," Tom smiled. And in the way of children and young animals, that was the only introduction they needed. They raced down the shore looking for seashells and curious stones.

"Look," Michael pointed. "That moved."

Tom scooped it up. "It's a hermit crab," he said. "They don't even make their own shells. They just look for empty ones and use them. When they get too big they have to find a new home."

At night, their parents let them go to the beach.

"But just for an hour," Mother said. "And don't get wet."

At the shore's edge Tom waited. They wandered the strand, searching for small white sand dollars so fragile, a mean look could shatter them into a million pieces.

"Oh," Kate pointed at one sand dollar as big as a flattened tennis ball.

Tom scooped it up and broke it.

"Why..." began Kate, till, like a conjurer, Tom extracted small bits of dove-shaped bones from the shell's fragments so perfect, it seemed they might fly away into the setting sun.

Tom showed them how the night water flashed when they moved their hands beneath the surface.

"It's magic!" cried Michael, making light trails in the water with his fingers.

But Kate knew it was not magic. She was the more skeptical of the two, less trusting, less willing to accept the welcoming invitation of an open door.

Tom studied them. "You're both right," he said. "Those light flashes are actually caused by little animals... or maybe they're plants, I forget which. But you can only see them at night, when the water is stirred up."

"Then how is he right?" Kate said. "I'm right. It's made by animals."

"Or plants," said Michael.

"Or plants," agrees Kate. "And neither animals or plants are magic."

"They can make light," said Tom. "I mean—you can't make light—I can't make light, but they can— isn't that a kind of magic?"

Kate supposed Tom was just being nice, trying not to make Michael feel dumb. She liked him for it. Michael was usually not so lucky. All year long he'd been called a sissy, a girl, a moon-calf, and a dreamer for preferring stories to baseballs, and magic kingdoms to soldiers.

"But I can make light," Michael cried. "Look! Everywhere I walk turns to diamonds!" He raced to where the tide had turned the sand dark and poked his toes in, pulling the grains upward.

"We are rich!" cried Tom. They raced down the shore together, laughing and jostling each other until Michael lost his balance and tumbled into the damp surf.

"Uh oh," said Michael.

"Uh oh," said Kate. "You are going to be in trouble." She drew it out long, like it was two words—troub—el. Michael shivered.

"Just wash it off," said Tom, pulling him toward and under the beating waves. Michael struggled. Then he emerged, soaking and shivering, coughing up water as salty as tears.

Michael stumbled up and chased Tom out of the water. Tom, though half wet, didn't even seem cold, but Michael's skin was as bumpy as the plucked chicken Kate had once seen hanging from a butcher's window.

"Won't you get in trouble?" Asked Michael.

"Me?" Laughed Tom. "I'd like to see someone try. Besides, I'm not the one who's all wet."

"You are now," said Kate, pushing him backward into the lapping waves. He held onto her arm, dragging her with him. Soon all three were rolling in the sand and icy water, sputtering, and laughing.

Kate and Michael got in trouble.

"Where does this Tom you talk so much about, live?" Asked Father. "Is he a townie, or are his people summer people like us?"

Summer people. Kate liked the sound of that. As if they could spend their whole lives in summer, never returning to school, and winter, and the tormenting laughter of other children.

"I don't know," said Kate.

"Haven't you asked him?" Her father shook his head and sighed. "What do his parents do?"

Both children looked at him as if he were speaking a foreign language. They didn't care what Tom's parents did, they only wanted to play in the waves, hunt for hermit crabs and sand dollars and make glowing trails of light in the night sea.

"Why don't you ask Tom to come for dinner," said their mother.

And Kate did, but Tom just shook his head.

"Can't," he said, disappearing into the darkening night. The children watched him go, fading into the flickering luminescence of sea and shore.

One night, at the end of summer, as they raced to meet Tom, Mother gave them a big bag of sunflower seeds.

"One—two—three—Crunch!" Shouted Tom.

They cracked in unison, spitting the empty husks into the surf and chomping the small tender seeds like a chorus of frogs. Kate still remembers it as the happiest night of her life. Why was it so wonderful? So much fun? She still doesn't know, only that for a moment, they were all together, heart, soul, mouth, and teeth working as one.

Michael had been right after all, she thought. It was magic. Magic, making the sea glow. Magic, letting them move through sand, surf, and summer as though they belonged.

The night after the sunflower seeds, Kate, Michael, and Tom played hide and seek. The obvious place to hide was behind a mound. So Kate lay in the tall golden grasses, barely breathing, but they scratched her bare arms and legs, and the sand fleas nipped her ankles. Cautiously she raised her head. No one was in sight. She sprang up, racing to crouch behind a dune. It must have been the perfect hiding place, because they never found her. She never found them either. She returned home after dark, tired and dirty.

"Where's Michael?" asked Mother.

"He's not home?" asked Kate.

"No."

"We were playing hide 'n seek with Tom, and I lost them."

"Tom again," said Father. "I'd like to meet that young man and his parents."

They waited for three hours, but Michael didn't return.

The police were called. Mother and Father asked about Tom. But neither the police or the townies had seen, or heard of a ragged boy with golden eyes and bleached hair. They grew silent when questioned, hastily changing the subject, organizing search parties, spending days and nights combing the beach and woods.

"It just shows how good people can be," Mother wept. "All these neighbors we didn't even know we had. I always looked down on the townies... b-b-but now..."

"Don't worry," said Father. "We'll find him." He put an arm around Mother and patted Kate's arm awkwardly.

But Kate knew they would never find Michael. The night after he had not come home, she had raced down to the shore, searching for Tom. She did not find him. Instead, she saw a new mound. It looked like all the others, but slightly darker, slightly fresher as if it had only now changed from sand to stone.

And surely, thought Kate, there must be a single moment when that happens? When sand becomes stone, summer turns to fall, ancient gods return. and childhood ends.

She knew that Michael had joined the other children, the ghosts she had seen that very first night, flickering in the light between day and dusk, shimmering in the place between shore and sea.

Kate could imagine the scene.

"Why don't we bury each other?"

"Me first! Me first!" cried Michael. He lay down on the damp line where the water met the land.

"No," said Tom. "We have to dig a hole first, otherwise your toes will show. Lie here."

He carefully scooped out a hole just a little bit bigger than Michael's body. Throwing handfuls of wet sand back into the sea. The tide flattened them into the beach and swept them away leaving no trace.

But Kate was wrong about two things, or perhaps she was both right and wrong. For she did see Michael one last time. It was not he, who was buried under the mound by the sea, or at least not yet.

It was five years after his disappearance. She'd been begging Mother and Father to return to the Summer House.

"I want to go in memory of Michael," she'd cried. Tears flowing down her face like rivers to the sea. "I want to return to the place of our last summer."

Mother shook her head, retreated to her room, and bolted her door. The catch clicked in the silence, as final as endings.

"I will take you," said Father, his voice flat and toneless as a tide-less ocean.

This trip was as different from the last one as day from night, as life from death, as joy from sorrow. There was no joking talk of ghosts, or arrowheads. There was no talk at all.

Kate had to wait till Father was in the bathroom to race down to the beach. The sun was sinking into the ocean. A splinter of light lingered on the horizon and was gone. A tattered cloud, like a blood-spattered rag, swayed over the spot of its going. Then dusk crept over the sky, darkness crept over the sea, and all was as still as the last sunset at the end of eternity.

She remembered watching the sun sink into the waves from this very spot, hand and hand with Michael, not so long ago, but a lifetime away.

And then, in front of the newest mound of sand she saw two boys dashing madly through the surf, foam breaking against their legs as bubbly as laughter.

"Hey!" Kate called.

The boys froze. They turned toward her in the dying light. One was a stranger, but the other was Michael, her Michael! She tried to call to him, but the words stuck in her throat.

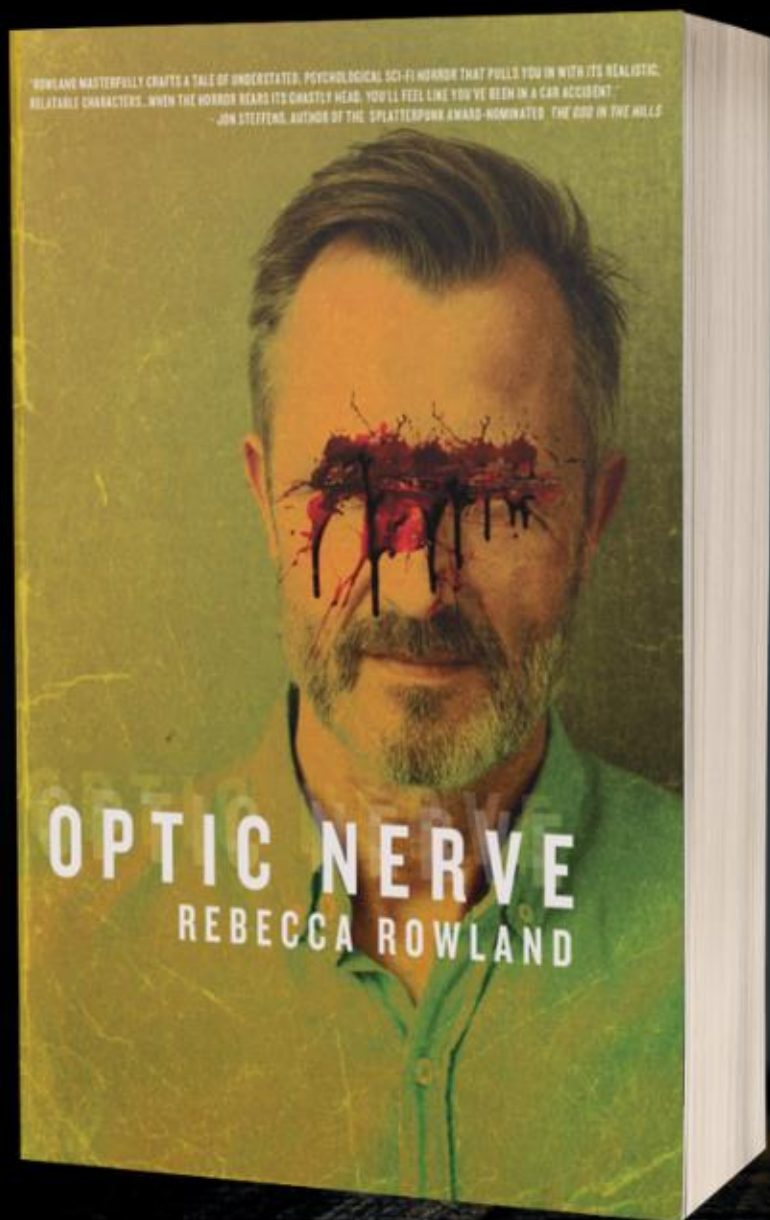
For just a moment his face was illuminated by the fading light, and she saw his eyes, no longer the clear blue of a cloudless sky, but tawny, almost golden, flecked with tiny grains of darkness, like bugs in amber. He stared at her like a stranger, like a townie, like an adversary, then pulled the unknown boy off into the sea, the sand, and the night.

About the Author:

E.E. King is an award-winning painter, performer, writer, and naturalist. She'll do anything that won't pay the bills. She's been published in over 100 magazines and anthologies. She co-hosts The Long Lost Friends Show on Metastellar YouTube. She spends summers doing bird rescue and winters planting coral in Bonaire. Her paintings, writing, musings, and books can be seen at her website and on Amazon.

Website: [E. E. King](#)
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Shawn wanted to cure blindness.



Now he wishes he could look away.

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Malcolm spent the entire weekend at the house of a gang leader whom he was told was incarcerated and most likely would not come out alive.

But his wife, a hot little thing, who looked quite young for her forty-five years, had been giving him the eye for a while now. She was hungry, he knew, so he decided to whet that appetite with his virility and libido.

"You should stay far away from her, Malcolm." Jerry advised him.

"Why? She wants me. Look at her. She's been giving me the eye." Malcolm replied.

"That's the King's wife. The mother of his children. Stay away. Last warning."

Jerry and Malcolm had been friends since primary school, but missed a few years when Malcolm went to university and was out of touch for a few years.

A lot of things happened in that time. Jerry got caught stealing coffee, crackers and meat from a supermarket and sent to jail for one year. The King took care of the financial needs of Jerry's family, his mother and two sisters for which the King got Jerry's unwavering loyalty.

Jerry was seventeen at the time he went to the Boys Industrial School. He had total respect for the man who saved his family from ruin. Malcolm didn't know what happened during the time he was studying.

"There's no fool like an educated fool. Remember Malcolm. Remember. You've been out of touch for sometime. Stay away from Marisa."

Malcolm chose not to. He was glad for the weekend. He ate, drank, slept and danced like it was going out of style. On his last night he chose to look around the grand mansion, and Marisa found him in front of the old oak door. She told him he was free to navigate the entire property inside and out but not to enter this one room.

Curiosity got the better of him and he pushed open the unlocked door. Inside was innocent enough, red flooring, with some sort of design painted in white, looked like a pentagram within a circle, a large rectangular shaped table, dark coloured curtains and at one corner another design too complicated to describe. And an altar covered with a red cloth, and one black and one red candle ready for lighting. All in all it was spooky. He heard a groan from within the room, so soft as to be mistaken, he turned around but nothing was amiss. He looked again at the design, something like a child's scribbling, but with some order and method and it was hypnotic. A lot of work went into this drawing. He stood there concentrating on it, when he again heard the groan, this time louder and insistent. Is that a request? A teenage girl materialized and he was so smitten by her poise, grace and charm that there was no time to be scared or formulate any questions. He smiled and greeted her like he would any person. But, she smiled and her face transformed into something so horrible and grotesque that he froze. Then she talked and the voice was grating to his ear, so much as to be painful.

"Why have you come here?" she asked him and thunder rolled and lightning flashed. The lines on the floor grew fluorescent and emanated intense heat. It felt like when taking the roast out of the oven. He was close to the door when it slammed shut. He banged and banged, calling for Marisa to let him out. He felt rather than saw the girl twisting her arms and then he was choking.

"Why did you come here?" She asked again.

"Curiosity." He answered after she released her hold on him.

"Then let's satisfy your curiosity."

She snapped her fingers, and the latest in soca music drowned all other sounds. He being a lover of local music, and out of touch all through the years of studying, the music was like a drug that took effect quite fast. Malcolm was lost to all and sundry while the music played on.

He woke on the porch side of the mansion with Marisa standing over him with a glass of orange juice.

"Here you go, sleepy head."

"Did I sleep here last night? What happened?"

"You tell me. Last time I saw you was three days ago when I told you not to enter that room. Did you?"

"I remember now. The door was open. It sort of invited me in. Wait a minute! Did you say three days ago?"

"Yes, I did."

"Three days." Malcolm slowly raised himself from the recliner while pondering this puzzle. "Three days?" He repeated. "No, no. That can't be." He tried to walk but his legs wouldn't respond. He looked down at them. Then at Marisa.

"What?"

"The King got his magic in that room for intruders. I warned you."

"And so did I." Jerry entered then, and wearing a scowl like it belonged there on his face continued, "Quite a lot of things happened while you were living nice at university Malcolm. Most of us lost jobs, family, health, some even lost their

sanity. To the very few who were self-reliant and had some resources to fall back on, they became something like saviours to the rest of us. But we all stayed in our place. We didn't cross the line. You just did."

"The king will be here soon enough." Marisa added.

"I thought he was in jail for life."

"Around here that means he'll be in and out of jail for the rest of his life. But he'll be coming from Tobago in a few hours." With Jerry's clarification came the fear of a man who ate the forbidden fruit.

"Don't look at me. He never told me to stay away from men." Marisa lackadaisically threw her hands up in the air while sipping her drink.

"Only that men should stay away from her. You've committed an act which is both inexcusable and unforgivable."

Now Malcolm was in a quandary. He could feel the sweat running down his cheeks. He thought about the punishment meted out to those who crossed the paths of gang leaders. This one boy, only nineteen, can still be seen around the city beating himself with a stick, and yet another smoking out the river, the same way that the priest smoke a coffin with the dead, before burial. The King's dabbling in the occult for monetary gains and revenge was legendary.

"Good Lord! What have I gotten myself into?" He said aloud.

"There is a way out. If you've got the stomach for it." Jerry proposed.

"Yeah? What's that?" Malcolm asked, holding his breath.

He did notice a suspicious look between Jerry and Marisa but didn't think much about it. He wanted a way out of this mess that was his doing.

"Spend the night in that room. In the morning we will say you came by with me. He won't be going in there for the next five days." Jerry explained.

"He does his stuff once every two weeks." Added Marisa.

"So you're telling me all I have to do is 'hide' in that room?"

"That's all. You up to it?" Jerry sounded like it would be an unpleasant task, but remembering the soca music, Malcolm thought otherwise. He had no recollection of whatever happened in that room.

"Okay. I'll do it. But my legs seem to be sleeping." Malcolm informed them.

"Don't worry, I'll carry you. Ready?" And Jerry promptly lifted him over his shoulder like he would a sack of flour or potatoes. He was a strong man. Marisa opened the door, Jerry installed him in the middle of the circle, and practically ran out of the room. Malcolm distinctly heard a key turn in the lock. Immediately, the girl appeared licking her lips, and the heat also returned. He felt himself roasting like a turkey. His legs that felt numb, were now as heavy as lead. He opened his mouth to call out, but no words were forthcoming, plus he could hear Marisa and Jerry talking and laughing just outside the door. And they weren't even being discreet about it.

Marisa said, "You're wicked you know that? Inconsiderate. Your own childhood friend! Shame on you."

And Jerry replied, "This one should bring us a good raise. Millions if I read it right. He's young and educated. The entity did ask for something with more spice. The educated ones are always spicy."

"What do you suppose is the reason for that?" Marisa asked uninterested.

"Who cares? You keep doing your part, I do mine, and we're all happy." Said Jerry.

"You're right. It's not our fault that some men choose to desecrate another man's bed. It's only fitting that they make amends for the same."

With the soca music in the background, Malcolm spent the night being nibbled on by the girl with the sharp teeth. Late into the night he understood that he was the sacrifice of the week. An understanding that came too late.

Because of cuts that won't heal or even close, Malcolm can now be seen around the city with a hooded overcoat and bare feet.

And Marisa got the ten-story hotel she wanted.

About the Author:

Soter Lucio is a great-grandmother from the mountainous region of Trinidad W.I. where folk legends abound. She works as an ironer by day and writes horror stories at night. She lives alone so there are no distractions except for the occasional ghost who gives her writing a boost. She's been published by Sirens Call Publications, Weird Mask, and Migla press.

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Twitter: [@JanSoter](#)

I desperately longed to find the graveyards of stars. We all knew that stars died, collapsing onto themselves with unimaginable weight and incalculable devastation.

They were the resting place of gods, whose wide, full tombs like mouths stuffed with the dirt, treasure, and worms from places that never were and always had been. They were the Gates to Someday, the window to the other side, a key to the mysteries that Death kept so close to his chest.

The greedy bastard.

I was so hungry to find the graveyards I'd do anything, befriend any demon, or take any chance. It's been said that any place were stained by death's touch no matter who or what were fixed points. Gateways to that endless nether place where cities built in gold, blood, and stars were wrapped in night and Death himself, conceals his greatest treasures from those who'd wish to steal it.

No one wanted it more than I did.

"You've got to die to find them. To find *him*." That was according to my so-called friend and self-proclaimed ecclesiastical sycophant, Dionysus Bolt.

It wasn't important how we met as much as he was sickly intrigued with the graveyards as me.

I'd looked all over the New Ashworth metro area which had its share of publicly run cemeteries and apart from the demented folklore, I didn't really know what I was looking for, apart from Dionysus' cryptic, and silly clues.

'The graveyards. They are the way points. That's how we find the Gates to Someday', he'd say sometimes in a zombified daze, after having too many energy drinks. He smoked a lot and I found myself too, somewhat attracted to his almost religious zeal.

We'd crept through every reasonable boneyard and dared to breach the walls of a few private cemeteries as well, but at the end of the night we found nothing but dull, quiet statues and lingering fog.

Finally, one night, Dionysus suggested the old grave of St. Cyr near the Maumee River Bridge. According to many, and him, mostly him, the bastard child of a god died here, forsaken by his cosmic roots the creature was left to die and many claimed to have seen the light of a dead child, the cries of a forgotten calling out to the stars.

"The many who died here were said to have been shown the path to where the Gates of Someday lead. So, maybe this'll be the place we can find it. Babe, wouldn't that be amazing if we actually found it here?"

Amazing, yeah, of course. I wanted this, right? I mused to myself. *Why wouldn't I want this?*

Dionysus pulled my arm as we approached the watery limestone path near the drop off next to the bridge.

"Are you sure this is the place?"

"Yes! I knew we should have searched here first...I don't know what you were thinking," he said.

It wasn't worth the argument, and even if I tried, Dionysus always had an answer for everything. "You're right, let's just get this over with. I'm starting to get tired of this. Maybe there's no such thing as *Someday*."

Dionysus sneered, his hunger for the truth was as strong as mine, but my resolve couldn't match him. He stood there, a long, youthful countenance outlined by the yellow glint of the moonlight.

"This was your bleeding fantasy. I only wanted to help you find what was on the other side. And here we found it, together."

He took my hand, grasped, well, completely enclosed it; so, there was another piece to our relationship I forgot to mention. Love, graveyards, and the search for death. Nothing was ever black and white, but as long as Dionysus was there, I knew things were going to be alright. Besides, it's hard to search for Death's Door without someone who *really* understands you.

Dionysus never led me astray, at least not on purpose. I couldn't back out now, especially when his eyes appeared so otherworldly, their milky glow reflecting off the ancient statues in the St. Cyr graveyard. Strange things attracted me to men, but old legends, and stone guardians ticked all my boxes.

"Are you alright, now?" He continued, still holding my hand.

"I think so. I'm sorry, I think I'm just scared that we may actually find what we're looking for out here."

Admittedly, I was terrified.

The name *St. Cyr's Gate* was plastered in rusted, metal letters across the entryway where black bars wilted under the weight of so many centuries. Gargoyles crumbled by the day, their bodies barely able to hold their own stony bulk, and misshaped headstones littered the dying grass patches as we, well I, nervously trudged through the cemetery. Dionysus on the other hand was as giddy as giddy could get. He, for lack of a better description, dragged me along. The

anticipation built up inside my head was so exhilarating, but finally standing here, I felt as frozen as one of those statues.

The winds were soft and unsettling as they gowned the area in dust and quiet darkness.

"Dion," I called him sometimes, "What exactly are we looking for? Does anyone even know what the *Gate of Someday* looks like?"

He ignored me, flashing a whimsical smirk in an attempt to ease my cautionary attitude. Soon, that charming visage melted away, expressionless, our hands together, his eyes were fixed on something, but I didn't know what. The moon was high over the graveyard, and I felt a disconcerting, almost nausea growing in my stomach.

He said you have to die to find it, I thought to myself. *He was joking right? He doesn't really mean...* My pace began to slow, unconsciously, not paying attention until a heavy tug pulled me to the ground and my mouth was filled with dirt and worms. The smell of blood flooded my nostrils and for a moment, I'd swear on everything that was reasonable, I saw something. The lights went out as if my eyes were sealed off and there was nothing but electric neon and a gateway.

Time was irrelevant, swirling deeper inside my throbbing brain was an endless tomb of stars. Falling and rising as if an ocean of liquid infinity, real and unreal, spiraling deeper towards some inconceivable center. Someday was mine. Finally, it belongs to me and no one else. I didn't even know if tears were possible where or when I was, but I never wanted to leave.

All at once, I was throttled from my infinite pleasure where all the stars left my wide peripherals replaced by sky, grass, and stone. Tears were soon real, blood became substantial, and smells were a contemptible jinx that tickled my neurons, over and over again.

"No...No... I want to go back." I pleaded in a hushed breath while Dion stood above me.

"Are you alright?"

"I – I 'm fine, but where...where am I? What happened?" Babble and useless phrases were all I could muster right now, because I only wanted to go back, back to Someday.

Dionysus knelt, more concerned than I'd ever seen him before, "You fell, babe. I'm sorry. I got too excited, and I must've dragged you as we were walking, and you hit your head on one of the headstones."

My fingers were stained with blood and my head was cool and warm at the same time.

"Where did I fall?" The world was tumbling, but I only wanted to focus on one thing.

Dionysus pointed towards a nameless stone. Many were old families, broken plots, and forgotten people.

"You were right." I said matter-of-factly.

"What?" Dion looked puzzled.

"I was there." I stared blankly into Dionysus' eyes. "Don't you understand? I found it! Him, whatever."

"What do you mean? You, you hit your head, babe." Dion said.

"That's not important! You were right. Everything we talked about. Remember? You have to die to find *him*. To find Someday. I found him. I don't know exactly what, but I found him, Dion.

"Whatever you did, you have to do it again. It was beautiful, I saw everything. The stars, the gateway to Someday. The cities. It's all real."

My bloody hands grasped him; Dion's long arms coiled feeling the still warm blood stain his skin. The realization was too much, but my hunger and gait returned when I finally spied the great, unendingness where everything was nothing and nothing bled from the spirals of tomorrow.

"Babe, you need to see a doctor, that's what we need to do. Let me carry you or you can lean on my shoulder, and we can get out of here, alright? Maybe you were right, and this went a little too far."

"No!" Blood began to drip down my forehead. "I know what I saw, Dion! This is what we've been trying to find, for god knows how long. We've searched the whole fucking city. Everywhere! And look, we found it! Now you want to back out? Sorry, I can't do that.

You've no fuckin' idea what I've seen. I saw stars die and reborn. I saw all possible futures and *his* throne. If you love me, for us, you'll do this. And whatever you did, I need you to do it to me again. Or else I'll find my own way back to *Someday*."

Dion stepped away visibly shaken by my grotesquery, and for once, I was proud that my resolve *finally* outmatched him.

"You can't ask me to do this to you. If you love me, you can't ask me to do this." Dion pleaded.

My concentration was beginning to wane, perhaps the loss of blood or the adrenaline pumping through my body, it was fuzzy now. Everything was fuzzy, unclear, shapes and places grew into shadows of whatever they once were, but I tried to remain centered on Dion's voice.

"Babe? Can you hear me?"

Yes, every word, but on the other side of him I saw the light of someday, flickering like a torch beacon across a galactic ocean. All the sudden, it was as if I were floating in an ocean of sludge and stars, paddling for an oar where Dion's hand reached for me on some unreachable shore; and on the other side Someday called, "Swim for the lights."

"Yes, give me your hand." Dion pleaded, although I heard the tears in his voice I didn't want to reach out.

The other side begged me to wade through the bog of shimmering blackness, and I knew what awaited me.

"I'm coming, I promise."

My voice was barely audible, I thought at this point. The scent of blood grew less and less to me, but more and more to Dion. Soon, fading into something nebulous and vague, but the heavy embrace of familiar sensations, a gentle hand, old cologne, and last regrets were enough for me to hear Dion, one last time.

"I'm right here, babe. I'm sorry, please don't go like this. Just hang on for a few more minutes, okay? I've called 9-1-1 and they'll be here soon. And when we get through this, we'll never come back to this place, or any graveyards again, okay?"

I wanted to acknowledge him, to let him know he was right and that we'd put this wild, cosmic adventure in some cobwebbed coffin and bury it; but I couldn't do that. I'd gazed upon something indescribably wonderful, and shedding my corporeal existence was worth every what-if.

I did hear sirens, but by that point it was too late. I desperately longed to find the graveyards of stars, the Gateway to Someday and I found them. I found that which was unattainable in life and promised in death.

Dion never let go, but through the last audible whispers I had to tell him as we sat in the old graveyard, sirens mixing in the silence of a thousand years, "Love me, Someday."

About the Author:

Maxwell I. Gold is a multiple award nominated author who writes prose poetry and short stories in cosmic horror. His work has appeared in numerous publications including *Weird Tales*, *Strange Horizons*, and more. He's the author of *Oblivion in Flux: A Collection of Cyber Prose* from Crystal Lake Publishing and currently serves on the Board of Trustees for the Horror Writers Association as the Treasurer.

Website: [The Wells of the Weird](http://TheWellsOfTheWeird.com)

Release of Beauty | B. T. Petro

"Come with me," you demanded, pulling me outside our cabin and into a winter twilight by the lake. "The snowflakes dance like thousands of silver fireflies." You always were enough beauty for me, but somehow managed to find more.

When I hauled you from the icy water, you had been submerged less than ten minutes. I sweated like it was summer counting compression cycles until you recovered.

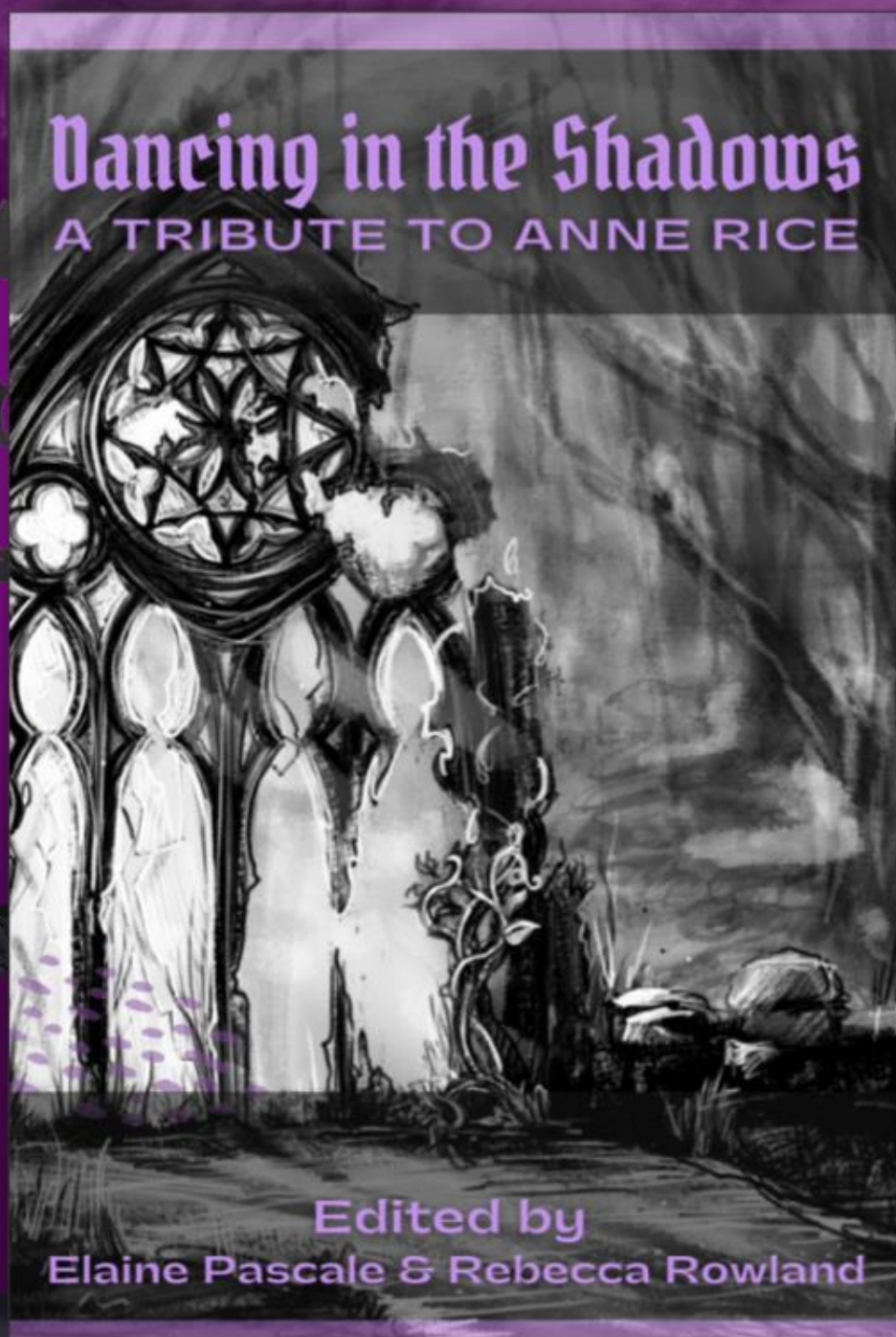
Except that it wasn't you staring up at me. There was no sparkle or sense of self, me, or us in your eyes. There was no beauty.

That is when I released you.

About the Author:

B. T. Petro is retired and living in Ohio. His published story genres include sci-fi, fantasy, and horror. The stories generally have a bit of whimsy or a touch of the macabre. His best friend when he was growing up was an invisible robot, who still visits from time to time.

In tribute to Anne Rice's legacy, nineteen Gothic tales from today's most innovative authors, drawing from the darkness where vampires and witches, mummies and rougarous, spirits and demons move to the music of nightmares.



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I was driving home from the annual Christmas visit to my parents when the weather worsened. The snow, threatening all day, finally began to fall. It quickly turned into a blizzard. I knew I'd have to stop; there was no way I was going to make it home. I'd have to find accommodation for the night; not ideal, but I had no choice. I hoped somewhere would be open on Christmas Eve. After a few miles of atrocious driving conditions, there was a sign '*The Boar's Head Inn, Oakborough. Fine ales and accommodation. Good Food. Next left*'. I turned left off the main road, instantly realizing my mistake. This road was narrow, the snow already a few inches deep. The car, of course, got stuck. I dialed for help, but there was no reception, not this far out in the sticks. I decided I might as well leave the car and walk to the inn. It surely couldn't be far.

Fifteen minutes later I still hadn't passed any buildings and I began to wonder where this damn inn was. I noticed a car on the left-hand side, the front end embedded in a snow drift. They obviously had the same idea as me, but they'd got a little further than I had. The window lowered as I approached. Two middle-aged people were inside. They looked cold.

"Trying to get to the inn, but we got stuck. Fuel's just run out. There's no phone reception. We need help."

I was getting cold too. Shelter was the key. I saw the dark outline of an unlit building about a hundred yards further down the road.

"How about there?"

"Yes, I was thinking that too," replied the man.

The wind was fierce and the man staggered when he got out of the car. The three of us walked towards the building. It was derelict, with boarded up windows. It was surrounded by a rusty metal fence with a faded sign: '*Oakborough Colliery. Closed until further notice*'. Discarded equipment littered the yard. The place gave me the creeps. I'm not prone to nerves, but the building looked dangerous. Brooding. But it was our only option; it was either find shelter or freeze.

The man shouted, but I could barely hear his words. His sentences were short, the wind stealing his breath.

"Didn't realize where we were."

I'd no idea what he was talking about. He looked at me in surprise.

"Before your time, I suppose. Happened one Christmas, back in the seventies. A whole shift was killed, about a hundred miners. Place shut down soon afterwards. Terrible affair. Never recovered the bodies. Town was devastated."

"Do you think we can find shelter?"

"Have to try, no choice."

He pushed open the metal gate and crossed the yard, his wife following. I stopped, unsure. The atmosphere felt wrong; the knowledge so many men had died made me not want to spend the night there, even if it meant hypothermia. My companions reached the main door of the building. Before they could touch the handle, the door creaked open and an emaciated, soot-stained hand reached out and grabbed the man's arm. He yelled and tried to shake himself free, but the hand held him. The woman screamed. I'm not sure what I felt at that exact moment; it was something close to terror, but mingled with amazement. I stood, my jaw slack as I watched my companions dragged inside. My feet felt like lead, I couldn't summon the emotion to move myself.

One word set me moving. One word that still wakes me screaming from dark nightmares. It got me running through the snow towards sanctuary. If I hadn't heard the word, I would have stood there until they came for me. The word was simple enough. It was '*turkey*', whispered out of a hundred long-dead mouths. Understandable, I suppose. They'd waited for so long for their Christmas feast.

About the Author:

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

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I hear a pitter-patter on the roof above me and my heart flutters. Waking fully only takes a second as the realization strikes me. It wasn't supposed to rain today!

I leap off the couch, nearly smacking my head on the low ceiling of the room. I stumble towards the window, socked feet sliding across the hardwood. I catch myself on the windowsill, narrowly avoiding smacking my face into the rain-spattered glass.

I throw the window open, flinching as it slams into the frame. I'm hit with an unfamiliar scent, like moist underbrush and damp leaves. As my eyes scan the outside, I realize the sun is shining over a crisp autumn day. I sigh. The pitter-patter must have just been in my head. My wistful wishing for *Him* to appear.

The Rain Man.

As His name suggests, The Rain Man only appears when it rains. It doesn't seem to matter where or when it's raining. New York, Cape Town, Moscow. He never fails to appear, as a shade clear enough to be remembered, but never identified. He carries no umbrella. No, they say He has no need of one and yet rain reportedly never touches Him.

For as long as I can remember, I've hated the rain. The way it always appears at the worst possible moment. How it soaks your clothes and chilled your bones. If the Rain Man can walk without getting wet, I need to know how it's done! Even if it means investing in a fancy suit.

It would make my day, my whole life, to finally meet this mysterious man. Mamma filled my childhood with all sorts of fairy tales: untouchable knights, world-saving witches, or relatable androids that blew up bad guys and fought through the anxieties of being an adult.

I can't do any of these things yet, and my twenties are here to keep the existential dread around. But I could dress up in a suit and stay dry, possibly looking half decent. At least according to my last partner.

In high school I'd daydream about the number of places He's been; the things He's probably seen, the people He's definitely met, and the things He's achieved. If I was lucky, which I'm not, He would run a club I could join, one where I could be recruited to become a Rain Man too. I'd fit right in: He and I are both gloomy, love dark colours, and autumn.

I recently moved away for college and my current city seems far more rustic than my childhood home in Detroit. My one bedroom apartment is cramped, but I manage. The walls and floors are boring, worn wood. Aside from my desk and laptop, there's not a lot to do. Sometimes when I'm bored I look through weather reports, and the reports of some local ghost hunters. No one here has reported seeing the Rain Man. But, my glass is always half full when it rains.

My optimism washes down the drain every time the weather channels claim rain is on its way. In the last three months it's rained twenty-two times and no one has spotted Him for a thousand miles. I sigh, recalling the times I've lied to Mom and my therapist about how life is going over here. It's hard to stay involved at school when Debate Club refuses to discuss the most water resistant suit, or the Anime Club says you're more depressing than *A Silent Voice*. *You know your scraping the barrel* when even any of the religious clubs call you a heretic before they've even read your CV.

I think I'm beginning to lose my mind. Two weeks ago I threw on one of my dad's old jackets and stood stoically beneath a deluge, hoping it would bring the Rain Man and He would want to finally meet me. All I received was a snuffle and fifteen seconds on someone's TikTok. But, today feels different.

I sigh, leaning out the window, praying whatever hears me and sends rain.

Time crawls by as I zone out, thoughts looming above me like dark clouds.

Familiar splish-splashes draw me out of stupor.

The rain begins in small patches, then starts to fall faster, harder, bigger splashes beginning to soak my sleeves. I stare at the coming storm, my eyes disbelieving such good fortune. There! Out in the middle of the field, I see an odd grey spot across the way. Everything seems darker there, a narrow pillar in the deluge.

Excitedly I pull out my phone, zooming in with the camera. There is definitely someone there. As I squint, I feel my heart begin to race. No umbrella.

The rain is falling so hard now that I can't quite make out if the person is wearing a suit. Blinking rapidly, I try to clear the water from my eyes, when suddenly I feel someone staring at me. I look out into the rain, and with a sudden sharpness, we lock eyes. Hair on my neck tingles. My brain says to blink but my eyes are now frozen in place. The phone's screen goes grey, like those old TVs.

Rainwater splatters my face as I realize I can't hear anything anymore. The world has gone silent. The world has locked in, focusing with fascinated horror as He drifts closer, as though carried on the wind.

Adrenaline floods my body as my heart races, but I'm stuck in place. I shudder as He grins. Something creeps up my spine and I instinctively hyperventilate. The water leaks all over my socks and the floor.

Numb, barely aware of my ragged breaths, I stare forward as the Rain Man floats toward me, smile distending. His suit is untouched by the rain, flickering like cascading drops.

When he is finally before me, He reaches out. Smiling, his mouth is impossibly wide. Dark like a sewer. His hands are dry, smooth like stone worn by the sea. I attempt to scream, but my voice is drowned out by of raging waters.

The Rain Man speaks like a crashing wave. Words reverberate in my chest. They are older than any human language; my mind fails me. My body hitches. I can't tell if tears or raindrops are running down my face. Half a decade's desire is finally within reach.

As He washes over me I feel paralyzed, and yet I feel like I must swim. Teetering on the precipice of a dim, roaring voice, I brace myself.

In the moment it takes my body to flinch with glee, all control is relinquished. My mortal body tries to shrivel, but that limpness is cast away and replaced by something else. I feel my lips curl into a grin as my jaw stretches, impossibly wide. I feel the dampness, but the rain no longer soaks me. Using my weight to push myself forward, I leap outside. All fear is gone, all doubt has vanished. I am one with the storm, and the Rain Man is by my side. He smiles that impossibly wide smile, and I no longer feel alone. I can't be afraid of what I asked for.

About the Author:

A gamer, lover of autumn, its dark histories, and horror media, Aaron Grierson's work often blends folk elements into society's love of technology. He is a First Reader for Flash Fiction Online and former Senior Articles Editor at The Missing Slate. Always hungry for more literature, references and puns inevitably sneak into his musings. Previous publications appear in The Missing Slate, Marisa's Recurring Nightmares, and are forthcoming in Polar Borealis and Polar Starlight.

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Just a Matter of Time | *Gloria Bobrowicz*

From under the grates of a New York street, Andy stuck his head out of his hiding place, which was where he took his family when he first heard the commotion. He turned to his wife, Edna, and said, "I knew it; it was just a matter of time. I've been saying it forever, haven't I?"

Everywhere he looked, he saw total devastation. Buildings collapsed, dead bodies lying about, mouths hanging open in silent screams. He crawled out of his hole and onto a discarded toy truck. A deep, deep sadness overcame him as he glanced around. There were no birds chirping, no dogs barking... just total silence. The explosion was the last sound Andy had heard and he knew exactly what it was.

Gathering his offspring and his wife, they traveled into the nearest building for food. That building happened to be a Chinese restaurant, bingo a meal fit for a cockroach and his family. "We don't have to go any further, we've got enough food here to last us a very long time, he told Edna. "Relax and feed the little ones."

"Stupid humans, I knew they would kill themselves off eventually. They finally did it this time."

About the Author:

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

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Featured Artist | *David Paul Harris*

I am often asked why my work is so disturbing. I prefer my work speak for itself. When the viewer is disturbed by the piece, that says more about them than it does about me.

I do not work the way other artists do, in which they accept a commission and follow a set of instructions to then create an image that is expected of them. I cannot crawl into the mind of a client and pull the image they are imagining out of their head. When I accept commissions it is because I feel something in the story. When I illustrate the piece for that story the unfinished piece is informing me what it wants to be. If I fight it the end result is not acceptable. Same can be said for my independent pieces. The only difference being that I am facilitating emotions from within that need to be exorcised. I create works from my perspective as I have experienced or are currently witnessing in the world.

Horror today, in all forms of media, is saturated with murder. As a species we have become jaded. True, we are seeing a lot of death, but even before the pandemic horror was largely associated with portrayals of murder. And so what I see is a very limited imagination in the human zeitgeist. I posit there are things far more frightening than murder. Artists working in horror must bring that to our attention.

Finally, I do not create for money. That is to say money does not motivate me. I turn down many commissions and money has nothing to do with that decision. I have to feel what I am working on. In the past I was like many other artists, working for commissions. I was miserable. I would create a concept and submit that to the client who would then start a dance of going back and forth with the image. They wanted this, or they didn't want that. I would become frustrated and finally quit. Very unprofessional, I know. And that's just it; I am not a professional. So I made the choice that I would not accept commissions based on money as a motivator. And I take it a step further: when I accept a commission I do not work for monetary payment. I ask the client to select a charity and donate what their heart tells them to. Many will criticize that process and I do understand, but they are not me. If I can be free to create my work and others in need can benefit then I am content to do that.

About the Artist:

David Paul Harris is a regular contributing artist to Red Cape Publishing with books such as DEMONS NEVER DIE, SIX DAYS OF VIOLENCE, SHADOWS OF DEATH, the magazine CAULDRON OF CHAOS, and more to come.

Online Gallery: [David Paul Harris](#)

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Poetry

End of the Line | *Andrew Kurtz*

A little red dot appeared on my
wrist,
growing longer as I tightened my
fist.
The blood stained razor blade lay
on the floor,
as I watched the river of crimson
gore.
A smile runs across my face,
that the world will be better
without such a disgrace.
I could have used a gun instead,
but I am too cowardly to shoot
myself in the head.
Sleeping pills might have done
the trick,
but I probably would just wind
up sick.
I didn't want to hang from a tree,
for all my friends and neighbors
to see.
Jumping off a bridge crossed my
mind,
to drown and leave the world
behind.
However, I chose the razor blade
as my instrument of death,
as I breathe my final breath.

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 Burroughs, and Ian Fleming.



In the Mirror | *Brian Rosenberger*

She saw what no one else could see
Her twin sister, dead in the womb,
Still alive in the mirror.
Her parents embraced the tragedy,
Kept it alive with annual visits to the cemetery,
Artificial flowers in remembrance
And prayers for forgiveness.
All meaningless.
She saw her sister.
Her sister saw her.
Her dead sister whispered.
She listened.
In the darkness, she thinks about loss,
About secrets shared, about sacrifice.
Her dead sister. Her dying parents.
Their blood pooling in red puddles.
She inscribes the mirror in red,
Waits for her sister, her return
And her comforting embrace.

The Long Winter | *Brian Rosenberger*

It has lasted longer than the time
The icicles in Ymir's beard would grow
The length of a serpent's fang or wolf's tooth.
They are Ymir's offspring.
The children of frost giants are still giants.
Moments to them are decades to us.
The children play. A snowball fight.
Their play continues.
Snowball after snowball.
Snowflake after snowflake.
Blizzard after blizzard.
Our Long Winter continues.

The Forecast | *Brian Rosenberger*

Once we relied on oracles to tell us our fate
And warn us of Heavenly wrath.
Blood sacrifices, tea leaves, crystal balls.
The ancient oracles are long turned to dust.
Now we have other oracles—historical data,
Doppler RADAR, weather balloons, satellite imagery,
And we still look to the skies for answers.
Hurricanes, droughts, typhoons, floods, earthquakes.

Now the world is white. The snow doesn't end.

Birds freeze in mid-flight.
The Sun is a stranger.
Frostbite has surpassed cancer.

We have returned to the old ways.
The weather forecasters were the first to go.
We know what the weather will be,
The same it has been for 8 months.
The sacrifices aren't to tell us our fate
But to change it,
As the snow continues to fall.

Ghost House | *Brian Rosenberger*

You still write letters never to be sent.
There's no current address.
In your dreams, you kiss her stomach,
Her eyelids, her elbows, her thighs, her lips.
In your nightmares, the ghost of her
Returns your affection.
Regret writes the letters for you,
What could have been.
You sit outside the Ghost house,
Near the FOR SALE sign.
You pen your never-to-be-sent letters,
Looking for a sign, a shadow, an invitation.
A signal when received, the love letters
To your dead lover end,
Replaced by notification
To the living that still care,
Your final farewell,
Your suicide note.

About the Author:

Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, GA and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of *As the Worm Turns* and three poetry collections: *Poems That Go Splat*, *And For My Next Trick...*, and *Scream for Me*.

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Restless | *Tinamarie Cox*

I live in the house my grandfather built when
he was young and strong, and
filled with love and dreams.
Where I lay me down to sleep
was once my mother's room.
She tells me how her father would
sit on the edge of her bed and
kiss her goodnight on her forehead when
she was small like me.

Every night, I listen to my grandfather
walking the floors beyond my room,
dragging his leg with a cane in a
thump-step-scratch rhythm against
the aged wood boards that creak under his weight.
No one else hears him in those late hours
pacing the hall and around his room with a
thump-step-scratch and asking
for his deceased wife.

My mother doesn't believe my complaints
despite the bruises painted under my tired eyes.
She tells me that a man who's been dead and buried
for years higher in number than my age
can't possibly be keeping me from sleeping
with a *thump-step-scratch* pulse.

I may never have met my grandfather,
but I have become familiar with the
thump-step-scratch tune
of his specter.

About the Author:

Tinamarie Cox lives in Northern Arizona with her husband and two children. She writes to escape her mind and explore the universe. Tinamarie's poems have appeared in previous issues of *TheSirens Call*, as well as *Grim & Gilded*, *Nevermore Journal*, *Spellbinder Magazine*, and others.

Instagram: [@tinamariethinkstoomuch](https://www.instagram.com/tinamariethinkstoomuch)

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



Witching Hour | *Jerome Berglund*

safe place sign at station...
come hither, bridge invites
billy goat gruff

two gerbils
too crowded a cage
one gerbil

corpse crawling with rats
...he tosses darts at them
indolently

sane ones in the room
use poisons untraceable
adulterating

serial killer gets famous
makes fans, by landslide
secures reelection

Revenants | *Jerome Berglund*

the pitter patter of rain
little feet arrive too late
find the entrance barred

we're doing them favor
culling few benefits rest
hunter maintains

they bring dead girl
back corporeal for finale
as phantasm, in dream

crater in rockface
blinks disquietingly
gone too low

riding the slipstream
earlier timelines let them go
access no longer

About the Author:

Jerome Berglund in another life once played a small supportive role in the visual effects on the blockbuster creature films Sucker Punch, Season of the Witch, Clash of the Titans. He has exhibited many poems, most recently in the Asahi Shimbun, Bamboo Hut, Cold Moon Journal, Failed Haiku, Haiku Dialogue, Scarlet Dragonfly, Under the Basho, and the Zen Space.

Website: [Jerome Berglund](http://JeromeBerglund.com)

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

Becoming | Amy Zoellers

Sleet-slick walls,
blink of pink-granite twinkle
in the rare sun streak
and I am buried alone.
When winter stillness chokes
the cricket song
I abandon my bones and wander,
my feathery tread
a light quirk in the snow
His window is near
and there my face glows
unwilling
but my internal fire jumps high
unbidden
and warms me
staring in at his hearth and lamp.
His pen roams the page
but he no longer sees.
he has dropped no letter
outside my tomb
for a time I cannot calculate.
I wait
and still
no word from the unseeing lover I left.
no recognition to hum through my atoms.

See me, sleeping trees and icy stars! (I moan).
"If I live another year..." he wrote once....
The rest is now mist, as I.
My particles, wind-blown, sparser.

Groaning I drift to the wrong mausoleum
and slide as fog down the bricks
and whisper a chill wind in at the cracks
a song for another
buried alone.
His song finds me.
Who was he?
a century my senior
stranger of dust
soldier of compassion
and cherished companion.
We whisper through walls
and our dwindling atoms mingle,
a lightning-song.
Now visible in our unity—
a veil-twisting, wailing storm.

About the Author:

Amy Zoellers is a poet, multimedia artist, exuberant baker, beginning potter and musical being. She co-hosts two monthly poetry shows, *Cake and Hyperbull* on YouTube and *3rd Sunday Poetry* on Instagram, both with Angela Yuriko Smith. Her art, poetry and song can be found on Instagram and YouTube. She lives in Independence, Missouri with her husband, son and cat.

Instagram: [@hipness_and_outrage](https://www.instagram.com/hipness_and_outrage)



Wake-Up Call | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa*

Every morning,
I would wake up to
my husband's feathery kisses
and whispered coaxing.
Today, I wake up to
the foulest of stench nearby,
to a sudden weight
crashing onto my bed,
and to the harsh growls by my ears.
Before I know it,
something pierces through my neck,
forcing a choked scream out of me.
My eyes shoot open.

At once,
I see my husband
looming over me,
his eyes
milky-white and unseeing;
dark trails of blood
stain his peeled lips and drip down
his gaping, rotting jaw.
Before I could scream once more,
he seals my lips
with his razor-sharp teeth
ripping my tongue out before
tearing my heart apart.

For Eternity | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa*

I accept his hand
And enter the shadowed cab
In the wan moonlight—
Against all oppositions—
To fulfill my heart's desire.

My feet trail his steps
Into the private study
Illumed by pale flames,
Where we kiss, where I offer
My neck to bear his fang-marks.

The brief stab of pain
Gives way to euphoria;
He takes what I give
As I pledge myself to him,
Sating his sweltering thirst.

We lie down, unclothed,
Till our deathless bodies merge
In a burst of bliss.
I'm his in flesh and spirit
Now and for eternity.

A Vampire's Lament | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa*

Bright colors—yellow, orange, red—explode
Across the velvet sky and paint the heavens
In spherical bursts of light, which I behold
From where the clinging shadows shroud my presence.

Beneath the fireworks ring the cheering voices
Which merge into a sudden melody
Of most chaotic and discordant noises
That make the air tremble with vibrancy.

They rumble in my bosom and pierce through
My long-dead heart while I, as though spellbound,
Forget about my thirst and my plan to
Feast on the mortals littered all around.

Upon the bursts of colors there I gaze
As they cut through my thoughts as dawn through mist
And transport me away—back to a place
Where warmth did, once upon a time, exist.

Such is a time I scarcely could recall
When vivid wonders filled a beating heart,
And sunbeams on my flushing skin did fall—
With which I, as a vampire now, must part.

Bright colors—orange, red, and yellow—burn
Like tiny suns that glow before my sight;
I watch them flash and fade before I turn
From all that Life beneath the pale starlight.

I've no place left among the human race,
For mine's the soundless shadow's cold embrace
Within a cobwebbed coffin's hollow space—
Beyond all hope, beyond all saving grace.

About the Author:

Ngo Binh Anh Khoa is a teacher of English from Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. In his free time, he enjoys reading fiction, daydreaming, and writing speculative poems for entertainment, some of which have appeared in *New Myths*, *Star*Line*, *Weirdbook*, *Spectral Realms*, *Liquid Imagination*, and other venues.

Facebook: [Ngo Ninh Anh Khoa](#)



Krampus Comes | *Corinne Pollard*

Kiss your parents goodnight,
Recite your Christmas list.
All is peaceful and light.
Murmur in dreams as his fist
Peels away your bedroom door.
Unwrapping your quilt
Softly, he smiles as you snore.

Children weep, but he feels no bloodguilt,
Only hunger when peering at you.
Merry Christmas, he whispers, dragging
Each screaming sack to pursue
Someone else who is naughty.

About the Author:

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

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

The Way of It | *Nina D'Arcangela*

Pain, muscles protest the need to move.
Blind, dragged into the glaring light.
Vertigo, the edge of the frustum too near.
Thunder, the sound of blood slamming through ears.

Clarified, a feather plucked from her hair.
Disrobed, a slave paints her with blest symbols.

Cold, her flesh upon the altar.
Splayed, her arms and legs tethered.
Wet, the tears that run from her eyes.
Revered, the shaman that will take her life.

Fear, the sound of naked feet slapping stone.
Hot, the blade that opens her throat.
Froth, iron-rich gurgle feeds the trough.
Panic, the struggle to pull in air.

Chanting, her people revel in sacrifice.
Silence, the body left as an offering.

Drought, the winds scrub the land of seed.
Famine, no crop will grow.
Blame, she did not appease.

About the Author:

Nina D'Arcangela is a quirky horror writer who likes to spin soul rending snippets of despair. She reads anything from splatter matter to dark matter, and is an UrbEx photographer with a mad passion for abandoned places, bits of decay, and rust. Nina is a co-owner of *Sirens Call Publications*, a co-founding member of the horror writer's group *Pen of the Damned*, the founder of *The Ladies of Horror Picture-prompt Writing Challenge* that has been running for 7 years, and the owner and resident anarchist of *Dark Angel Photography*.

Author Blog: [Spreading the Writer's Word](https://spreadingthewriterword.com/)

Instagram: [@DarcNina](https://www.instagram.com/DarcNina)

stone cold truth | *Eliana Vanessa*

the taste
of retribution
drips like molasses
from the caskets of the divine,
you could call it a haunting,
as i summon, with long nails,
a demon or two
from so many cemeteries;
the perilous spirits
crossing the line,
carrying with them, in tatters,
their rugged tools of the trade
as they work to fight off
the remains of carcasses,
descending,
spiraling them
back into the smoke-filled
stench from which they came.

new moon | *Eliana Vanessa*

lost in ruins
of abandoned tombs
effigies
of ghost-snakes appear,
their fangs
piercing the veins
of memories
once stinging
with black bile and torment;
ribbons
of burnt wormwood
still visible,
float heavily through the trees
as onyx nails,
scribble over coffins
in a frenzy,
scratching bloody hexes
signed in sigils
and strange languages
vowing that no one will be spared.

About the Author:

Eliana Vanessa grew up in New Orleans, participating in 100,000 Poets for Change and The Jane Austen Festival. Her work appears in Sirens Call Publications, Punk Noir, Madness Muse Press, The Blue Nib, Medusa's Kitchen, San Pedro Review and in the anthologies: Masks Still Aren't Enough (2019), Americans & Others (2019), and It Was A Dark & Stormy Night: Sixteen Halloween Tales (2019).

Genevive | *Eliana Vanessa*

whispered curses
with the best of them;
decomposing bodies
like quicksand in her mind,
the trunks of which
hung like hourglasses,
from trees,
hanging out to dry—
her thoughts,
reeling with confusion,
as no amount of gin
could kill the pain
of the demise, inflicted,
her fears, now sinking,
in a murder of corrugated crows.

untethered frustration | *Eliana Vanessa*

you are the snake,
apple of my eye that waits,
soot on your knees at the altar;
smile of a martyr,
as if there were any Hope.

one reason
one song
a terrifying display,
untethered frustration

i stare at the rosebud
and pity how it never
ceases to bleed,
how no amount of medicine
will change its wilting pleas;
my eyes are cut to crush
cups cascading rain
alongside my decided gain—
there's truth beyond
the bite or fall
in the drip of a simple spell.

Skullball | *Eliana Vanessa*

to finally have
enough skeletons
saved up for winter
is a relief; bloodstained,
my cemetery is complete;
here the porcelain
hands of time
stir cauldrons, hellbent,
to conjure the twisted spirits
that lift veils of black roses
off the faces of coffins,
floating in a tear stained sky—
where lovers, once falling,
are bludgeoned and cut loose,
into an endless trail
of restlessness,
while Death, down below,
in her suit of silken crimson snow,
smokes cigarettes, limitlessly,
kicking a skullball for another poem.

The spidermoose | *Mathias Jansson*

In the dusk you can see
its frightful silhouette
its red eyes gazing
above the trees
weaving its dark web
to catch a stray hiker
and suck out his guts
like a human fly

In the dark woods
this ancient horned creature
with eight long hairy legs
tall as the trees
has walked on the earth
since the beginning of time

The natives call it
a spidermoose
but I don't think
you can imagine such a creature
until you are caught in its web
and feel its stinking breath.

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](#)



The Box | *Christopher Hivner*

The taps
came from inside the box
under my desk,
dark liquid oozed from the corners.
When the box moved
I jumped from my seat
and that's when
the tentacles emerged,
wrapping around my ankles.
I don't know where
the stinger came from
but it plunged through my stomach,
then retracted
pulling my liver out with it.
I fell to my knees
and the box opened.
It was beautiful inside,
swirling blue light
with sparks that exploded
like fireworks.
A beneficent female face
rose from the light
to kiss me on the lips.
The sensuality
relieved my pain
and my body went limp.
I was lost in bliss
even as her tongue
snaked down my throat,
through my organs,
to wrap tightly around my balls
and squeezed.
I fell forward
into the box,
into the abyss
of darkness and silence.
The flaps closed,
sealing me in.
Time was meaningless
in the box
so I don't know
how long my transformation took
but I am anew
and sensing a presence outside.
Time to say hello.
Tap tap tap

It's a lure to the depths
but you don't feel the danger.
Dimples of light sparkling off the waves,
act as flirtatious winks,
kisses from soft lips to the nape of your neck.
The sudden need for more from your new lover
leads you to the water's edge,
foam lapping at your feet, sucking on your toes.
Farther in you wade,
the warm ocean swallowing your body,
tasting flesh, mixing salts,
bringing you to life with sensual rhythm.
The tingles you feel
must be the work of the ancient sea,
it couldn't be
the teeth
of a prehistoric beast breaking your skin.
The feeling between your legs
must be a knowing tongue
not a tentacle
from the silty floor reaching inside of you
to extract what it needs to feed.
You are positive of the devotion
of your new lover
until the moment your blood
becomes your bath
and you are greeted by your insides
floating on the surface around you
bobbing in rhythm
with the light-dappled waves.

I Will Meet You | Christopher Hivner

I am the gathering thunder
feel me deep in your belly
I am the coming flood
run, it excites me
I will lurk in the aftermath
to pick up your scent

I am the voice you hear
in the decaying midnight air
I am the presence you feel
at the foot of your bed, hovering, watching
I am the light that soothes you
I am the eyes of your lover
I am the threads of the sheets you wrap yourself in

Crawl to your dreams
my sickly pet
I will meet you there

About the Author:

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

Facebook: [Christopher Hivner](#)

Twitter: [@Your_screams](#)

Stalker | *Miracle Austin*

She paces down the lonely halls in her feathery, sable train—
dragging it across the dusty floors.
Crawls up walls with her twelve-inch nails...
Rides in backseats
Swims dark seas
Dances in the wind like an angry hornet...
Flies faster than Supergirl, in and out of doors and windows
Never sleeps
Constantly watches and solicits those with their guards down.
Now, she posts on a swaying tree branch outside, only waiting to collect her next soul.

About the Author:

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

Instagram: [@MiracleAustin7](#)

Twitter: [@MiracleAustin7](#)

Medusa's Death | *January Bain*

Eons my sight be known,
to desecrate all flesh to blown.
Send my dragon on the wing,
no earthly voice, fire the sting.

To Death and Hades with all who scorn,
for soon they too will be asunder born,
so lay no disrespect on me,
I prove your worth not to be.

Beauty once a vision pure,
scant hope or cure to the lure.
No one to see or love for me,
or day of rest or comfort be.

No end I fear can be near,
Today I ask the overseer,
to give price to end my reign,
send me back to whence I came.

About the Author:

January Bain has been fascinated with mythology since childhood when her mother read her stories every night before bed. She writes poetry and books in a number of genres, has won awards for her writing, and had novels translated into other languages and games. She first and foremost considers herself a storyteller, obsessed with words, images, and motivations to bring her stories and poems to life.

Facebook: [January Bain](#)

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All bets are off.



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Rek-Cocci stirs—
Old, nefarious worm.
Deep in subterrene slumber
its segments flex, secrete,
a repellent corpse-white epiderm.

Rek-Cocci, grand devourer.
It That Swallowed The Second Moon.
Writhing, the cadaveric mass bucks
against a stalactite-studded roof,
pain dispelling dregs of its millennial swoon.

Rek-Cocci, ever-starving,
Dark-Haunter, Gorger of Graves.
Threading the earth like a loathly root
it shivers, bleeds, roused from senescence;
vermiculate ichor the coarse stone veritably laves.

Rek-Cocci, coffin-worm incarnate,
revered of Eld in abominate temple-deeps.
Now, a centuried ritual performed above:
living blood offered up by unliving hand.
Through porous stone the unhallowed sacrifice seeps.

Rek-Cocci, blind unsufferable god,
idiot avatar of atavismal Void.
Lubricated by its leaking wounds
& energized by lich-rite goety
it bores upwards, seeking the black magician thus employed.

Rek-Cocci, Mindless Dreamer,
long disregarded as primitive, uncouth lore.
The dead god breaches the temple-close,
sundering flagstones, displacing altar & offering:
its blood-garbed summoner falls prostrate, pressing fleshless face to floor.

Rek-Cocci, aeon-abandoned blight,
grown dim in annals penned on hides of human flesh.
Compelled by unreverent sorcery
to abide by bidding of that once-mortal,
it knows hot wrath, & a maggot's yearning to return to its chasmal crèche.

Rek-Cocci, sense-organ of entropy,
sovereign of dead cycles & decay's rank succulence.
Yawning a tine-lined maw, it spews an acidic fetor before
devouring the unnamed necromancer, swiftly digesting desiccate viscera
as it burrows back to its nameless Darkness, passage holing apocalyptic rents.

Amongst the Sargasso | *Scott J. Couturier*

The rank weed stretches endless,
coiling & clutching, fraught with foul
blossoms & pale crustaceans that crawl
over vine-draped hulks of ships long-belabored.

Bound from horizon to horizon by
masses of malign greenery that surge
& subside with the subtleties of each tide,
Sargasso hungry for derelicts to centennial abide:

& what amongst the weed thrives?
Colossal octopi ply those poisoned waters like
aqueous spiders, haunting a web of ghastly
green—
malevolent eyes peer from depths unfathomed &
fecund.

Tentacles scrape the deck clean—
prick the watchman from his post, vivisect
bleating sheep in their iron-bound pens. Around
the offal-port gather gargantuan crabs of mottled
hue.

Their clicking! Like castanets of doom,
onyx eyes shimmering on slime-laved stalks.
A reek is in the wind—foul gust of deep's decay,
harbinger for whatever abyssal horror will next
besiege.

Now, a pale wreck looms from mists
that cling & coil about unshuttered lamps.
Something out-boils from her sea-rotted hold—
slick black hordes, legion eyes lurid amid brining
damps.

The rank weed stretches endless:
becalmed & beset, bleak languid days
& nights of frightened huddling in berths reinforced
against the endless *scraping, scuttling, flopping,*
slopping.

No escape or future to wistful crave,
nor fair sun, or breeze untainted by the weed's
awful fishy-vegetable feter: no port towards which
to soulfully yearn. The Sargasso is prison, is home,
is grave.

To the Wolves | *Scott J. Couturier*

A pale moon of gangrenous bale ascends;
wolves howl in homage to her lurid orb.
Over marshes by night my pathway wends;
November's snowfall each footfall absorbs.
Well know I the way, but—what can await
in that drear manse of my ancestral curse?
Torn portraiture, grave-mosses profligate
above each lintel, house carriage a hearse—
mercy, to be spared my homecoming date!
I waver as the pack draws nigh, bloodlust
resonant in each bleak, advancing bay.
I think of my father, once gone to dust:
foul magics I worked to revive his clay.

Now a gray slopping thing, master & lord:
I welcome the wolves with flick of my sword,
stomach slit & bowels eager outpoured.

My neck shows the scars—
two toothsome, pearlescent punctures.
Now, sealed behind iron bars
I am kept from satiating sanguine hungers.

Reflection In Blood | *Scott J. Couturier*

Every time I
glance into a mirror I
am confronted with the ghastly semblance of your face—
A shadow, intangible, leering at my
shoulder, lips curved in unspeakable mirth.
Fangs visible, & the lambency of witching fires
bright & hot in your lidless eyes.

I thought, at first, an hallucination—
how could it be other?
I was haunted, bad acid flashback I suspected,
but you lingered, *swelled*, dominating
my waking eye.

Now every pane of glass reveals you—
The edge of the razor discloses your smile—
Something moves in me, dark, intangible,
the hitching of my breath expanding your grin.
I am sick with you, yet wish not to be well;
My mind is infernal, consumed,
thwarted by the mirror's cold, insensate surface.
I crave the warmth of flesh I know to be dead.

Thus craven, I claw at senseless glass
thinking to free your loving maleficence
from its frozen field.
Eventually, the denying surface shatters.
Fingers, shredded, fall to heaving sides,
life-blood waxing to a sanguine pool at my feet.

Looking down, I see your ever-widening grin reflected vermilion.
Blessedly, I start to sink.

I crave hot blood—
but more, I desire the rapturous bite!
My own ichor in bright flood
gorging that lovely revenant of the night—

Oh, it pains me terribly
to be so hale & flushed with life!
My passions wax unbearably—
from secreted metal I hone a razor knife.

The orderlies mock me—
call me mad, dump pig's blood in my bowl.
I lap it up with a ghoulish glee,
mind fixated on my final, fatal goal.

The knife, now keen,
I save until late one mournful winter's eve;
He comes to me in a dream
re-enacting our delicious, deleterious cleave.

The yearning is too great!
Slitting down my wrists with nary a cry
I seek my twin hungers to sate
until I collapse dead, drained blissfully dry.

About the Author:

Scott J. Couturier is a Rhysling-nominated poet-and-prose writer of the weird, liminal, and darkly fantastic. His work has appeared in numerous venues, including Spectral Realms, Tales from the Magician's Skull, Space and Time Magazine, and Cosmic Horror Monthly; his collection *The Box* is available from Hybrid Sequence Media, while his collection of folk horror poetry, *I Awaken In October*, is available from Jackanapes Press.

Facebook author page: [Scott J. Couturier](#)
Author Blog: [The Loose Palace of Exile](#)

At the end of days, the dead will rise
as angels, beating their righteous
wings in search of justice.
There is no mercy.

At the orphanage, the graveyard's
hallowed ground erupts;
while in the woods, small graves stir.
Thin blankets of leaves shiver,
never warming the bones of those
who lie shallow beneath them.

The blessed—ordained guardians of this place,
who granted each other forgiveness,
whose sins were redeemed but never regretted,
rise, their knife-edged wings gleaming with
desire, lust unsated by death.

The abused and murdered children
need no forgiveness.
They rise, lamenting their cruel fate.

Their ember-edged wings smoulder with
simple desires—to be named, to be loved.

Heaven and Hell stand open to
receive the newly-risen dead.
The blessed and the innocent
plead for their ascension.

The blessed sinners pray
for absolution,
their pure words
excusing dark deeds.

The unshriven innocent
extend weak hands,
their cupped palms offering
their suffering, their unwilling sacrifice.
Soft zephyrs of compassion
fan their wings into flame,
transformed to Seraphim, they soar.

All around, the flawless light
of judgement day illuminates
deceptions and
dissembling mitigations.
Rejects them.
In Pandemonium, the devil waits patient,
All guilty souls will fall, at the end of days.

About the Author:

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

Speak clearly to Anibus—
a soul has found the Nile,
torment is the scribe's vigil,
strokes confessed in suffering,
penance awakened by the tomb,
misread words have no path
in eternity.

The book of the dead
prepares the essence in offering—
conscience weighed by artistry,
spells of a counselled hand, offering the
heart to Osiris, a judgement
held in trust, the scarab's birth,
painstaking crafted into existence.

Mastery of words
is the gift beyond suffering—
the god's true charity, shaping the
scribe's mind, the plague of the
flickering flame, questioning blindness
under the watch of Ra, as the darkness
tempts error, offering a soul to oblivion.

A path summoned by Anibus—
only the Field of Reeds can
offer form; the heart stands
trial to the feathers fate,
Osiris offers judgement; condemned
by the scribe's poor hand, a soul
is sentenced—denied food, clothing
and attendants, the burden of eternity.

Anibus calls for clarity—
a scarab falls from the procession,
Ra guides the scribe into madness,
the boat travels empty; the reeds
will never find the words, the walls
provide no empathy, the symbols
live with tragedy, haunting the dead
as they suffer in eternity.

A Marionette may Cry | *Christopher Collingwood*

In a tug of sadness—
the strings offer nothing,
motions played out, condemned to a
childlike sympathy,
acted—but never to mature,
frozen in crayon, as the eyes move
but never express.

Locked in betrayal,
a tragedy of pretence
dressed in performance—the mourning
of a lost puppet, hands cover face;
the closure of a show, the head tilts
in sadness; tragedy of life,
the body goes limp; no tears
for a porcelain face, all held back
by the curfew of string.

The passing of a real
emotion is never shown,
bequeathed only by the
weeping hand, hidden by form,
locked by the motions
of reality; the marionette
will never know—what is
felt and what is staged,
trapped by the wire, never given
a real moment, or a real place to connect.

Just a tune lingering in
the background, a tragic smile—
of a painted rose, wishing to
be swayed by an emotion;
nothing changes, all worth
becomes stolen by the strings,
a world hanging without truth,
leaving nothing else but a
moment worthy of a tear.

Idle threats of the Butterfly | *Christopher Collingwood*

Butterflies have eaten my dreams
Riding on a placid wind of nightmares
Raw beauty bound in a rainbow swarm
Blocking out a dreamer's twilight
My fantasies consumed in a delirious deception
The peaceful garden of my escapist youth
Ravaged in a fury not fit for a heart in ecstasy
Burning my water colour sunsets
Drowning my muse in tears of self-pity
Cocoons giving birth to elegant nightmares
Watching as my rosy-cheeked lover
Summons me into temptation
Her amber hair flowing over the horizon
As her statuesque perfection is shredded
By a symphony of pastel wings
A kaleidoscopic frenzy of retribution
Dissecting my inner most pleasures
Butterflies pour out of my mouth
Cleansing the land of sensual delight
Stealing my first childhood kiss
Swarms bleeding innocence from my world
Leaving me as a derelict wanderer
Collapsing to the weight of hollow indignity
In a barren waste of limitless perversion
I awaken to escape from my self-torment
Left to ponder my absurdist tragedy
Finding a dead butterfly beneath me
I realise that even the most beautiful sadist
Can find no better place to work its craft
Then the savagery of demented dreams.

Cling tight to blood stained sheets,
the night will bring you torment,
suckle deep upon a weeping vein,
as deception taints your breath.

Keep warm by lies and nightmares,
as your flesh peels from then bone,
for nothing soothes a demon,
like the sound of gruesome fate.

Welcome tragedy into your ears,
as you shatter your next bone,
hold tight to all your favourite anger,
as we remember all our screams:
the screams from vengeful lovers,
so vile in their betrayal;
the screams from frightened children,
as they find horror in their world;
the screams of tragic victims,
memory feeds upon their loss;
the screams of the dying,
the damned can be so cold;
the screams of remorseful watchers,
finding the torment born of choice;
and all the screams we may not hear,
but whose atonement we shall watch.

So pick your favourite scream,
as the blood trickles from your lips,
may your agonies always blister,
and your torment leave you restless,
until you remember all your screams.

About the Author:

Christopher Collingwood was born and raised in Sydney Australia. He completed university in Sydney and graduated with a degree in business studies. Chris has devoted his spare time to writing, with works published in Not One of Us, New Myths, Andromeda Spaceways, Abyss & Apex, Hexagon, Shoreline of Infinity, and the recent Smoke in the Stars anthology, among other dimensionally unstable places.



Ossuary | *Mariel Herbert*

Resting place:
I wonder which bone ages
without your sedimentary weight
depressing mythology...calcium losses

Recounting ribs between night terrors
Do you miss being kaolinite?

Why make me your phantom limb,
a Freudian slipped stitch in your side?
Were I born from blood instead I'd transfuse
myself into another universe.

Aurum | *Mariel Herbert*

If milk cartons still had faces, we might yet
see her photograph from her last birthday—
elemental hair glistening with amino acids
extracted from a star trail of salted oats.

The tidy confines of her jump ship are left
better than she found them. Every living
trace is gone. Even echoes: residual
thermodynamics, meals with her old crew.

Dark opens into dark; the captain slumbers,
sharing her dying dreams with water bears.

Fairy Dust | *Mariel Herbert*

We dream of forests eternally white.
The restful ghosts of endodontic trees.
As landscapes of hydroxyapatite
Denature and decay in spearmint breeze.
We mourn enamel's eventual fade;
Grind and fall down, spit out this leaden grief.
Crystalline crowns splinter, litter the glade.
No children left to trade fresh baby teeth.
Belief has abandoned their little beds.
Swarming for warmth, we crowd, crumble, and crack.
Knowing beneath pillows lies emptiness,
We're rootless now, and we'll never come back.
A world without imagination:
There's no magic in indoctrination.

About the Author:

Mariel Herbert's speculative poetry and fiction have appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Dwarf Stars 2022*, and *Liminality*, among others. She lives in Northern California with her family, including one high-maintenance dog, and hundreds of low-maintenance books. She runs a few speculative reading groups and also writes haiku and senryu.

Website: [Mariel Herbert](http://MarielHerbert.com)

The climate has changed. Agree or deny, but—much like debating the day-sky's ever hazier blue—we inwardly know that it's true, and why. Seemingly harmless, too many warm days—like a sequence of unwitting assassins—have been invisibly chained, passing indifferently over vast areas of too little rain, incidentally dispersing insidious drifts of pollution.

Though the partially obscured sky provided scant notice, winter, after a long wait, has at last—if most unnaturally—arrived. For reasons not entirely clear, winter has selected this particular evening to appear—emerging, unexpectedly, as a kind of tipping-point, with potentially deadly intent.

The bizarre, brumal air becomes oddly crystalline, its chilling effect growing, somehow, from within—the bones already deeply cold—the responding flesh drastically cooling.

A surprising crunch of brittle, just-frozen grass echoes under my footfalls—causing me to pause, still as any stone.

Like branching icicles, the lancing, interlocking calls of owls pierce the interior of this nefarious, rising dome of new night. These sharp extensions of meaning—hanging harbingers, pure and solemn as death—now merge in a strange, solid silence.

An incipient, unpredictably morphing snow-globe forms—its angled flakes arising inscrutably from darkness—cunningly concealing any coming changes—perhaps hidden dangers quietly lurking in its labile, deceptively expanding borders.

A shocked sky holds its breath. How long? As yet, unknown.

Rodents, seeking shelter along rapidly hardening ground, dare not rustle the fallen, flash-frozen leaves—for fear of swooping razor-taloned attacks of raptors, waiting above. Owl-eyes glow reflectively—like glassy implants—with every cryptic sonance and any motion signaling...a next meal...which...never comes.

The burgeoning, but suddenly enormous, singularity of dusk shows its youthful appetite—steadily swallowing the past and present in the spreading, protean edges of a freezing sphere of retribution—soon encasing all noise of an angry, overheated earth with a still-fledgling, but increasingly unyielding, cryo-husk—no other future, at this time, made manifest.

About the Author:

Will H. Blackwell Jr. is a retired professor (botany), Miami University (Ohio), living now in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. His fiction has appeared in: *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, *Disturbed Digest*, *Outposts of Beyond*, *Shelter of Daylight*, *Trembling with Fear*, and *365 Tomorrows*. He has poetry in: *Aphelion*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Descant*, *The Fifth Di...*, *Scifaikuest*, *Slant*, and *Star*Line*.

She said, I was her heart's desire,
her beloved.
Sometimes
I think
she meant it.
I think
sometimes
I felt it too.
But now I feel
empty
of desire
I feel
only strangeness
holding her heart in my hand.
I feel it pulsating with life.
I feel the blood flowing like tears,
while she lies still,
so still,
empty
emptied
of desire
heartless,
like me.

Feed The Flames | Lynn White

Gather round
the hearth
it's a cosy place
if the fire is burning
and we'll keep it burning
never fear
the flames
flickering
dancing
alight
alive,
a living fire.
Gather round,
we'll keep it burning
the home fire
watch
closely
let yourself
be hypnotised
bewitched
be mesmerised
by the flickering flames,
waving and dancing.
Listen to them
as they crackle
and scream
as a living fire must.
Gather round,
never fear
only
feed the flames.

They're shrouded in mist almost
as dark as the shrouds
they wear to cover themselves,
to cloak themselves
for their journey.
Shrouds like dusty abayas
uniformly grey,
shapeless,
bloodless,
formless,
lifeless
grey.
Only their mouths still red,
stained by their final feast.
The feast of what was left.
And now there's nothing,
nothing any more.
No more.
Nothing.

About the Author:

Lynn White lives in north Wales. Her work is influenced by issues of social justice and events, places and people she has known or imagined. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy and reality. She was shortlisted in the Theatre Cloud 'War Poetry for Today' competition and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net and a Rhysling Award.

The House on Drunkards' Hill | John Villan

Rocks stud Drunkards' Hill, jagged but serene, landslides
leaving a hard scramble, no trail to wend the paths
one weaves. Far above, a dense column of cloud threatens;
below, the thicket falls to shadow. So forward I crawl,
upward I climb, every arduous step a sullen triumph.

I summit, hill mounted like a raucous beast in heat,
a conquering general blooded and choking on ragged breath.
Here is the house. Face severe as the grave, rotten shingles
clinging like dead scales, mottled with mold and old age.
Double doors ajar: a welcome, a warning, an indifferent gaze.

A sentry observes from above, a grizzled possum ancient
and monstrous, pointed snout pushed through broken window,
presenting most proudly a mangle of jagged yellow teeth.
He is my brother, and so I say unto him *Peace be with you*.
Thus I enter, passing below, the fierce chill at my back.

Inside, the house commences a ballad of glory and regret,
a tale of earnest planters told in wide planking, a song
of proud scions sung in fine oak bookshelves stocked
with volumes of prayers and poems—sad stories, too,
of a declining line, war intestine, sons gone to waste.

Floors stained rust and walls of plaster cracked, corridors
leading to rooms of squalor wherein the spoiled seed
festered like a wound, spread noxious and rooted deep.
The air fills with sulfur scent, remnant of old violence,
as the house groans and seethes with bitter memories.

A door, splintered and roughly hewn, extends an invitation
to regions yet darker, a cellar clawed deep in black earth.
From within calls a voice, guttural and cruel, answered
by mere grunts ugly and low—but here my courage
fails and I take my leave of the house on Drunkards' Hill.

About the Author:

John Villan is a writer of fiction and poetry. He has lived and traveled throughout much of the continental United States and has an avid interest in American history, with a special focus on colonial era history. He lives in northern Arkansas along with his wife and their three dogs.



a dark abyss no light would break | *Linda M. Crate*

there was no reason
for her to be
on guard they told her,

but she was terrified
someone was watching her;

when she walked out
into the water
the siren told her she
wasn't wrong but now instead
of being the victim of a vampire
she would now be a victim of her—

no matter how hard she swam,
the siren was faster than her;

yet still she tried—
even if it were futile,
there was nothing more than
in that moment she wanted
than to live;

she couldn't leave the sea fast enough
before the siren swallowed her
to a dark abyss no light would break.

fortune did not favor the brave | *Linda M. Crate*

the werewolf
had killed her husband,
and her children;

so now she hunted him
with silver bullets—

she knew that he could
always kill her first,
but it would be a game
to see who could get who
first;

maybe she'd get lucky and
he would be caught off guard—

unfortunately,
she found out the hard way,
that sometimes fortune
did not favor the brave.

each time it made her happy | *Linda M. Crate*

in life she had been a beauty,
and in the undead she was a
beauty still;

and she didn't feel guilty
for all the blood
she needed because the thirst
never seemed to end—

she stalked the woods at night,
whispering shadows between
the trees as her only warning;

but most men didn't even notice
her until she bit deeply into
their necks draining them of
every last ruby—

and every time she killed she
imagined she was killing
her vampire sire again,
each time it made her happy as
she saw the flames swallow
him into ash to be swept up in the wind;

she was not sorry for what she
had become because it was not her fault.

she wanted vengeance
against the werewolf that
had killed her wife,
and she was determined to
get it by any means
necessary;

the witch gave her the power
of a dragon and she felt herself change
into a woman that was both
human and beast—

she looked down at her claws,
and ran her tongue over her now sharp teeth;

"am i just a different shade of monster?"
she asked the witch.

"child, to someone we are all villains,
and monsters aren't always vampires and
werewolves or dragons sometimes
they are every bit as human as you were.
don't you want your revenge?"

yes, yes, she did.

and so she stalked him through the trees,
he only noticed when she was inches from him.

"what is this?" he demanded.

"i thought since you liked devouring people
someone should show you what it is like to be
devoured."

before he could answer, she swallowed him;
and she felt joy at his screams and despair—
her stomach rumbled in approval,
licking her lips she thought revenge was a
rather tasty dish.

you have no authority here | *Linda M. Crate*

she had heard of monsters,
of course,
but she knew that they knew better
than to attack her;

she walked through the trees with
an air of superiority—

the vampire watched with his
catlike eyes flicking to follow
her every step,

and her thoughts amused him;

who did she think she was,
to command every monster?

he had no problem humbling her,
and so he grabbed her around
the waist;

as she protested and shouted at him
the vampire chuckled:
"you have no authority here," he told her,
before biting deeply into her throat
swallowing every last drop of her blood.

About the Author:

Linda M. Crate's works have been published in numerous magazines and anthologies both online and in print. She is a three time best of the net nominee. When Linda isn't writing she likes to enjoy nature walks, photography, reading, dancing, and music. Her favorite musical genres are industrial, indie, rock, and goth. She's always been a misfit, but she prides herself on always being herself.

Facebook: [Linda M. Crate](#)

Twitter: [@thysilverdoe](#)

Jack The Ripper | G. Richard Evans

Night-time slowly falling,
Another end to day.
Silent thoughts come calling,
Chase sanity away.
As darkness slips across the sky
Your body fills with lust.
Such a screaming, burning pain,
Eventually you must
Take to the streets all black and sly,
With your scalpel thrust.
Dreams of death, with every breath

There amidst the thickening fog,
Silken skirts a'swirl.
Stands a lady of the night,
Blonde hair all a'curl.
Rage runs rampant, blinds the mind,
Clouding reason's light.
But not so much you don't take care
There's no one else in sight.
Then the practiced blade will slash,
Strokes both short and tight.
Blood is there, everywhere.

Dawn comes slowly creeping,
Tolling night-time's doom.
You sit alone remembering,
In your darkened room.
Another body bleak and still,
In some dark alleyway.
Cold and hard as graveyard stone,
With nothing left to say.
The blood upon your hands is gone,
Now silently you pray.
For release, from the beast.

About the Author:

G. Richard Evans is a former counselor and teacher who writes horror fiction. His first book, *Maniacs, Monsters, and a Bump in the Night* was released a few months ago. He has been a fan of horror for as long as he can remember and has an extensive collection of books from such authors as Stephen King and Robert McCammon.

Facebook: [Ric Evans](#)
Instagram: [@juric1945](#)



Kiss me deadly | *Max Bindi*

You know the light bends
pain goes straight to the point
the blackest sea and the darkest sky blends
till you can hardly see their joint.
You know time is nothing
but an eerie transitional toy
It will bury all things
that we cannot destroy
Now lie beside me in this unearthly dream
Now lie beside me in this haunted room
Now lie beside me endlessly
between the dingy glitter
and the dazzling gloom
and kiss me deadly
one more time.
You know there's nobody in the crowd
one too many phantoms in our solitude
the winds murmur our names aloud
when alien shadows roam in the wood
and there are no more comforting hollow words
only your stone-cold black lips
strange memories sliding forward
with no ominous time left to keep
Now lie beside me in this unearthly dream
Now lie beside me in this haunted room
Now lie beside me endlessly
between the dingy glitter
and the dazzling gloom
and kiss me deadly
one more time
one more time.
You know there's nobody in the crowd
one too many phantoms in our solitude
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with no ominous time left to keep
Now lie beside me in this unearthly dream
Now lie beside me in this haunted room
Now lie beside me endlessly
between the dingy glitter
and the dazzling gloom
and kiss me deadly
one more time

Death-thought | *Max Bindi*

We fear death
above all.
But even more
than that
we dread the loss
of our ultimate finality.
As if once dead and gone
we should mourn
with our own demise
the very loss of our death
forever moving forward
without the consoling thought of it.

Death Poem | *Max Bindi*

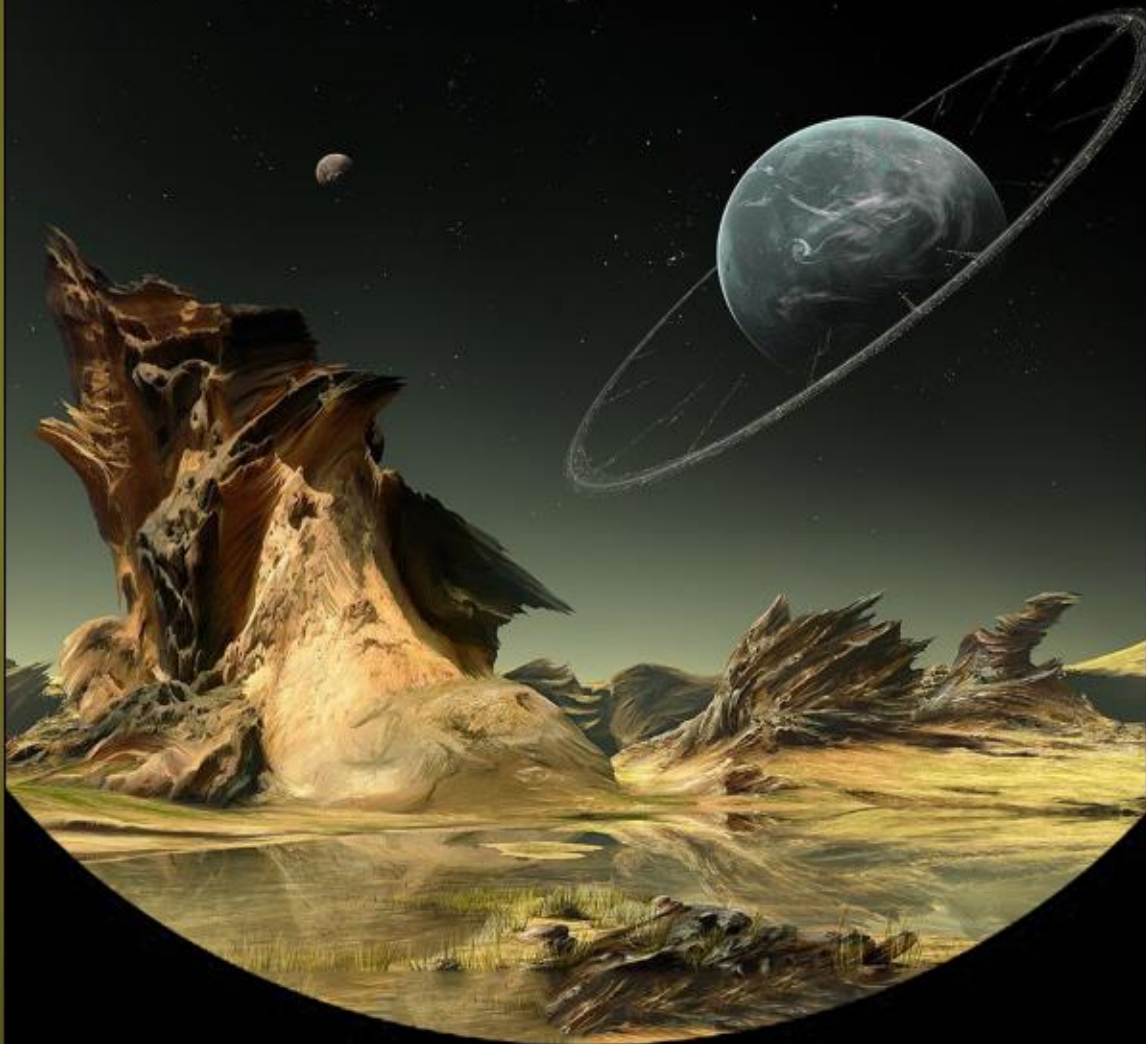
Death is an embalmed bird of pray
plumping its old dusty feathers
Death is a black rider at the end of his tether
Death is a creepy mannequin in its Sunday best
Death is the linen shroud in the hope chest.
Death is a veiled lady in marble
Death is a bone chilling warble
Death is a slow dance macabre
Death is a cobwebbed candelabra
Death is a disappearing land's arson
Death is not real but in its own person
Death is a sudden eternal lull
Death is a self-important grinning skull
Death is the ruinous bottomless well
Death is the dead clock's knell
Death is mercilessly kitsch.
Death is mud thrown out cleaning the last ditch.

About the Author:

Max Bindi is an Italian English teacher, translator poet/singer/songwriter. His work has been featured in Poetry Anthologies, Childrens' books and Poetry magazines. He has also been extremely active in the alternative electronic music scene with his darkwave/synth pop/goth project "Outpost of progress" publishing a large number of songs in Europe and USA.

Facebook: [Max Bindi](#)
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The Pest House | *Meg Smith*

I have found you so well,
in the dithering of leaves—
scarlet unspoken, fevers
withered to shadows,
and brushed away.
Rooms are bearing witness,
walls without light.
Does no one come,
waiting until the chimney
ceases to smoke?
Are no provisions made,
no prayers said?
But, a man does come, with
an offering of fire, and wood.
Even bread demands
a final dream.

The Sea Grass Jester | *Meg Smith*

My friend, handsome
in your purple bones,
enjoy your wine and fish,
by night's ocean
A concert beckons, blares,
and begs your thunder dance.
My friend, handsome
in your gray and blue,
skin drawn to bones, but
enduring in laughter; a tide waits,
its creatures murmuring
in their danger's song.

The Night Garden | *Meg Smith*

I open the iron gate,
to the world of colors—
darkness cannot conceal them.
Cars and trucks go by,
but I keep my silence
on the path of stones.
Fire, water, air, dreams—
all conspire to caress.
All become flowers here,
fires in solitude,
along the brick wall.
I can rest here,
in a peace of knowledge,
as good as any winter morning.

Bright Bleed | *Meg Smith*

In the snapping of embers,
teeth will draw it out.
There is no hunger
like the hunger of shadows
so close to the last
dark breath,
when blood becomes
not blood, but some
silent riddle,
ceasing to flow.

About the Author:

Meg Smith is a writer, journalist, dancer, events producer living in Lowell, Mass. In addition to previously appearing in *The Sirens Call*, her poetry and fiction have appeared in *Dark Moon Digest*, *Silver Blade*, *The Chamber Magazine*, *The Cafe Review*, and many more. She is author of five poetry books and a short fiction collection, *The Plague Confessor*. She welcomes visits to her website.

Website: [Meg Smith](http://MegSmith.com)

Year's End | DJ Tyrer

Last day of the year
Death moves silently
Amidst the noise of drunks and fireworks
Sound of tuneless singing
That drives the old year out
Strikes as the clocks chime
One—two—three—four
Strokes towards midnight
Five—six—seven—eight
Strokes of the strange curved knife
Nine—ten—eleven—twelve
It's done—it's over
The old year and this life
A sacrifice ordained in elder times
To the two-faced god
Immortal, yet ever-dying
Rising again like the newborn
Solstice sun
An assurance, or an insurance
For a new year, new life
The acolyte, too, reborn
To wait another year...

Haunted Honeymoon | DJ Tyrer

Haunted house
Cheap, cheap, cheap to rent
Perfect for the honeymoon
If in need of a little TLC
Relive the past
Re-enacting that fateful, fatal night
Centuries ago
Passion, pain
Jealousy, joy
Desire, destruction
Two bodies grow chill
Honeymoon, marriage, lives over
Together in death

Examination | DJ Tyrer

Elder thing from an eldritch plane
Some place beyond the usual dimensions
As unimaginable in their infinity to us
As our limited existence is unimaginable to them
Fascinated it descends from higher spheres
Into delineated space-time
To examine the inhabitants of our alien world
Appearing at times like a glowing globe or discus
And at others a dark and menacing cloud
And at others still as discontinuous tentacles or spheres
It plucks up the first one it meets
A startled man in a bowler hat
Plucks him from space-time
Lifts him sideways out of mortal view
To examine in detail most fascinating
Evisceration without the job of slicing open
Pseudopod limbs slip sideways through dimensions
To lift the viscera out
A comprehensive examination
The subject screams—shrieks—shakes—sobs
Truly fascinating
The head pops right off
The sound and motion cease
Peel the skin away to reveal a grinning skull
Amused at its strange discarnate fate

About the Author:

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

Blog: [DJ Tyrer](#)

Twitter: [@DJTyrer](#)

It's lonely on the other side of the mirror.
But it beats the fate
that comes with being burned to ash.
Not angel dust. Just black ash.

All because of an innocent dance,
a magical evening in the woods
was seen. Witnessed.

By my best friend and confidante;
but friendship really is a dying art.

Mastery of my craft saved me—
I took the hysteria surrounding me
and twisted it into a matrix
and passed through a looking glass.
A safe haven. A prison.

But before the conjuration,
I bridged the worlds with words—
I'm not bloody stupid.
But I am lonely.

And I have a gift. I see people.
And I let them see me.

So when night falls, light a candle,
turn off the lights and face a mirror;
make eye contact with yourself—
eyes really are the window to the soul, you know.

Say my name out loud thirteen times.

I crave the bonds of friendship
and I want to reach out to you
and pull you over to my side.

But I can see through you—
Your reflection reveals more to me than your
appearance;
and trust is more valuable to me than any other
trait.

If I don't see trust... I see betrayal.

And then I see red—
My fingernails itch at my sides,
my face grows hot with rage
and I explode into a fit of screams—
my hands springing out the mirror,
thrashing and clawing wildly at your face.

You scream and run away
but jostle the mirror just enough
so it falls and shatters
...and I'm free...
and right behind you.

About the Author:

Renee Cronley is a writer and nurse from Southern Manitoba. She enjoys long walks in the cemetery and hates when people chew with their mouths open. Her work has appeared in *PRISM international*, *Love Letters* to Poe, *Dark Dispatch*, *Black Hare Press*, *Off Topic* and several other anthologies and literary magazines.

Instagram: [@reneecronley](https://www.instagram.com/reneecronley)

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

Lying Awake | Annie Zamparelli

Somewhere in my dreams I lay,
White clouds above in the light of day

Worms squirming, wriggling, tickling my skin,
Lungs gray and motionless under flesh so thin

Soil so cold surrounding my chamber,
Nightshade atop in dormant slumber

Darkness engulfs me, smothers me, overwhelms,
Like a fossorial creature, I inhabit their realm

I lie awake in anticipation,
To face my fate, my adjudication

No spectral loved ones to warm me, welcome me,
No exuberant laughter that flitters like confetti

Instead, in silence here I remain,
My body motionless, forever to wane

About the Author:

Author of short stories and poems, Annie Zamparelli's story *Final Day* appears in the digital magazine *The Thieving Magpie*, Issue 16. Retired from the Healthcare Industry, Annie enjoys writing, reading mystery novels, historical biographies, and sketching. Annie passionately believes that we expose our soul to the world when we express ourselves through our writing craft.

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

Thomas is hiding | Goran Lowie

he is hiding away in his room
talking to strangers online
the distance in his heart increasing
poison glistening in the dark-blue
of his eyes.
in his nightmares, he is eaten
alive by black bears in the company
of all his friends, who just watch and
do nothing.

he looks out of his window and sees
the carcass of a fawn, its failing flesh
devoured by human teeth, a dead soul
taken by hands unknown.
his avaricious eyes widen
noxious thoughts fill his mind
a deep, insatiable hunger painning him
in the darkling night, he wonders
looking down at the pillaged fawn
if the strangely familiar sight
is his own doing.

I am nightmares | *Goran Lowie*

I am the rat that hides in your walls;
I am the sky:
I am the night, the dark, the shrouded sky,
hiding unknown dangers.
I am the unlit shadows in your house;
harboring human shapes:
I am the things you see at night
I am nightmares.
The other souls that, passing in your room,
each with their own minds;
Unspoken fears that kindle me,
feel sudden unease.

“I have a bad feeling about this place
it feels cursed and haunted;
there is something wrong about it
it’s a place of nightmares.”

Why do you stay in my vicinity;
sleeping soundly still?
All that I see, and hear, and feel
shows your lack of care.

For thousands of years I’ve haunted;
families, generations,
uncountable people I’ve driven insane
I am nightmares!

Why are you not frightened by my being?
I have tried all I can
I never expected to find One who is
unfrightenable, uncaring

For the first time in my eternal life, I am scared.

Swimming in the Changeling Sea | *Goran Lowie*

uncontent with life
I quickly found my place
in the realm of changelings
becoming
a proud elephant, a gentle giant
a stalking panther, silent in the night
a subservient human, unadjusted to
others
a foolish mayfly, quickly taken by a frog

after hundreds of lives
my weakly speckled, dimmed soul
struck by the myriad of stories
dissolved, allowing one final transformation:
becoming the changeling sea
trapped, unwilling, forever fluid
until the oceans dry
and the changelings die.

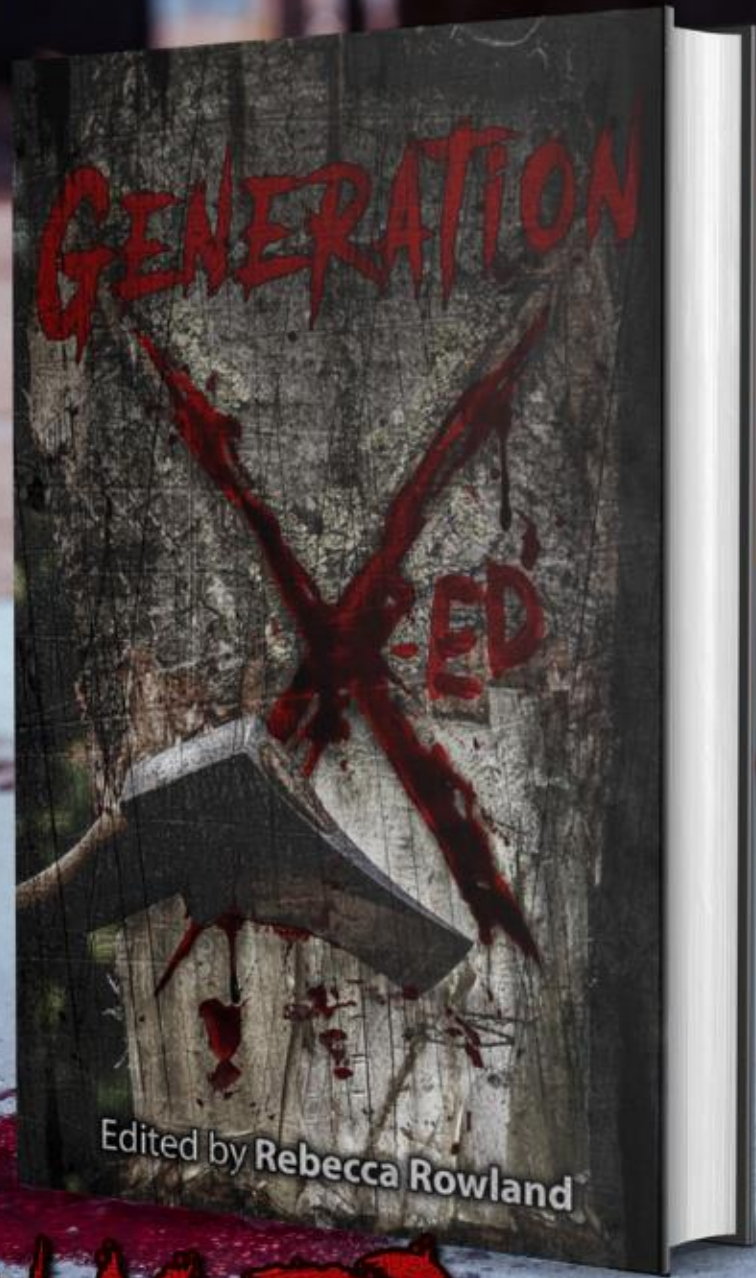
About the Author:

Goran Lowie is an aro/ace high school teacher of humanism from rural Belgium. He firmly believes we should always look for alternatives and is obsessed with writings which explore such things.

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Horror written by the authors it created.



GENERATION X-ED

in Print, eBook, and Audio from **DARK INK**

I've been told plenty of times
the Rain Monster's all in my head.
Maybe it's true because I never see her
on a day when it's gray and wet, the sky
white as a dingy old sheet hung out to dry.
The kind of morning the soothsaying
Weatherlady portends zero chance
of Precipitation, but the clouds must
watch another channel.

I spot the Rain Monster in the dark.
Peering from a window at sheets of water
pouring down. Catching sight, aware
during those striking flashes of Lightning
before the grumbly ripples of Thunder.
I glimpse a shadowform, brief and sudden—
hypnotically eerie—always a surprise.
Taller than a person, wider with
spikes, a distinct shape.

Also when I'm half-asleep, between one
dream and the next, lids open and closed.
She might appear, flickering, half-there too.
Mostly I view her in my nightmares,
roaring. It rains a lot in my Imagination,
to make up for the Dry Spells that are
growing worse, cracking the earth,
causing lakes to dry even as seas covet
land, grabbing hold, rising.

I see her when I'm thirsty, tongue
bloated and rough. Promising relief—
only to laugh, retreat in silence, depart
like patches of fog. It's Heatstroke
warns my Auntie. "Stay outa the Sun!"
But there is no light where the shade
runs deep and cool; where my thoughts
are wild as junglebeasts, and rain
is a monster with claws.

I'm going to capture her next time
she comes... cast a net and drag her home
to my closet. Then I will never be parched,
never lacking a friend, and never afraid.
I will rule the community! Everyone
who called me crazy for telling fibs,
making up fables about dreadful creatures,
will have to admit I was right all along!
I wonder what to feed her.

I've never had a pet, even a fish, much less

my own monster. There she is, a brainstorm!
I'll wait for her to slip out, toss the web
and tangle it around her so she can't rip free.
This is my best idea yet.

Darkness Sails The Pewter Skies | *Lori R. Lopez*

A deep darkness sails the pewter skies
In an airship built on insufferable cries
There's no drop of compassion to derive—
No end of the madness, unmerciful lies
For Darkness sails these desolate skies!

Beware lest the vessel purge your soul
The heart of your gist, what makes you whole
Neath a wintry Moon, leaving none alive
Its journey ulterior, a lofty role
Beware lest the devilship claim you whole

For that is the mission a crew must strive
In every Port Of Call the hounddogs dive
With flapping tatters, a fell-beast swoop
The banshee-wail of a bumble-hive
In a heart-stopping drop, they'll eat you alive!

"Caution to the wind until they're all dead!"
The Captain roaring "Full-speed ahead!"
Carrying contagion, the Black Death soup
Its mention sufficing to stir bloodshed
An eternal cruise of cackles and dread

A cargo of bones, of corpses still owed
The tombship anchors to un-load
Fitted for caskets, unfit for the grave
Spreading ill fog and a chill forebode
The ship of doom launches to scour'n re-load

'Tis foulness afoot—in the currents a Sloop
No chance to avoid it; no place to regroup
When Death's on the prow, naught will save
From a band of ghostmates, a terrible troop
No end to the lowness these Pirates'll stoop!

Skimming soil or air with a kraken reach
The Skeleton Crew has a lesson to teach:
"Do not count your blessing's even as ya crave
What someone else has! Their own to each.
No outrunnin' the Reaper!" the Seadogs preach.

Joints creak, timbers strain from teeming shadows
Withered, they voyage past the veil of repose
Dancing macabre—gleeful laughs unmistakable

To ranks and shades of unkempt Crows
Perched atop beams in sarcastic black rows

The Unjolliest Roger scowls and sighs
Searching for victims through hollow eyes
Those who wage Sin and those forsaken
None'll be spared; there's no compromise
As Darkness sails these pewter skies.

The Gondegone | *Lori R. Lopez*

As a child I played Shadow Puppets with Momma
I swear at times they seemed to watch us back
My mum would say if I thought about something
With all of my heart I could make it happen

But that's not why The Gondegone is here
I sure can't wish him away. All of me wishes
I could. My mother murmured a spooky incantation
That kept me awake for nights. Grandma said
It was Momma's favorite Nursery Rhyme, keeping
Her wide-eyed too. I'll never understand why
Mom showed me how to shape The Gondegone
with my hands! Since that moment I feared
He might steal me away, or gobble me whole

The brute was probably busy, or waited
Till I was grown, a much larger meatier morsel
I've caught glimpses of crimson orbs
Nightmarish monstrous forms in the gloom
A fiend's gallery of frightful versions, visions
Green and black tendrils writhing, glowing—
Suspended from a central point; signs of him
In the vicinity. I've seen walls darken
Heard guttural malignant growls
Chanting new lines of verse, adding to
Familiar words. He's right, I can't forget
I can't unhear his morbid jeers...

"Snatchy-snitchy, gaunt and stitchy
Bone and skin, flesh tight and itchy
Birds have flown, the Sun has shone
You're all alone in my Creepy Zone
The lights are on, you need to yawn
Afore the Dawn comes Gondegone!
Scratchy-scratchy, walks so twitchy
Bendy, brokey, unmendfully glitchy
A jingle of iron, a tingly chill
A shiver-shuddery flinch of thrill
Causing hearts to race at top-speed
Clenching teeth so hard they bleed!
Scaring cats to claim their lives

Fingernails long as carving knives
Black as ink a ghoul will slink
Escaping from a crack or chink
The Gondegone leaves ruts in floors
He'll mark the halls and open doors
With Skeleton Keys hung on a ring
You can't unlisten to him sing!"

The ghastly voice and silhouette consume me
With dread. Momma's in a Nursing Home—
Her own mum resting in peace, a nonbeliever
I'll never understand why he didn't take my
Mother. I suspect she knows but isn't telling.

come the maniacal | *Lori R. Lopez*

I rang a handbell on a street corner one day,
and held a sign to warn THEY'RE COMING!
Nobody cared, throwing dirty looks and trash.
I kept ringing that bell, until somebody took it.

Another day my sign was ripped in half—
the stick wielded like a club to chase me.
I screamed "They're still coming!" as I fled.
Nobody paid attention. I made a new sign.

The same message. And found another spot
two blocks away. (I'm told this is the definition
of Crazy.) Ruffians beat me with my own words!
I really believed the result could change...

Yesterday I knew it would, because they're here.
I call the worst of them Maniacs. I bet all of those
people are sorry for not listening—while being
rounded up and loaded into long black trailers.

Pulled by a fleet of conspicuous dark Semis.
I figured it was the Government. Only no Feds
were gonna slice an old man's head off, for moving
too slowly up the ramp! Like I said: Maniacs.

I'm clueless where the monsters arrived from.
Far as I can figure they were hired, recruited—
a marauding Army funded by Shadow Money.
The coldest side of Humanity. Almost alien.

Come the maniacal, my familiar world was gone.

I think the soldiers must be on drugs. They appear
oblivious to pain. By electric Scooter I followed
a column of trucks to a strange complex. A huge
site where people entered mysterious structures.

And came out zombies. Mindless and obedient,
rather than decrepit brain-eaters. Parking my red
Motorbike, stripping off a helmet, I observed lines
of worker-zombies directed to other buildings...

Where crates were coming out stacked on trains
of heavy-duty carts, like Airports used for Baggage.
A train was halted to inspect a crate. Scoped Rifles,
with Bayonets. The future is weapons. And pills.

Another paused train contained boxes of boxes, then
smaller and smaller boxes, that eventually yielded
bottles, with little white pills. All intended for private
regiments of brutal inhuman drugfiends! Maniacs.

Loyal to upper echelons. The Powers That Be.
The fat cats who have really been in charge all along.
Those sinister unbalanced Billionaires, Trillionaires
manipulating societies; buying laws, playing War.

Literally the filthy rich. Hands dirty from shady
illicit wheeling and dealing. They've finally taken
over openly. I was wrong. No-one was coming.
The worst, the truly maniacal, were already here.

I had seen a vision of Tomorrow, but it's Today.

Doomscroll | *Lori R. Lopez*

Insomnia picked at my innards akin to birds
fighting for scraps. A pen scratched paper by
lamplight, more respectful than the metal
clacking of keys in a still house, though I did
cherish the sound like rain.

Were I solitary, I'd welcome the clatter.

Hunched over page, I struggled to focus...
eke out some wisp of meaning from scraps
of incomplete thoughts, a distracted disparate
jumble pressing to emerge. Better than a skull
too empty: a noggin invaded by marching
ant legions of undermining echoes.

My head drooped; eyelid-blinds sagged.

A pane of glass exploded. In swooped
a large belligerent beast, startling away any
presence of mind. A frightful black Corvus
screeched, tone and behavior commanding
attention—talons curved, clutching a rolled

document. Yet no missive unfurled when
the midnight delivery obscured my paper.

A blank, unworded, indefinite contract.

My hand wrenched forth, pen clasped too
tight, compelled to write. Jaws clenched,
mouth a straight line. The bird careened,
tracing revolutions of flight, loosing shrill
unnerving screams. A chill entered my
domain with this harpidan. I shivered,
fending off the dives, and all the while
I scribbled fervently, mechanically.

Helpless to resist, to pause or cry out.

Gawping with disbelief at my handiwork!
Horrors, abominations I could not ever
condone let alone be complicit spilled
to a vile receptacle—my body a pawn,
an unwilling conduit, the tool of transfer
as mind-numbing details flooded through
a blunt instrument achingly gripped and
could not be erased, unsaid, unread, their
ruby-red ink permanent, staining.

I believed every syllable, incredulous.

And feared a statement that loved ones
would perish, the unspoken terms bind,
a silent tacit 'agreement' I dare not break.
Providing sweat, blood, countless tears...
it was my prophecy, legacy, confession
as much as the Crow's—or whoever sent
a winged harbinger to my window!
Each dreadful description must unfold.
Snatching the Doomscroll, the bird flew.
I woke and remembered. I cannot forget.

About the Author:

Lori R. Lopez is an offbeat author-illustrator, poet, songwriter, and wearer of hats, as well as an animal-and-monster-lover. Verse has appeared in *The Sirens Call*, *The Horror Zine*, *H.W.A. Poetry Showcases*, *Weirdbook*, *Spectral Realms*, *Space & Time Magazine*, *JOURN-E*, *Oddball Magazine*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Altered Reality Magazine*, *California Screamin* (the Foreword Poem) and much more. Books include *The Dark Mister Snark*, *Odds & Ends*, *Leery Lane*, *An Ill Wind Blows*, *The Witchhunt*, and *Darkverse: The Shadow Hours*. Lori has been nominated for the Elgin and Rhysling Awards.

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Beware! Mister Snark is lurking...

THE DARK MISTER SNARK

Lori R.
Lopez



LORI LOPEZ-15

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Red.

Then darkness.

Noises buzz in the background. Quiet, loud, then quiet again.

Where am I?

Red.

I shake my head to clear the confusion. It aches, dully.

Black.

The noise, a mechanical rumbling, passes.

Red again. Nothing but red. I'm not even sure if my eyes are open. I try to open them, eyelids heavy. I want to rub them, pull them open with my fingers, but I can't feel my hands or arms. I can't move them.

I will my eyes to open. The right one cracks first through sheer will. Light bleeds in from the edges. The red light brightens with a moment of intensified pain against the glare and then...

Black.

I blink, trying to focus, to see something, anything.

Shapes move below me, blurry and dark. I feel like I'm waking after a week of heavy sleep. It's hard to keep my eyes open but I blink hard and deep as if that will help. I spread them as wide as I can against the darkness.

Red.

So bright.

I close my eyes tight in shock, reeling from the sudden change, tentatively opening them again as the light burning through my eyelids fades and I am once more in the dark.

The shapes below me form as if through a mist. Unfocused, but familiar. I briefly wonder where my glasses are. Lost? Broken?

People.

People walking?

The rumbling returns. A car, or at least something in the shape of a car, zooms past between the people.

This feels familiar.

Red light.

I blink. It's easier as my eyes adjust. I watch figures, passing back and forth below me. It's a street, a normal high street. Shops divided by a road.

The red light blinks off.

This time I'm not plunged into darkness. I can still see the street. It's dim, my eyes are slowly coming back to life, but I can see things more clearly now. I hardly notice the red light return, other than the red sheen it casts over everything below.

Below.

Am I looking out of a window?

I try moving my head to look behind me, but I can't, it's stuck. Or fixed. Am I tied down? I don't feel any straps. I can't feel anything. I concentrate on turning my head. It hardly moves.

I focus on what I can see.

The street is definitely familiar. The shops are small, local shops, no big chain stores. A small butcher's shop, a baker's, and a general store.

I've been here before.

My high street

I twist my head as far as possible to the right. I can just make out a post office on the other side of the butcher. Turning my head the other way I see another road joining this one. A crossroads?

I can just make out the traffic light pole on the other side of the road and the edge of what might be a bar sign, but that is it. I turn back to look straight down the road that stretches off into the distance.

A car approaches.

A little too fast.

It roars up the road and disappears under me. Too fast for me to follow. It was blue, a man behind the wheel, gripping it like a racing driver.

Driving like an idiot.

There was a dent over the front left wheel.

A dent.

A daughter.

My daughter?

I had a daughter.

A memory.

My daughter.

Where is she?

A yearning builds inside me, flooding the place where my chest would be if I could see it. I try looking down but can't make anything out. I want to call out, but I'm helpless. I remember how to speak, how to call out, but I can't make a sound. I want to scream. I need to know she is safe.

I can't remember her name. Oh God, what was her name?

Stop.

Calm.

Breathe.

I'm freaking out a bit.

I'm lost. I don't know how I got here. It's familiar, but my memory is hazy. I don't even know my own name. Who the hell am I?

I had a daughter.

I think.

I need to focus. Focus on the familiar, what I can remember? Memories of having a daughter came back to me so other memories will, surely? It's just a matter of time?

My mind clings to this first memory, playing it over and over again in the hope that it triggers more.

What was her name?

What did she look like?

A vision of a pretty girl with long hair floats somewhere just out of reach. Brown, her hair was brown. She was pretty. She was mine.

Where is she? Instinctively I try to reach out and find her. Take her hand and hold her. But I couldn't reach out for her even if she was here.

A laugh.

I stare out through the red light and see a man with a young girl. She holds a golden teddy bear up for him to see and giggles.

My girl.

She was like her.

A similar age.

6 or 7.

So young.

She liked teddies.

Arthur.

Yes, Arthur, her favourite. He had mahogany brown fur and a light brown tummy and paws. She'd had him from birth, Granny gave it to her.

Her granny.

Mum?

Why can I remember the name of a stuffed bear and not the name of my daughter or mother? Or my own damn name? My eyes threaten tears, but nothing comes. I just stare out of this... this window through a veil of red and I'm powerless to do anything. Touch anything. Remember something! I scream. Or, at least, I make an attempt at screaming. If I could see myself, I would look quite mad, a crazy woman, locked in a silent scream.

The red flashes off and I'm plunged into darkness once more.

Did I sleep? My mind went somewhere but I don't remember dreaming. I just switched off and then woke, or became conscious. Switched off and on like a lightbulb. It feels late in the day, the world outside my window is duller, and there is more traffic.

Rush hour?

People heading home after work.

I should be at home. My home. Family.

The blue car I saw this morning returns, slower this time, held up in traffic. The driver is angry, edging the car forward in impatient, violent jerks. I see shop displays reflected in the car windows. Red, green, and yellow lights. Fairy lights. Christmas lights draped around a window full of gifts and toys.

A toy shop.

I can't quite see it, but I know it's there, down to my right, nestled in the space I can't quite twist my head to see.

She loved the old toy shop. It had been there since I was a child, the same faded boxes in the windows, a doll with a dress so pale you could only guess at its original colour. I remember feeling sorry for the doll when I was a little girl, thinking she would never find someone to love her. My parents wouldn't buy her for me, they wanted me to have a new doll, a smart, pretty doll. Then Maddie asked for her.

Maddie.

Madeline.

My Maddie.

She danced down the road with that doll, laughing and giggling like the girl with the bear. I remember it like it was yesterday.

Was it yesterday?

I can still hear her giggle, the sound of her shoes as they clipped along the pavement, twirling with the doll in her arms, stopping only when we reached the crossing.

Red light.

A car stopping in one lane.

A green man telling us to cross.

The roar of an engine as another car screams through the lights coming the other way.

A blue car.

Screams.

Black.

Nothing.

The red light pulls me back once more.

Morning again. I can't see the sun, or a clock, it is just a feeling, a sense I get from the light and the people moving around below me. It's quiet, a few people walk past, newspapers in hand, fresh bread from the bakers. I can't smell it, but I can imagine the warm, yeasty odour of freshly cooked dough.

Maddie.

I remember Maddie.

The car.

And the screams.

Where is she now?

The red light blinks off and an engine revs below. I look down and the blue car with the dent tears away from the lights, disappearing beneath me, its engine screaming.

The lights.

The crossing.

The doll.

Maddie.

The pain.

I took it.

Most of it.

The car hit me as we crossed the road, going so fast it was like being charged by a rhino. Multiple things snapped inside me as my body was tossed into the air and smashed onto the pavement, crumpled, bleeding, dying.

Oh God.

I hear the screams again and see the devastation in my mind. I re-live the moment, lying on the pavement, watching the car as it disappeared into the distance. Not stopping.

I saw the doll, lying in the road, an arm missing and its faded lace dress speckled with blood.

Mine?

Maddie's?

Then I saw her, slumped against the traffic light pole, her head drooping forward onto her chest. An arm and a leg bent so awkwardly they must be broken. She didn't cry. I crawled to her, calling her name as people screamed and shouted around me. I heard someone yelling about an ambulance as something broken pierced a soft and vital part inside me.

White spots flashed behind my eyes as I crawled towards Maddie, focussed on her and nothing but her. The pain made the journey last forever. People tried to stop me, to help me, but the primeval sounds and growls I made as they approached told them to leave me. And they did. They saw where I was headed.

I heard sirens.

They weren't on time.

I just wanted to be with Maddie.

My shattered body reached her as the pain became unbearable. I was dying and I knew it. But I was with Maddie. I reached out, took her hand in mine, and curled up with her. I held her tight as I died, lying by the traffic light.

The red light pulls me out of my reminiscence.

The anger builds, burning, powerful, all consuming.

In my head I scream at the light to go away, I want to be left alone. The light listens and it blinks out.

Did I do that?

I will it back, imagining the light flooding me.

And it does.

Tyres squeal as cars grind to a halt below me. I will it to change again and the cars pull away from the junction, slowly.

I did that.

I wait.

I watch in the evening as the blue car speeds dangerously up the road. It was so fast on that day it didn't hang around and no one remembers it. The blood has been washed from the street; the tragedy already forgotten.

I watch the car disappear down the high street until it turns left out of my view, and I know what I must do.

Morning again, and I'm waiting. I'm patient. I have all the time in the world. I have been watching every morning for weeks. Months? Time is strange. I know the routine now; the old man who walks out to get a paper, his Jack Russell snapping at his heels, the old lady with her bloomer loaf and pint of milk, and the young boy delivering to the butcher's. The same routine every morning.

Any moment the blue car will come around the corner and hurtle along the high street towards the lights.

To me.

I also know that the security van is coming along the left-hand road, it passes behind me cutting across the high street as it heads around the back of the shops to the bank. Twice a week, regular as clockwork. I've watched it in the reflection of the Post Office window.

It's just a matter of time.

Of timing.

The other light is green. The van, which had been slowing, accelerates. I sense the torque in the engine, the whine as it increases speed as it lumbers towards the junction.

Red light.

The blue car approaches from the high street, slowing as it approaches the red light still traveling too fast. Anger boils up inside me. I think of my Maddie, of the doll, so new she hadn't even named her. So young, her body had no chance against a half-ton of speeding metal. Even with me between her and the car, she stood no chance.

7 years old.

Gone.

My Maddie.

I will the light out of existence with all the anger and hatred I can muster.

The red light disappears.

The blue car accelerates. Hard. And screams through the junction.
Just as the security van passes the green light at the crossroads.
I can just make out its reflection in the Post Office window.
Screeching brakes and the dull thud of two heavy vehicles colliding. It's not the loud, metallic bang I imagined.
Just a solid, dull thud followed by the tinkling of glass and then screaming. It may not have been a bang, but it was still satisfying.
I pray that the van is okay. It's armoured so it should be? It will be okay.
I hear someone shouting to stop, to wait for the ambulance.
The driver appears, reflected in the shop windows, crawling along the street, dazed, and confused, covered in blood. He crawls like a sniper into my view and away from the light. He uses his arms to pull himself along, his legs both hanging limply behind him, useless. His trousers and shirt are torn and bloodied, picking up dirt as he drags them across the road and onto the pavement. He doesn't know where he is going, what he is doing.
He reaches the curb and rolls over onto his back.
He looks straight up at the light.
At me.
He can't see me, but I hope he knows it was me.
Maddie's mum.
As I look down, I know he isn't going to survive. Half his face is missing. Flying through the window, into the side of the van has taken away his bottom jaw, part of a cheek and one eye. It's a wonder he made it as far as he did.
Should I feel happy about this?
I don't.
I don't feel pleasure.
I feel satisfied.
Closure.
I'm done.
The red light flicks on, flooding the scene and blotting out the blood. For a moment he almost looks peaceful.
Then he gurgles, blood splattering out of his torn throat and he dies, alone in the street.
At least I had Maddie.
With one last effort, I will the red light to be gone.
Forever.
It's time...
...for me...
...to
GO...

About the Author:

Mark Walker lives in Gloucestershire with his family and more pets than is reasonably necessary; beetles, tarantulas, guinea pigs and a rabbit to name a few! He has previously published short stories in the 'Twisted 50 Vol 2' horror anthology, 'Twisted Ghosts of Christmas' collection and 'Terror Bites' which is now sadly out of print. He also contributes reviews to Horror site, Ginger Nuts of Horror.

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The moment before I wake up coiled tight from a nightmare, mind and thoughts pulled taut, my limbs twisted around my body, I hear my grandmother telling me not to go to sea. The stagnant air of my cabin feels cooler, signaling it is almost sunset and time to go up to the main deck to keep watch. I grimace as I stretch, my joints popping back into place, but the pain helps shake the tormenting images from my mind.

Fumbling through the dark, I make my way to the bathroom, locking the door behind me despite being the only person left on the ship. I wrap my lips around the faucet and slowly turn the knob to start the water. There is no way of knowing how much water is left aboard and I do not want to waste a single drop, so I drink just enough to clear the cotton from my mouth.

I press my ear to the door, listening for movement. When I hear nothing but the wind whistling through the empty hallways, I open the door. Only darkness looks back at me, so I make my way out from the depths of *The Godmother*, frequently pausing to listen to the silence. It is almost pitch black, but I do not dare light my torch and be seen, in case something has come aboard the ship.

When I emerge atop, the sunlight and heat envelop me in a suffocating blanket. I pray for the temperature to plummet quickly with the light, then look opposite the setting sun. The horizon dances with false lights from the day's heat.

The Godmother left Marken, Holland three weeks ago under the cloak of darkness. There was no passenger list, no manifest. The captain was an honorable man who had never in his life broken a law, until I begged for his help escaping the wickedness spreading through our province. Something was taking the children. Or taking over the children. The rumors were not clear, other than children were affected by an evilness and Rotterdam and Amsterdam were already infested. As an island, Marken should have protected our children. The elders agreed to burn the bridges, but that did not work. I was forced to conspire with the captain to gather as many families as we could and sail to Iceland.

The Godmother made it one week into her voyage unscathed, through the North Sea with her sights set on Reykjavik. I woke that seventh day before dawn and was first to spot the blanket of fog shrouding the water to the south.

Many passengers did not survive to the eighth day. The captain's compass started spinning wildly as the fog crept closer, and fear quickly poisoned the passengers' minds. Had the captain not locked me in his quarters with himself and his twin daughters, I could have perished in the desperate fighting with my townsfolk.

The surviving adults stood outside in the blazing sun, burning themselves to a dehydrated death while desperately watching for land and ships. I know night is the time to watch, when lights from land or beacons from ships shine through the darkness. My grandmother taught me that years ago. When the men went out to sea, the women slept during the day and worked their chores at night so they could look out to the water and see the torches as ships returned.

I also learned from my grandmother that the Sea plays cruel tricks on us. And these tricks She plays, more often than not, she plays during the heat of day.

Most of the adult passengers perished by the eleventh day. Myself, the captain, and three other surviving women went room to room through the ship that night, searching for the children who were hiding from the heat and the violence. Once the children were gathered, one woman brought them to the kitchen to find food while I, the captain, and the other women tossed bodies into the sea. They had discussed proper funeral arrangements, or storing bodies below deck, but I warned them that the smell and decay would quickly claim our remaining lives.

The captain was an intelligent man, and well versed in navigation. Despite the ship's broken compass, he could have waited for darkness and followed the stars to Reykjavik. Instead, he wasted our fuel steering the ship in this direction, then that direction, then turned completely around, to follow the lights his daughters gleefully pointed to on the horizon. By the time I convinced him of the Sea's trickery, the ship was already dead in the water.

A phantom giggle snaps me from her memories. I duck behind the anchor and scan the empty deck. The riggings and mast stays sway and jingle with the motion of the waves. I must be losing my mind. I am alone, I know I am alone.

The children had cried for their parents for three days before themselves disappearing. The captain desperately tried to believe the children—his own girls—had seen a ship and swam to it for rescuing. The women and I searched for the children, but found not one of them. We only found a stuffed bunny, a sleeping companion to the captain's girls. The captain took the bunny with him on his voyage off the back of the ship. All other evidence of children aboard had vanished.

As another fit of giggles rings out, I think perhaps I missed a child. *The Godmother* was large enough that a child could have remained hidden until now, perhaps in the coal room or behind the deckhouse. I am sure no adults remain alive. I had watched the captain give up the ghost, and two of the final women followed him overboard. The third woman's body still sits at the bow. With her gaping mouth and hair blowing in the wind, I can almost convince myself it is a singing mermaid figurehead carved into the ship's bow.

Or perhaps the giggles are the calls of a seagull. As the passengers' bodies trailed behind the ship that tenth day, seagulls followed, screaming and swooping and feasting, their cries sounding of malevolent laughter until the fog swallowed them up.

I squeeze my eyes tight and picture myself on the shore of Marken, standing next to my grandmother, listening to tall tales of the Sea. My grandmother warned me about this voyage, telling me to stick to land. I take three deep breaths, holding each one, then finally open my eyes.

The blanket of fog covering the water to the south now surrounds the ship and creeps up the sides. The sea below is metallic and a pungent smell of decay floods my nose. The ship creaks as the fog sends it careening starboard. I push myself up and run to the bridge, slamming the door behind me and shoving the locking pin in place. I peer out through the film of salt on the windows, then gasp at the thing reflecting back at me. It is not me. It looks like me, without blood to color my flesh. It stands like me, but hunched over with crushed vertebrae.

The sea has gone silent. The creaking ship, the lapping waves, the screaming gulls have all died away. I raise my hand to the glass, the tormented reflection doing the same, and tears flood down my face when my fingers meet the rigid bones of the false me's hand.

Then the locking pin dislodges with a small *ping*. The hinges creak and the door slowly swings open. Pressure courses through my ears and it takes every ounce of willpower I have to stay conscious. Hairs on my neck stiffen, perspiration pours down my back. I plead with myself not to lose consciousness. I do not yet know if I should run or hide or play dead to escape this new threat.

The door is three quarters open; I pray it is a trick, but now the fog is just outside, in the last few inches hidden from sight.

I snap my eyes open. I am back in my cabin, tucked safely in the bowels of *The Godmother* as the ship steadily drifts north towards an island yet overcome by madness.

It was a dream! I laugh aloud. Just another nightmare!

But I can only see white. Brilliant white. And I cannot catch my breath. I gasp for air and choke on fur. I try to brush it away, brush away the thing pulled taut across my face. But it will not budge. I grasp at the furry object, the tiny body, the floppy ears.

The room fills with the sound of giggles. The twin girls are here, in my cabin. With the other children. All the children.

Fur sticks to my teeth, coats my tongue, and scratches at my larynx. Suffocation's burning hands trail down my trachea and tear at my lungs.

As the children press the soft, floppy bunny ears down my throat, I wish I had listened to my grandmother and stayed away from the Sea.

About the Author:

A.M. Symes writes ghost-infused fiction with the intent of giving people nightmares. In a quest to summon Shirley Jackson's writing muse, Symes earned an MFA in Fiction Writing and occasionally volunteers for the Minnesota Book Awards. Her stories have infiltrated Crystal Lake Publishing, Coffin Bell Journal, Flash Fiction Magazine, and WolfSinger Publications. Symes lives in Minnesota with her best friend and a banshee.

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Daddy slopped a glob of grey plaster onto the top of my new playroom wall. Each rounded piece fit perfectly, forming rows that climbed from floor to ceiling. They were all painted with different designs, creating a kaleidoscopic montage. Those were the fancy words my mamma used to describe it. She was such a good artist. Her masterpiece—a present for my fifth birthday—was almost complete.

"A beautiful playroom for a beautiful girl," she'd said, giving me a big hug. I remember feeling so light inside, I coulda floated away.

"Oh, it's so close to being done!" I jumped up and down, squeezing my Janie, barely able to contain my excitement. My doll's plastic head and limbs jostled as her red hair flopped side to side. She'd been a gift from my granny when I was born—the same doll she'd cuddled every night as a child. I didn't care one bit that her dress was faded, or that she was missing an eye, because to me Janie was perfect.

"You wanna put this piece on?" Daddy asked.

"I'm not tall enough." I pouted. "I'm always too little."

Daddy's strong arms swept under my armpits and flew me up onto his shoulders. "Soon enough, baby girl, you'll be all grown up. Enjoy these fancy-free days while you got 'em." He flashed a lopsided grin and passed me the piece.

I smiled back, nodding. "Alright, Daddy."

He pointed to the spot he'd slopped with plaster. "Now put that cranium there."

I smushed the piece into place, loving how light glinted off the painted clouds covering its surface. The jaw suddenly shifted, its incisors pinching my pinky. "Ow!"

"You alright?" Daddy asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine." I yanked my pinky free and shoved the piece down hard—punishment for snapping at me.

Daddy lowered me to the floor and tickled my sides. Once my giggles subsided, he admired the wall. "Pretty ain't it?"

I smiled—the kind that showed all my teeth. "I wanna grow up to be an artist just like Mamma. She says I got a good eye."

"You do." He touched the tip of my nose with his finger. "You can be whatever you wanna be."

That warm, floating feeling washed over me again. "When can we make the very last piece?"

"*Me and your mamma* are working with the final still life tonight. I promise you can put the last piece on the wall when it's done."

I squished Janie as I crossed my arms. "Daddy, but you promised you'd let me *help* make the last one! Not just put it up!"

"Baby girl..." His head tilted, a sigh escaping his mouth like he always did before telling me I couldn't do something. But before he said another word, I stomped up to him and glowered.

"You promised!" With a flick of my wrist, Janie's head nodded in agreement.

Daddy called up to Mamma, then looked back down at me with a quirked eyebrow. "I guess I did..."

"Mmm hmm."

He waved a hand. "Well, a promise is a promise." Daddy led the way out of the playroom and across the basement to the rear closet. He lifted a wooden hatch on the floor inside. A light popped on, brightening a set of stairs leading down.

"What's the first rule of the art studio?"

"Don't paint anything without an adult present," I answered confidently.

"The second rule?"

"Don't kill anything without an adult present." Janie nodded with me.

"And the third?"

"*Never* talk about our family's art."

"Good girl," Mamma said as she joined us. She had silky blonde hair just like mine and was the bestest mamma.

We walked down into the studio and Daddy turned on the gallery lights, revealing wash tubs and boxes of lye sitting against the far wall. Easels were scattered about, some canvases already painted.

Next Daddy flicked on umbrella-like lamps surrounding the main studio. Soft light bounced every which way, and that's when I saw the still life tied tight to a chair in the centre of the room. He looked a lot like Mr. Grosner, my gym teacher—the one who'd touched my bum during class last week.

"Nobody touches my baby girl when he *shouldn't*." Mamma gave Mr. Grosner a pointy glare.

My gym teacher's eyes widened. Wet, stringy hair clung to his forehead; his screams muffled by a rag. My daddy chuckled as he readied the tray of artist's tools. Paint brushes, palette knives, a hammer, drill, pliers, jars of a liquid that burned, and lots of shiny blades.

Daddy and Mamma shared a look I couldn't quite understand, then Daddy knelt in front of me. "Are you sure you're ready to make art with us?"

I gave him an *I'm-big-enough* look. "Yes."

Daddy sat back on his heels and looked at Mamma again. "Alright, little darlin'. So, once we finish creating the art, we toss the fleshy chunks to the pigs, then dissolve the rest. Except the skull. That goes to your mamma to clean up and paint for the wall." He smiled. "The very last piece."

I clapped my hands, over-the-moon happy, as I hugged my Janie. "Can I make the first cut? Or pluck out an eye? Janie needs a new one."

Daddy ruffled my hair. "Now, now. Cutting is for when you're a bit older, baby girl."

Before I could argue, Mamma said, "How about this... You can help us abstract the subject and pluck an eye out for Janie then, okay?"

I beamed with pride. *I get to help!*

"And we can get ice cream after," Daddy added with a cheerful grin.

"Ice cream, too? Yay!" I took off, skipping a wide circle around Mr. Grosner's chair making my folks laugh. Then I stopped, turning. "Can Janie come?" I held my doll out, giving her a shake.

Mamma donned her red stained smock. "Sure. We'll put an eye patch on her."

"Perfect!" Daddy rubbed his hands together. "Now let's make some art."

About the Author:

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

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My Lost Teddy | Andrea Allison

Her screams raised me from a deep slumber. Pools of blood lined my path. I knew what awaited me, but continued on my journey to the end. An imposing dark figure squeezed himself into my leather recliner as I took my place in an opposite chair. Blood dripped from above, but I dare not look for its origins.

We sat as silent opponents before he presented a tattered teddy bear with one eye, my treasured toy once lost. A childhood wish melted into a current one as his spoken words bellowed through the silence, "A loss paid with a loss."

About the Author:

Andrea Allison currently writes and resides in a small Oklahoman town. Her work has appeared in Trembling With Fear, The NoSleep Podcast and Drabbledark II Anthology.

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Max stalked back and forth in the kitchen of his cabin in the woods. Crouched behind the small round table, in a corner, was his neighbour lady Harmony Spector. Her wide eyes watched not him, but things that weren't there.

"You know, don't you?" he shouted, impatiently. "You know where they went."

She focused her eyes on him then and shook her head. The blade she clutched to her chest was clean, but she could have washed it, and he knew there was no point in asking her.

He'd awakened this morning to hear her singing, and had discovered her here in the kitchen, covered in blood. The loopy cat lady of Red School Road, except she didn't have cats. Fish were her thing. Even her damned shorts had big orange fish on them. A blue one emblazoned her t-shirt. He should have kicked the crazy bitch out, but his wife and kid were missing. He had hoped she could provide him with a clue. What had he been thinking?

"Twinkle, twinkle, little star." Her child-like voice was steady, calm as she sang what used to be his son's favourite song, long ago when he'd been younger.

He wiped his arm across the kitchen table, knocking off a vase of half-dead roses and four empty bottles of Molson Canadian. Everything crashed to the floor, glass smashed and sprayed over the floor. Harmony jumped up, cringing, her knuckles white around the knife handle, clothes stiff with dried blood. Even the waves of her bright red hair were streaked with it.

"Did you kill them?" he demanded.

"Twinkle, twinkle little star," she sang again. "How I wonder what you are."

"What?" Max clenched his hands into fists at his sides. He didn't want her telling the cops he'd threatened her. If he called them. He'd tried earlier, but every time he touched his cell, she'd responded with "You don't want to do that." Her tone had been so creepy, he had stopped trying. "What in Hell is that supposed to mean?"

Silence.

"Listen you crazy bitch, if you don't tell me what you know, I'll dump you into the fishpond out back!

"Dump me in then."

"Damn!" Crazy fish lady probably wanted to live with the fishies.

"Up above the world so high, like a diamond in the sky." She stared at him, through him.

"Are they dead?" Max asked. "Is that a stupid clue?"

"Twinkle, twinkle."

"Fucking bitch!" Max stalked to the door. With one last glance at her, he left the cabin, the door slamming behind him.

Clouded with anger, he slammed his fist down onto the hood of his jeep. Pain shot through his knuckles, into his arm and jolted him to reality. Looking at his hand he noticed blood splashed across his fingers, his sleeve, his shirt. Some of it fresh and red. Some of it dry and brown. He stared, trying to recall...

Only yesterday he'd left his wife and son here in their summer cabin to go into the city for groceries and other supplies. He'd met some buddies and they'd gone for a drink. One drink. Somehow day had blurred into night, night into morning and he'd woken up in the cabin unable to remember anything after the first few drinks.

"Twinkle, twinkle, little star."

He whirled around. "Harmony?"

The painted spirits of the dead swirling around Max came to Harmony as she sang. She'd discovered that only one song would subdue these ghosts. Spirits often screamed, as if in death they were in some kind of torturous agony. Singing seemed to soothe them.

"Twinkle, twinkle, little star."

The wraiths eddied about her, their colours blending and separating like strands of nebulous string. They had no faces, no features so it was impossible for her to tell who they were, or even how many. Sometimes she thought one, other times it seemed like two or four.

"How I wonder what you are." She dropped the knife back onto the table where she'd found it. Her fingerprints were on it, but she'd only grabbed it in self-defence, afraid Max was going to hurt her. Had he hurt his family? Or had they left him? So many questions. So much blood...

Last night Max's car had pulled into the cabin's driveway. He'd gotten out of the car, puking and staggering under the yard light. Somehow he managed to lurch his way inside. Then the yelling had begun.

At first Harmony had thought Max and his wife were arguing again. But she'd realized she only heard Max's drunken roars. It had upset her fish, and she spoke to them softly, assuring them it would be all right soon. But it only got worse.

"Up above the world so high."

Screams and thrashing from next door had finally pulled her out of her own cabin. Every light in the place had been on. Harmony tried to remember more, but only wisps of confused memories remained—Max's horrible screams, splattered blood, putting the drunk to bed. Then the spirits had whirled in, to scream and twist about her as she cleaned.

"Like a diamond in the sky." Harmony put her hands over her ears. She didn't want to sing anymore, didn't want to see the ghosts, but they followed her across the kitchen floor, her sneakers crushing broken glass as she headed outside.

"No more," she whispered. She wanted to go to the comfort of her home, back to her fish. Besides, she had to change her clothes. Somehow, she'd gotten blood on these..

"Harmony?" Max called again.

But there was no one around.

Chill wind whirled around him. Unseen hands caressed his hair, his skin, pulled at his clothes and pressed themselves over his eyes.

"How I wonder what you are."

Unintelligible voices shrieked in the wind. Max reached up to his face, clawed at his eyes but couldn't remove the hands. They spun him, around and around, churning up his empty stomach. Childish laughter echoed in his ears, mingled with a woman's sobs.

Then, for a moment, they stopped, gone as quickly as they came. Sunshine glistened off the cabin's roof, momentarily blinding him. "You're hearing things, Maxi," he told himself. "Still hungover r from last night."

"Up above the world so high."

"Harmony?" He scanned the yard for her. For anyone.

Sunlight glared, wind whistled. Cold hands reached inside him. His breath caught as pain exploded in his chest and his sight went dark again. Faded memories pushed behind his eyes— the glint of a knife, blood, screaming. Had he struggled with Harmony?

"Like a diamond—"

He tried to call out for help, but the ethereal hands eddied about him, squeezed him, wrapped around him like a lover's arms.

The last thing he heard was Harmony's laughter.

About the Author:

Kellee Kranendonk has spent a life time writing. She remembers fondly her late grandfather claiming she was born with pen and paper in hand, and laughing gleefully at her stories. She believes he would be proud of her many accomplishments as an author. Kellee lives in Atlantic Canada with her husband, two of her children and various animals.

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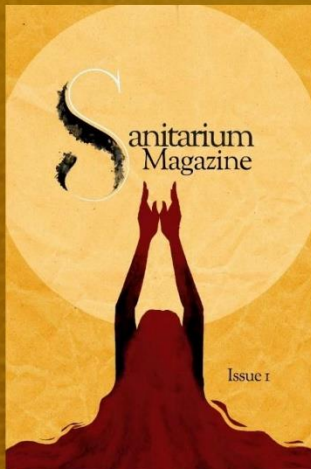
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Hector peered out of the taxi while it followed the road along the island's west coast. He saw rocks snared in a white, chaotic, ever-shifting net of foam and, beyond those, the churning grey waves of the Atlantic. In fact, there was nothing but churning grey water for the next 2000 miles, from here to the shore of Newfoundland.

He was so lost in thought that the taxi driver's voice startled him. "I know you. You're Hector MacIver. The late Donald and Agnes MacIver's son."

Hector raised a hand and felt the hard, gullied surface of his face. The years he'd misspent with drink and drugs had taken their toll. "I thought I'd changed."

"You have. I nearly didn't recognise you when you got off the ferry yesterday. Do you remember me?"

"Angus Paul McKinnon?"

"Correct. I call myself A.P. nowadays. Your people kept themselves apart. I wasn't sure if you'd known your neighbours much."

"It's a small island. We were bound to know everyone on it." He noted with distaste the figurine of the Virgin Mary standing on A.P.'s dashboard. "Even those whose beliefs we disagreed with."

A hill shaped like a crooked witch's hat rose ahead. Its slopes were unkempt with bracken and Hector couldn't see on it even one white dot denoting a sheep. The sky was so oppressively low that the hill's peak seemed to gore the middle of it.

"You're going to pay your respects?"

"Yes." Reluctant to show emotion—weakness—in this man's presence, Hector tried not to sound sad. "I suppose they're all there now?"

"Not some of the young ones. Those who fled." A.P. fell silent for a minute, perhaps remembering that his passenger, 40 years earlier, had fled too. "Finlay Morrison was the last. He died a decade ago. Poor Finlay wasn't that old. I guess loneliness killed him. All the other members of his community gone. He'd lost his wife to cancer and his son... Well, the son was another who fled."

Finlay Morrison hadn't been married while Hector lived on the island, so he didn't know who his wife and son were. He hoped the son had fared better in the outside world than he had.

A church appeared on the hill's western slope. The harled church-wall facing the road was leavened only by a small timber door and a couple of slit-like lancet windows. One end of its roof supported a stone belfry that now lacked a bell. Below the church, extending to the roadside, was a graveyard enclosed within stone dykes. The bottom dyke ran along the top of a bank a few yards above the road, and steps descended from a gate at the dyke's midpoint.

A.P. stopped the taxi by the steps and tooted his horn. "When you rang me, I asked if you could wait 20 minutes before we set off. I'd just dropped someone at this place. It made sense to time your arrival with when she'd want picking up again."

Hector was surprised. He'd assumed nobody had set foot here since Finlay Morrison's interment ten years ago.

Noticing his reaction, A.P. added, "I admit my people treated your people badly in the past, but we're more civil today. The council sends someone regularly to mow the grass up there, check on the kirk building, keep everything respectable-looking. Your folk would have wanted that. I get sent sometimes, since I'm a council worker as well as a taxi driver. Of course, Rosie does some maintenance too."

"Rosie?"

"Aye. Where is she?" He gave the horn another blast. "We call her the English Rose— occasionally call her Mad Rosie, as like most English folk she's a bit eccentric. She runs the New Age Healing Shop in the town. Takes an interest in your kirkyard too. Visits here a few times each week and makes sure everything's orderly. She's been coming for four years, ever since the last funeral."

"Four years? You told me Finlay Morrison died *ten* years ago."

"Well, Finlay was the last official member of your church buried here. But remember I said his son had fled the island? There was a special reason why. He'd got a neighbour's daughter, a Catholic, into trouble. He scarpered when folk discovered the pregnancy. And the girl, not long after becoming a mother, cleared off too." He tapped the head of the Virgin-Mary figurine with an insouciance that suggested she was there for decoration, not veneration. "I can't blame the lassie, to be honest. She got a lot of flak. Because my lot can be just as sanctimonious as your lot were, Mr MacIver. Anyway, Finlay was dead by this point. That left the girls' parents with all the responsibility for raising the child."

A woman with long grey hair and a baggy woollen sweater that respectively swirled and billowed in the sea-wind appeared at the gate above.

“Not that they showed much responsibility. The poor wee lad’s grandparents were embarrassed by him. Didn’t care where he wandered or what he did. Which was probably why, at seven years old, he took a tumble off the harbour wall and drowned. The grandparents insisted he be buried here, out of sight, out of mind, with the Morrisons—his other grandparents. So, we informed the Reverend McCrae in North Uist, where your church still has a congregation, and he came and did the service. He’d buried Finlay previously.”

The woman made her way down the steps.

A.P. mused, “I attended that lad’s funeral, actually, in my capacity as island gravedigger... Such a tragedy. And if you believe the stories, he’s had a lonely time of it up there since.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know. The *faire chlaidh*.”

Even after 40 years, Hector remembered his Gaelic. *Faire chlaidh*... The graveyard watch.

“I’ve no time for old superstitions,” he snapped. He nearly said, “...old *Papist* superstitions.” Then he shoved open the door, banging it against the grey-haired woman, and struggled out. “Sorry,” he grunted before starting up the steps.

Discombobulated, Rosie settled into the seat he’d vacated. “Who’s that rude old man? And what’s he doing here?”

A.P. eased the taxi out from the roadside. “Old man? I’ll have you know he’s a similar age to me.”

“You’re joking.”

“Well, I haven’t done the hard living he has.”

Hector limped up a path that bisected the graveyard and led to the church door. A seagull squatted on a cambered headstone and cawed at him spitefully. Then, losing interest, it sprang up and flapped away.

He found his parents’ headstone. Standing before it, he whispered: “Father, Mother, I’ve returned. And well... I debased myself. The sinfulness I indulged in was foul. But you need to know that I’ve repented. I’m back in the fold. I’ve realised how wrong I was, and how right you were...”

Hector stopped speaking as he heard something else—not a gull cawing, but things clinking and jingling, their sounds carried to him on the wind. Perplexed, he turned from his parents’ grave and moved in the sounds’ direction.

During the past minutes, the sun had unexpectedly broken through the clouds. Yet the graveyard remained grey under the shadow cast by the hill. When his forefathers, early members of the Reformed Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, had wanted to establish a house of worship and burial ground on the island, its Catholic authorities had allowed them only this site on the uninhabited west coast—which, thanks to the hill, was never touched by sunlight.

The sounds came from a small headstone beside a regular-sized one bearing the names Finlay and Rhona Morrison. The name on the small one was hidden by crisscrossing ribbons with little bells fastened to them. Things were positioned along the stone’s base, taped in place to stop the wind dislodging them: a bouquet of flowers, teddy bear, toy robot, plastic dinosaur, Meccano truck. Meanwhile, planted in the turf before it were three paper windmills and a rod shaped like a shepherd’s crook, from whose end hung a set of wind chimes.

Hector contemplated this tinkling, twirling, jangling display for a time. Then, enraged, he tore the ribbons and bells off the stone, kicked away the toys, wrenched up the windmills and wind chimes. As he ripped the wind chime tubes off the hoop they were attached to, and flung them into the wind, he noticed a label inside the hoop—the label included the words, ‘New Age Healing Shop’. He didn’t spare the flowers. The Reformed Free Presbyterian Church had despised the custom of putting floral wreaths on graves, regarding flowers as pagan flummery on par with Christmas trees, yule logs, mistletoe and holly. He snatched up the bouquet and crushed it. Petals blew out of his hands like confetti.

He finally slumped against the Morrisons’ headstone, rasping for breath, heart thudding inside him. The violence hadn’t made him feel better. The insult still rankled—his community’s place of rest violated by the godless, maudlin junk that the Englishwoman had piled on the child’s grave!

He hobbled away from the Morrison’s burial spot. His legs felt feeble now. He used a stick normally, but hadn’t brought one to the island, not wanting to show his infirmity before his old Catholic neighbours. Meanwhile, he noticed how the hill’s shadow, engulfing the church and graveyard, had grown darker. Had the sun vanished again? But he saw sunlight still falling on the landscapes to the north and south of here.

A seagull cawed... No, not a seagull. The teasing sound was less harsh, more human... Child-like... He halted and turned back. Behind him, the scene consisted only of headstones, the dyke, some open ground covered by shadow,

some brighter ground beyond the shadow. His eyes narrowed. Did the sunlit ground appear further away than before? Had the shadow expanded? Had the *graveyard* expanded?

At his vision's edge, something small and dark seemed to flit from behind one headstone to behind another. Hector shifted his head and focused on the second headstone. Nothing emerged from behind it. Either nothing was there, or something *was* there waiting for him to look away before it moved again. Past the headstone, the hill's shadow, and the graveyard itself, looked enormous.

Hector heard a pounding sound, growing louder until it was deafening: his heart.

He decided it was time to leave and started hobbling towards the gate. How would he get back? He could phone for the taxi, of course, but didn't want to face A.P. McKinnon again. The man's know-all manner had been irritating. And his parting comment about the *faire chlaidh*— well, that'd obviously spooked Hector and was making him imagine all this nonsense now. Instead, he'd stand on the road and put up his thumb when a car appeared. Cars were infrequent but not unknown along the west coast and, on islands this size, hitchhikers enjoyed a 100% success rate.

As he descended the slope, he wondered if, peripherally, he saw something flitting from headstone to headstone and keeping pace with him. Whenever he looked round to make sure, however, the mysterious thing was never in the open. Sometimes he heard soft, almost musical sounds—not the Englishwoman's bells or wind chimes, but peals of a child's laughter.

His legs shook but he kept going. Ahead, the shadow seemed to extend over the Atlantic, smothering it in darkness. Was the ocean even there? Or did the graveyard extend forever?

Suddenly, he discovered he couldn't continue. His feet refused to move. It was as if they were ankle-deep in hardened cement. He heard the laughter again, and managed to turn towards where he thought he'd last sighted the thing. "Stop tormenting me!" he cried. "Come out and show yourself!"

After a time, it emerged. First it watched him shyly, then it came skipping towards him. It remained dark and featureless until it was in front of him. His nostrils filled with a stale odour like that of dust and cobwebs and mildewed clothes. It lifted its head and revealed its face, which was a surface of grey, lichen stone, vaguely contoured like a skull.

Hector screamed.

His heart screamed too.

Later, he found himself standing on the same spot, feet still incapable of moving. The graveyard extended endlessly in all directions, populated by countless headstones, and the hill's shadow enveloped everything. He no longer saw the dykes, open hillside or ocean.

The small dark thing with the hideous stone-skull face danced in a circle around him, never stopping, always laughing.

Then his own face felt something. A brief, sharp stab of pain.

Minutes after A.P. had dropped Rosie off, she'd phoned and begged him to return to the graveyard.

The seagulls had ravaged the corpse lying in the middle of it—its exposed parts mainly, its hands and face. The hands resembled discoloured sausage-meat someone had punctured multiple times with a barbecue fork. Whereas the face... A.P. didn't spend long looking at that. The beak-shredded lips and empty eye sockets were bad enough, but the messily-dismantled nose was worse.

Rosie had gone for a few minutes to the graves of the Morrisons and their grandson. Now she returned and said numbly: "He smashed them. Toys, flowers, bells, windmills, wind chimes... Everything I put there to keep that child's spirit happy. The child must have been furious. He must have... manifested himself."

"You're being fanciful."

"I sensed that child's presence here. Like the stories said!"

"The *faire chlaidh*? The soul of the last person buried in a kirkyard having to stay and keep watch over it? Rosie, that's just guff we spout to entertain the tourists." A.P. sighed. "I thought he'd managed to walk down to South Bay and get on Mary Sinclair's bus before she made her last run of the day. Or he'd hitched a lift. He was staying in an Airbnb so nobody knew he hadn't come back. Damn, I should have checked. He clearly wasn't a well man."

Rosie tried not to look at the corpse. "Can we leave now? And get the police to deal with this?"

"Rosie... I'm one of the island's policemen."

"A.P.," she cried, "is there any job on this island you *don't* do?"

Still immobile, Hector heard them, but couldn't see them. His spirit seemingly occupied the same spot as them, but their physical forms were in places apart.

He heard A.P. say, "I bet what happened was... He got so worked up breaking your things on the wee boy's grave that he gave himself heart failure."

Then Rosie asked: "What'll happen to the remains?"

"Once the inquiry's finished, we can bury him here with his parents. Another job for the Reverend McRae from North Uist."

The child laughed again as it circled him. The circles it made were becoming wider, so that it gradually receded into the shadowy graveyard and became harder to see. Hector suspected that soon the child would disappear altogether and he'd be left here alone.

He touched his face and felt lichen-scabbed stone.

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*, *Horrid Magazine*, *The Horror Zine*, *Hungur*, *Schlock! Webzine*, *Shotgun Honey*, *The Siren's Call* and in half-a-dozen anthologies.

Blog: [Blood and Porridge](#)

What We Have Become | *Linda Lee Rice*

When the insurgence began, our ancestors fled to the tunnels and sewers. They carried with them the survival items they would need for what they thought would be a short time. Food, water, clothing, flashlights and lanterns, such as the one you see here.

But time passed and the world did not become the Utopia that was planned. Riots, looting, and killing was the normal, so our ancestors stayed in the sewers and tunnels. Every so often, someone would volunteer to go above and scout out the world beyond but never returned.

So, our ancestors began to change as the years passed. Clothing became scarce, so hair grew to cover bodies to keep out the damp and cold. Eyes became larger, with slits that widened in the dark to be able to see, because the flashlights darkened, and the lanterns ran out of fuel.

We still had food of a kind and the water, although it smelled bad, was drinkable. So, we blossomed under the ground like a fungi...pale, quiet footed, and ears that rotated to any sound. We evolved into...something else.

The lantern was placed on the stone as a symbol of what we were and where we came from. Forgotten memories only told as stories now over the warming fires of wood which drifted through. The fifth generation of those who went underground and didn't surface again listened to these stories and wondered.

We had a language, not quite the language that was brought down, but a combination of several languages along with hand signs and signals. After all, when you're hunting for food, you must be fleet footed and quiet among the tunnels and sewers.

Our teeth changed shape and became sharper, pointed to make it easier to rip our prey apart since we didn't have the niceties of forks and spoons. Ah, but the sharp knives! Those we had, carefully sharpened for ready use.

As I write this, I hear a noise in the tunnels that's unfamiliar. Murmurs of speech that aren't of our kind...and my mouth waters.

About the Author:

Linda Lee Rice has had published poems, stories, and articles under the name of Linda Lee Rice/Linda Lee Ruzicka. She has always enjoyed the way words can take the reader to another world, time, and place. Linda lives in Central Pa with her husband Bill. They have a cat named Sookie Sue and one named Kit Kat plus a big goofy dog named Chase.

Facebook: [Linda Lee Rice](#)

'It is right to hold remembrance, the Purge of Vaz'tu'zuel has asked a heavy price this night, not since the Third Summoning have we fought so hard for victory in the mortal realm, and never have I known the Clerics knowledge of the sacred blessing, or the Knights mastery of steel more clearly than this long night. The power of steel and blessed water seemed drawn to demon flesh, as flame and agony became one with each blow. It was only by sheer strength and skill that we forged a river through the fallen Knights, allowing the tide of blood to flow to our victory. A price heavily paid with a mountain of corpses that had risen on both sides, offering death more companionship than had been known in many long years. I ask you to remember with me all those that were slayed in all their agony; raise your skull, and let your chalice spill with bile and blood, as we speak torment together: To Skil'va the Defiler of Bone, showing no honour in battle, leading the great sixth skirmish with his infected blade, causing a trail of agony and death on the battlefield. Long is our memory of your tormented conquests, truly a creature made for the night, a demon that was twisted from early youth, fighting back the unjust summoning, as the sacred words made you ferocious, you would never compromise for a nightmare, always keeping the balance of man. To Brajitula the Great Beast of Enjix, the Fist of Val Stone, who crushed more skulls than any other demonic on the battlefield. You were condemned to the dark void when your idols were destroyed in the mortal realm, in youth we fought beside each other, counting the hearts we had collected. To Xa-Vi-Nigh, the Nightmare of Shadows, who decimated countless minds, with its vision of the endless wake. You restored my presence when my name was lost in the First War of Clerics, you were once the gatekeeper to the realm of madness, banished by the unspoken deed, you were never forgiven by humanity, and could never reclaim your true purpose. To Blurg the Contagion, Protector of the Rotten Fang, whose pestilence and disease were greatly appreciated during the long trials of combat. You were born when then village of Mobrille sought to cure its town folk with ancient magic, a living plague that no one wished to remember, I gave you a name, after you had been shackled in the cellar of a selfish town. To the Gathering or Insectius, the great swarm of parasites, no corpse remained with flesh after its touch, inspiring the troops with each sight of bone. Although we knew little of each other, I learnt you were freed of the dark wizards call in recent battle, as short as your freedom was may your spores find a new host to endure. To Vamplor Ridius Master of the Dark arts, Summoner of the Damned, who conjured the endless weeping, and reclaimed many corpses to fight in the final battle. Some have said, that you appear too human to be truly demonic, but none could believe this after seeing your work during the battle, how twisted was your mind we may never know. Plaith Wootag, the Messenger of Hell, whose call is familiar to all demons; *'My words are death, my presence is exile, defile for the fallen'*; the last words heard by many mortals, and words I have known since I was young, when your family were slaughtered by King Alric's Knights in the war of the Endless Sun, you saved my life, and from that day you have been my brother and kin. Finally, I would like to remember an old friend of mine, Nigazul Sval Vatoool, Heir to the Decimated Realm, First Tormentor of Flesh, the Unawakened Leader of the battle, who lead the troops in the vilest raid I have ever witnessed, and brought more death to the battlefield than any other demonic; you raised me during a dark youth and taught me how to use my hatred, giving me a greater focus and strength against the sacred orders. Let us raise a toast to all these horrid creatures, and acknowledge the death and destruction they caused on the battlefield. Their deaths shall not be forgotten, nor shall the agony they caused, may they be devoured by our jealousy and unending loathing'.

About the Author:

Christopher Collingwood was born and raised in Sydney Australia. He completed university in Sydney and graduated with a degree in business studies. Chris has devoted his spare time to writing, with works published in Not One of Us, New Myths, Andromeda Spaceways, Abyss & Apex, Hexagon, Shoreline of Infinity, and the recent Smoke in the Stars anthology, among other dimensionally unstable places.



Strong Women Strange Worlds presents QuickReads

Free Live On~Line Readings
of Sci Fi, Fantasy, & Horror
by Women and Non~Binary Authors

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Quick Reads that Take You Around the World and Beyond!

In February of 2021, authors Terri Bruce, Anne Nydam, Sarah Smith, Kathryn Sullivan, Elaine Isaak, and a few other women authors who were part of the same professional association for women and nonbinary writers of speculative fiction arranged a virtual group author reading of their members for Boskone, an annual convention run by the New England Science Fiction Writers Association. In the past, the readings had always been in-person at conventions, but that year, due to Covid, the convention was held online. The virtual reading, which featured several authors each reading for a few minutes, ended up being well received and a lot of fun.

"We all said, 'That actually worked really well. Why don't we try it again?'" says cofounder Anne Nydam. Terri Bruce adds, "That's when it hit us. 'There was no reason we couldn't do this all the time. The tools existed, had existed for a while. Heck, in my day job, I was delivering 2-3 webinars per week to clients. So, I was well versed with using virtual webinar/meeting tools. But it took Covid and a virtual convention for the idea to hit us.'"

The question, however, was if there was an audience for such a thing.

The group set off to find out.

During March 2021, focused on a mission to elevate the voices of women and nonbinary authors of science fiction, fantasy, and horror, they piloted five virtual readings. They experimented with day of the week, time of day, the number of authors, and the length of each reading.

Initial feedback from both authors and audience was an enthusiastic "keep going!"

"I was blown away with the results," Terri says. "With very little lead time to get the word out, we were attracting 10-20 people to each reading. I've frequently read to a room with a lot fewer people at in-person events. There's a saying at conventions: if the audience outnumbers the panelists, then the session was a success. By that metric, our pilot sessions were an incredible success."

From there, "Strong Women - Strange Worlds" and their virtual "QuickRead" events were born. From March to June of 2021, the group set about building the infrastructure they needed to run the events in earnest. They came up with a name for their group and a logo (Anne, who is also an artist as well as an author, makes all the group's graphics). The group settled on a schedule of the first Friday from 12-1 pm ET (which draws a more international crowd) and third Thursday from 7-8 pm ET of each month, and the winning combination of six authors each reading for no more than eight minutes.

During this time, there was some turnover in the organizers. A few founders stepped down. Two stepped back to just occasional host/emcee duties. But soon other volunteers joined up. "Patricia Correll who handles our social media and Kate Pope, who bills herself as the 'token non-author' on the organizing committee and is one of our hosts/emcees as well as doing a bunch of administrative things behind the scenes, both came aboard early on and have been with us since almost the beginning," Terri says. "More recent additions include authors Elaine Pascale, who handles author outreach, Claudia Blood who handles registration and some of the YouTube channel work, Ef Deal who does all our video editing, and Darke Conteur who runs our podcast."

The group bills their events as "a tasting menu of stories."

"Six to eight minutes is long enough to give a good sense of the story and for the audience to get caught up in it, but not so long attention starts to wander," says Terri. Anne adds, "When authors stop reading at a cliff-hanger, the chat box explodes. We always leave them wanting more."

Each reading takes place live on Zoom. To make the events more interactive, commentary and real-time reactions from the audience as each author reads are encouraged in the Zoom chat box. Once the readings conclude, there is a live Q&A, with the audience encouraged to turn on their cameras and mic and chat with the authors.

"We went through all the women and nonbinary speculative fiction authors we all personally knew pretty quickly," Terri says. "We hit a point where we thought, 'Uh oh, we're going to have to start repeating authors because we've recruited all of the authors that exist in this specific niche.'"

Turns out that was not the case. “We had to move into ‘cold calling’ type outreach, just reaching out to authors we didn’t personally know, but once we started Googling, looking at the table of contents of speculative fiction anthologies, looking at the panelist lists for speculative fiction conventions, that sort of thing, we realized there are *a lot*, I mean A LOT, of women and nonbinary speculative fiction authors. But the problem is they don’t always get the visibility and attention they deserve. But then, that’s why we started these readings. To give these under-represented authors a platform for sharing their work.” To date, the group has reached out to more than 950 women and nonbinary authors and featured over 200 authors at their readings, and there’s no end in sight.

The stories and writing featured at the QuickReads are as varied as the authors. “There’s so many articles and stories and plenty of research about how women and non-binary authors and characters are under-represented in science fiction, fantasy, and horror. There’s a stereotype out there that all we’re writing is paranormal romance and urban fantasy, that sort of thing. That all we’re writing about is ‘feelings’ and romance. I think even we, the organizers of these readings, have been a bit surprised by the depth and breadth of what is being written by women and nonbinary writers. I mean, just look at the top end of the market for what is out there. Becky Chambers, Martha Wells, Mary Doria Russell, Nnedi Okorafor, Erin Morgenstern, Audrey Niffenegger, Anne Rice, Shirley Jackson, Gemma Files, Mary Shelley, Ursula Le Guin, Robin Hobb, Margaret Atwood, N.K. Jemisin, Octavia Butler, Diana Wynne Jones... the list goes on and on and all of their work is so different. And that’s just the tip of the iceberg. We’ve featured authors writing in every sub-genre of speculative fiction: military science fiction, hard science fiction, cozy mysteries, comedic fantasy, comedic science fiction, epic fantasy, new weird, slipstream, steampunk, slasher horror, psychological horror—you name it, we’ve had it.”

What’s perhaps surprised Terri most of all is the number of authors who don’t even realize they are writing speculative fiction. “Sometimes I send an invitation email to an author and they write back and say, ‘While my stories feature a witch, they are cozy mysteries. That’s not speculative fiction’ or ‘I write time travel romance so I don’t fit with your focus on speculative fiction.’ “Time travel. Super heroes. Alternate history. A lot of people don’t realize those are all under the umbrella of science fiction. It’s not all aliens, robots, and space travel. And if it has a witch or a ghost and it’s fiction, it’s fantasy.”

In addition to showcasing the diversity of stories being written by women and nonbinary authors in the speculative fiction genres, SW-SW also works to showcase diverse voices. “We’ve been able to feature a large number of LGBTQ+ authors, authors of color, and even quite a few international authors. We’ve had authors from Canada, Trinidad & Tobago, Greece, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Sweden, Finland, Japan, Hong Kong, Australia, and even South Africa take part in our readings [the only limiter is that the author’s work must be available in English and their reading for SW-SW must be in English]. Our audience has also been international—we even have regular attendees from France, England, and Mexico.”

The group is working to expand participation in the QuickReads by authors from Central and South America, Africa, and Caribbean and Pacific islands, as well as by Latinx and Indigenous authors. “We know they’re out there,” Terri says. “But what we’re finding is a ‘digital divide’ in that these authors don’t have much of an online footprint that we can find; often they don’t have websites or, if they do, there’s often no way to contact them—no contact me form and no email address. They often aren’t on social media (or, at least, social media accessible from the United States such as Facebook and Twitter). There don’t seem to be many anthologies centered on Latinx and Indigenous speculative fiction writers nor many ‘listicle’ articles featuring works by these authors. And when there are, there aren’t many women and nonbinary authors included. But we are open to recommendations!”

Authors don’t have to wait to be invited by SW-SW; they can self-nominate. “We have a standing invitation to any authors of science fiction, fantasy, and/or horror who identify as female or nonbinary and who have at least one published work of speculative fiction,” Terri says. “Just go to our website (www.strongwomenstrangeworlds.weebly.com) and fill out the author interest form if you’re interested in participating in one of our readings.” There is no fee to participate.

The group welcomes authors not just of novels, but also of short fiction, poetry, graphic novels, comic books, and picture books. They include authors of work for all ages from children through adults. And they welcome those who are

self-published or published by a small press as well as those published by one of the large, traditional publishers. Anne explains, “We require published work simply because it would be too cruel to give our audience a taste of something amazing, only for them to find out that there’s no way for them to get hold of it afterwards to read the whole thing. But the wide array of different ways work can be published these days can only be a benefit to under-represented writers, so we support it all.”

For book lovers and science fiction, fantasy, and/or horror lovers interested in attending one of the readings, the schedule and audience registration form can also be found on the Strong Women - Strange Worlds website. “Our readings are free to attend,” Terri says. “We are committed to that. We are a group of volunteers who put together these events out of a shared love of books and a shared passion for SW-SW’s mission. The fact that each reading features about 50% repeat attendees and 50% first-time attendees is just icing on the cake—there’s familiar faces at each reading so it’s like a book club or social club, but we’re making new friends every time as well.” As an added incentive, each event features giveaways of books and author swag. “Who doesn’t love free stuff?” Terri says.

At the end of the readings there is a live Q&A with the authors. “If the audience doesn’t have questions,” Terri says, “then we just ‘freeform’ it. The emcee or one of the authors throws out a question or topic and the featured authors just run with the topic. We’ve had some great impromptu panel discussions on being a writer, creativity, research, being a marginalized writer, et cetera. There are times we have to kick the audience—and the authors--out of the Zoom room because everyone has something else they have to get to, but the conversation is so engrossing, no one wants to leave!”

The group shows no signs of slowing down; if anything, they are expanding. Terri says, “During 2022, we launched a YouTube channel with recordings of our QuickRead events. We launched a podcast featuring author readings and interviews. We host a quarterly chat for the authors. We have a Discord for the authors to network and hang out. We’ve begun venturing into hosting a monthly, live online book fair. And we have a bunch more things we hope to roll out in 2023.”

Of course, their ability to do so depends on attracting additional volunteers. “We’ve been amazingly lucky in our ability to attract volunteers,” Terri says. “Everyone is super busy these days. The authors especially—it’s hard to juggle writing, editing, marketing, appearances, and all the other moving pieces that go along with being a writer. So the fact that they manage to also find time to help with SW-SW is incredible. But, of course, we can always use more help.”

The crew behind Strong Women - Strange Worlds invites you to attend one of their upcoming QuickReads to find out for yourself why their regulars keep coming back month after month.

Visit them on the web at www.strongwomenstrangeworlds.weebly.com to learn more.



Strong Women Strange Worlds



Friday, December 2, 2022



Friday, November 4, 2022



Thursday, October 20, 2022



Friday, October 7, 2022



Thursday, September 15, 2022



Thursday, August 18, 2022



Friday, August 5, 2022



Thursday, July 21, 2022



Thursday, June 16, 2022



Friday, June 3, 2022

Strong Women Strange Worlds



Kyoko M, Missy Jane, Heather Rose Jones, Sue Burke, Mari Ness



Thursday, May 19, 2022

Jenn Gott, Elaine Pascale, Leah Bobet, JF Garrard, Cerece Rennie Murphy



Friday, May 6, 2022

Joan Marie Verba, Morgan Chalut, Sara Codair, Barbara Krasnoff, L. Marie Wood, Stephanie Damore



Thursday, April 21, 2022

Nancy Jane Moore, Premee Mohamed, Josie Malone, Shirley Chan, Jennifer Brozek, Amber Royer



Thursday, March 17, 2022

Ef Deal, Sarah Raughley, Eugenia Triantafyllou, Si Clarke, Jacqueline West, Stephanie Burgis



Friday, March 4, 2022

Veronica G. Henry, Valerie Valdes, Katherine Silva, Amy Grech, Britta Jensen, Karen Osborne



Thursday, January 20, 2022

Jane C. Esther, M. Dalto, Anne E.G. Nydam, Sarah Smith, E.C. Ambrose



Tuesday, January 18, 2022

Kristi Petersen Schoonover, C B Lyall, CM Harris, Tenea D. Johnson, Gillian Polack, S.B. Divya



Thursday, November 18, 2021

Claudia Blood, Jennie Goloboy, Tonya R. Moore, Jessica Lévai, kt mather, Nerine Dorman



Friday, November 5, 2021

Reni K Amayo, Sonora Taylor, Kate Heartfield, Akua Lezli Hope, Christine Lajewski, Carole McDonnell



Thursday, October 21, 2021



Friday, October 1, 2021



Thursday, September 16, 2021



Friday, September 3, 2021



Thursday, August 19, 2021



Friday, August 6, 2021



Thursday, July 15, 2021



Friday, July 2, 2021



Thursday, June 17, 2021



Friday, June 4, 2021

I knew that one day I would pluck up the courage to leave.

I would pledge it, silently, though feeling it only faintly, as I stood outside the Peakes' house, the moon like a piece of broken bread through the black, naked tree branches.

Each time, I would force myself to look up, because the last time I saw my mother whole, she was twisting and grasping uselessly at the air, all while swinging like a bell, the wind rippling through her skirt.

Jenny Beardsley, then about 12, and tall, ran up, pulled the shoes from her feet, and ran off, and no one stopped her.

I stayed still, because of my mother's very last words to me, while being dragged aboard a cart to the Middlesex Gaol: "Child, forget me. And don't look for dead men's shoes."

I was 9 years old then. I had and still have but a bare grasp of numbers. But that date, I remember, and think upon when it comes 'round: The 15th of June, in the year of our Lord, sixteen-hundred and forty-eight.

Said as such, sounds so ordinary as to be cruel.

I am now 16, and a woman, indentured since that day, at the home of Constable Charlie Peake, because my mother could not pay her jail fees.

In one respect, I am free, and pray to remain so.

It is unlikely I will ever marry. Before the trials, the mad accusations, Billy Bryce, who was 9 then, too, would give me a smile from across the path. Now, I think he even leaves by a different door, so as not to see me.

All in all, I did not find myself much watched, or escorted. Most other girls go about this errand and that, with a hundred eyes upon them, as if they might otherwise fall into the devil's snare when fetching a pail of milk.

I go to collect firewood, to collect flowers and berries for dyes, and medicinals, and never, it seems, do eyes follow. I do believe most eyes in this town would prefer to stand blind of me, rather than singe themselves by casting a gaze upon the daughter of one of such condemned.

I knew this for certain when I looked upon the Haywards' little girl, Elizabeth, no more than 4. She used to smile back, but then, the very day after I saw my mother last, Elizabeth screeched, and rubbed her free hand furiously into her face. Her mother grasped her other hand, and pulled her along without a word.

At first, it made my tears smart. Now, it makes me smile. They will turn, maybe even run, so as not to look at me.

And then, while getting some water from Tremmell Brook, one day, I happened upon Ann Disborough, whose voice startled me, so seldom does anyone address me directly.

"Mercy Baxter. If I was you," she started, "Don't waste your tears. If they cross the path when you come, and won't speak to you, or look at you, less chance you have of catching pox."

The pox had carried off most of her family, as it did for my own father, so long ago. Ann has so long been indentured to the Latham family, but I believe the Latham boy, Jacob, does have a room prepared for her in his heart.

And so, as I went about my daily chores, I began climbing higher, each day, on the forest trail in the outlying land that forms a semicircle around the town, lumbering up into a place called Fox Hill.

That is where the best firewood is to be found, and some late blooms, and milkweed pods, but something more.

On Fox Hill, I found that which I so missed, and what I wept for, silently, in my spare bed downstairs.

There, I found my mother.

It seems so simple now. Of course, when I was a child of 9, this place was mostly unknown to me, like the other side of the world.

Did divine Providence lead me here? Perhaps, and if so, after all, God is good in His justice.

I do not know.

I only know that I found it, gathering firewood.

My mother was not to be put into hallowed ground, of course. A few charitable neighbors presented a petition – passed on by a Town Charter man who I think once did have a fancy for mother.

I overheard the minister, when he visited Constable Peake, say with a scoff that the petition had even gone as far as Governor Winthrop.

Their kindness warmed me, of course, but it was all to no use.

Did the governor even see it, sitting at his wooden desk in front of his warm fire, deliberating the regulation of prices of wheat and rum? I do not know.

And whatever came of that petition, no one would or could tell me what became of mother once dragged down from that tree. I did not ask.

After so much time passing, there were only small leavings, in the thin, dry soil, jagged with rocks. At first, these rocks were all I saw.

A flicker in the thin breeze – a cloth. I closed my eyes. When I did, the hem of my mother's skirt appeared to me, once more. as if again above me, in the shadow of the tree, barely concealing her feet bare of her stolen shoes.

I opened my eyes, and trembling, I reached, and touched it, delicately. And the rocks, glinting dully in the sun, I saw, were not only rocks.

The very earth had grown teeth, pushing through the dirt. Like the teeth of a baby, you might say, pushing from gums, causing much fussing, and crying, as did the Peakes' children that I so comforted. Only here, these teeth provoked nothing but silence.

I began to come back, any day I had the chance, to visit, and to converse.

I vowed against the impulse to curse out loud curses for those who told lies, who repeated them to the magistrate, even as he began to nod and snore.

But soon, my will failed me, and I did so curse, out loud, then asking forgiveness, of my mother, the sky, of God, myself. "I'm cursed as you are," I said to the little mound of tatters. "The daughter of one so cursed. No one looks at me, or hears me."

I began, then, to speak of trivial things. How tough the meat was at dinner, how the Peakes' house was sometimes cold, but that Constable Peake and his wife were not unkind, though somewhat distant.

Before I could stop them, cold tears were snaking thin streams along my face.

I began to sing the childhood songs she had taught me, and my voice echoed, so that in time, it was as if she was after all, singing with me.

Now and then, I would come across a tuft of copper-colored fur, caught upon a twig, or high, bare stalks of grass. And once, I even saw a mother fox, and her kits, with their copper faces and golden eyes, from the small, dark opening of their den.

And I smiled at them, though in my heart, I could think only of a mother, and her children safe, as once I was with my mother, safe.

Before leaving, I would always make certain to return with a good gathering of branches and twigs, so as not to appear to be idling, or shirking other tasks.

Then, one afternoon, as I was returning, after putting my found twigs and branches on the woodpile, I heard Goodwife Peake, who was inside, talking with her sister.

"Your servant seems gone all hours gathering wood. Whatever keeps her?"

"She can stay away; the less time in this house, the better."

It was then I opened the door, sharply, with the iron lever making a screech on my behalf. They both looked up, their faces frozen in a shock, and I smiled.

I said, "Good day," and went out to the herb garden.

Then came the day, in November, when trees and grasses were stripped of their flowers and berries. Cold stirred, and I said to Goodwife Peake: "I must away, for more wood."

The ground was hard and thin, and was not so easy to climb, not so friendly to my feet. A few times, a rock in the ground would come loose, and I would almost come down tumbling with it, but I recovered myself.

When did I ever feel so tired, I wondered, and sad. Yes, sad, for I suppose the weight of so many sad things in my life, and I could not even banish the thought by the fact that I had a home and a bed, if little more.

I tried to think only of my meeting at the summit, where I would know joy.

But when finally, I arrived, the cold tugged at me even more. I pulled my wool cloak, worn thin in many places, and seemed as much to let in the cold as keep it out.

With my hands now a bit raw, I grasped at the scrap of fabric, fluttering like a leaf in the ground, which now seemed only a scrap, like any.

And I saw that the only real truth was the mouth that would no longer speak to me, and hadn't spoken to me, since crying from the rattling cart: "Child, forget me. And don't look for dead men's shoes."

I had disobeyed.

I tore at the ground to free it, and after some time – the remnants of that same mouth.

Still, there it was, freed of the soil that had held it so long, but silent, still silent.

"Your only words are mine," I said, and the wind carried the amazement of my own voice.

I cried out, and looked down, cradling in my hand, the nakedness of teeth, jaw, and silence – no more lullabies, no more soothing when I was sick with fever.

But that was not the voice I heard now.

I looked up. It was a man's voice, or a grown boy's voice, one barely familiar to me now since it was so many years since it last addressed me.

It was Billy Bryce.

I stumbled, and stood, crushing my treasure of bones to my breast, and pulling my cloak in around me.

"Why, Goodman Bryce," I gasped. "It's been so much time."

I should run, a voice within me said, but my feet seemed to quiver at the ankles, betraying me.

For so many years Billy Bryce had made a habit of looking away from me when I passed, that I barely knew his face now. It had grown hard and spare, cut like the pass of the hill itself.

I took a step back, and he stepped toward me. "Ye should know, Mercy Baxter, that your visitations don't go without comment. Many comments. There are rumblings now as far as Charlestown." He smiled a smile like that of a dog grown tired of begging.

Despite my growing fear, I laughed, for I thought myself so unknown, so unworthy of comment, let alone gaining fame harborside, at least 20 miles hence.

My fingers began tracing the fine etching of my mother's teeth, and it was then I felt she did at least come to me, in spirit as much as in these poor remains. "It's true, Goodman Bryce," I said, and when I moved toward him, he took a step back. It amazed and heartened me, so I stepped closer.

"I have the power, you see, and you leave me here and now, unmolested, I'll have no cause."

My heart was close to bursting, like a bundle of leaves in a fire, erupting.

He did not step back again, but now instead, came toward me, reaching out his hand.

I made a cry – an unnatural sound that even tormented my own ears – and I reached up, and so swiftly, did bring my mother's jaw upon his mean head. At once, he crumpled, withered, and fell on the hill's slope of loose, dry stones, bringing with him a dark, scarlet streak.

My hands quaked, as did the very core of my body. I cried out again, and became blind, for a moment, as my tears gushed.

And then came another cry, but not from me.

I looked, and it was the fox – no, a stream of them, moving, their pretty flame-colored fur so bright. And Billy Bryce, now sleeping, but not sleeping, did not stir at all as they approached him.

I pressed my mother's jaw more deeply to me, but as the foxes moved like a great copper cloud, the calling of crows and the swoop of hawks, or buzzards, was not long in following.

"Not my mother, but I," I whispered, though far from thinking myself a clever summoner of familiars, I knew it only to be nature's own unfeeling course.

I looked down to see that a leather bag had fallen free from Billy Bryce, and I knelt, still trembling. It held a few coins. I turned, to descend, with this bag and my mother's jaw in my clasp, no firewood, nothing more.

When I returned to the Peake's house, I was greeted with a cross reproach for having no firewood. I begged for a pardon and said I would return the next day.

"I think I see no need," Constable Peake said, and both his wife and I looked at him with surprise. "Methinks your mother's debts are paid, and it is time for you to set out."

With my mother's jail fees, I would surely be in service to the Peakes until they both were in the grave, and my servitude passed to their children, should I live long enough.

I looked away. What I learned living so long in that house, is that Constable Peake, his livelihood bound up in sorting the innocent from the guilty, could see guilt plainly. Or perhaps could fix it upon someone, and then believe it to be rightly placed.

The air in the house grew very cold. I quickly nodded, went to my mean bed to bundle what few possessions I had, to be ready to set out the next morning.

The time had come, and courage, I had. Along with some coins.

I knew Goodman Hubbards would be making a journey to Charlestown for provisions. With my coins, I know he would surely agree to take me, as Goodman Hubbards cared more for coins than any curse.

With one of Billy Bryce's coins jingling dully in his own pocket now, and with him making no further inquiries, I did go, in a cart, but unlike my mother, unchained.

About the Author:

Meg Smith is a writer, journalist, dancer, events producer living in Lowell, Mass. In addition to previously appearing in *The Sirens Call*, her poetry and fiction have appeared in *Dark Moon Digest*, *Silver Blade*, *The Chamber Magazine*, *The Cafe Review*, and many more. She is author of five poetry books and a short fiction collection, *The Plague Confessor*. She welcomes visits to her website.

Website: [Meg Smith](#)

After parking his tractor in the barn, Fred turned it off and wiped sweat from his forehead with his handkerchief. The heat wasn't the only thing bothering him, though. His work day had been much longer than usual. It had been harder than most, too, what with the strange holes he'd discovered on the acreage he'd plowed and readied for planting yesterday. Priding himself on his down-to-earth, no-nonsense approach to life, he knew he hadn't overlooked them, and holes couldn't just appear out of nowhere, but there they'd been. Strangely, they reminded him of pictures he'd seen of moon craters.

Over the past few months, other farmers in town had discovered the same thing, some of them suggesting asteroids had fallen. Fred had snorted at that idea. He had a different, more logical theory, suspecting pesky neighborhood kids were to blame, finding a new way to pull pranks.

They'd certainly cost him valuable time today, forcing him to till the ground again. He'd worried about loose pockets of earth deep down, or something else he couldn't see, so he'd gone over the same area several times before leveling it back out.

Fred stepped down from his tractor and felt something move under his feet. Losing his balance, he fell, landing on a rake. He yelled out at the sudden pain in his stomach as the tines punctured his skin. Stumbling to his feet, he felt light-headed and swayed. When he raised his shirt and gingerly touched the small wounds, his fingertips came away red.

"Dang," he muttered. "Well, it could've been worse."

Fog rolled into the barn—typical occurrence, given the nearby lake—and wafted past him. It reached the rake and hovered, drifting back and forth above the bloody tines.

The movement reminded the watching man of a cat rubbing against a scratching post, or luxuriating in a patch of catnip or sunny spot on the ground. But he snorted at his own whimsy and turned his attention back to his belly.

Fred, dabbing at his wounds with his handkerchief, didn't notice the fog changing color from a translucent gray to a faint reddish tinge.

He trod heavily toward the open doorway, but gasped, stopping abruptly. His eyes widened, and he reached to touch his back where a scythe was embedded between his shoulders blades, his sweaty, light-green shirt darkening.

The nearby wall covered with tools and farm equipment shimmered faintly, and a machete flew from its hook, striking Fred's right shoulder with an audible thunk. A hoe rose from where it leaned against a pile of pallets, flipping blade-side up. It soared toward the man, the blade impaling his forehead, and blood ran down his face.

More tools left the wall, striking and slashing Fred's body. A pair of shears pierced his neck, going straight through to the other side.

His mouth gaped open in a scream, but all he could manage was a faint gurgle. He collapsed on the ground, blood pooling around him.

Tools dropped beside him, landing in the blood, and the red pool grew smaller and smaller until no trace of it remained.

A thump signaled a door shutting somewhere close by.

"Where are you, Fred?" a man called from outside the barn. "You big lug, you haven't forgotten our plan to visit the bar, have you?"

"You ready for a nice, cold beer?" another man asked. "We are."

All the tools rose from the ground. Soaring through the air, they repositioned themselves where they'd been previously just as Fred's buddies walked into the barn.

About the Author:

Gabriella Balcom writes fantasy, sci-fi, horror, romance, literary fiction, and more. She loves forests, mountains, and back roads, has had 307 works accepted for publication, and was nominated for the Washington Science Fiction Association's Small Press Award. Gabriella's books, *On the Wings of Ideas* and *Worth Waiting For*, resulted from her winning publishing contracts. Her novella, *The Return*, is also out; three others pend publication.

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My bedroom was quiet. Too quiet. The oscillating fan blew on my face. It was muggy as beads of sweat formed on my brow. I would only get angry when the cooling air would leave my face. I had a simple problem with an even simpler solution, but I was too scared to slide out of bed and pull up the button to make the fan stationary.

If you heard them, you would also be frightened. If I slid out of bed, they would know I escaped the comfort of my slumber. On top of feeling the filthy sweat, I had to piss. I tried drifting back to a calmer and safer place, but the harder I tried, the more alert I became. I felt their eyes on me as their voyeuristic desires for my shivering soul grew more powerful. My bladder was throbbing for me to relieve the pressure. I knew they would come if I slipped out of bed.

My heart raced. I was terrified and tightened my eyes closed as I wished them away. I even tried praying. Nothing was working. My bladder would get its way, and the sweat would drive me to madness. It's always hotter when they latch their desires onto me.

I looked at my alarm clock. 2:43 am – three hours until daybreak. I couldn't make it that long. The pain to piss was unbearable. "One sheep. Two sheep. Three sheep," I counted. Nothing like having punctual pests showing up right on time. Some call this the witching hour.

It all started twelve months ago when they showed up. They swarmed like bees, even making a faint buzzing sound. They attacked my thoughts and amygdala like piranhas. The first time I was cursed with their presence, I was paralyzed while they feasted on anything good in my life. Thoughts of giving up and committing suicide were overwhelming.

They don't yell. They whisper, forcing you to pay close attention to what they are commanding you to do. I entertain their dejected voices as much as I want to shut them up. It makes me nearly defenseless. And it was happening again. My bladder was full, and my face dripped with sweat. I slid out of bed, and a mob of dark drifters pounced on my soul like a starved lion. I couldn't resist their commands any longer.

The temperature quickly dropped. I pissed and was instantly relieved of any discomfort. I went back to my bed. As predicted, like leeches, they latched their blades into my mind. The whispers grew. "Find him. You are nothing without us. Find him. When you are done, do the same to yourself. Find him. FIND him. FIND HIM! THEN END YOUR PATHETIC EXISTENCE. FIND Him, FIND HIM, FIND HIM, FIND HIM!!!"

I was able to finally move. I put on my shoes and slipped on my blue jacket. I grabbed what I needed out of my purse. Then... I came here. I had to find you. You can no longer continue to profess gentleness and concern for others. There is no kindness. Only destruction and chaos. They will have their way. They will win.

I know you are scared. I can see it in your wandering eyes. Wander those irises all you want during these last few minutes on this earth. God can't save you. All I had to do was stay in bed, and you would have been able to live. Shucks.

I know; I could have ended this without a callous monologue and play-by-play. But this is always the part I love. This is why I let them continue to whisper in my ear. Oh, one more thing before you perish. They want me to whisper a message in your ear. "We will win, you will lose. See you in the underworld, Pastor."

And here is one last kiss on your forehead before your final departure. Safe travels.

About the Author:

Ty A. Bechel loves horror and thriller and creative writing. Bechel is the founder of two nonprofits in Illinois and currently serves as an Executive Director at one. He has published two books about his lived experience with substance abuse and how it affected his life and those around him. He is a freelance, community-based journalist with Alton Advantage, Riverbender.com, and Prairieland Buzz Magazine.

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Captain's Log, SS Demeter, 6 July 1893.

Cargo loading completed at the port of Varna. Cargo consists of material for the Austro-Hungarian agricultural colony at Sirenum, including 100 sacks of seeds of various types, 20 crates of farm implements, 5 steam tractors and 20 boxes of experimental earth. Port Master Laszlo Kurvich approved lift off at 1245. Lift-off accomplished without problems. Chief Engineer Rustoff reports contra-gravity engine operating at optimal efficiency.

Captain's Log, SS Demeter, 8 July 1893.

Wireless contact made with Russian Lunar colony of Katerinaberg and permission granted for trans-solar flight. Navigator Daweson reports navigation computation engine set for maximum efficiency flight to Mars.

Captain's Log, SS Demeter, 10 July 1893.

Warrant Officer Lundo reported an 'odd sound' from the secondary cargo hold. Lundo reported scratching, like metal on metal. A subsequent inspection of the hold by myself and an engineering team found nothing out of the ordinary. However, Lundo is an experienced spacer. I have instructed engineer Rustoff to perform periodic checks of hull integrity until we can make planetfall on Mars.

Captain's Log, SS Demeter, 13 July 1893.

Warrant Officer Lundo is missing. He was not at his post when Shipman Second Class Kharnov reported to the bridge to relieve him from watch. Kharnov informed me that he was missing from his post. A subsequent search of all crew accessible areas of the ship has turned up no sign of Lundo. I have ordered Engineer Rustoff to don a pressure suit and conduct a search of all other areas of the ship.

Addendum: Rustoff was unable to find any sign of Lundo; however, Engineer Neumann reports that oxygen reserves are 1% below expected levels. Rustoff suggested that this may be due to the airlock being used. If so, Lundo must have ejected himself from the ship. This is the only possible explanation.

Captain's Log, SS Demeter, 15 July 1893.

Shipman First Class Arkin is missing. His absence was discovered when he failed to report for breakfast duty at 1230, London time. A search of the ship, both accessible and inaccessible areas revealed nothing. Oxygen reserves are depleted by 1% again. It is clear that either Lundo and Arkin committed suicide by ejecting themselves or that one of their crew mates murdered them. I have consulted with Engineer Second Class Hockbader, who also serves as the ship's medical officer. While only speculating, he believes this could be the effect of some non-terrestrial disease contracted during the Demeter's previous voyage to Venus. Both Lundo and Arkin served on that voyage, as did most of the other crewmen. If this is true and some disease is causing either suicidal or homicidal behavior, we will have to arrive at Mars as quickly as possible. I have ordered Chief Engineer Rustoff to increase contra-gravity output to 100%. Although this may cause damage to the engine, we need to reduce flight time as much as possible.

Captain's Log, SS Demeter, 18 July 1893.

Much has happened. The body of Engineer Second Class Turkmen has been discovered. He was assigned to conduct a hull integrity check in the main cargo hold. When he failed to report to Chief Engineer Rustoff with his findings, Rustoff and Engineer First Class Danilov proceeded to the cargo hold. There, they found Turkmen, dead. I have had Engineer Second Class Hockbader perform an examination of the body. I will append his summary:

'I have conducted an examination of the corpse of Engineer Anatoly Turkmen. His skin displays a pallid coloration, unnatural to his living state. He does not display signs of rigor mortis, his limbs remaining supple. There is light bruising about the neck and shoulders. This is the only sign of injury. Without a proper examination in a hospital setting, it is impossible to determine cause of death, although disease remains a possibility'.

I have ordered crewmen to remain in groups. As of now, I have 12 men remaining.

Captain's Log, SS Demeter, 20 July 1893.

Rustoff is dead. Johann Rustoff served with distinction his entire life, first with the Russian Navy, then the Russian Extra-Planetary Task Force and, finally, as Chief Engineer of this ship. He was found in the corridor between engineering and the cargo hold. Why he was there alone, I don't know. He was not the kind of man to disobey orders. His body displays the same condition as Turkmen's. I am afraid we may not live long enough to reach Mars. I have had Radioman Beecher attempt communications with Mars, but Sun activity is disrupting wireless signals.

Captain's Log, SS Demeter, 21 July 1893.

Beecher is gone. Oxygen levels down; another use of the airlock. I am convinced that something is on-board my ship. I have had remaining crewman form into 5-man teams and equipped them from the ship's arms locker. I will lead one team, Shipman First Class Wallerstein will lead the other. We will conduct another search of the ship. We have to find what is killing us.

Captain's Log, SS Demeter, 22 July 1893.

Wallerstein is dead, as are his men. Bodies found strewn about engineering. Signs of violence, horrible violence. Firearms were found discharged.

Hockbader was with them, so I have no medical officer to provide a report. However, any thoughts of a disease or human malady have been wiped away. No disease can crush a man's chest or rip an arm from its root. There is something inhuman murdering my men.

Captain's Log, SS Demeter, 23 July 1893.

If you find this, know that I have failed. As a captain, I have failed to protect my men and ship. As a man, I have failed to show courage in the face of evil. That is the only way to describe what is happening; something evil, something monstrous is among us. After finding Wallerstein and his men dead, I had ordered my remaining crewmen to gather supplies and meet me on the bridge. We would barricade ourselves there until we reached Mars. I proceeded to the bridge to begin lowering bulkheads across the ship, to impede whatever it is that is attacking us.

Upon arriving at the bridge, I immediately heard the chime of the intercom. It was Navigator Daweson. He was shouting that they were under attack. Before I could respond, there was a horrible scream, then silence. I have never heard such a sound before; even while fighting against the Turks, seeing men in the most horrible states of disfigurement and pain possible, such a sound as I heard had never issued from a human throat.

I immediately lowered all the bulkheads and locked the hatch to the bridge. To my shame, some of my men may have been alive. But after the bulkheads were in place, there was no hope for them of reaching me.

I can hear a steadily growing thudding. From the indicator panels, it is the sound of the bulkheads being destroyed, one by one, as whatever it is that is out there grows closer to the bridge. It is still 5 days until Mars. I will not be able to survive. However, I may be able to destroy whatever it is. When it breaches the bridge hatch, I will discharge my gun into the main view port. Let's see how well this fiend deals with the vacuum of space.

This is Captain Mikonos Durscher, SS Demeter. May God have mercy on my soul.

Accident Report, Captain Richard Boone, 23rd Regiment of Foot, Assigned Victoria City, Mars.

The SS Demeter, a Bulgarian licensed cargo vessel, entered Martian orbit on 28 July 1893 at 0345, London Time. Attempts to contact the ship via wireless were fruitless (see attached report from Victoria City Space Traffic Centre for details). The Demeter entered Martian atmosphere at a high rate of speed and impacted on the Martian surface at 0352, London Time. Impact site is 36 kilometers north of Victoria City, near the South Polar Canal.

Two companies of the 23rd Regiment, commanded by this officer, were dispatched to conduct rescue operations. Upon arriving at the crash site, it was clear that the vessel had impacted at an oblique angle. The ship's starboard hull was ruptured, exposing the interior.

Two platoons of the 23rd, led by Lieutenant Paul Forrester, Royal Engineers, entered the Demeter to search for survivors. Although the force of impact seemed to rule out survivors, one was found, Count Vladimir Drakul.

Count Drakul is a Romanian national, who claims to be here as part of an Austro-Hungarian agricultural mission. Count Drakul testified that the Captain of the ship appeared to be suffering from some sort of homicidal dementia and killed a number of crewmen. Count Drakul further attests that he locked himself in his quarters for approximately 9 days and is unaware of what transpired on the ship from that point until the impact. I have attached his full testimony, as well as the ship's log to this report. Unfortunately, the log is in what the Count identified as Bulgarian, a language which neither I nor any of the men under my command can read.

The Count's papers are in order and the Regiment will provide transportation for the Count and 20 boxes of soil from Earth to Victoria City. The Foreign Ministry has agreed to facilitate the Count's transportation to the Austro-Hungarian colony of Princess Charlotte Land. Salvage operations conducted under the command of Lieutenant Forrester have determined that the Demeter is a complete wreck. The matter of its final disposition will be turned over to the Colonial Administration's Maritime Office.

Addendum

Captain Surgeon Richard Barlow reports that two men have come down with an unknown illness. They are exhibiting signs of fatigue, pallor and anemia. Surgeon Barlow also reports they have developed small lesions on the neck. Upon returning to Victoria City, I will have these men quarantined. Hopefully, this is not some new Martian disease.

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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Vending Machine | Aaron Grierson

Breathing was such a chore, so I'm glad I don't anymore. But this eternity is dull, numb like the yellowing lights.

Today I may be lucky—someone approaches my vending machine. The robot seems so tranquil, eyes flickering, fixating in my direction. It runs a finger along the screen, gentle scrape of steel on glass. Can it see me? I scream and try to wave, muscles twinging wildly within the restraints.

With a shrug, the robot stumbles away before collapsing on the street, dark. A tear wells up in my eye and pray I don't choke in my plastic prison.

About the Author:

A gamer, lover of autumn, its dark histories, and horror media, Aaron Grierson's work often blends folk elements into society's love of technology. He is a First Reader for Flash Fiction Online and former Senior Articles Editor at The Missing Slate. Always hungry for more literature, references and puns inevitably sneak into his musings. Previous publications appear in The Missing Slate, Marisa's Recurring Nightmares, and are forthcoming in Polar Borealis and Polar Starlight.

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A crash rattled the screen door. Through the window, Holm saw a plume of earth captured by the nearly full moon shining on his property like a lighthouse beam. With a lantern in one hand and a double-barreled shotgun in the other, he headed toward it, clouds of dirt popping up behind him.

In the deep crater sat a large rock that looked like a black pockmarked egg. Ocher smoke swirled from its surface. Charred sulfur and burned metal made Holm set down his lantern and cover his nose and mouth with a handkerchief.

Sparks flew as the rock cracked open. Inside, a creature of twisted gray flesh shrieked so loudly Holm clapped his hands against his ears, his shotgun dropping to the ground. Memories flooded his head, the recall so vivid he dropped to his knees.

When they cleared, a single, monstrous eye studied him, its cornea a swirling mix of blues, greens, colors so alien he couldn't describe. Yelping, he grabbed his shotgun and fired both barrels. Bright blue ichor blossomed on its shimmering silver scales, and the thing crumpled, the onyx shell collapsing on top of it. Thick liquid reeking of offal spread across the crater bottom before seeping into the ground.

Holm stumbled away, back to his house, the screen door clapping behind him as he picked up the phone and waited for the party line to clear before contacting the sheriff.

Sheriff Schaffer arrived the next morning, stating he would have called but the party line kept interrupting. "The Feds want to see it," he said. "With kids killing themselves on the highway in car accidents, you'd think people would stay off the phones in case of emergency."

A pair of men with black suits and government badges showed up an hour later. They interviewed Holm as, outside, soldiers in fatigues waved Geiger counters and scientists in contamination suits examined the remains at the crater's bottom, then took the pieces away on a deuce. "We'll be in touch," said the men in black suits before they drove off in a gray sedan. They didn't leave cards.

Holm's fields hadn't produced crops since the drought ended, or since his wife's and daughter's passing the year after, when the virus was going around. Anna, his darling wife, with full eyes but thin lips; and Mary, inquisitive and cunning, whose cornsilk hair shone like spiderwebs in moonlight. She'd planned on buying a telescope from the catalog.

That afternoon, with no chores to perform, Holm turned on the radio and napped.

In his dream, a meteorite streaked a sky effulgent with stars, then swept close to the ground like a crop duster about to drop DDT on corn. It sped past him and Anna, knocking them to the reedy grass, and scooped up ten-year-old Mary from the ground. She screamed as the meteorite sped skyward and disappeared among the stars.

Static crackled on the radio, waking Holm with a start.

At the foot of the bed stood Anna and Mary.

Skin taut and gray, eyes black yet glowing, they looked like approximations of his wife and daughter. A smell like formaldehyde, not perfume, stung his nostrils.

But he knew it was them.

They led him to the crater. Its bottom was a pool of silver fluid reflecting the afternoon sun.

Anna and Mary flanked him and tugged at him. He jerked from their cold touch in revulsion. Anna's eyes widened, colors bursting in the black orbs. Holm swung at her and she fell into the crater, the fluid swallowing her without ripple or sound. Mary jumped on him and he hit and ripped at her, her body tearing like wet paper mache. He threw the pieces away until there was nothing left, then staggered back to the house, vomiting in the grass before the screen door clapped shut behind him.

They came again that evening.

They weren't alone.

Joining them were two more individuals. Bernard and Winnifred Martin, whom he used to see when he took Anna and Mary to Dilg's general store. Both had died from the virus. Both had the same black eyes and gray skin.

Holm slammed the door, its lock clicking loudly. He told the pair of voices on the party line to hang up so he could call Sheriff Schaffer, but they only yammered more loudly about pie recipes and the hooligans on the road. In frustration he kicked the phone's wooden stand and grabbed the shotgun from his closet.

Outside, the four began to hum in unison, raising their voices to a sustained note that transformed into a shriek. Holm threw open the door and shot twice, reloaded, and shot twice more. Each fell and melted into the grass, leaving nothing but silver puddles.

More came, each in guises of people he knew, all of whom had passed. His parents. An uncle he'd visited when his father had taken him to the city, who had died of cancer. And, always, Anna and Mary leading them.

He took care of all of them, though he was running low on ammunition, and food. He tried drinking water from the well, but the swirls of color, as if the surface was coated with motor oil, kept him from doing so. Thirst was becoming an issue. Soon a trip to Dilg's Grocery would be vital.

He turned on the radio to determine what might be happening, but news broadcasts were panicked and inconsistent, then resorted to nothing but static. On the party line, callers continued to ignore his pleas to hang up so he could report these mirror people coming to his door, then realized he didn't know who to call. The government men hadn't left a number. And Sheriff Shaffer likely didn't have the manpower or knowledge to deal with something like this. But what other option did he have?

He would go to the sheriff's office first, and then Dilg's. He needed food and ammunition anyway.

His keys hung on a hook next to the front door. He pocketed them and scanned the front yard through the screen door, then opened it so slowly the hinges wouldn't creak and closed it behind him, so it didn't slam.

When he went out to his truck, Anna and Mary were waiting for him, along with Ed and Marthe Kahle. They'd died in a church fire when he was a boy; their skin was charred and swollen with bubbles as they approached.

Holm realized he'd forgotten his shotgun.

Despite their rotund forms, they were fast and pinned Holm to the ground before he could run back inside. As Ed straddled Holm's chest, he opened his mouth wide and lowered his head. Ed had no tongue, no teeth, just a void so dark that splashes of color spontaneously burst forth, as if he'd squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his arm against his face. Holm tried to scream Marthe's hands were on his throat. Anna and Mary circled.

Holm's fingers curled around a sharp heavy rock. He gripped it tightly and smashed it against Ed's head. It crunched like an eggshell and Ed collapsed, the crushed head spilling thick silver fluid over Holm's face and hands. Marthe emitted a shriek so loud Holm's ears rang. Her grip loosened enough that he was able to crawl to his knees and use the rock on her.

Staggering, Holm rose and ran to the house to get his shotgun, Anna and Mary close behind. He shot before they got to the porch. When he got back and started his truck, the only thing left was silver puddles reflecting the afternoon sky.

Shaffer didn't believe him. Holm could tell that as he related the incidences of the past few days. While Holm insisted the dried ichor on his denim jacket and flannel shirt were evidence, Shaffer suggested it might not be more than something brewed from the still they both made when they were teenagers and liquor was illegal. Holm even implored Shaffer to drive out to the farm with him so the sheriff could see for himself. Shaffer leaned forward, arms crossed on his desk blotter. His voice was even and slow, as if Holm was a small child who needed to have explained why something he did was wrong.

"I know things have been rough since Anna and Mary passed. It was hard on the community. People loved them both. I'd never met any woman with a more generous heart, or a child with a more curious mind. We were all devastated when they were killed."

Holm opened his mouth, but Shaffer quieted him with a wave of his hand.

"We don't have to go into the details again. No, my investigation didn't uncover anything I could prove. The insurance adjuster said it was an accident, and I don't have much choice but to accept his report." His eyes narrowed. A knowing smile crossed his lips. "But the payout kept your farm solvent, didn't it? Hell, you're probably the only farmer that came out ahead, even though you didn't grow anything since before the end of the drought. If you haven't invested everything in Seagram's."

Holm glared at Shaffer, who sniffed.

"Judging by the smell, that's what I would guess we have here. Maybe you heard someone talk about that show at the movie house, the one where space aliens made the dead rise from the grave. Played with your imagination. Regardless, go home. I want you to stay away from whatever you've been sipping."

Afterward, dazed, Holm bought groceries and replenished his supply of shotgun shells. When he got home, Anna and Mary, joined by the Heydens, approached from his front porch. He brought out the box of shotgun shells and shot

all four. They were nothing but silver liquid seeping into the reedy blades of grass by the time he retrieved the paper bags from the truck and closed the front door behind him.

The young man's Plymouth screeched to a stop in front of Holm's house. He pounded on the door and begged to be let in. "Please, they're chasing me! Hurry!" Dubious behind the screen door, Holm gauged the young man was of little harm, so unhooked the screen door and opened it, the rusting metallic springs screeching.

He seated the young man at the dining room table and offered him some water he had boiled. The young man accepted the tall glass dusted with calcification and quaffed it all in two gulps. His black leather jacket creaked as he wiped his mouth with his forearm.

When Holm asked what had happened, the young man was vague, mumbling some nonsense about how they were everywhere and coming to get him and how he needed to hide. "I figure they're not going to find me here," he said, staring into the empty glass. "I would have tried closer to town. But this place was out of the way. Desolate. Besides," he chuckled and offered Holm a knowing look, "I feel like you have some sympathy for my plight."

Before Holm could answer, Shaffer's squad car pulled up to the house. He left the young man at the table and went outside.

Shaffer scowled beneath his hat and told Holm he'd gone to the graveyard and found nothing out of the ordinary. Not a grave disturbed or a headstone touched. Pity momentarily flickered through Shaffer's face, then came back to the stern visage Holm had seen earlier. "I've asked around. I've heard you're firing your gun regularly. We can't have that. If your head's going funny, then you're a danger to the community. I want your shotgun. You can have it back when you dry out."

Holm heard nothing. Instead, he kept wondering why Shaffer didn't ask about the shiny Plymouth parked in the front yard, or the tire tracks in the grass. Even when he darted his eyes to it, Shaffer, refused to acknowledge them.

He didn't even see the young man until it was too late.

The young man jumped onto Shaffer's back and clawed at his head. He opened his mouth, his jaw widening unnaturally, and began shoving Shaffer's head inside. Shaffer screamed and drew his gun, but was thrown forward as the young man swallowed up the rest of his head. The gun dropped to the grass. With muffled cries of pain Shaffer ran past Holm toward the barren corn field, the young man mouth widening to swallow torso and arms. Holm picked up the gun and ran after them. He fired until Shaffer's pistol clicked. The young man shriveled like a suddenly drying grape, rivulets of metallic fluid running along with the blood welling from the bullet holes in Shaffer's back. Shaffer took two more steps before collapsing to the ground.

Right next to the crater.

Wailing, Holm rushed to Shaffer and shook him, begging him to still be alive. He tried to explain it was an accident, that he was trying to save him from that monstrous kid, then confessing everything about what happened to Anna and Mary, how desperate he had been when the drought dried up his farm.

At the bottom of the crater, the fluid bubbled. Anna and Mary rose and took hold of Holm, his body limp in their cold hands. Neither gentle nor forceful, they dragged him into the crater and into the metallic fluid. He sobbed as he sank to his knees, then his chest, and finally submerging his head. A single bubble floated to the surface and popped, and then the fluid was still.

When the government men returned more than a week later, they found the crater and the remains of the sheriff. Whatever had rested at the bottom of the crater was gone now. They looked at each other and shrugged. Collecting further samples would be futile.

Holm couldn't be found. The rest of the town shrugged it off, thinking good riddance to bad rubbish.

In time, the property sold to another farm family, though they had little luck with their crops. The corn stalks grew tall, but the corn beneath the husks resembled either a hideous mouth contorted in a scream, or one wide with laughter.

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*, and *Generation X-ed*. He lives in Central Texas.



The

BURY Box

LEE ANDREW FORMAN

Available on Amazon

"The deer's antlers are made from bone, you know?" Jimmy said, snapping photos with his phone.

Priya shuddered and pulled her denim jacket tight around her.

"Let's head over that way, I'll bet there's some cool shit out there." Jimmy pointed past the herd of red deer, predominantly female, though there were two stags with impressive antlers. One of the stags wore deep red scars around its head and walked with a limp.

"Can we not just stick to the trail?" Priya said.

Jimmy glanced along the path and up to the old manor house, a heritage site, and noted the few people wandering about taking photos of the same thing, over and over. They didn't have his eye for distinctive imagery, an eye he knew would secure the social media partnership he was in line for: brand directors crave originality.

Rabbits darted through the brush and squirrels danced across tree branches.

"We'll be fine. Come on, while no one's looking." Jimmy grabbed Priya's hand and pulled her across the grass, passing the tame female deer as they nibbled at the greenery of the garden.

"The males are, like, really big," she said.

"Largest wild animals in the country. The males will fight over the females, so usually where there's one, there's the other. But don't worry, these are used to people." Jimmy always felt like he was reassuring Priya or explaining things to her. He sighed and caught a whiff of dung. The joys of nature.

They passed through a shadowy clutch of firs only to reach a fence upon which a sign was nailed.

DANGER: DO NOT PASS THIS POINT!

"I'll hold your bag, Priya. Come on, up you get," Jimmy said, holding his hand out and raising his eyebrows.

"You're serious?"

"Hell yes. Look, you like the handbag, right? And that denim jacket? How about those Jimmy Choo's I got you? If I get this brand deal, there'll be plenty more where that came from, okay?" Jimmy opened a wide pale palm and nodded at it, to which Priya sighed and placed the handbag.

The fence behind them, they traipsed through long grass, the silhouette of forest off in the distance.

"There's another red deer, by the trees," Priya said, shielding her eyes from the low, gloomy sun.

"Technically, that's a stag. You can see the antlers."

"Whatever. So what exactly are you looking for?"

"I'll know when I find it," Jimmy replied.

Priya rolled her eyes. Jimmy's schtick was wearing thin, and it's not like she was short of offers. Her DMs were a sea of opportunity.

They walked on. The grass swayed like slender dancers and among them a cracked iPhone screen protruded. An older model. Priya glanced across the field, where the stag wandered parallel to them. She could see the antlers now it was closer.

"Hey, let's get a selfie with it in the background," Jimmy said, throwing his hand around Priya's shoulder and smiling. She flicked her hair from her face and posed.

They walked on. Priya tripped over something hidden in the grass and landed in a puddle.

"Oh my god, disgusting," she said as Jimmy helped her to her feet. "What was that?"

Jimmy kicked the grass aside. A pearlescent deer skull was half-buried in dirt. Beside it, five broken smartphones sat like heirlooms tucked away in a drawer. Jimmy laughed and snapped photos, including a couple of selfies.

"I don't like this, Jimmy. We should head back." Instinctively, Priya glanced to their right; the stag still followed them. It seemed even closer, and it was huge and muscular, much bigger than those nearer the manor house.

"No way, babe, these photos are great. They've got the clothes in with some fresh background, there's gonna be something else cool round here. I think there's a river through the woods up ahead. People love that shit." Jimmy walked on.

Priya brushed off the dirt and followed, nervously eyeing the stag as it stalked parallel to them, edging closer. The forest encircled them like a battlefield, and mist permeated its deeper dark. Priya felt her heart beating harder. There were no other deer here, nor rabbits or squirrels. Nothing at all.

"That ugly bastard is coming in for a close-up," Jimmy shouted, laughing.

As it neared, its scars became clearer, the chips in its antlers more pronounced, and glimmers of blood shone in its neck mane and on its chest.

"Don't get too close, Jimmy, it doesn't look happy to see us," Priya whispered, her eyes locked with the stag's, which were crimson.

The stag roared, and Priya threw her hands to her face and closed her eyes.

The heavy pounding of hooves, the desperate cry of Jimmy, a strange odour of virile musk.

She opened her eyes as the stag threw its head up and gored her boyfriend, its disparate antlers made of bone penetrating his chest and stomach. Jimmy's scream lapsed into a gurgled moan and then silence. The stag lifted Jimmy from the ground and stood tall, mist-covered forest behind them, holding him horizontally. Jimmy's phone fell from his hand.

Priya couldn't find the voice to scream, but backed away slowly, aware the field was wide and open. The stag flung Jimmy's limp body into the high grass, hidden from sight.

She turned to run but stopped. A second deer faced her, a female, doused in blood as if tattooed, red-stained chops curving into a smile.

Heavy hooves pounded behind her.

The gloomy sun faded before her eyes.

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, Scribble, and Dark Recesses Press, among others. He's also published one novel and one short story collection.

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The Overthrow of Charms | *Robert Mayette*

I could have loved her, if only she would've let me leave.

I know when the Storm wants to talk to me; a faint green glow appears around my most insidious tomes when she wants that. It's the same verdant aura that crowns the cliff face at the center of the island, pulsing with a life that seems to say to me, "Come to me, Prospero. Come to me now."

Nimue lured Merlin with that same silent song of light and shadow. But, for them, there was happiness. And I could never be happy with the Storm. Not if it means bidding my daughter Miranda farewell, surrendering her back to the civilized world, alone and wondering why I'm not there to guide her.

The Storm will never stir in me a pain and passion strong enough to make me sacrifice my Art—but I have no choice in answering her call.

I'm not stupid.

I'm near the top of the natural staircase in the cliff face when I see her green swirls, the color of sick and ancient life. I step to the cloud's edge. "You wanted to speak again."

Motes of orange pulse on her eddies when her otherworldly voice sounds. "I see the ship of the men is almost ready. Have you found a way to secure me aboard?"

I shake my head. "We've considered every option. You'd sink us. There's no power on Earth that could contain your torrent."

She's silent at first, but then there's a sound that might be a sigh, or just a stray meaningless gust. "I helped you. I have made all that you've done possible. And now I will leave with you."

I walk to the cliff's edge, and gesture to the rich paradise below us—the vines and their perfect angles, the sea of blackberry plants that smell so sweet even up here. "There's so much beauty and wonder in the world that you have

here." A firefly draws near and lands on my finger when I offer it. "All the spirits dance with you—they dance *for* you. Surely you want nothing of the world of men. It is a place of treachery and disease."

"When do we depart?"

"Storm, be reasonable. This island would die without you. Don't you care about your home? It all hums with life because of you." I turn my hand to guide the firefly toward her, and it takes my cue, lifting from my finger to join in the twinkles of light that surround her clouded, shapeless form. "It all falls in adoration before you." I give her a courtly bow.

"Do you love me, Prospero?"

I couldn't raise my head right away.

It would be ungallant to let her see my scowl, and she'd see it, no matter how accomplished my attempts to hide it.

She knows I don't love her. That maybe I could, but I love my own life more. To be Duke of Milan again. To host parties where powerful families court me for influence. Where I would watch my beloved Miranda take this dullard Ferdinand as her husband and further grow my influence as her belly swells with the cycle of life. To be a grandfather soon, before my tired joints surrender their potency.

I finally lift my gaze to her. She's lovely, in her way. "I love the power you give me. I love how you amplify my books of magic."

Her wisps pulse with eagerness. "We are the same. Your studied magic, my tumults and eddies. We are the same, you and I. The river, and where it runs. One cannot tell one from the other."

It's time for her to hear the truth. "I'm swearing off my magic soon. It's time to go be a father and a ruler again."

There is a long pause before she says, "You love your daughter."

It's odd to hear her say it. It has understanding, resignation, and a tint of grudge within it.

"You are leaving me because of her. For her to have a good life."

"Leave Miranda out of this."

"You would stay? If she asked you to stay?"

"It's not your concern. I'll ask Ariel to come and attend to you. You're becoming lonely and just need to speak to another."

"I have all the attendant I need." A wisp of her touches my ankle.

Of course, I feel nothing of the touch. "I cannot feel for you the way you feel for me."

The wisp recoils. "Because you have another. You have Miranda."

I turn back to the stairs. "I have to go."

"I can batter her from you."

I suddenly want to summon a blast to rip her apart. But, easy, good sir. A jilted woman is a fearsome thing, even without magic. "There are things beyond your power," I call over my shoulder, and I feel a comforting distance at my coldness.

"And I'd do it like this!"

The earth shakes. No, my *mind* shakes, my hands, my tongue. The cerulean sky melts into the viridian forest canopy, dappling, swirling. The sun is a mighty demon prince as I twist and crumple down to the stone ground. The demon prince wields a serrated sword. And it holds a delicate hand that drips with blood as if freshly severed.

And I feel tired and overwhelmed and then, a hope. Because there it is, revealed. Roaring vertigo makes it clear: her magic is not hers; it's mine and hers is a servant to my own. Because my magic reminds me of a spell I last performed years ago when I sheltered a witch from a charlatan priest who would have burned her for the social grace of it. All the rite needed was the hand of some random drunken beggar (I think it was) and she disappeared from the eyes of the church until it was safe.

I look at my own hand through the daze. One just like this—that's the key.

The spell of Transformation. The spell for the perfect disguise. The hand of whom you are to copy is the only magical ingredient required, and then it's done.

Nothing on earth would find my Miranda then. Not until we are safely away. Then I could reverse the magic.

My whole body is sharp-ridden, my vision darkens, as a thought-bolt rushes to discern the perfect dupe in which to shield Miranda from the Storm's angry eyes.

The cliff face is empty and silent when I wake again. I pad down the stone steps and race back home. I prepare.

And then, I invite the dupe in.

"There is yums inside?" says the monster Caliban. His breath smells of ash and skunk cabbage again.

We're in my hovel, the dumb beast and I. When it was an obedient creature that didn't leer at Miranda, I would allow it here, to sit upon its cushions in the corner. It knows our home well. Which is why it approaches so energetically to the new device I've created. The device sits on an iron stand at shoulder height, like a cauldron on its side, inviting a look in though it was shielded with enough shadow magic to make it impossible to see into. It would seize a strong arm placed into its open mechanical mouth. Then it will spread open a hidden chamber to make an immobilized hand ready for the carving knife.

I pat it heartily on its fish-scaled back. "Yes, Caliban. Many yums."

"You not offer yums before."

So, it wasn't pure stupidity. "Because this time is different. I'm leaving you soon. I'm going away and I'm not going to see you again. I want to make amends for the past before I leave. Miranda and I are both leaving soon with the foreign men. And we want things to end well. Justly and well. For all of us."

It looks hungrily at the black open mouth of the device. It wants so much to do it. "And you forgive Caliban?"

"To be angry with you is like being angry with a stick-wielding idiot child for wanting to swat a god."

It nods eagerly, too stupid to realize the insult. "And your daughter, where is she, to say that she forgives me?"

"She's surely taking her final afternoon walk. Now, are you going to eat the yums? Or will I have to offer them all to Ariel?"

"No! I want the yums!"

It plunges forward with one hand, but I reach out and grab its slimy forearm. "Wait!" I nod at the strand of cloth on the table next to us. "You must put on this gag first."

"How do I eat yums with cloth on my mouth?"

"Magic is very tricky. If you reach in while you are able to eat the yums right away, then the yums won't appear. Because they are yums that live in the faerie world. But if you have a gag on, well, then the yums feel safe. They know they won't be eaten, and so they don't hide away in the land of the faeries."

It reaches for the cloth. "I will trick them! Yes, that makes sense! Your magic makes sense!"

"A tremendous wizard you'll perhaps make someday. May I help you put it on?"

"Yes, master! Please!"

In a moment, the creature is tied tightly at the mouth, incapable of saying another audible word.

"And now, if you'll just reach into the box, you'll get your reward."

It goes to put through a hand, but I slap it away.

"Both hands. At the same time. You'll never know if they favor left or right today, those fickle faerie yums. If you put in just your left hand and they are in a 'right' mood, then you will never find the treasure that you richly deserve."

With almost a lunge, Caliban shoves both of its forearms into the mouth of the device.

And I step on the foot pedal release.

Spikes sink into its flesh. It howls, but through the gag it sounds like a whimpering fox.

I reach for the rusted halberd that came with Miranda and I from Milan, the one I used as a rudder for our escape boat. *Hold still, you pathetic creature*, although I don't particularly care if it bleeds out entirely all over my hovel.

Please! Please, no! it tries to say through the gag when he sees me pick up the halberd's shaft.

And, yes, it feels exceptionally good to say just before I thunder the weapon down upon the creature's vulnerable wrists, "Aren't they just *delicious*?"

It screams at the blow and writhes with such rage that it pulls the trap box off of the stand. It stumbles out through the animal hide flap. The flap catches on its horned head and it charges blindly into the underbrush.

All is quiet again. The beautiful quiet.

They're both on the ground, left and right. The left still twitches. I choose the right, and give the left a gentle pushing of my boot toe so that it will be out of sight. I'm not a monster. I don't want pain to come to anyone.

But the spell *must* be perfect. A backup hand can only be useful.

Over on my bookstand sits the grimoire with the Transformation charm. I will make Miranda safe from the Storm, letting her hide in plain sight as the dumb beast. And we will escape from here on the ship.

I am almost through the spell when Miranda charges through the door as if she's seen a great horror.

No, I think.

She must have met up with the Storm and succumbed to its charms. The Storm said it would try to get her to ask me to stay, and I expect Miranda to be compelled to ask me exactly that.

But she blurts, "Father, quickly, we must leave now!"

I drop a cloth over Caliban's right hand and tuck it into the pocket of my robes before she sees. "If it was the monster you saw, there's nothing to fear."

She grabs my arm and pulls me toward the door. "No, there's a new storm forming in the center of the island. We need to board the ship and go immediately!"

Damn.

She'd destroy it all.

We run up the gangplank. I still have Caliban's hand tucked into the folds of my robes. I could still disguise Miranda, if we're pursued.

On the ship's deck, Miranda pats her newly beloved Ferdinand on his chest almost absently as she looks back to beckon me on.

I feel...wanted. Strangely competitive in my daughter's estimation, and with a man half my age. I am young again. Perhaps I was foolish to think I'd lose her. But the fear still in her eyes causes me to take a quick look back at the island's central mountain, which is easy to see here from the lagoon.

I stop. "There isn't any storm brewing in the center of the island."

She moves next to me. "Yes, you're right. Maybe she's planning something more sinister now. Let's go below decks and be out of sight."

So, they *had* met before. "'She?' Who is 'she?'"

Miranda soothes me with ethereal eyes. "I'm not a child who has never seen the world, Father. I know all about her. Let's go."

She takes my hand. A lonely old man can only follow when his daughter takes his hand like this into her own.

We go below deck. She quiets, sits on a straw bed, and thumbs through a book of Ferdinand's, an illustrated copy of *The Decameron*. Her nervousness is in me now. I pace.

Soon, we are under sail.

An hour passes. She seems very happy, laughing like a young girl when Ferdinand comes to visit; it's a delight to see her pleased.

I feel evil holding onto Caliban's hand. While she seems distracted with some story, I tuck it into the top drawer of a bureau in our quarters.

"Oh?" She stands, notes her page, and sets the book down. She steps near. "Yes, that's a good place to store them. Here, put mine with it."

I've no idea what she's talking about.

She reaches into the pockets on her coat. She pulls out a grisly severed hand, beautiful as her own, though paler, and with mangled strips of blood and bone where her arm should be.

She smiles. "Would you like some applause? Would that set you free?" She snatches Caliban's hand from the drawer and claps it together with my Miranda's dead hand in mock appreciation.

She did what I didn't have time to do. She's the Storm! I grab her by the shoulders. "What have you done to Miranda!"

Her mote-filled eyes are like an intimate woman's. "The River. And where it goes. Transformation is my charm, too, Prospero."

And I shake her. *You bitch! I'll make storms like you've never known!*

Her eyes darken and flash like lightning. She scowls and snarls.

Outside, thunder erupts and there are yells from men up on deck.

The ship would not endure. It would not contain her.

I could've loved her, if she'd let me be free.

But some charms can never be overthrown.

About the Author:

Robert Mayette is an author of historical speculative fiction. His short fiction has appeared in journals ESC! Magazine, MiPoesias, Word Riot, The Battered Suitcase, and anthologies My Peculiar Family and Ink Stains.



Julia and Richard strolled arm in arm down the picturesque Riverwalk. The city always seemed to come to life for them when the warm lights of the shops began to reflect on the dark water. The Riverwalk was always so crowded during the day; for them, the night hours were more enjoyable. Julia and Richard stopped and leaned against the railing. They watched the small gondolas float down the calm water. The tourists were always easy to pinpoint. The laughter and excitement was palatable and the never ending presence of a camera or cell phone was a dead giveaway. The pair continued down the Riverwalk, looking into windows and people watching. Julia had the uncanny ability to notice when somebody felt out of sorts. She was able to infiltrate their mind and senses therefore bringing them to Richard and herself. Richard never possessed that ability. He wasn't envious, just confused why he had to use brute force but Julia only had to smile.

They spotted a young man and woman sitting on a bench. The young woman seemed to be crying. Julia went straight to her. Without saying a word, Julia sat down and brushed the hair away from the woman's face. The woman recoiled but as soon as her eyes met Julia's all of her fears were pushed aside. The man began to protest but Julia looked him in the eyes and he settled. Richard stood behind the man with his hands on his shoulders. He lifted the man to his feet and walked with him to the darkened alley. Julia took the woman by the hand and they followed the two men.

Richard struck first. He grabbed the man by the back of the neck and spun him around. Richard hissed loudly at the man. That broke Julia's mental hold on him. The man tried to scream but Richard sank his razor-sharp fangs into the man's throat. Blood began to pulse and seep out from between Richard's lips. He raised his head and let out a guttural growl, "Blood always tastes sweeter when they are scared. Thank you, my love for releasing him just in time. Your timing is impeccable." Julia smiled. She was a delicate creature and was almost timid in her approach, she lifted the woman's wrist to her lips. She sank her sharp fangs into the woman; still holding onto her mind the woman let out a small sigh as her life drained out. Julia looked at Richard, "I enjoy it better when the blood is calm."

Allan | Kathleen McCluskey

Allan trimmed the beautiful violets along the walkway to his front door. They brought a peaceful tranquility to his turbulent life. The blooms represented a momentary calm as the beautiful flowers developed. Allan was a man that was constantly on the edge, ready to explode. His stress levels were palatable even to strangers.

As the flowers grew so did his seething rage for his neighbor. The woman was young and carefree, two traits that Allan despised. He would obsessively watch her through his living room window. Even when she wasn't visible he would still watch her house. In a trance like state, he would mindlessly pick at the palm of his hand as he glared through the sheers. Allan was beginning to lose his grip on his sanity as thoughts of murdering her ran through his head.

The gorgeous flowers played in the summer breeze; they seemed almost magical in their serenity. Allan sat in his garden with his back against the house in the dirt. He was surrounded by the fragrant blossoms and tried to breathe in some of their tranquility. He lowered his head and sighed loudly. He thought to himself, *Today is the day, I will rid myself of that bitch*. He stood and shook the dirt off of his pants. In a catatonic stupor he opened the door to his home. He went straight to his bedroom and opened the top dresser drawer. He pulled out his old Colt 45 and tucked it into the waistband of his jeans.

Allan walked across the street; he could hear music coming from the backyard. He strained to see, through the slats in her tall wooden fence, if there was any movement in the yard. He backed away from the fence when the large door began to open. A soft voice spoke to him, "Hello, Allan. I was hoping you would eventually tire of watching me and come over. My flowers have been singing my siren's song for over a year. You finally heard it and decided to venture over." Allan only stood there looking at her. "I see I have confused you." She shook her head, "I have been beckoning you. Your anxiety and hatred made you irresistible to my sisters and I." She swung the door all the way open. "See? My beautiful ladies do love to snack on meat that has marinated in your particular style of malice." They pulled Allan into the yard. The large door slammed shut behind him. The stunning sirens changed into hideous beasts and attacked.

The neighborhood would never miss Allan. They assumed he had just moved away. "Good riddance to bad rubbish" one neighbor commented. The sirens waited for the house to be occupied again. They knew that their beautiful purple flowers were a beacon for the tormented.

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.

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London, December 24th, 1919

The distinguished Professor Lord's return to the British Isles was nothing less than a woeful one, as he mourned the devastating loss of his young wife, Isabel. She was a kind-hearted girl who gave every second of her spare time to the sick and dying as a volunteer nurse during the flu epidemic. Alas, wealth and security were no protection from nature's cruel hand as she soon became one of the sick and dying herself, the final victim of her own kindness.

On his travels deep in the jungles of central Africa he often thought of her love for the world of technology. In particular, the invention of the telephone. So much so that he could not resist the opportunity to surprise her with a brand-new candlestick telephone made of elephant ivory. It seemed only fitting that it be buried with her, along with a photograph of her mother and the Holy Bible.

Beneath three weights, a face and a moon dial, 3am had ticked on by as the pendulum of the grandfather clock that towered in the far corner swung to and fro. Opposite this, the locked door to Professor Lord's study. The man himself sat wide awake at a large mahogany desk, undisturbed by the howling winds of the cruel winter outside. A lit cigar hung loosely from his lips as he held a near-empty glass of whiskey in his hand, common vices that did very little to dull the absence of his dear wife.

He gazed at her picture in the silver frame she had made for him as it sat inches away from his typewriter. With his earnings from the university no less, but that did not spoil the sweetness of the gesture.

His eyes wandered down to the cigar protruding from his lips. In a moment of weakness, he wished he had the gall to use its fiery tip to burn her image out of existence. Just a second without a reminder of her passing would surely soothe the ache in his soul. Instead he stubbed the thing out in the marble ashtray sitting inside the open desk drawer.

Slamming it shut, he raised a glance. He froze.

In place of his wife's picture was a telephone. But not just any old telephone. It was a candlestick telephone, made of ivory.

Her name escaped his trembling lips.

He cried out as the telephone rang. The wooden floorboards screamed under the legs of his chair as he kicked himself away from the desk.

The professor tried his best to ignore it and yet on the ringing went. He made a feeble attempt to throw his unfinished glass of whiskey at the cursed contraption. Somehow the stiff drink slipped from his grasp, shattering somewhere over his shoulder.

Answering itself, the handset toppled from its hold and rolled until it clinked against his typewriter. The connection brought the machine to life.

She knows what you did, it typed.

He whimpered as he spoke her name again.

She knows what you took...

...and she is angry!!!

"Who is this?" Professor Lord knocked the telephone onto its side with his wrist as he erupted to his feet. "What is this? Some sort of juvenile hoax?"

He stopped as he realized that his wife's picture had not vanished. It was sitting at the foot of the great grandfather clock.

"Oh, Isabel, is it you?" Taking up the telephone in one hand, the professor stumbled across his study.

Folded over, his other hand reached out for the silver picture frame. But as he slowly rose from retrieving it, the pendulum of the clock caught his eye. A ghostly limb swung in perfect time with it as it was reflected upon its surface.

"She knows what you took..." a woman's voice rasped from the telephone. "...and she is angry!"

Lord froze.

The swinging appendage was a trunk.

The professor's desk splintered apart beneath the weight of the magnificent creature. Shuddering violently, he turned to the furious grunts of the mother elephant. Dark blood streamed down from where two beautiful tusks should have been.

Professor Lord screamed as she charged, sounding her ear-splitting trumpet.

Her might crushed his body into that of the grandfather clock, encasing his corpse within it like an upstanding coffin.

He was found the next morning by his staff, his body pulverized inwards, still holding the picture of his wife and the candlestick telephone, made of ivory.

The very next day, at the will of his beloved, their empty home became a shelter for the sick and dying for the very first time that winter.

About the Author:

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

Instagram link: [@l. Stephenson](#)

The Christmas Guest | *Gabriella Balcom*

"You really go all-out for the holidays, don't you?" Hank studied his hosts' décor. A spectacular, festively decorated tree and brightly wrapped gifts dominated the living room, along with lifelike models of Santa and reindeer. Christmas music played, and wreaths, holly, mistletoe, and other seasonal items were everywhere.

"Christmas is important to us," Wendell replied, exchanging glances with his wife, Gloria.

"We throw a feast for our relatives each year," she said.

Hank followed them into the dining room, his eyes widening. "Wow! That's a *lot* of food." A vast assortment of meats, casseroles, vegetables, breads, and desserts covered the huge table. Licking his lips, he seated himself without looking at the other guests.

"What's that for?" he asked when Gloria placed an empty serving tray across from him. "Another main course?"

A faint snarl from the right was his only answer, and he glanced that way, gaping.

Three seats away, a man shimmered, eyes glowing red. Dark fur sprouted from his skin, jagged teeth from his mouth, and pointed ears grew atop his head. Within moments, a werewolf sat where the human had been, and other 'people' around the table started morphing, too.

Hank shot to his feet and turned to run, but gasped to see another *thing* standing behind him. It shoved him back into his seat.

Wendell and Gloria—now werewolves, too—grinned, revealing their oversize fangs, and Wendell pointed a paw tipped with long claws at Hank.

He was still screaming when creatures began ripping him apart. As they tossed his body parts onto the empty tray, droplets of blood and bits of flesh flew everywhere.

"I always love coming here for Christmas," a werewolf growled before grabbing a bloody hand and biting into it.

About the Author:

Gabriella Balcom writes fantasy, sci-fi, horror, romance, literary fiction, and more. She loves forests, mountains, and back roads, has had 307 works accepted for publication, and was nominated for the Washington Science Fiction Association's Small Press Award. Gabriella's books, *On the Wings of Ideas* and *Worth Waiting For*, resulted from her winning publishing contracts. Her novella, *The Return*, is also out; three others pend publication.

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We only meant to share our love.

The bricks were the first step. We shaped them out of the unfamiliar clay we found in nameless riverbeds, drying them on shores we had barely begun to see as our own. The fire came next, which was familiar: fire is the same wherever you form it, and thank the Lord for that. In short order, the walls of the ziggurat came as if exploding from the earth. Each man and woman among us cheered with every moment of success, no matter how insignificant it may have seemed from the outside. There was great cause for celebration: we had come so far, drawn by the words of the Lord. And now the only thing left to do was bring ourselves closer to His kingdom. We hoped that the spires of this monument would serve to stroke the face of our creator.

Soon, the ziggurat was complete. The makeshift tents that surrounded it had long ago given way to the more permanent foundations and walls of our homes. Places that protected families and their children: younglings who would only ever know this strange land as their home. The same children who would name the rivers and mountains that carved the horizons. After the final brick was laid in the ziggurat, it was immediately decided that we had not yet paid appropriate tribute to the Lord. Many had died during the structure's creation, and though we hadn't built it for them, it was impossible not to be inspired by their sacrifice. The sky was right there, waiting to be broken.

We could get closer.

We laughed amongst ourselves and found new sites of clay, rolling our sleeves up to the elbow and telling each other grand tales of the old world we had left behind for a glimpse at the face of God. The tower began at the apex of the ziggurat, stretching over years, then generations: a hand grasping at the heavens. By this time, our building and gathering methods had advanced in leaps and bounds, and the tower exploded upward in a shocking display of architectural fervor.

We only meant to share our love. But in the wrong eyes, affection can look very similar to aggression. The Lord meant to remind us of that.

By the time that the tower made its first incision into the clouds, we had a city that surrounded it. Trade routes and schools and palaces flourished. The smell of cooking fires was replaced with kitchens and cafes. The whispers of personal trade gave way to the resplendent roar of the marketplace. The Lord had rewarded us with a cornucopia of fertility and wealth.

It was strange to see the tower disappear behind the cloud cover high above our homes and temples. At first we didn't even notice that the builders who worked their way into the spire's highest points had not returned in many days. And if we did notice, we told ourselves that new complications had come about that required extensive planning and effort. The tower was surely in its final moments of construction.

Wasn't it?

We had worked for so long and with such unbridled zeal that we had begun to forget what the final goal actually was. But even as days and weeks and months passed without word from the builders of the tower, we assured ourselves that all was well. That we would be happily gazing upon the smile of the Lord very soon.

The first drop of rain came in the morning, when the world was only just stirring. The fat, clumsy drop splattered against the domed roof of the temple closest to the ziggurat, shattering into a fine mist the color of rubies. It was followed closely by a rust-colored downpour that painted the city with the color of violence.

We didn't see the first builder drop from the tower, but he was impossible to miss when he cried out. He laid against the hard stones of the ziggurat bellowing in pain and rage and grief, even as passersby stooped to help him. He howled as they attempted to lift him before settling him back down again when they noticed splinters of bone and gristle shearing through the meat of his arms, legs, and chest. He desperately sought out the attention of those around him, his voice garbled with nonsense. He screamed out again, and those closest swore that they could see the red flesh of his tongue stretching in every direction until it split. He spoke pleadingly in a nightmarish bark while gesturing with broken fingers toward the unseen pinnacle of the tower.

"YHWH!" he shrieked. "YHWH!"

The cry continued like steel against a looking glass until someone in desperation dashed the builder's head apart with a sledge, smearing his ouroboros of words into a burbling stain against the brick.

By this time, the storm of blood had increased in ferocity, and more builders fell with it. Some survived the fall long enough to gargle meaningless nothings into our ears. We were left disturbed and terrified by their broken janglings, and many more fell beneath hammers and axes, even as they attempted to make themselves understood. Their executions matched the hideousness of their words, and the secrets hidden somewhere behind them. Other builders died instantly as they crashed into the chiseled stone of the tower's walls or splattered into the hard, packed earth of the city below. Even in our panic we silently praised these merciful deaths: the falling angels who had spared us the screeching hum of more pitiful blasphemies.

Some remembered the names of those who fell, and perhaps they even wept to see them brought so low. But no one allowed themselves to be seen mourning the dead: already a fear of contagion had begun in our minds. The mother of

one of the builders found her broken child in a puddle of viscera on the stone steps that climbed the ziggurat. She pushed his gore-slicked hair away from his face tenderly before standing and turning her back on his shattered frame, calling out for him to the strangers that surrounded her.

"Has anyone seen my boy?" she demanded, leaving the body behind.

Above us, the tower shifted.

The endless layers of fired brick, now accentuated in striated marble and precious gold, rocked somewhere above the cloud cover. For generations, some would claim to have seen the infinitely gargantuan shadow of a hand sweeping its way through the shape of the tower. In the moments before it fell, the last of the builders could be seen scrambling their way down the sheer face of the brickwork, clinging perilously like spiders.

A face the size of a mountain split the gathered clouds like a newborn from its mother's womb, staring down with the infinite disapproval of the divine. In the short moments that followed, there was no one in the city that didn't believe we now gazed into the face of the Lord. A Lord who had found us wanting in every single way. The builders had done too good of a job. The face's stern frown and penetrating eyes had fooled us, however briefly, and our awe gave way to fear as the sculpted head fell from the heavens like a medallion of hubris, pulling down every brick that we had spent generations molding and firing and stacking. The face and the tower obliterated any workers left behind, along with countless others whose only crime had been tending to the dead and dying.

The void against the sky left an open wound that would never scab or scar. And as the shattered powder of our generations-long endeavor settled, we bled in the unseen shadow of our labor's destruction. We wept and wailed and fell asleep and did our best not to meet each other's eyes. In the days that followed, we tried to decide what to do next. When we found that our neighbors could no longer understand us, we tried to muster some level of surprise, but failed. It would be a long time before we could build up enough trust to even turn our backs on each other long enough to walk away. Until that day finally came, we would continue much in the same way: waking up each morning to take in the tower's absence as the bleeding sky soaked the earth with gore.

About the Author:

Phil Keeling is a writer based in Greenville, South Carolina. His work has been published in Cleaver Magazine, Five Out of Ten, Drunk Monkeys, and All Roads Magazine, with upcoming publications in The Pinch, Scare Street's 'Night Terrors' series, and the anthologies 42 Stories, Abominable, and Bad Spirits. He is the co-host of Pixel Lit, a podcast about video game novelizations.

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Congeries | DJ Tyrer

Sign above tent flap says 'Congeries'. Sounds exotic to hicks who cannot resist the lure of the strange, paying a dime to tramp inside.

Within, a vat and, in it, something bubbling. A congeries of blisters, oozing, throbbing. Occasionally, an eye, oddly human, blinks over the rim and boneless limbs reach out, flailing.

Spectators jump back, laughing, shrieking, delighted.

Then, when night falls, that congeries of throbbing globes flops out of the vat and crawls through the shadows of the carnival and into the nearby town in search of flesh to absorb.

A child vanishes, to the sound of "Tekeli-li"...

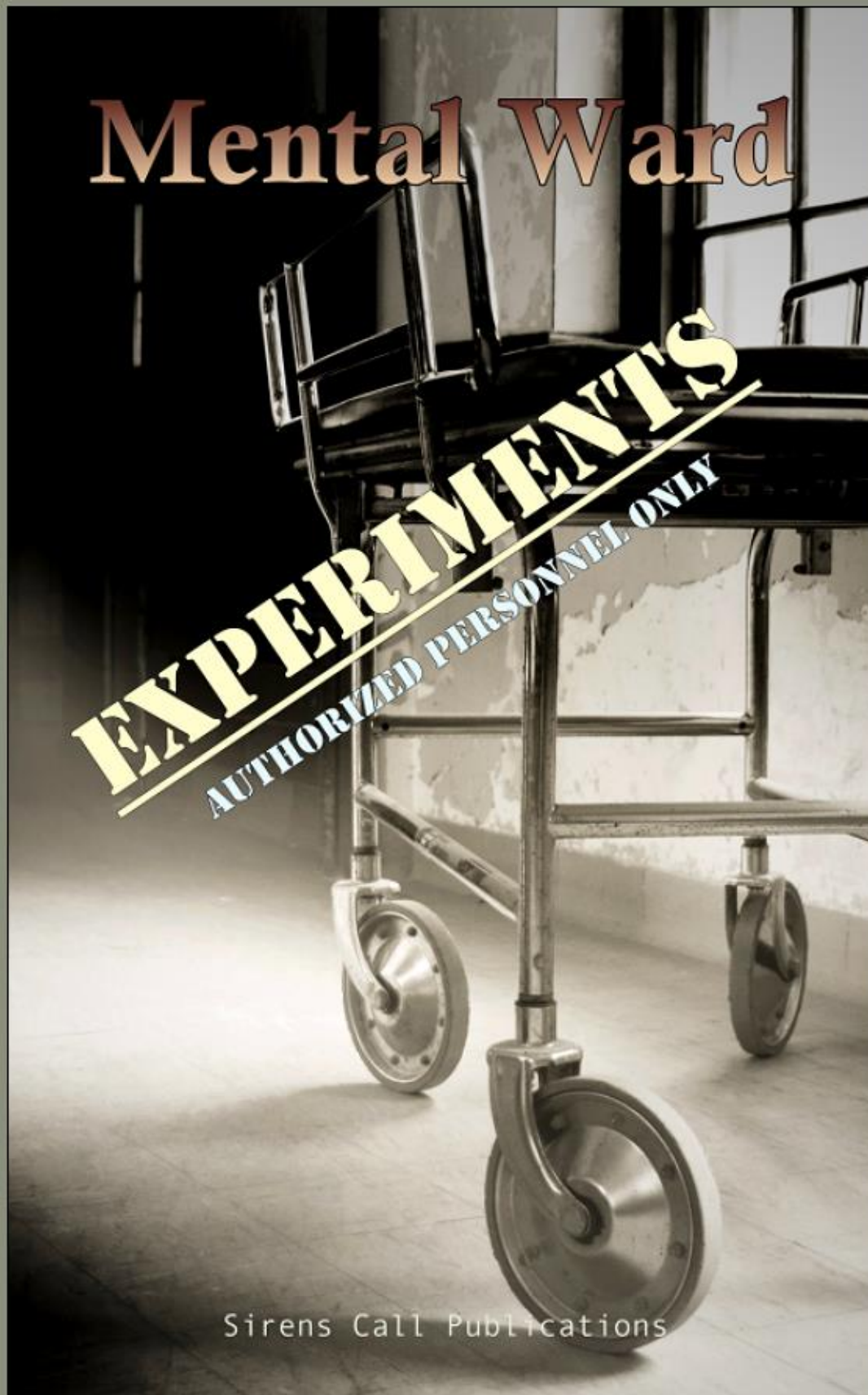
About the Author:

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

Blog: [DJ Tyrer](#)

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Step into a world where sanity is left behind,
and horror is what the doctor ordered!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

"So, we have a deal," the thin tall man smiled. "You will get what you want and I will take what you promise."

Adam was only happy. His fingers were numb and his flesh burned from inside out. He felt thirsty but he was scared of the water below, which was green and putrid. The cave was dark and slippery. Bats hung from cracks above-head. He was holding on to a crevice that got hotter every minute. He did not wish to live that way longer.

"Anything," Adam begged.

The next day, Adam's colleagues saw him finish up his paperwork an hour early and then ask for extra assignments.

At night, the office burned down. The boss was dead. Adam got a raise.

In a year, Adam was driving a Porsche and he was living in a villa.

"Luck!" he would say.

One boss had a heart attack. A dead rich woman turned out to be his long-lost aunt. Only he knew how to cut the right wire to neutralize a bomb placed in the board room. No one blamed him. The man who had put the bomb confessed, "I wanted to save the world."

Then one night, Adam's stock prices soared to four hundred percent of the base value and he sold them off.

When Adam turned seventy, his fifth wife was twenty-five.

"Gold digger," people whispered. Adam ignored them.

"Are you having an affair, honey?" Adam joked.

"I love you more than anything else in the world," Lisa asserted.

She felt sorry though. He saw that in her eyes. His body had betrayed him. The doctor gave him six months: "We still don't have the technology. Maybe in several years. Would you consider making a donation?"

At night, Lisa was tired and depressed. Her friends tried to hide the damning article, but it peeked out from the drawer. Same old. When she took off her clothes and lay in the tub, the lukewarm water felt good. She poured a glass of wine and turned on a mild jazz. That's when the water started feeling hot. Steam poured out of a nozzle she could not identify. It smelled like lilac. Then it smelled like death.

"I can't get out," Lisa screamed. "Someone, pull me out!"

No one came. The music only got louder.

When Adam finally walked in, her eyes sparkled. "Get me out," she begged.

"We will need a deal," he smiled, standing at the door, letting the heat crawl into her flesh and burn it.

Lisa's face turned pale. Adam looked different. He was taller and leaner and his hair was gone. His tongue was forked.

"Get me out of this hell. Anything," she whispered.

"Here I am," he touched her. She closed her eyes and felt nothing.

The next day, when people buried Adam, Lisa was in black, standing like a woman beaming inside.

"Whore," someone whispered from the back. She did not care. A new cycle had begun—a new life to think of.

About the Author:

Fariel Shafee has degrees in science but enjoys writing and art. She has recently published in *Deracine Magazine*, *Chamber Magazine*, and several anthologies. Her portfolio and publication list can be seen on her website.

Website: [Fariel Shafee](#)



The small, ill-clad man extended his nicotine-stained hand to Peter Farrell and placed a dog-eared photograph in his hand.

"Thanks, Noah," said the dapper outreach worker, who was dressed in long, black stovepipe pants, a pink linen shirt, and a black velvet bow tie. Illuminating the photograph with a flashlight, he examined the image of a wasted drug addict with the twisted face of a lost soul. Switching off the light, he cast his eyes over the twilight homeless encampment squatting on the periphery of the Walmart parking lot.

"I know Billy Gunn was your best friend," he said quietly. "Plus, he and the other three missing men who lived here were clients of mine, so I'd appreciate your cooperation. Please tell me about the last time you saw him."

"Billy woke me up in the middle of the night and introduced me to his new ladyfriend, Betty," croaked Noah. "She was a real honey: a short, shapely redhead, sweet-looking, dressed to the nines. Believe me, she was worth wakin' up to see." Noah spat on the ground and grumbled to himself. "For the life of me, though, I can't figure what a classy dame like her ever saw in poor Billy, him being a hardcore addict and all."

"Is there anything else you can tell me about this Betty?" urged Peter. "Anything at all that might help in my investigation?"

"Well," continued the little homeless man, "she had these weird fingernails. You know, the press-on kind; only they was long and pointed, bright yellow with little laughing skulls on 'em."

"I see," whispered Peter. "I hope you don't mind if I hold onto this photograph a little while longer."

"Shore 'nuff," said Noah, withdrawing into his tent.

Peter pulled out the photographs of the missing men as he walked across the shadowy parking lot to his vehicle. Frowning, he paused to examine them with the light: Ralph McGivern with his crude, pockmarked face and long hair; Alfred Peterson, the red-faced alcoholic with large flappy lips, one cheek marred by a scar; and Todd Hammer, who resembled a large bulldog with bulging, fierce eyes. Every one of them had wandered off in the middle of the night with a beautiful, wealthy woman hanging on their arm, as had Billy Gunn. The women were all different: an Asian beauty, a robust Amazon, an Ivy Leaguer, and a short redhead. But they had one thing in common. They all wore long, pointed press on-nails, bright yellow, with little laughing skulls on them.

Flicking off the light, Peter let his eyes adjust to the darkness. Close by, up the wooded hill abutting the parking lot, he saw house lights. *There are people living close to the parking lot*, he thought. *Up on the top of that hill.* "And there's a trailhead," he said aloud, noticing a small opening in the woods near his vehicle. "No one saw any of the women drive off with my clients. Maybe they went up there."

Peter entered the trailhead and headed up the hill, using his light to find his way around the occasional branch or tree root. The trail came to an abrupt end at the top of the hill, right next to an odd-shaped mobile home enclosed by a screen of cedar trees. A gravel driveway wound out of the cedars all the way through a sprawling trailer park to a tall neon sign emblazoned with the words *Soft Shoulders Trailer Park*.

Peter stopped dead in his tracks and stared at the mobile home in the cedars. The peculiar structure, shaped like a sausage with one end cut off at a sharp angle, had something faintly familiar about it that disturbed him. The oval door on the sharp end resembled a screaming mouth, and the two round windows above it looked like eyes wide open with terror. "Sort of like the panic-stricken face in *The Scream*..." he muttered. The Edvard Munch painting had always fascinated and horrified him simultaneously.

A tall blond woman stepped out of the mouth and waved for Peter to approach. Her hourglass figure was cloaked in an amethyst-coloured satin dress. Long tresses, which draped down over her shoulders, partially covered her dark, almond-shaped eyes.

"Not too many people use the trail," said the woman in a soft, melodious voice. "Are you lost? Can I help you?"

"Maybe," said Peter, awestruck by the woman's singular beauty. "I'm a city outreach worker. My name is Peter Farrell. I'm looking for several men who disappeared with the following women: an Asian model, a short redhead, an Ivy League type, and a big girl with a tall, athletic figure."

"Hmm..." she hummed thoughtfully. "Those girls sound familiar. Maybe I've seen them. But it's too buggy out here to talk. Come inside a minute, where we can talk without being pestered."

Peter entered the well-lit home through the tall oval door.

"My name is Jezebel Fairbanks," said the woman, smiling and pointing to a couch. "Sit down and help yourself to a drink while I take a minute to fix my face."

Jezebel disappeared into one of the adjoining rooms. Peter looked about and was startled by the sight of four large, unusual-looking Toby mugs, sitting on a shelf staring down at him. *Never seen mugs like those before*, he thought. "Hmm... a red-faced man with a long scar; a bulldog-like man; a wasted-looking fellow with a twisted face; and a crude-looking individual with horrible skin and long hair. How strange..."

The air in the trailer suddenly felt hot and oppressive. Drops of sweat dripped from his face. Taking hold of the bottle and glass on the coffee table, he poured himself a drink and downed it. A moment later, Peter's head began to spin. Falling back against the couch, he struggled for breath. His eyelids drooped heavily. *She spiked my drink!* he wailed inwardly, as his consciousness faded.

Peter's eyelids flickered and opened. The room echoed with the sound of men's voices—frightened voices. But the room was empty except for the Toby mugs sitting on the shelf, staring down at him.

"He's as good as dead," rasped a thick voice.

Peter stared with disbelief at the Toby mug with the distinctive scar on its face: the face of Alfred Peterson, one of the missing homeless men.

"Not yet!" shouted the porcelain head with the bulldog face next to it, the spitting image of Todd Hammer. "The witch's brew he drank put him under, but he's comin' back now. And he's gained the witch's vision. He can see and hear us..."

Peter opened his mouth to cry out at the maddening vision of talking heads, heads he was familiar with, but the brew that had given him the vision of the heads had stolen his voice, and he was unable to utter a word.

"He was fooled by Jezebel and her shape-shifting powers, just like we were," groaned the long-haired, crude china image of Ralph McGivern. "Pete! She has the power to look like your image of the ideal woman, the kind of woman every man wants and desires. Tall, short, fat, it don't matter. She can be what any man wants her to be!"

"It's almost the Witching Hour!" shouted Alfred, his lips flapping frantically. "She'll come outta her room in a minute! One fateful embrace, one little scratch of her nails, and the elixir will be in his blood. Then he'll be under her power forever."

"He'll be as helpless as a lamb," interjected the horror-stricken head of Todd Hammer. "And he'll walk smiling to her cauldron, where he'll be vaporized and stored in a Toby mug! He'll end up another mug in her collection of horrors. Just like us."

"No he won't!" interjected the fourth mug, bearing Billy Gunn's twisted, suffering face. "Not if we help him. Peter is our outreach worker. He came here to help us. He's a good guy. We have to lend him a hand!"

"How?" asked Hammer, his eyes bulging from his head. "We're helpless."

"No we're not," said Gunn. "We can urge him, *beg* him to flee."

"Get up, Peter! Hurry! It's almost midnight!" the four heads shouted in unison.

Peter turned his head and gazed blurry-eyed at the small bedroom where Jezebel was sitting, smiling before a large mirror, using a brush of skunk fur to coat the laughing skulls on her yellow fingernails with a hot, frothy liquid. Frantically grasping the edge of the couch with his soft, banana-like fingers, he pulled himself to his feet.

"Too late! It's twelve o'clock high! The Witching Hour!" screamed the heads. "Run, Peter! Run!"

"You'll pay for your interference!" howled Jezebel, standing at the doorway of her bedroom, pointing a finger threateningly at the four Toby mugs.

Peter rose to his feet. Stumbling awkwardly, he headed toward the mobile home's oval door. Tripping over his feet, he fell sideways through its large door screen, landing heavily on the ground outside. Desperately lifting himself up, he dashed toward the trail. Running, walking, falling in the dark, he careened down the hill to the parking lot. Unlocking his vehicle with his remote, he fell into the driver's seat. Exhausted, he dropped his head back against the headrest and fell unconscious.

The world was warm and sunny when Peter woke up in the vehicle. Tears ran down his cheeks. Wiping them away, he thought about the narrow escape he'd had. How could it have happened? No one in his right mind would believe him. Was it just a hallucination induced by a drugged drink? Did the witch in the trailer park even exist?

There was one way to find out.

Peter started his vehicle and drove to the private road that ran up the top of the hill, to the neon sign spelling out the words *Soft Shoulders Trailer Park*. Driving under the sign, he headed through the park to the cedar blind in the back forty, where the unusual mobile home had once stood.

All that remained of its presence were tracks in the dirt, and a small group of city police who knew and trusted the outreach worker.

"What's happening, Sergeant Johns?" asked Peter.

The burly sergeant smiled. Pointing at a small, balding man standing in their midst, he said, "The owner of the park here called us about a tenant who rented this private spot by the trailhead. The deposit she'd paid him was missing from his unopened safe this morning. When he came out to talk to her, he found the mobile home and the woman missing too."

"She was a meek-looking little woman," cried the owner to the group of officers. "With glasses and a crooked nose."

Peter got out of his vehicle and walked to the spot where the mobile home had been parked, and stared, horrified, at the remains of four smashed Toby mugs.

"She *did* get even with them for helping me," he whispered, shivering at the sight. "The poor souls. How many others will there be?"

About the Author:

Thomas Koperwas is a retired teacher living in Windsor, Ontario, Canada who writes short stories of horror, crime, fantasy, and science fiction. His work has appeared, or is forthcoming in: *Anotherrealm*; *Jakob's Horror Box*; *Literally Stories*; *The Literary Hatchet*; *Literary Veganism*; *Bombfire*; *Pulp Modern Flash*; *Savage Planets*; *Dark Fire Fiction*; *The Sirens Call*; *Blood Moon Rising Magazine*; *Corner Bar Magazine*; *Free Bundle Magazine*; *The Chamber Magazine*, *Yellow Mama Webzine*.

Her Only Choice | Shannon Acrey

The young woman, dressed in ragged threadbare clothes, stands near the interior mouth of the cave. She watches the soft and beautiful snowflakes drift lazily down to the ground, which is completely covered in a thick blanket of snow. She shivers and moves back within the chamber to the small fire she had started. Her long, bony frozen fingers reach for the meager flames, and the aching pain in her empty stomach again threatens to make her faint.

She couldn't do it. She couldn't. But her gaze travels longingly to the body sitting up against the far wall. Her sister. Passed away from hunger three days ago. Her lifeless blue eyes stare out unseeing across the distance of the cave. The young woman shivers again and tries to stop her thoughts from going there. *She couldn't.* But she was starving, and this was her only source of food she could find.

She couldn't.

She couldn't.

She slips out the knife from her dress pocket. The flames reflect on the silver blade, tainting it with its red fiery light. The light looks like blood, like the gruesome task has already been completed.

She couldn't.

She couldn't.

But she could...

About the Author:

Shannon Acrey, from Indiana, holds a B.S. in Elementary Education and an A.S. in Radiography (X-Ray). Shannon likes stretching her creative skills with writing, beading, photography, and painting with stencils. She enjoys spending time with her husband and two daughters. She will have three upcoming poems published in *Sirens Call Publications*, and also has been published twice with *Wingless Dreamer Publisher*.



It was an early December morning and the stars shimmered bright against the Texas sky. The roads were treated in preparation for the upcoming snow storm, but the cars were few and far between. It was as if the potential threat of bad weather had everyone at home, bunkered down. Rob and his two teenage friends stood on the vacant highway overpass. They were all warmly dressed in winter coats, knitted hats, and pants. A large bucket of rocks sat by their feet. The chilly air nipped at their finger-tips.

"We picked the worst night to do this," Nathaniel sighed.

"Just be patient," Doug said. He was the shortest and stoutest of the two friends as well as the ringleader of the group. His gaze was fixated on the stretch of road ahead of them, as if he could will some sorry sucker to drive through.

Rob was quiet. His hands were shoved in his pockets to hide their nervous trembling. Part of him hoped no one would be out on the road, and that Doug's stupid idea would be forgotten as easily as their assignments before winter break. Doug said it would be a fun prank, but it seemed more dangerous and reckless than anything else. Rob's posture stiffened as a pair of headlights appeared in the distance.

"This is it boys," Doug feverishly rubbed his hands together. "It's time to assume our positions."

Nathaniel grinned as he grabbed the left side of the bucket while Doug grabbed the right. They both grunted as they struggled to lift it over the concrete wall. The closer the vehicle got, the queasier Rob felt. He could try and stop them, sure, but it's not like it would prevent them from trying again on the next passing car. He knew his friends, and once they decided to do something, they wouldn't stop trying until it was done.

"Get over here and help," Doug said.

Rob tried to move, but it was like his boots were glued to the ground. Doug said something on the lines of, "Stop being a pussy," but Rob didn't hear him. He only heard his own heart racing. Nathaniel and Doug managed to sling the bucket over the edge right as the vehicle, a dark-colored pickup truck, had reached the shadow of the overpass. Everything felt like it was happening in slow motion. The truck swerved as the rocks bounced off the hood and smashed through the windshield. It shot across the other lane and collided into the concrete medium. Doug and Nathaniel appeared to be in shock or awe, motionless as smoke erupted from the stationary truck.

"What did you two idiots just do?" Rob asked.

They didn't respond. Rob attempted to take a step towards them, but they were already running in the opposite direction towards the nearby woods. Rob flipped around and high-tailed it after them. Dense brush, and fallen branches snagged at all three of the teenagers as they ran. Rob was heaving, practically choking on the cold air by the time they stopped. It was darker than on the road with the trees blocking the majority of the moonlight.

"Why the fuck did you run?" Rob managed in between breaths.

Nathaniel slumped down with his back against a thick pine tree. Doug was pacing, his hands behind his round head as he walked.

"We need to go check on them," Rob said.

"No way," Nathaniel said, shaking his head. "I'm not going to jail. No college will accept me if there's an arrest on my records."

"What if the person is seriously injured and needs medical attention? Are you so selfish that you'd rather let them die?"

"I'm *not* going to jail," Nathaniel repeated.

"Will you both just shut the hell up for a second so I can think?" Doug shouted.

"You thinking is what got us here in the first place. I'm going to go make sure they're alright," Rob said.

Nathaniel shook his head and buried his face in his hands. Rob only took a few steps before Doug tackled him to the ground. Doug pressed his weight into Rob's stomach and restrained his hands above him.

"You're not going anywhere," Doug said.

"Get off of me."

A pinecone snapped behind them, sending a shiver down Rob's spine. Doug slid off him and stood up, but Rob didn't move. Every fiber in his body told him that he should be running, but he was paralyzed with fear. It was far too early for anyone else to be out in the woods and something in his gut told him it wasn't just an animal. A man limped into view with a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. Several glass shards were protruding from his skin, and his flannel coat was soaked in blood. Rob held his breath as the man lifted the shotgun towards Doug.

"Hey, take it easy man," Doug said. He held his arms in the air defensively and took a few steps backwards.

Without a word, the man pulled the trigger twice. Bullets tore through Doug's chest, spewing flesh and blood into the air. Nathaniel screamed as Doug's lifeless body fell to the ground. The man caressed the shotgun and limped towards Nathaniel. Nathaniel stood up on his shaky legs, but was blocked by a massive tree trunk as he attempted to take a step back.

"Please, sir, don't do this." Urine ran down Nathaniel's leg. "It was an accident, I swear."

A smile formed on the man's cracked lips. "An accident, huh?"

Nathaniel feebly nodded.

"Well, that would be a shame," he said, pausing next to Doug's body. "Considering your friend is already dead and all."

Nathaniel tried to run, but his foot caught one of the tree's massive roots and he fell onto the ground. The man shuffled over and pressed the barrel of the gun into his back. Nathaniel whimpered as tears slid down his cheeks. Rob remained still, unable to bring himself to his feet. It was like he was watching a bad horror film, only the man wasn't holding a prop gun and Doug wasn't pretending to be dead—he was *actually* dead.

"I don't want to die," Nathaniel whispered.

Shots rang out as the man pulled the trigger three times. Nathaniel cried and screamed until his own blood pooled and choked him. It was an awful sequence of sounds, but the silence that followed was worse. The man gripped the shotgun as he scanned his surroundings.

"I know you're there, boy. I can hear you breathing." He spat onto Nathaniel's body.

Rob slowly moved his hand over his mouth as the stranger reloaded his gun. His fingers were clamped down tight enough to lose circulation and his face ached. He wanted to believe the man wouldn't be able to find him, or that he wouldn't think he was guilty by association. While he wasn't the one who dumped the rocks, he didn't stop his friends either. A twig snapped in the distance and the man fired off another two rounds. He paused, as if he was waiting to see if he killed his target, and Rob decided to take his chance. He jumped up and took off running back towards the highway. The man flipped around and pulled the trigger, sending a bullet into Rob's left shoulder. He fell forward, throwing his hands in front of him to break the fall. His shoulder felt like it was on fire, overshadowing the pain from the burs and thorns stuck in his hands.

Before Rob could even attempt to stand, the man was already next to him with the gun aimed at the back of his head. He kicked Rob over so that they were facing one another.

"For a second I almost thought there were only two of you kids. Hell, if you hadn't had ran I might not have found you," the man said, laughing. "You kids have to pay for what you've done."

"Is that what this is? Some sort of fucked up vigilante justice?"

"You better watch your mouth boy."

"Fuck you."

Rob winced as the man pulled the trigger, but nothing happened. The man pulled it twice more, but again, nothing—he was out of shells. Rob grabbed the gun's barrel and thrust it back, nearly knocking the man down. He jumped up and started running again. Adrenaline pumped through his veins, making his strides long and fast despite his wound. The man chased after him as quickly as he could, but Rob was already at the edge of the woods. As soon as his boot touched the pavement of the service road, he was blinded by headlights. He had no time to react. His legs buckled as the Honda smashed into him and pulled him underneath it. He rolled several times before landing in the center of the lane. The vehicle's wheels screamed as it sped away into the night.

Rob's entire body was writhing in pain as he spat blood out onto the road. He slowly rolled himself over to find the man looming over him. His expression was no longer amused, instead it was serious and cold. He bashed the shotgun's handle into Rob's face over and over again until his vision blurred and darkness consumed him.

About the Author:

Kendal Lou Dickson is currently pursuing her MA in Creative Writing at Saint Leo University. She is a multi-genre author with several publications, including two novels and a children's book. She enjoys spending time with her dog and three cats, riding her horses, attending comic cons, and competing in barrel racing competitions.

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"What the hell good is it gonna do us to see this glow anyway?"

Devin had been quiet in back for a while, more restrained than usual, but they had been on the road 90 minutes. Dark countryside had looked the same for miles. An eruption had been inevitable.

From the passenger seat, Keely shot Thalia a slight head tick and eyebrow lift of apology. She'd asked if her boyfriend could tag along even though this was supposed to be a girls night. Not what most would think of in a girl's night with drinks and dancing, but a girls night for them like back in high school. They'd done the whole urban explorer thing then with occasional forays into paranormal activity or high strangeness as Keely liked to call it.

"It's just for the novelty," Keely said. "See something unusual."

"It's not dangerous."

"Tested for radioactivity," Thalia said. "Not to say the rumors of disappearances aren't true."

They hadn't quite fancied themselves investigators. They had just tried to catch unusual sites when they were reported in their vicinity. They'd driven a day to see a weird light show kinda like the Marfa lights once. Another time they'd traipsed around Palmer State Park following a couple of Sasquatch reports, Thalia the skeptical Skully, Keely the Mulder, wanting to believe.

None of those excursions had resulted in them seeing anything out of the ordinary. The lights hadn't really been that impressive. But on each occasion, they'd sipped beers and talked about life and boys and hopes for the future.

Thalia had always worried Keely lacked confidence, but she never expected the future to hold Devin. Life was full of surprises of the non-paranormal kind.

Thalia had taken a job at a drugstore to get some cash coming in while she figured things out after high school while Keely had earned a scholarship and begun college classes with family support behind her.

Devin had locked his sites onto her in a shared class. Or wrapped his tentacles around her as Thalia tended to think of it. He really seemed to have noted Keely's social uncertainty and seized on that.

She seemed dressed to please him tonight. She'd always been the pretty one, blond hair bouncy on her shoulders. Tonight's supplements included a V-neck sweater with a pendant strategically aligned on a thin chain.

"So where are we going again?" Devin asked.

"It's called Porter's Crossing," Keely said softly and almost apologetically to him this time. "Reports say it's like a Will-o'-the-wisp."

"That's what you called it," he said, nodding.

"Sometimes it's called foolish fire," Thalia added.

"Why foolish fire?"

"The old British legends hold it's a misleading light and it lures travelers off their paths to their dooms."

He gave that a snort. "What a crock. Great of you to drag us out here, Thalia."

She made eye contact for a second in the rearview mirror. "Keely saw the reports and called me, thought it would be fun," she said.

"It is just a little bit of adventure," Keely said, again softly.

Devin shook his head. "When are you guys going to give this crap up?"

"Nobody twisted your arm," Thalia said.

"Keely said I should come and learn to get along with her old bestie."

"Fine." Thalia tried concentrating on the road. Her phone rested on the console with the map app open, but she still needed to watch for the turn as the coordinates drew near.

She was on her feet all day and didn't really need a jag like this on a Sunday night, but she'd hoped since the school had a long weekend that she would have a chance to talk over the whole Devin situation with Keely.

He had his hooks in enough that Keely had probably felt obligated to include him. Devin was probably keen enough he had sensed the danger of his bullshit being called while he wasn't around. He'd insisted on staying close the weekend Thalia had driven up to school not long after he and Keely started dating, tagging along for lunch and every activity.

"In one mile, turn onto Dooltown Road," Siri's voice said.

Thalia slowed. She didn't know that he'd hit Keely or done anything abusive, but the manipulation was clear. She'd realized a good while back she and Keely would drift apart, go separate ways, but she didn't want this path for Keels. What if she married the guy?

She pressed the pedal a little more and sent the car roaring along the bumpy side road. Farm equipment and trucks had battered the asphalt, making the ride bumpy now, but she was ready to get to the site, take it in and get this over with.

Keely and Devin could sleep in tomorrow. She had to be at a counter. She took them through a couple of curves and sped up again.

"There gonna be a lot of people?"

"A lot of people have probably already come and gone," Thalia said.

"Any experts weighed in?"

"What they always say," Thalia said. "Swamp gas. Seems like that's where the foxfire name would come from, but I think it morphed from foolish fire."

"I see it," Keely said, getting animated for the first time. She was pointing at a spot through a stand of trees a short distance ahead. Thalia looked at her phone. They were just shy of the intersection of another farm road, about where the glowing spot was supposed to be.

No other cars were in sight. Maybe they would have a private viewing.

Cold air hit them as soon as they opened the doors. They stared then toward the faint blue glow, something like a piece of a corona in the shadows.

"So a lost soul is the other possibility?" Devin asked.

"If you wanna go the oooh eee oooh mystical route," Thalia replied.

They worked their way toward what had become a trail trampled by all the visitors. Thalia took the lead. She'd been on enough of these outings that she didn't really fear the light.

"I have to admit, I'm the one who's been more open to mystical notions," Keely said.

Devin snorted again. Thalia would probably pay for that.

It was more than Keely usually said in Devin's presence.

"Right spooks and trapped souls."

"Or demons," she said. "Maybe there's a scientific explanation for demons just like other phenomena that have been explained, though. We just don't know it yet."

Devin's snort was louder this time.

"Why do so many bits of folklore associate crossroads and deals with the devil? Do those form some nexus or conduit?"

Thalia frowned, considering. Porter's Crossing?

"You make a deal, and the devil always screws you, right?"

"Those make good stories," Keely said. "You get what you wanted, but it's a curse. But there's other lore about Clauneck. He's the one who grants gold, or treasure."

"Riiiiiiight," Devin said.

The semi-orb was larger than Thalia had expected.

Devin actually took a few steps ahead and stared into it.

"Can I get some gold?"

Thalia wrinkled her brow. She and Keely had never agreed on everything, but there was no need for him to make fun of her.

"It doesn't work like that," Keely said. "He has a sigil."

"What?"

"Just a symbol."

She lifted a hand to that pendant at her necklace, rubbing the raised ridges between thumb and forefinger.

Devin was bending forward, hands on his knees, looking into the glow.

"He had to be given something to show respect too," Keely said. "He was all about the respect. Treasure might not be gold. Just something you need."

She muttered something Thalia couldn't make out, maybe: "Or need to be rid of."

Then she raised her foot.

"Respect, well, maybe that's offering tribute of some kind."

Keely's foot pressed against Devin's ass and gave him a shove, knocking him off balance. He flailed arms, failed to stabilize and toppled over into the glow.

Thalia's eyes widened as he plunged forward. They opened wider still as claws and tentacles enveloped him. "I'll be damned," she said.

For the first time in a long while, Keely laughed.

"Not you," Keely said, hugging her. "Not you."

About the Author:

Sidney Williams lives in Virginia with his wife and his cat, Zoë Moonshadow. He is the author of Si Reardon detective thrillers from Crossroad Press's Gordian Knot imprint. His work also includes traditionally published novels from Pinnacle Books plus Crossroad publications including *Dark Hours* and the Lovecraftian thriller *Disciples of the Serpent*. Sidney's recent short stories include tales in *Quoth the Raven*, *Love Among the Thorns* and the upcoming *Unknown Heroes vs. the Forces of Darkness*.

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Together Forever | *Fariel Shafee*

I followed the wet footprints to the bedroom. There, he was, in a feathery white bathrobe, drying his hair.

"Good morning," he greeted, not bothering to look back.

Good, he did not see my face. I must have turned pale or green. I wanted to run away from the house but my feet felt stuck to the floor.

"I worked all night, and so will rest today," he now looked back and smiled. His face showed signs of exhaustion. His eyes, though, sparkled, as if the nightlong work had yielded miracles. He did not look sad or angry.

I hoped he would want to smash me or turn me into dust. After all, I had done my best to send him to the after-world. But he smiled again like a saint, and saw himself to the bed, pulled the bright floral sheets over his body.

I closed the door behind and went to the kitchen. It was tidy. I had wiped up the floor for hours and I had burned the rags. I had washed the knife too, put it in a plastic bag and then buried it under the oak tree.

The kitchen smelled fresh and the knife was not in the drawer. But in the drawer was a thumb, *a human thumb*. *How could I have forgotten?* I felt nauseous. Did he not have the thumb when he dried his hair?

I buried the thumb under the oak right next to the knife. *Who did I kill?*

"Was it *that* dark?" I mumbled. "Did he psychologically torture me just THAT much?"

I remembered his smirks, his derisive comments about my failures and the provocative flirtations with every woman who came around. "Enough!" I had warned.

He did not listen. But then it was his badness that had attracted me. I wanted to have him as mine just because he was so reckless and because so many others wanted him.

I returned to the living room, and saw unopened envelopes scattered on the side table. *Did I kill the mailman? Why would the mailman come in the evening?*

At night, I felt starved and finally had a cup of Campbell soup. Then I threw up. I had to know who I had murdered.

When I drove into the forest, a full moon was above-head. Even dogs did not come to this portion. It was thick with thorny plants—no flowers or edible fruit.

I expected fresh soil to lie scattered around. But I did not expect that hole. It was deep and empty. "So, I did not kill anyone?"

"You came home, darling?" he looked fresh still, standing on a mound, and his skin glowed. "Remember why you loved me? I hurt you. I was different." Then he elaborated: "I also never die."

I saw a storm brewing and the branches shaking violently. He was smiling still, and his eyes sparkled. "I too want to have you forever. It is mutual."

About the Author:

Fariel Shafee has degrees in science but enjoys writing and art. She has recently published in Deracine Magazine, Chamber Magazine, and several anthologies. Her portfolio and publication list can be seen on her website.

Website: [Fariel Shafee](#)

I may have only been thirteen years old but even I could tell something wasn't right. There was a palpable darkness that hung over Hollow Hall Estate. Taking a deep breath I straightened my back, held my head high but my hazel eyes were downcast as I strolled through the dark wallpapered hallway. With every step I took I caught glimpses of movement out of the corner of my eyes. The only problem with this is I'm the only living breathing thing in the hallway. *What is that?* I almost balked and ran back to my room throwing the lock in place as I slammed the door shut but I had learned running would only gain more attention. I knew the cameras that were trained on the center of the hallway would never catch any of it. *Why can't the camera's see what I see? Why am I always the only one to see what isn't there?*

There were cameras in every room of the house, even my private bathroom. A shudder chased itself down my back. Immediately I straightened back up. *I feel more violated living within the confines of this new home more than I ever had living at St. Joseph's Orphanage. I know I should be grateful to be out of that hell hole but did I leave one hell hole only to enter another one?*

Cameras. Locked doors, strange noises, growls in the middle of the night, windows that never allow a breeze, no telephones. The only radio in the house was under lock and key. It was to keep up on weather conditions only. And most importantly, there wasn't even so much as a television to watch. What was a child supposed to do for entertainment? At least at the orphanage there had been other children to play with.

Grabbing the door handle I finally breathe a sigh of relief as I step outside. Even that was like stepping back in time. The outdoors even though it allowed me a broader sense of space, there was no escape to be had because we were miles upon miles away from any normal civilized society. Even though the sun shined bright I grew colder by the minute. I remained outside as long as daylight allowed but I knew within hours I would have to go back inside that dead, lifeless house they called home.

Home. How I longed to be in such a place but I guess that was just never meant to be. I was an outsider. I was the orphan no one wanted. I was the shoe cast aside. My existence meant nothing. So why am I here? Why were they the ones who wanted me? After all I'm no one special just a child no one wanted. I sat beneath an old gnarled oak pulling my sweater ever closer to me.

"Follow me," whispered a soft voice in my ear.

Fall leaves continue to release their hold on the withering branches of nearby trees. I turned quickly to see who could be there but saw nothing. I don't know if that was more comforting then seeing the shadows that lurked within the house or not.

"Follow me."

There it was again but I had no idea what it was. Frantically, I searched for someone, anyone but no one was there. Slowly, I stood bracing myself against the tree. Its a solid structure that gave me peace of mind.

"Hey now," I shouted as I felt the tug on my arm trying to force me to move but once again no physical being was present.

"Hurry, before it gets too dark," came the soft voice.

I looked around to see if anyone was watching me. No. Did I dare explore beyond the front yard? Would Mrs Hall find out? What would they do if I disobeyed?

"I can't see you. Who are you?" I swallowed around the lump that had formed in my throat. No response, just the urgent tug on my arm guiding me deeper into the recesses of the property. I stopped dead in my tracks as a silvery form took shape in front of me. I held my breath not daring to move an inch. "You're a ghost?"

The image of a young girl nodded affirmatively.

"Who are you?"

"Lilly." She seemed familiar but why?

Before I could say more she grabbed my hand in hers and pulled me along. We came to a small clearing with an old metal fence boxing in what looked like headstones. I kept trying to look back to see if anyone was following but I didn't see anybody else. My legs began to shake. I didn't want to go in there. I hated cemeteries no matter how small or big. They were a home for the dead.

"No!" I shouted trying to get free of this ghost.

"Must see!"

From the looks of it there had been a grave newly dug. The scent of fresh dirt hung heavy in the air. The shovel leaned against the fence. Its tip is crusted with dirt. Who would put a grave all the way out here in the middle of a field? Why was it so small?

"Please!"

My legs moved forward of their own violation. The gate squeaked as I opened it further. There was only one other headstone close to the newly dug grave. Lilly's name was on it. I couldn't make out the dates though they were too faded. But on the one for the newly dug grave made my heart seize in my chest. I swore to God I literally stopped breathing in that moment of pure terror as I read the name on the headstone.

Chelsea

Born 1937 Died 1950

"No!" I screamed at her. Something was wrong. I was terrified. How could this be? I wasn't dead.

"They say curiosity killed the cat. What does that make you?" questioned the one voice I dreaded most in this world. My new stepmother, Mrs. Hall. *How did she sneak up on us without me hearing her?*

I froze in place, too scared to turn and face her. I knew the rule about being allowed outside. I had to remain in view of the front of the house at all times. I wasn't allowed to wander. She grabbed the shovel. Moments later my head was killing me. I looked down and saw blood coating my body. I was being swallowed by an ever growing blackness.

"Damn it, see what you made me do! You made me kill you before I wanted to. Oh well, there is plenty more orphans where you came from." Her laughter faded away to nothingness. She turned her attention now towards Lilly but her ghost had already disappeared as well as the life from my body.

About the Author:

Tiffany Price is a small town writer from Ohio but resides in the beautiful state of Texas with her family. When she isn't writing, taking care of her hoard she spends time with her grandchildren. Her escape is playing Animal Crossing New Horizons. She loves to read and watch movies. The scarier the better.

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Colder | Brian Rosenberger

Jane wished she had worn a sweater. It was noticeably colder. Jane loved this time of year. The lights, the decorations, the Holiday spirit. Great walking weather too. Her walks had made a difference. Jane felt better, her clothes hung a little looser, and she had more energy. The scales were much kinder too.

The Cold made her walk faster.

Turning the corner and headed for home, she felt a sudden pain on her neck, like a bee sting.

Ouch! Another sting. Her hand came away red, smudged with blood.

This time on her cheek.

Her eyes darted, surveying the landscape for the likely prankster. Nothing.

She walked faster, breaking into a run, a dash.

The Cold continued to nip, small tastes, as she ran.

The Cold nipped at her heels, her hair, her back.

It would be a long Winter.

About the Author:

Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, GA and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of *As the Worm Turns* and three poetry collections: *Poems That Go Splat*, *And For My Next Trick...*, and *Scream for Me*.

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The Blood Lights are the last thing you'll see...

The BLOOD LIGHTS

ELAINE PASCALE

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Summer is the best time in any kid's life and I had planned to make sure this summer was no different. Carl, Brandon and I had spent countless hours the last week of school planning every day of our summer. Sports games, paintball, waterparks, amusement parks, everything you could think of for three twelve year old boys.

The three of us all lived within seven small blocks of one another, so that made it much easier to get together every day. Brandon and I had known each other the longest, we had been friends since we were six. Carl moved to the town when we were ten and the three of us had been inseparable ever since.

Our first day would be spent at the batting cages, followed by a large pepperoni pizza, and a sleepover at my place.

"Yo Carl, you ready to hit a homer?" asked Brandon.

"I better if I want to stay on the team," Carl laughs.

"You'll be fine, you got this brother," Brandon assured him.

Brandon was just being kind, Carl was terrible at baseball, but boy, could he outrun anyone. If and when his bat did touch that ball, he flew around that diamond like a lightning bolt, as if something was breathing down his neck. He would even look around the park with this paranoid look on his face after reaching home plate, like running had triggered something primal inside of him.

Our session at the batting cages went well. We did two sessions each and I missed only 5 balls, Brandon missed 7 and Carl, well he just had a good time being with us. We headed back to my place and played some video games in my room until nightfall. That's when Brandon turned to us with his eyes wide and a grin that possessed some devious plan.

"Hey...let's sneak to the park after dark!" he said.

"What would we do?"

"I don't know, just...hang out there. Haven't you ever been at night? It'll be fun, we can just go for a bit, then we can head right home" Brandon insisted.

"I don't think it is even open at night," Carl replied.

"Well, obviously Carl, that's why it will be fun!"

"My parents will find out," I said.

"No, they won't. They never check on us," Brandon insisted.

As much as I hated to admit it, this was true. We were good kids and my parents always just told us goodnight and left us alone after that. They never opened the door to make sure we were sleeping or anything. I didn't know if I wanted to start disobeying their trust this early into summer vacation, but I didn't want to let Brandon down.

"Okay...but only for a bit!" I said.

"Of course, just a bit." Brandon assured us.

As the night wore on, so did our nerves. My parents came in and gave us our usual goodnight speech. We waited by my door for a bit until their light turned off in their room. We tiptoed to the front door and began the walk to the park as swiftly and quietly as we could. Dodging each pair of car headlights and every neighbor's front porch security light as we scurried by. We hunched down and sped along the parked cars in the street. We finally reached the familiar sign that seemed so ominous at night. The fog grazed the tops of our knees as we headed to the playground. The stairs to the top were freezing and wet. We slid along the path to the highest point of the slide and sat together shivering. We pulled our hoods up around our faces and our teeth chattered.

We sat there together and talked about girls, sports, and how to outsmart the school bully we all had an issue with. As the minutes came and went we ran out of fresh things to talk about, which wasn't hard for three boys who talked to each other every day. Brandon was going on about some girl that he swore had a crush on him, providing every bit of evidence for his case when we began to hear something in the distance. It was the low twinkle of an ice cream truck, in between each breath Brandon would take, it grew louder. I ignored it at first, but it was obvious we all heard it. Of course that was a normal noise around this neighborhood, but not this late. Carl grew very uneasy and shifted around peering into the fog, he was the first one to react to the noise. We all locked eyes on the small road by the park and waited. Why on earth would the truck be turned on and out this late? We saw the neon lights sliding along the walls of the houses as it pulled up to the curb. The three of us sat staring at the truck in disbelief. Nobody spoke, all that was heard was our shallow breathing. Carl's body slumped to the floor of the jungle gym and his breath started to grow heavier and heavier. Brandon and I laid against the floor as well in order to dodge the sight of whoever was in the truck.

"He found me," Carl cried.

"What? who? Do you know him?" I asked him.

"Carl, who is it?" Brandon yelled.

The truck interrupted our questions and sped forward towards where we laid hiding from...whoever this was. The headlights of the truck illuminated our hiding spot like criminals trapped in a spotlight. We held as still as we could as if that would help make us invisible, but deep down we knew it was obvious that we weren't fooling him. The truck pulled closer, slowly, easing forward until the brakes screeched to its final halt. We squirmed around, adjusting our heads to be able to see the truck. The eerie music still rang out among the night air. We couldn't see past the lights and into the driver's seat to see the stranger. It sat for what seemed like hours, still, engine purring under the twinkle of the music.

Carl grabbed my leg and muttered "I gotta go now, I'm sorry, he found me". Brandon and I looked at each other confused, but we all wanted to get out of there. The three of us popped up as quickly as we could and jumped down the steps of the jungle gym, darting off into the night. Brandon and I ran to our left and Carl took off to the right. We yelled his name and asked where he was going, but he darted forward fast as he could. We knew we couldn't reach him because every time we even blinked he seemed to be ten feet ahead. We turned to the truck and saw it hit the gas headed straight for us. The distance to my house wasn't far at all, but now that we were being chased by a possible psycho in an ice cream truck, it seemed like we would never reach it. We ran down a bike path that the truck would never fit along and lost him for a bit, we hunched over catching our breath. Our own heartbeat was so fast it drowned out the familiar jingle of the truck and we were broken from our terrified trance when the neon lights met our eyes. We ran towards the riverbed and slid down towards the bottom losing him again, it seemed to work because he turned slowly and sat in the truck watching us run along the canal splashing sewer water all over the place as we ran.

"Sh....should we wait for Carl?" I asked.

"He chased us, not Carl. Carl is probably 3 cities over by now. I'm not going back out, but we can wait in your house, Carl knows where you live."

"Are we in danger? Why did he act so scared of an ice cream man?"

"Maybe they moved all those times because of him?"

"A stalker ice cream man?"

Both our eyes looked back up towards where the ice cream truck was. Brandon and I ran up the riverbed and back to our familiar streets. We let ourselves be seen under each streetlight and each security light this time, hoping someone would help us and let us in if he came back. We were approaching my house now and we stopped again to make sure he wasn't near. We laid in a bush in Mr. Jenkins yard for a bit. There was no noise, no lights, the coast was clear. We flew through the front door, not caring if we woke my parents up. We slammed the door behind us and locked it.

We sat in the kitchen with the lights off and stared out the big front window just waiting. Thirty whole minutes had gone by and no sign of Carl. We looked at each other and accepted the fact that he must have just ran to his own home. I had an idea how to check on him. I debated waking my parents and having them call his parents, but how do I explain something like that?. Then I remembered that the three of us lived close enough that we could talk to each other on walkie talkies. I ran upstairs to channel in and try to get a response. We clicked to our usual station and began talking.

"Carl, Carl come in, over!" I said.

No response.

"Carl, are you there?" Brandon anxiously yelled.

The walkie talkie beeped, but Carl said nothing.

"Carl, please say something!" I pleaded.

Finally he replied to us, but he didn't speak, it was just the muffled noise of the ice cream trucks jingle. He said nothing, we just heard the jingle in the distance. Neither of us could move, we just stared at the walkie talkie dumbfounded. As it would beep in and out, it seemed to grow louder.

"Do you think he is messing with us?" Brandon asked

"Is that something he would do?"

"No, but I want it to be," he admitted.

"He might have known the guy," I replied trying to calm Brandon and mostly myself.

"Yeah...maybe an uncle or something."

Those words were like a home-run. I was done with the walkie talkie and the eerie music that came through every few minutes. We laid down and tried to play it cool, laughing about it all, but our hearts were still pounding. We sat in complete silence, staring up into the ceiling. It was obvious neither of us were going to get any sleep tonight. But we laid there trying anyway. About twenty minutes had passed and we both froze up as we heard that damn jingle again. We slowly sat up and stared at each other in complete horror. We turned towards the window and saw the neon lights approaching. Sure enough, believe it or not, he was coming towards us.

"Maybe Carl is with him."

"Yeah...maybe we can get a cone," I laughed nervously.

"The ice cream creep doesn't know where we live, there is no way."

"Totally, he's just...trying to scare us."

That's when the brakes screeched again and I knew he was stopped right in front of my house. We both stared at the window as the reflective neon lights twinkled along the glass. I slowly sat up and crawled towards the window, Brandon slowly followed. I crept up along the wall and poked my eye to the street down below. Brandon came to the other side and reared his head in the same direction. Sure enough, the truck was in our front yard! The driver slid from the front to the back and adjusted something inside. He walked to the front again and popped out of the open door to the driver's seat and waved at us. He knew we were up there, there was no point in hiding, but we slumped down further from sight trying so hard to be invisible. He grabbed a scooper and showed it to us as if he was trying to show us a magic trick with it. He pointed at it and gave us a thumbs up and grabbed his large middle section in a silent psychotic belly laugh.

The driver walked to the back of the truck and lit up the inside. We could see his freezer being opened and he took something large out. He closed it and cleaned off the surface with a rag. He then grabbed the large mass and thumped it down on the surface. This was no ice cream tub or bucket of sprinkles, it was Carl's lifeless body. The man looked up to us again and played charades with Carl's body. Pretending to cut parts off of him. Sawing at his middle half with his palm, laughing again with that fake belly laugh. He grabbed two large cones and held them up towards us. He leaned into Carl's face and placed the cones over his eyes. He looked up and gave us a thumbs up. We couldn't scream, we couldn't look away, we couldn't run. We just stood there in shock watching this madman freakish silent sideshow.

He pulled a bloody apron down and stared up, waving at us to come down. He showed us two sugar cones as if we would dare go to that truck. He pulled the scooper and put his arms out in front of him. He froze for a few seconds and his smile began to fade. He had a look in his eye that made us both scream internally. He then completely changed his body language and dug the scooper into Carl's eye socket and pulled out his eyeball like it was nothing. He scooped the bloody mass onto the cone and held it up. He dug into the second eyeball and threw it onto the second cone. He shoved the cones up towards us and squeezed them so hard the triangle cones shattered in his palms. He shook his head and looked disgusted at the cones of death.

He began to walk toward the house, looking up again and hurled the cones towards the window, smashing them into pieces and splattering Carl's green eyes against the window. We flinched as the cones made an ungodly noise, but we were unable to turn away. The eyeballs slid along the glass and dropped back down to the front yard. Slowly leaning forward we looked for him below, but as our gaze darted around the yard, we realized he was...gone. The truck was empty, Carl's body still slumped over the counter.

The more our breath slowed, our hearing came back and we heard a light noise in the hall. Behind us the door swung open, he pulled a large hammer from his belt loop and swung it down toward us.

About the Author:

Ashley Cooke is from Long Beach, CA. She is the author of two poetry chapbooks, *Seven Sins* (Between Shadows Press), & *Presence Vision* (Two Key Customs).

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The very sight of the house conjured a feeling of dreadfulness. A venomous malignancy that spread through ones being until its chilling toxicity overwhelmed the senses, forcing away any prolonged gaze. A looming, uninhabited three storied structure of Neo-Victorian architecture discreetly nestled miles from any town or settlement in the densely wooded hillsides of Maine. The dark wood siding, sable slate roofing and boarded widows adding to the ominous aspect of the antiquated and ancestral abode of the two men parked in front of the building's facade.

"I can't believe Mom and Aunt Sophia actually lived in this place." Remarked Warren Burke from the back seat of his brother's car.

"It looks like something from a movie set. Reminds me of the house from Psycho." Alan's wife Lynn added disquietingly from the passenger seat.

"Well, it won't be our concern much longer." Added Alan Burke from the driver's seat. He sighed heavily and pointed to the windshield. "It looks like the realtor is already here."

A red compact car sat parked near the home's decrepit front porch. The porch itself ran the entire front of the house. Vines, long dead and brown, still wrapped about and clung to the aged porch columns and lattice.

"What's her name again?" Asked Warren as he opened the back door and climbed from the car. His actions prompting his older brother and sister-in-law to do the same.

"Sabrina. Sabrina Bower." Replied Alan as he closed the car door and pulled the collar up on his gray pea coat. The October air was gradually growing colder as the day progressed. "Well, I suppose we should go in and get this over with."

The aged pine stair treads groaned opposingly as the three climbed the porch stairs and entered the house through the unlocked front door. A shadowed interior greeted them as the planks nailed across the windows denied any reasonable amount of light to enter. Immediately Alan reached for the light switches near the door. Neither activating the dust coated light bulb in the foyer.

"No electricity." Alan said allowed to no one particular.

"Good thing we didn't schedule this in the evening." Warren added.

A staircase met them at the foyer and ascended to the second floor. A narrow hall ran alongside the stairs and deeper into the house. Warren excused himself and moved down the hall. After a brief pause, Alan and Lynn followed. The hall ended at the kitchen at the back of the house. Warren, though knowing the results, tried the light switches on the wall, regardless.

"Looks like she left her pocketbook." Warren stated, jutting his chin to the outdated dinette set in the corner with its yellowed tabletop, faded plastic seat cushions and dust coated chrome legs. Resting on the table sat a beige leather pocketbook, an attaché case and a flashlight.

"I wonder where she went?" Asked Lynn as she entered the kitchen and noticed the left items on the table.

"She's probably upstairs." Suggested Alan as he looked up to the ceiling. "Sabrina?" He called back down the hall. "Ms. Bower?" The three listened to the awkward silence of the house as no response was answered.

"Come on," Alan took Lynn's hand, "Let's see if she's upstairs. Warren, check down here." And the couple walked from the kitchen.

"Right." Replied Warren unenthusiastically.

Warren stood there alone in the room and listened to their footsteps as they climbed the staircase. Sighing, he strolled over to the table and the abandoned items left upon it. He glanced over his shoulder and scanned the kitchen. "Sabrina?" Besides Alan and Lynn walking above him, not a sound could be heard. Satisfied, he opened the pocketbook and carefully rummaged through its contents. Alan suddenly called out Sabrina's name again from upstairs and the unexpected noise caused him to quickly pull his hand from the bag as if his fingers had wandered into a mousetrap. He exhaled and scanned the room once more.

A rap on a door sounded. He spun around expecting the woman to be standing in the room's threshold, arms folded across her chest as she suspiciously eyed his mischievous probing of her personal item. The kitchen was void of anyone. It was only now that he realized the gloominess of the room. Particles of dust swirled about in the air, made only visible by the rays of light that pierced the wood slats on the window. The rap came again, followed by a hushed voice.

"Warren." The voice called.

"Hello?"

"Warren, come down to the cellar."

He frowned at the unknown voice and its uncertain location. He stepped away from the table to the center of the room. "Who is it?"

"Warren, come down to the cellar." The voice repeated.

This time the direction of the voice, which he deemed to be of a female, came from behind the cellar door at the other end of the kitchen. Cautiously, he moved to the door.

"Warren, come down to the cellar."

He inched closer to the door. The voice, though it spoke quietly, seemed remotely familiar. He stood only a foot from the door now. "Who is it? Hello?" Reaching from the doorknob, he turned it slightly and found it to be unlocked. Slowly, he pushed the door inward. The wood stairs descended a dozen feet before the darkness below engulfed the staircase beyond and the cellar floor below. Instinctively, he tried the light switch on the wall inside, producing nothing more than a soft clicking. "Hello? Sabrina?" He called down the stairs.

"Come down to the cellar." The female voice replied from the blackness and something pale moved at the foot of the stairs.

Straining his eyes as they adjusted to the total lack of light, he felt for the handrail and started to carefully descend the stairs. "Ms. Bower? That you? Why are you down here in the dark?" Unbeknownst to him, as he stepped down into the cellar, the door behind him, with no physical presence, began to slowly close.

"Did you find her down here?" Asked Alan as he walked to the kitchen with his spouse in tow. The room was empty as it was silent. "Warren?"

"Her stuff is still here." Remarked Lynn as she gestured to the table.

"Warren! Sabrina!" Alan shouted. His voice falling dead within the walls of the old house. Before his wife could question the situation, which was beginning to take on an alarming note, Alan pulled a chair from the table. "Stay here. Let me take a look around. Maybe they're outside." His voice failing to produce the confidence he had hoped.

"Where do you think they—" She began as she reluctantly sat down.

"Lynn, relax. Okay? He's probably outside with her getting some papers she forgot in her car. I'll be right back." He turned and walked from the kitchen before she could bombard him with questions which he had no answer to.

He walked in an almost marching fashion down the hall to the front door. What was only supposed to take mere fifteen minutes was now dragging on well beyond that. After his father had passed, his mother's sister Sophia, also a widow, was invited to take up residence in the house. The two sisters provided a desired companionship to one enough while sweeping aside any feelings of isolation and abandonment that would surely manifest in time.

Alan stopped short of the door. His brow furrowed, and he stepped back to observe what he had previously not taken notice of. Etched into the inside face of the front door was a circular image. A ring composed of mini angular shapes and writings which held no meaning to him. Inside the circle was an inverted triangle. Each point connecting to the surrounding circle. He slowly reached out and ran his fingertips over the carved image. He wondered how long and why the symbol existed.

"Alan? Did you find them?" Lynn called from the kitchen.

"No." he called over his shoulder. "I'm going to look outside now." Without further hesitation, he opened the front door and stepped outside.

A chilled, blistering wind greeted him as he stepped out onto the porch. He shuddered and looked up to the clear cloudless sky. Being outside made him realize just how dark the inside of the house was. He sucked in the cool air and felt himself relaxing despite the unexpected length of the visit here. From the porch, he gazed out at both vehicles parked out front. Neither Sabrina nor Warren were in view. He gave himself a few minutes of privacy as he pulled out and lit a cigarette and took in the view of the tall dead grass of the front lawn and the wooded areas beyond. He stood alone, briefly gathering his thoughts and planning out his next course of action if the two were yet to be found. He knew Lynn would hurl a barrage of questions at him when he returned empty-handed. He

exhaled deeply and dropped the half-finished cigarette, crushing it beneath his shoe before he turned back inside the house.

"No one out here. They must be—" his word faded as he entered an empty kitchen. "Lynn?" The chair remained partially drawn away from the table, but with no one in it.

"Are you kidding me?" He blurted out in frustration as he placed his hands upon his hips and turned around in a circular motion in the kitchen, scanning the room impatiently.

A knock came. "Alan."

He stopped, listening intently to the unexpected voice. After a moment it came again. "Alan, come down to the cellar."

He cocked his head and turned to the cellar door. The voice almost sounded like Warren's. He waited.

"Alan, come down to the cellar." The voice requested. It was with no mistake Warren's voice coming from beyond the door.

"Warren?"

A reply did not come. Walking to the cellar door, Alan opened it and pushed it in. "Warren?"

"Come down to the cellar." Warren's voice called back from the pitch black below.

"Why are you in the cellar? We've been looking for you." Alan answered sternly. When no reply sounded, he moved to the kitchen table and retrieved the flashlight next to the pocketbook. Returning to the cellar's threshold, he turned on the light and directed it into the depths beneath the house. "Warren?"

The beam of electric light penetrated the dark and revealed the bottom of the staircase and a small portion of the cement floor below. The silence that surrounded him gave the air itself an almost galvanic sensation. "Warren?" His voice was weak. A sound resembling a scuffing against the dirt of the stone floor sounded. Using the handrail, Alan guided himself down the stairs.

The lower he made his way down the wooden staircase, the more the air about him seemed to become alive. Stepping off the final stair, he paused. "Warren?"

When his brother failed to reply he stepped further into the cellar. It was when his light revealed the pale naked bodies of men and women standing along the cellar walls that he ceased moving. His body froze in a fossilized grip of fear. Despite his paralyzation, he swept the flashlight along the cellar walls, showing the bodies facing him. Their heads bowed to the floor. The sound of the door upstairs closing averted his attention, and he spun about, pointing the light to the closed door at the top of the stairs. His breath seized in his chest. Quickly he turned his light back to the cellar. The bodies were now closer, moved away from the walls and formed a loose circle around him. They remained unmoving, heads still lowered, as if their advancement came only by the absence of light.

With his breath previously being clutched tightly within his chest, it now came in a rapid, almost suffocating succession. Keeping the beam of light on the cadaver-like forms, Alan backed up the stairs. Once his hand fell upon the familiar touch of the handrail, he turned away from the cellar floor and raced up the stairs, stumbling as he ascended.

He stopped abruptly at the closed door. Etched into its face was the same mysterious circular symbol that had been applied to the inside of the front door. His face contorted in an incomprehensible horror. What had taken place in this house that he and his brother had grown up in? What unexplainable events transpired here between sisters? He spun and pointed the light down the stairs. The bare white legs and feet of the bodies were visible at the foot of the stairs. He screamed and pounded at the door, trying its locked knob. The flashlight fell from his hand as he flailed at the closed door. Behind him he could hear footsteps climbing the stairs.

About the Author:

Frederick Pangbourne is a short story horror author with five of his own anthologies in publication. He has numerous stories featured on a variety of magazines and other anthologies. He is a Marine Corps veteran and retired law enforcement officer who lives in Florida where he continues to write and relax.

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John Evers only wanted recognition... How could
he know evil was only a snapshot away?

SNAPSHOTS OF HELL



GREG MCWHORTER

Available on Amazon

"Lester, wake up."

Miranda's voice called him back to the humid reality of the condo, speaking right into his head over the drone of the fan. Lester dragged his hand down his sweat-dampened face and lifted his head, squinting into the darkness.

"What?" Lester croaked.

"I'm hungry," Miranda said

Lester groaned and dropped back against the moist pillow. "Have a squirrel. There should be two left."

"Not anymore," Miranda hissed. *"I'm hungry."*

Lester's brow furrowed and he looked around again. He found her bright eyes hovering above him and the thin wisps of her frame caging his body. "Come closer," he muttered. He lifted his hand as Miranda floated towards him and compared the opaqueness of his flesh to her form. She was barely visible. "Shit," he said. "How is it that bad already?"

Miranda wrapped her fingers around Lester's scarred wrist and tried to pull it to her mouth, but he resisted easily. *"The animals don't do anything,"* she whined.

"We know that's not true," Lester said, sitting up and swinging his legs off the bed. "They just don't do enough." He took a deep breath and stood, pushing through the arthritic pain in his knees. He crossed the room, dark but for the streetlights' glow filtering in through the closed blinds, and turned on the desk lamp sitting on Miranda's old mirrored dresser. He had cleared the top of her belongings and replaced them with a shallow bowl, in which sat a bloodied rag and a pocket knife.

Miranda eagerly tried to seize the knife, lifting it an inch only for it to slip through her ethereal fingers and clatter back against the bowl.

"Stop that," Lester scolded, taking the knife himself. "You're wasting your energy."

"Hurry," Miranda pleaded.

Lester hesitated with the point of the knife against his inner wrist. Five months had passed since Miranda died, yet he was still unused to the knife's bite. The scars were growing heavy. He needed to choose a different location to bleed from, one less obvious. Miranda wrapped her fingers around the knife and pushed it forward in an attempt to cut him. "I said stop it!" Lester snapped. He lifted the knife to his bare chest, shuddering at the knife's cold edge against his skin, and he inhaled sharply as he drew a short, straight line below his collarbone.

Miranda pressed forward and began to lap at the wound. At first, he wasn't sure she was able to drink, much of the blood slipping through her tongue and down his chest into the white, wiry hair. But each sip gave her strength and form, until he could feel the pressure of her against him, could see a woman more than a shimmering mirage. After a few minutes, Lester put his hand on Miranda's shoulder and gently pushed her away.

"That's enough," Lester said quietly, trading the knife for the rag and pressing it to the cut. Miranda was plainly visible now, naked and swaying on her feet, eyes glassy.

"Not enough," Miranda whispered, reaching forward to pull at the rag. She stopped as Lester took one of her hands and kissed it, there being just enough of her there for his lips to connect. A bit of the cloudiness left Miranda's eyes.

"Better?" Lester said with a soft smile.

Miranda nodded distantly. *"Better,"* she repeated.

Lester walked down the hall to the bathroom and dug one of the larger adhesive bandages out of the cupboard. The cut was still bleeding; with a frown, he slipped a test strip into his glucose meter and caught a drop of blood with it, checking the milligrams.

"A hundred and ninety-two?" Lester mumbled to himself with a sigh. "Shit." He looked up and saw Miranda watching him from the doorway. "It's alright," he said, throwing the test strip into the wastebasket. "Remind me to take my medicine in the morning. I might've forgotten my last dose."

Miranda eyed the wastebasket as Lester drank a cup of water. She slipped past him as he left; as he turned to go back into the bedroom, he glanced over his shoulder and saw her crouched over the trash, lifting the test strip to her mouth. He frowned, starting to call out to her, then he shook his head and re-entered the bedroom.

Lester turned off the light and laid back on the bed, not bothering to pull over any sheets or blankets. He watched the ceiling fan circle for a while, crossing his arms over his stomach and beginning to doze. He was pulled back to attention when the bed creaked near his feet.

"Are you going to be alright to watch TV?" Lester mumbled sleepily. There was no response save for the bed creaking again, creeping up the bed until he could feel the slight pressure of Miranda straddling his hips. Lester grimaced and shook his head. "Not tonight, Miranda—"

Lester opened his eyes to see the knife blade catching a beam of streetlamp light coming through the blinds. Miranda panted, nearly sobbing as she lowered the knife toward his throat. "*I'm sorry,*" she whispered. "*I can't take it anymore.*"

Lester slapped the knife out of Miranda's hands, his arm passing through her icy form and making her cry out. He pushed himself up as she clawed at him, one strike tearing the bandage off his chest and another breaking a blood vessel in his nose, the gore running hot and freely. Lester grabbed her shoulders as best as he could manage, her non-flesh squishing under his grip, and held her back as she tried to lap up the fresh blood getting caught in his beard.

"What do you think you're doing?" Lester snarled. "What happens to you if I die? Do we both go? Or will you be trapped here, untethered?" Miranda keened wordlessly and Lester dug his fingers deeper into her shoulders, shoving her back. He glared into her desperate eyes and bared his teeth at the fog in them. "What if it gets worse, Miranda?"

"*I'm so hungry,*" Miranda sobbed. "*It's all I can think about, Lester. Please, let me drink. I'm dying.*"

Lester's shoulders slowly lowered. "You're not dying, my love," he said quietly. "You're already dead."

Miranda sobbed harder, and Lester drew her in, holding her wavering form as blood ran from his nose. She absorbed the blood where it landed on her, and she pressed her hand to the reopened wound on his chest. The more she took in, the more she stabilized, until the blood dried up and she whispered, "*I'm sorry,*" pulling back from him.

Lester watched her shrink away, ashamed, and after a pause he reached down to the floor and grabbed the knife. He took her hand and placed it in her palm, regarding her seriously. "Either put it back on the dresser," he said. "Or kill me now."

Miranda stared back, and then slowly, she rose and crossed to the dresser, setting the knife back in the bowl with the rag. She returned to Lester and leaned down, kissing him on the lips and catching the bloody smear that remained there. "*I love you,*" she said.

"I love you, too," Lester mumbled, wiping the blood around his nose off on the back of his hand and lowering himself tiredly back onto the bed. "Will you stay until I fall asleep?"

Miranda curled up next to Lester and started tracing familiar patterns on his chest, her touch feather-light and cold. Lester crooked his arm around her and aimlessly played with her hair, drawing his fingers through the spider-string strands until his hand grew heavy and dropped to the mattress. Cooled by his phantom, Lester drifted back to sleep, leaving Miranda behind as her eyes grew hungry and she sunk a lengthening nail, slowly, back into the wound.

About the Author:

Annika Johnson is a lifetime hobbyist writer from Northeastern Ohio. While they are an English major, they owe the bulk of their fiction writing experience to online collaborative settings and the fanfiction on which they cut their teeth. Horror is a new genre for them, and they are excited to learn more of its craft. They are working on their first novel, started in 2019.

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The Woman in the Black Dress | *Linda Lee Rice*

She's appeared again for the third night in a row. I don't know why she's here or what she wants. I just know that there's a cold breeze that wafts around my shoulders, and then there she is, staring.

I asked the other guards at the asylum if they had seen her. My co-workers just shook their heads and laughed. They said that I was as loony as some of the long-dead inhabitants.

It's not that there are any live inhabitants anymore. The asylum was emptied and abandoned after the incident. We're here to just guard the property against looters and unsavory characters. It's not a difficult job, just walking around the building inside and checking the grounds outside. But from the first night, there was something just not...right.

The story goes that one of the patients had escaped her straight jacket and proceeded to go on a murder spree. They said that she hacked whoever she could with a butcher knife that she swiped from the kitchen. Then she went to the third floor where the 'medical equipment' was and set it on fire. On damp days you can still smell the smokey aftereffects after all these years.

They said she was beautiful, dark, and mysterious, and her husband had her committed. It was told there wasn't anything wrong with her, she wasn't insane, but she had threatened to leave her husband, in retaliation, he had her locked up. The doctors decided to experiment on her to dampen her willfulness.

She endured it all, the hot and ice-cold tube treatments, electroshock, and even aversion therapy. But she lost it when the doctors decided they were going to shave her head. Her hair was her pride and joy, luxurious waves falling to her hips. Her husband knew this was her vanity and approved of the doctors' plan to humiliate her.

She had secreted a small sliver of metal within her bindings. The orderly came in and brushed her hair out, took scissors, and hacked it off to her shoulders. When she was left unattended while the orderly went to get the razor, she cut her way free.

She wreaked havoc on the orderly upon his return, quickly silencing him. Darted up the stairs, setting fire to the medical equipment and slicing the throat of any attendants. Climbing out onto the turret connected to the asylum roof, she ripped off her wedding band and threw it to the ground.

She screamed into the wind, unintelligible to those who watched in horror from the ground. She spread her arms wide and laughed as she stepped into the open space and fell to the ground.

As I said, she has appeared the last three nights, staring at me with her big dark eyes. She absently mindedly reaches up to stroke hair that is no longer there. Insanity now swirls in her eyes. I see a glint of metal in the darkness that surrounds her as I tell myself this isn't real.

The knife is sharp...

About the Author:

Linda Lee Rice has had published poems, stories, and articles under the name of Linda Lee Rice/Linda Lee Ruzicka. She has always enjoyed the way words can take the reader to another world, time, and place. Linda lives in Central Pa with her husband Bill. They have a cat named Sookie Sue and one named Kit Kat plus a big goofy dog named Chase.

Facebook: [Linda Lee Rice](#)

Strange Palate | *Patrick Winters*

In life, he'd been John London. An award-winning chef and famed judge of *The Big European Cook-Off*. He had a lavish home, expensive cars, and a splendid side piece in Amanda Walsh, who'd gone far as a contestant in the *Cook-Off*, thanks to him.

But that all changed the day Amanda came to his house, sick, afraid, and biting. Now, he was a shambling mess with nothing left, save his discerning taste.

He'd yet to eat anyone that he found satisfactory. Most people's flesh was too bland. Lacking acidity. In need of seasoning.

Perhaps some Italian would hit the spot...

Wednesday at Huang's | *Patrick Winters*

Charlotte had dinner at Huang's every Wednesday evening, without fail. The servers were friendly, their dumplings were spectacular, and she always got a kick out of the fortune cookies that came with each meal.

When she cracked open tonight's treat, a cold feeling settled over her.

"Help... me..." it read.

That cold sensation sunk into her chest. Then it wrapped around her heart, crushing it. She gasped in pain and slipped down to the floor.

"Help... me..." she pleaded, her voice a feeble croak.

By the time a server noticed her, she was dead—a blank fortune in her hand.

Bright and Bold | *Patrick Winters*

Ashley knelt on the sidewalk, playing with her chalk. Maybe if she sketched the bad things she'd been imagining lately, they'd stay on the concrete and leave her head.

She drew her parents, yelling at each other again. Her mommy had a gun in her hand.

She drew old Mrs. Marvin from up the street, lying still on her kitchen floor, flies buzzing around her.

She drew her cousin, imagining him a few years older. He had a needle in his arm and foam in his mouth.

As she started another drawing, a loud bang rang out inside her house.

Black Magic Treehouse | *Patrick Winters*

When Billy got to sleep in his treehouse overnight, he never imagined he'd make a new friend doing so.

Abigail was kinda weird, with her pale skin and old dress, but she seemed nice enough.

She told him that she'd lived on their property years ago, and that she'd been accused of being a nasty witch.

Then people made her swing from the tree they were in as punishment. Billy didn't think that sounded so bad. He said he loved the swings at school.

"Would you like to swing now, like me?" she asked.

He said yes, and Abigail smiled.

This House is Not a Home | *Patrick Winters*

Something had been staring at him from the window of his gingerbread house.

Some tiny, shadowy thing, peeking out now and then from the cookie construction he'd made last week. He'd rush over to it, looking inside for the elusive intruder, only to hear its laughter strike up as he turned his back to the house.

Then, in the night, he'd hear its taunting whispers. Telling him things it shouldn't know. Of wrongs he'd committed. Eventually, he couldn't take it anymore.

He grabbed his revolver and put it to his temple.

As the shot rang out, the gingerbread house collapsed.

About the Author:

Patrick Winters is a graduate of Illinois College in Jacksonville, IL, where he earned a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing. He has been published in the likes of Sanitarium Magazine, Deadman's Tome, Trysts of Fate, and other such titles. A full list of his previous publications may be found at his author's site, if you are so inclined to know.

Author website: [Patrick Winters](#)

Had enough? Kids being little demons? Boss giving you Hell?

Are you just about ready to pack it all in?

We'll leave your life behind and succumb to the charms of Ireland's newest boutique hotel. Overlooking Béaldubh Lough in County Kerry this hidden treasure will steal your heart away.

Nestled in a beautiful glacial valley the name literally means black mouth lake and the colourful folklore of the region has it that at the bottom of this salt-water Lough lies a cave which was once an entrance to the underworld. Stories say that creatures from beyond would use this passageway to enter our world and steal away children, until one mother cried so much for her lost baby that her tears filled up the lake, barring their way forever

There'll be no such sorrow for you though. The water itself stretches down to fathomless depths and offers ample opportunities for exploration and recreation, with paddle boats and canoes available for hire, or even snorkelling if you're feeling particularly brave.

Surrounded by craggy hills the hotel is built on a site originally established by a secretive order of reclusive monks and dates back to 500 AD. Peace and quiet are guaranteed since the entire area is a literal dead zone for technology. With no telephone or internet reception, it will be as if you've disappeared off the very face of the earth.

It's far from bored you'll be though with so much to explore and the entire area is steeped in romance and history... a lot of it blood red.

The original house was constructed during the Munster plantation of the early 1600s, however much of it was destroyed by rebellious tenant farmers during which time the colonists were displaced.

Local legend has it that Isabel, the youngest daughter of the newly appointed landowner had fallen for Donagh, the son of a poor tenant farmer. When Isabel's father discovered their liaison he had the unfortunate lad done away with by sailing him out to the centre of the lake and dropping him over the side. A night of violence followed which saw the landowner's family hung to death in the nearby woods, all except for young Isabel that is. It's said she walked into the dark waters to meet her lover and never returned. On a clear night listen close for it's still possible to hear her lonesome, plaintive song being carried ashore on the gentle waves.

What is now the east wing was converted into a convent and industrial school at the turn of the 1900s. At this time it was used to house a series of neglected, orphaned and abandoned girls who were watched over by the famously strict nuns until a mysterious fire gutted most of the building in the early 1970s. Records from the time are patchy as to what was the cause of the flames but reportedly no bodies were ever found amongst the wreckage.

Shockingly the building remained derelict for decades afterwards until it was purchased by the current owners who have had it loving and exquisitely restored, renovated and extended beyond any of its former glories.

Béaldubh Lough Hotel is now ready to add another chapter to its rich history and has quickly risen through the rankings to stand established as one of the top luxurious getaways in the country. All while retaining the decadent charm of being a secret attraction.

Enjoy a meal in our finest dining rooms, which are stocked entirely from our own gardens and onsite farm, then afterwards find comfort in one of the many nooks and snugs dotted throughout the property or spend your evenings watching the blood red sunsets through the floor to ceiling windows in our comfortable bar. Darkness creeps in quickly over the forests which surround the Lough.

Listen out at midnight as, regardless of if there's a full moon shining on the lake or not, you might catch the haunting, lonely howls of the fabled last wolf which locals say still stalks the wilds, but don't be surprised if you doze off instead and later feel a gentle hand on your shoulder, rousing you softly. It will just be one of our courteous staff leading you to your bed.

Béaldubh Lough Hotel. Come and stay for a weekend and you'll never want to go home.

In fact, you may find it impossible to leave.

About the Author:

Ken McGrath's fiction has appeared in Cirsova Magazine, K Zine, The Society Of Misfit Stories Presents..., Liquid Imagination, Daily Science Fiction and the anthologies, 'The Devil's Hour' (HellBound Publications) and 'Transcendent' (Transmundane Press) among others. He lives with his wife in an upside-down house in Dublin, Ireland.

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392 Days | Christopher Hivner

I saw metallic wings in the sky, watched them move up and down pushing the cold air in circles. They were huge, each longer than a school bus. The body they were connected to bulged like an engorged tick, the slick surface seeming to move in waves.

The machine flew over my neighborhood, rising and descending in the sky, traveling in no particular pattern. The people of the town left their houses to gaze at the silver bird.

"Look," someone shouted. A hundred heads turned in the direction of a young girl pointing a finger to see a string of flying machines on the horizon.

"What the hell are they?" my next-door neighbor asked in a hushed voice. I didn't answer because if I gave them a name, they would be real and I didn't want them to be. I didn't know what they were but was positive we were all in great danger.

"I think we should run," I whispered under my breath. The only person who heard me was the little girl who had seen the 'flock' approaching. We locked eyes momentarily before she turned and ran down the street. She disappeared around the corner. Her parents never even noticed, still staring into the sky. I never saw the girl again.

I was compelled to stay against my own advice. It would be nearly a month until we realized only the children had escaped.

The silver birds kept coming, from some recess in the sky they emerged, gliding over our town as though it was a summer field of wheat and we were mice. Every so often one dropped down, swooping with its wings peeled back, and plucked one of us from our spot, flying off with its prize.

It's been 392 days since they appeared. Our sky is filled with soaring mechanized birds that wait for us. We who remain stay in our houses, venturing out at night for food, moving slowly in the darkness. Sometimes when I think I've finally gone insane, reaching for the outstretched hands of my dead parents, I remember that young girl who ran. I tell myself she made it and is okay, living in a place where the flying machines don't exist. She's found new parents and friends to start over. I know this to be true because if it's not real then I'm already dead.

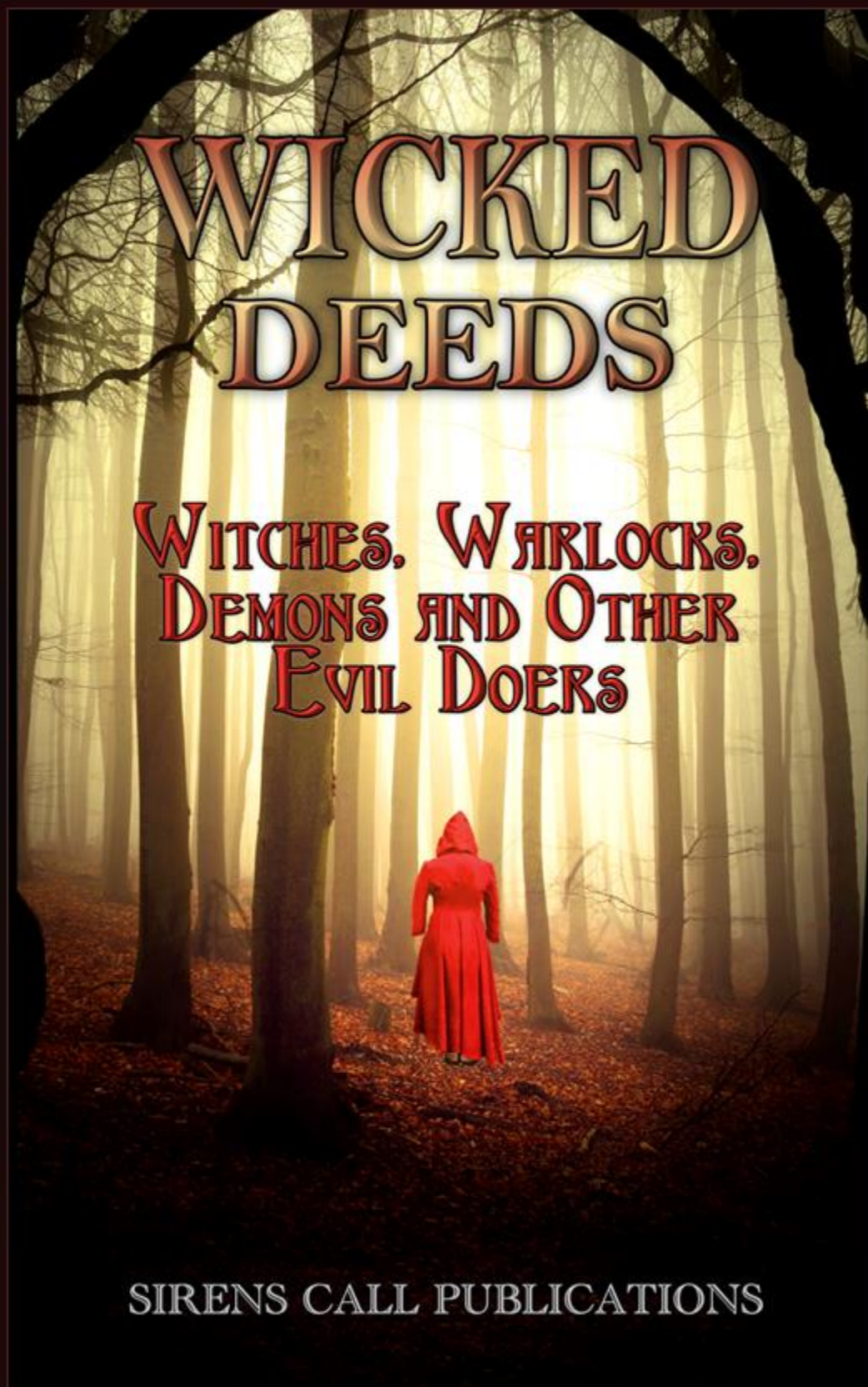
About the Author:

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

Facebook: [Christopher Hivner](#)

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Sometimes wicked people do wicked things...



Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble,
Kobo, and iTunes

Stretched beyond the farm's narrow dirt road, across from the strawberry field, and the pond, and Luna's favorite, Mr. Quack, Luna learned why secrets are a formidable thing.

It was here in the wildness of a spring day, Susie Mayberry stood at the edge of her wildflower field, dotted with playful butterflies, and hollered to Luna, "I used to hear you all the time when you'd stroll up and down the road and play that violin. Come join me?" Susie held in one hand her fiddle and the other a violin.

Luna had no ready answer. Her life had been full of decisions, but none made by her and those that were had been struck down by the hand of God. Luna stared at the field ahead of her, the peak of the strawberry hill kissing the horizon, then down at her feet crusted over from the mud by the pond. This was all so wonderful and *new*. Luna stepped a toe forward. Her body tingled all over. She scanned her farmland, the dilapidated barn, her run-down home, and no father as far as her eyes could see. Her tentative steps became steady and fast as she crossed the dirt road.

When she arrived, Susie handed her the violin.

"I only like to play one song. It's called The Lord's Tale." At age seven, Luna had heard Ma decry the title to Father just before he punched Ma. This was his reminder that 'music is the Devil'.

Luna situated the violin on her shoulder and lined the curved edge along her cheek. The violin's weight a comfort, bringing her memory to the days when Mr. Quack squawked his disapproval, and the air was thick with promises of soupy hot days and picnics by the kitchen door with Ma, and teaching Luna to play the violin.

Bow in hand, she stroked the first note and heard her mother's hymn, a haunting sound echoing around her. The notes swung and slid, filled the cheerful space with sorrow, rage, and finally peace. When the last note cried out, Luna placed the bow and violin at her feet.

"Luna Aberdash, you get on over here, you hear." Father yelled.

A numbing fear spread fast through Luna. "Thank you for letting me play." She raced through the wildflower field, across the dirt road and to her farmland. She nearly got by her father, but he snatched her by the straps of her summer dress and dragged her to the back of the house.

"Thou shalt not disobey man, Luna." Father roared before he plowed his fist into her mouth.

Luna, lopsided and dizzy, struggled to regain footing. Father had not seen the struggle, he could not have because next his foot had kicked her thigh sending her tumbling to the ground. "That was for playing with the Mayberry kid."

Ma came out the kitchen door humming her tale, wet clothes hung over her arm, ready to be laid onto the clothesline. "Did you fall, dear Luna?"

Curled in a fetal position, Luna coughed, "Father..."

"Yes, thou shalt not disobey man." And Ma shuffled along the dirt path leading to the clothesline.

Father let the kitchen screen door slam behind him, his complaint about rebellious children and sinners pestering Luna's heart.

Luna pushed herself up from the pebbled ground and ran through the strawberry field to where the hill always promised a new beginning. She laid in the grass. Her arms crossed at her chest as she propelled herself down the hill. Tumbling downhill with such quickness she stunned her emotions. The blades of grass whiplashed her skin. Her breath came in quick gasps, catching the spring afternoon's heat and mixing with blood that had pooled in her mouth. She landed just at the perimeter of the pond where Mr. Quack's wings fluttered, disturbed by the human's entrance.

"Excuse me, Mr. Quack," Luna said, wiping the blood from her chin with the checkered cloth of her summer dress. "I'm just rolling through. But since you are here, and I am here, I wonder if you can answer my question: you have wings, Mr. Quack, tell me where I can find God's land where the angels sing, and a soul is free?"

Four Years later

Ma's blood stains the table, my blood the floor. Yet Ma stands at the back door, The Lord's Tale heavy in her vocal cords, hands on her hips and that stupid ruffle apron on.

Luna turns and glares out the kitchen window.

Spring is ominous. Every year the trees become bold and vibrant, the grass a neon green and fresh tulips and daffodils, always the same color and position, sprout through the ground and dot the dirt road.

It all wreaks of newness, Luna thinks.

A petulant wave of anger rides up Luna's esophagus and chokes her throat.

All Luna wanted was to play the violin.

And to try something *new*.

She pushes away from the sink. "Ma, I'll be by the pond if you need me." The lightest touch she puts on her mother's shoulder. Ma moves out of the way, continues singing the Lord's Tale while she takes a seat at the table. Her forefinger circles the blood stain she cannot wash away this time.

Luna examines her mother's face—the deadpan expression, no wrinkles, no creases—no life exists. She exits the kitchen letting the screen door slam against the casing.

At the hill, the mud is thick and splattered in chunks all over the grass. It makes for a slow, peeling roll downhill. At last, Luna makes it to the bottom, her body sprawled against the grass. The sun is warm on her pale flesh flecked with shades of yellows and purples, her father's love taps, as Ma called them. The birds coo and sing in the nearby trees, a happy instrumental that is unsettling and confusing to Luna. She sits up and stares across the pond.

The cattails yet to grow tall enough to hide her when she swims, the tadpoles too tiny to see jumping about, and the small fish are hard to find moving in unison from this way or that. All these living creatures imprisoned, except Mr. Quack and his family.

They have wings.

Her reverie is interrupted by the hollering and laughing across at Mayberry's place where Susie plays her fiddle, and a fast rat-a-tap-tap resounds across the land. Luna stands at the edge of the pond, eyes closed, toes just dipped in the cool, spring water and listens. Fine hairs raise across her body. Her heartbeat becomes in sync with the drums thump, pushing and rushing blood through her veins, beating into her soul.

Her body strikes the pose as if the violin is there, heavy in her arms waiting to show the world what she can surmise in tune, in darkness and light. How crescendos and decrescendos move in a dance. The Lord's Tale a breeze, riding the heavy steps of the drum and fueling the fiddle's peal. She sways and twirls along the edge of the pond, singing her praise.

Mr. Quack squawks a frantic rhythm, but Luna continues her twirling, eyes closed, violin poised, singing truth with feverish abandonment of torment and hate ensconced in defeat and sadness. Crescendos.... and up and up Luna is pulled, flying closer to Heaven.

A loud boom overpowers the fiddle's eerie tempo. The ducks squawk and squeal, a frenzied elevation of the music. The birds escape the trees in a whoosh of air before silence oozes over the hill. Luna flashes her eyes open and across the pond is Mr. Quack, limp, dead, and in her father's hands.

It is afternoon in late summer. Father has not come back from his hay hauling. Ma wipes her hands on the pristine white apron. The ruffle strap drops off her shoulder when she hands a plate of food to Luna.

Ma goes back to humming her song, lost in her own saving Grace. Luna slides her plate to the edge of the table, hoping it falls off and crashes. The ceramic object shattering in large chunks against the yellow linoleum floor. The tiny shards will sit where her father rests his bare feet at dinner time, slicing and dicing the man's skin. *Matching soles*, Luna thinks as she curls her toes.

The plate teeters on the edge of the table and Luna stretches across to grab it before it can fall.

She steps outside and takes the long path to the pond. Along the way the trees bend and sway. The hot breeze bites her flesh where the open sores weep with Father's waspishness.

Luna twirls along the dirt road. The dust kicks up, a tornado of neglect and disobedience incarcerates her immediate path. To the right, the barn, and the hill, and the pond.

She twirls past the hill. Sandy particles peck at the sores, open them so wide the petulance has nowhere else to go but out. She squeals with delight. "Nowhere else to go but out." Her flesh tingles with an odd exasperation of itself and it makes her stop abruptly. She has not traveled beyond the hill, the pond, or the dead Mr. Quack since her musical incident with Susie Mayberry. And yet here she stands, at a crossroads. She puts a toe onto the blacktop of the main road and tests the balance it creates within her. Her mind dizzy, her body sways.

Luna retreats to the tornado of truth, and the pond, and that beautiful hill.

Five months have come and gone. School has begun but Luna sits at the kitchen table. Her summer dress replaced with overalls, wool socks and shoes that are too small.

The jams from the strawberries are sealed, one for each week of winter's grasp. The pieces of wood from her violin sit like a plaque of honor against the stone fireplace. "We need the wood more than the music," Father said.

"Are you not hungry?" Ma asks.

Luna stares back. Ma has the same face and eyes as Luna. They are wide, blue, and empty. Ma's arms and neck, her hands, and legs have the same markings as Luna's. Twins, Luna thinks, only her mother taller, older, and *wiser*.

"I'm full." Luna stands and reaches for her hat and gloves and the oversized winter coat hanging on a hook just next to the kitchen door. "I'm going to get the mail."

Her mother begins to hum *The Lord's Tale*. Luna steps out onto the fresh fallen snow listening to the crunch beneath her feet. A winter's music better than the hymn.

At the main road, Luna can see across the strawberry field. She finds the footprints of deer and rabbits but no duck, never a duck again. She arches her back, arms outstretched as she focuses on the clearest blue sky surrounding the farm. The maple and oak trees are brushed with thick lines of snow, an unsullied spectacle, God's best creation, she thinks.

Her knees buckle when she steps into a steeper mound of snow and her face catches the fall. Stunned, she lays, face buried. The ice crystals prick and poke at her flesh, numbing her cheeks and lips. There is silence, she recognizes, as the solitude of winter crests over her body. She wiggles further down into the snow mound.

Luna opens her mouth. The snow seeps into the warm orifice. The cold is an unbearable pinch against the weak enamel of her teeth. Her gums grow numb as her mouth works to melt the freezing water. It soothes her swollen throat and cheeks.

The plow's arrival is followed by the crunch of its blade tearing into the land and the faint swoosh as the blade wipes away the frosted beauty from the blacktop. As if the fiddle has begun and the drums keep time, Luna's blood rushes through her veins.

Metal grinds against road. The engine's roar becomes more voluminous as it gets closer to her snow hill, pulsating its warning. The steep mound of snow vibrates around Luna. She finds comfort in the abandonment of warmth. Solace in Mother Nature's embrace.

Today, the angels will give her wings, Luna knows.

About the Author:

Erica VanBuren is a coffee drinking, water healing kind of gal who has a penchant for playing devil's advocate, likes to talk to the dead, been married for eons, and has three delightful children she hasn't cursed yet. Her street creds include a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing and English, and a shoutout for her critiquing skills in a published novel.

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Three Keys | *Gerald Hayes*

Beatrice died a rich woman. Through wise investments and not giving in to her children's demands, she accumulated a fortune. Her three estranged children knew their mother had money, which they wanted.

Beatrice's children gathered for the reading of the will, in the office of Beatrice's lawyer. They were sitting around an oak table when Mr. Lawton appeared, carrying an old wooden box. A brass keyhole adorned the front and tarnished handles were on both sides of its lid.

The lawyer also carried three skeleton keys and an envelope containing Beatrice's last instructions. The keys looked similar except for the bits, which protruded from the ends. Different bits meant only one might open the box. Mr. Lawton opened the envelope and read the instructions.

"To my children: Whomever opens this box will inherit my money. However; if none of you open the box, my money goes to a charity of my choosing."

Mr. Lawton distributed the keys. Yancy, Meredith, William grabbed their keys and held them with anticipation of newly found riches. Yancy, the eldest child, went first. "I am the oldest. Surely, the money is mine. Don't worry. I will share what I think you both deserve."

He inserted his key into the lock and twisted it to the left and to the right. The lock didn't open.

“Step away.” Meredith said, as she brushed Yancy to the side. “Mother adored having a daughter. We spent hours partaking in things only mothers and daughters could. When I open the box, I will consider sharing a portion with my brothers.”

Meredith went through the motions with the key. She forced the key right and then left. The lock wouldn’t open. With a sigh of frustration, she sat down, waiting for William to open the box, hoping that he will share generously.

“Mother always had a special love for me. As the youngest, I was closest to her heart. I’m sure she wanted me to inherit her money.”

William gently moved the key to the right. He then turned the key to the left. Once more, the lock didn’t open. With anger in his eyes, he threw the key onto the table and yelled. “What was mother thinking? She had three loving children who cared for her, even though we didn’t see much of her these past several years. Now she has left us out of her will.”

“How could she?” cried Meredith. How shall I raise my family without the money I deserve?

“Now all will be lost to some charity.” Yancy replied. “This is no way for her to show us the love we showed her.”

The reading was over. The three angry children grabbed their coats and left. On the table sat the useless keys. As soon as they were gone, Mr. Lawton sat down in front of the box. He held the handles and easily opened the lid. He reached in and extracted a piece of paper. It contained the name of Beatrice’s favorite charity.

About the Author:

Gerald (Gabby) Hayes is a writer, and photographer. He is also a traveler, explorer, and wanderer. Born in California, he has spent his life moving from place to place, for business and for pleasure, not always in that order. He lives in Colorado and owns a consulting business, which gives him plenty of opportunities to travel, write, and make photographs.

Blog: [Travels with Gabby](#)

When the Silver Fell | *Nina D’Arcangela*

As I sit on the bank shivering under a woolen blanket, I can still hear the metal screech of the bridge as it tore loose. I hear car horns blaring, people screaming, see holiday gifts tumbling on the rough current. Many say a large winged creature warned of it. My harbinger, miniature in scale, spoke of the collapse, the frigid water, the slab of asphalt angling to the silt below. What he didn’t tell me was that you would ruin me, you’d take everything, and in that taking, you’d try to take me too. I wish you had.

Forty-six people died that evening, the only two never to surface again brought me into this world, and you saw fit to never allow them the dignity they deserved.

About the Author:

Nina D’Arcangela is a quirky horror writer who likes to spin soul rending snippets of despair. She reads anything from splatter matter to dark matter, and is an UrbEx photographer with a mad passion for abandoned places, bits of decay, and rust. Nina is a co-owner of Sirens Call Publications, a co-founding member of the horror writer's group Pen of the Damned, the founder of The Ladies of Horror Picture-prompt Writing Challenge that has been running for 7 years, and the owner and resident anarchist of Dark Angel Photography.

Author Blog: [Spreading The Writer’s Word](#)

Instagram: [@DarcNina](#)



The house shudders, a trembling whisper ghost wafting over a grave. A strong jolt and rolling, shaking drunken waves of movement displacing vases, sending picture frames askew. Floor to ceiling hairline cracks become fissures, paint and plaster spewing and spitting. The entryway chandelier is undulating, beckoning, as the rumbling grows to a roar. Pendulous light prisms cartwheel and careen across spiral stairwell walls.

"Justin!" The scream tore out of Natalie's throat. She reaches for her husband. The shaking continues, the rumbling louder. The house sounds like it will collapse.

Justin holds Natalie tight.

"Are you okay?" whispers Justin. "That was a big one."

Natalie nods. She opens her dry mouth, but no words come out.

"Stay in bed. I'll go downstairs and check the house." Justin throws a t-shirt over his muscular torso and grabs slippers in case of broken glass.

"Be careful on the stairs!" Natalie finally manages. "Aftershocks!"

Seven years ago, Natalie found her father at the bottom of those stairs, his neck broken, after a 5.9 earthquake. This one felt much stronger.

Justin starts downstairs. There are cracks in the stairwell windows and their framed wedding photos are strewn about, glass crunching underfoot. From above, all he sees is mayhem.

Justin calls upstairs. "So far so good!"

He hopes the damage to the house is only cosmetic. Natalie had inherited the house after her father's death and she had taken great pains to maintain the home, inside and out. He knows she will be heartbroken to see the entertainment center they bought with wedding money on the floor, the big screen TV broken, the china cabinet with family heirlooms shattered.

As Justin descends, the chandelier crystals vibrate and turn in unison toward their target, light from the window reflecting and flashing, blinding him. He throws up a hand and turns away, losing his balance. He falls, tumbling down the stairs, hitting his head hard on the floor. Blood seeps from his skull and forms a dark, red oval on the white and gray marble floor.

Natalie hears several thumps as Justin's body bounces down the steps. She rushes to the stairwell and is puzzled to see large prisms of light dancing on the wall. Mesmerizing shafts of white light move, flicker, then form letters. She thinks she sees a word. She reaches out and the wall is hot to the touch. Natalie spells out....M-I-N-E."

Natalie withdraws from the wall, panting and crying. She sees Justin's twisted body below and runs screaming down the stairwell, cutting her feet. She throws herself onto Justin's chest.

"Not again!" she screams. "Not again!"

The chandelier crystals shiver in excitement, reaching a crescendo. The spirit within had rested in deep slumber for seven years, waiting for a 5.9 or higher. Today exceeded all expectations—a 6.7 on the Richter scale. The house and Natalie belong to the light once again. Fixtures all over the house flash on and off, surging and celebrating into the night.

About the Author:

Jennifer Shneiderman is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker living in Los Angeles. Her work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in many publications, including: Yale University's *The Perch*, UCLA's *Windward*, *The Rubbertop Review*, *Anti-Hero Chic*, *The Chamber Magazine*, *Ghost Orchid Press* and *Madness Heart Press*. She is working on a screenplay about zombified sea creatures taking over the planet.

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Wishing Time Would Stop | *Radar DeBoard*

Fisher gasped as his eyes darted around the empty street that was barely illuminated by the moon's light. He desperately tried to find something that would tell him where he was, and more importantly, what time he was in. It was clear that he was probably in a European city during the 1800s. He managed to spy brick smokestacks in the distance, so the industrial revolution must be underway or had already ended.

Fisher saw a man staggering down the street in front of him and he ran toward the man, "Excuse me, sir!"

The man stopped and stared at him as Fisher approached him, covered in sweat.

"Do you know today's date?" Fisher desperately asked.

There was a moment's pause before the drunken man said, "Quelle? Je ne te comprends pas."

Fisher looked at him for a moment then reiterated, "The date monsieur. What is the date?"

The man pushed Fisher away muttering, "Vous stupide touriste."

At least one good thing came from trying to talk to the man, he now realized he was most likely in France.

Fisher made his way over to the wall of some random building and leaned against it. He didn't know how much longer his body would be able to keep doing this. It had always been a possibility when his colleagues and him built the time travel device that it would malfunction, but he never expected it to get this severe. He pulled his shirt up slowly so he could examine the pocket watch that was fused to the surface of his stomach. It was still ticking, which he assumed was a good thing.

Fisher didn't know how it had happened, but somehow the device had glitched while he was leaping through time. It had painfully fused itself to him and from that moment on the device had been randomly sending him through time. Fisher had lost count of how many different times he had been taken to, but it was well over fifty by this point. There was no discernable way for him to fix the device. His only hope was that he would be dropped into some period of time where he could contact his colleagues before he was transported somewhere else.

He slowly sunk to the ground and gasped with exhaustion. Fisher hadn't realized that the time jumps would take so much out of him; both physically and mentally. Each time he jumped, it hurt. It hurt more than any other pain Fisher had ever felt before in his life. He knew the jumps were eating away at his body. It may only take a few more times before he wouldn't even be able to move. He was scared that his body would disintegrate into dust before too long. Yet, more than that, he was scared he would never be able to go back home. That he would be lost to time.

Fisher felt the device start the process for a jump. He quietly began to weep as he whispered, "Please, no more."

About the Author:

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

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Goodreads: [Radar DeBoard](#)

Waiting for You | *Lynn Ruzzo*

I waited so long, and still he didn't show. He said he'd be there, just like always. Same time, same place. We'd never been apart very long. But those times lengthened as years went by. Less often, he'd come. I wondered if he were busy, or just unable to meet despite his want. Or maybe he no longer desired these short visits? Would he abandon me? Would I, him? I swallowed the urge to walk and never return. I had to. For him. For me. But eventually, I had to go. The world beyond the veil called and I couldn't resist. Before I faded back to the void, I saw his eyes on me, and I smiled before I vanished.

About the Author:

Lynn Ruzzo is a young author from North Carolina. When not crafting tragic short tales, she spends her time writing poetry that no one will ever read because she's too shy to share it. Lynn recently joined the group that writes for the Ladies of Horror Picture-prompt Challenge that takes place monthly on [SpreadingTheWritersWord.com](#).

Casey jolted to full wakefulness, heart hammering. Nothing appeared out-of-place in her bedroom. Nobody lurked in the shadows or the corners. Nobody crept along the corridor of her family's home. Yet something caused sweat to soak through the underlayers of her hair and raised goosebumps along her flesh.

A stench like stagnant water and rotted roses made her eyes water, and she gagged. *Oh no, not again.* Her stomach lurched.

She threw her covers to the side and launched from her bed. She slipped her feet into fluffy slippers and snagged the robe from the foot of her bed, fluid in her fear, graceful despite her growing dread.

Her breath puffed before her face, and she shivered. Why couldn't her parents keep the house at a decent temperature? Her knees knocked as she pressed her hand to the frosted panes of her bedroom window.

A full moon transformed snowy drifts into glittering fairy mounds, but Casey ignored the beauty. Something hid there. She knew it by its scent, by the way her ribcage felt abused by her organs, like they panicked at the thought of a familiar threat and intended to break their way free.

She strained her ears to hear the voice. It had beckoned her last year. It had haunted her dreams. Like a siren's call, it compelled her to leave her childhood bed and join it on the lawn, away from the assumed protection of the family house.

It didn't seem to know how little protection her family's home offered her. It didn't know Casey didn't trust.

She squinted, swiping her breath's condensation from the view, but she couldn't see it, the being who took the form of a beautiful woman and called her name. "Join me!" It had enticed. It promised the fulfillment of her inner potential, but instead it had tried to sap her will.

She'd not heard from it for over a year. *Why had it returned?*

Although she couldn't see it, Casey knew it lingered somewhere, blended into the environment somehow, a perfect chameleon, its voice blended with breezes and night noises. But where?

Fighting her reluctance, Casey turned the handle of the casement window for a better look. Gusts of frigid wind ruffled her hair, set her curtains to dancing, and tossed the sheets of the essay she'd worked on over the holiday break from her desk to float to the floor.

Casey rose on tiptoes, her heel sliding from her slippers, so she could lean out, to seek it.

Hers wasn't the only head poking from a window of the second floor. Rachel, her little sister, whose room was beside Casey's, also leaned from her window, her hair buffeted by the winter wind. She reached her small hand toward something in the backyard, something that completely captivated her. Her lips moved as though she conversed with an unseen lover, like Juliette on a balcony.

"Rachel," Casey hissed, "Rachel, get inside. You'll freeze."

Rachel didn't hear her sister. Longing transformed Rachel's pre-teen face into someone more worldly.

Hastily, Casey pulled her window closed without latching it, certain she needed to break whatever held Rachel entranced before the foolish girl threw herself from the window. She dashed into Rachel's room.

Here, Casey heard the voice, but it sounded like a young man. It called Rachel's name with the fervor of a zealot seeking converts. Rachel, caught in its spell, swayed as she leaned further than safety suggested. The middle schooler didn't notice the mottled state of her freezing skin, the blue tinge of her whispering lips.

Casey tugged the blanket from Rachel's bed and stalked toward her sister. She kept her voice low and even, like she might with a sleepwalker or an excitable child. "Rachel, come here, please." She leaped, wrapping the blanket around her sister's small shoulders. She wrapped Rachel in a hug and used all of her weight to pull her sister away from the window.

"Hey!" Rachel protested, but Casey slammed the window shut and closed the curtain on the scene outside.

Rachel pushed by, intent on the window, but Casey intercepted. "Shh, shh, shh." Casey closed her eyes and wished the temptation away from her sister. "Stay here with me."

Rachel's nostrils flared and her eyes narrowed. "With you? You're only here until school starts again. Then it's every man for himself, right? You'll go back to your dorm and leave me to take care of everything here!" She shivered, bottom lip trembling, tears an indignant storm.

"Rachel, I'm always going to help. You can call me anytime you need me. That's why I bought you a cell phone. But that..." Casey shivered, "thing out there. It's not something you should listen to. Believe me."

"Why should I?" Rachel stomped to her bed and jumped in. The mattress swayed atop the ancient boxsprings. "That BOY's my friend." She pointed to the window. "You better not have scared him away."

Casey gulped. "That's not really a boy. It can change how it appears. It picks what most appeals to you."

Rachel thrust out her chin. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, I do. I saw that thing, too. It called to me every night last year. Remember? I told you about it." Casey cupped her sister's tear-streaked cheek, but Rachel scooted away and pulled her knees to her chest.

Rachel's voice shook with emotion. "Maybe this isn't about you, Casey. Maybe this is something about me. For me. Did you ever think it could be something completely different from your experiences?"

Casey shook her head. "No, it's the same thing. I recognize it."

Rachel's cheeks reddened, and her lips pinched. Her voice hissed like the radiators that tried to rewarm the room. "You said a woman called you. Not a really cute guy." Rachel glared and pointed to the window. "That's a hot guy out there, and he likes me."

"It can change how it looks."

"Oh, really?" Rachel snorted. "That's convenient."

Casey inhaled deep. "That thing's making promises, but it's lying."

"Maybe the woman who called to you lied, but not my guy. I believe him." A secretive smile dashed across her features. "He loves me."

Casey sat at the foot of Rachel's bed and forced herself to make eye contact. "When have I ever lied to you?"

Rachel snorted again. "I know. You don't lie." Her voice mocked. "You can't, right? But guess what?" Rachel leaned closer to Casey. "You can be wrong sometimes."

"Okay." Casey rose, slid a hand mirror from Rachel's dresser into her robe pocket, and tied the robe's belt. "Let's go then."

"What? Go? Where?"

"Outside. Now." Casey pulled the belt tight, as though it might cut through her middle. *I've got to make her understand.* "Let's meet this friend of yours."

Rachel gaped. "He might not even be out there any more."

Casey closed her eyes and felt it, malignant as a spider lurking in its web. Its stink permeated the air, overpowering the lovely perfume of the spiced cider they'd warmed earlier. "It's still there. Waiting." Casey offered a wobbly smile. "Dress warm. It's cold outside."

They donned socks and boots, parkas, hats, gloves, and scarves worn over their pj's.

Rachel slipped her hand into Casey's when they stepped outside. Snow crunched beneath their boots as they made their way around back where the thing had stood beneath their windows.

Moonlight spotlighted to illuminate the figure. It shimmered like a waterfall with features that streamed and bled, one into another, each tumbling atop the other. One moment it looked like the teen idol who sang of his love to Rachel. Next it looked like the moon maiden who lured Casey. It assumed aspects of Casey and then Rachel, their father, then the pastor. A too-wide smile stretched across its changeable face, a constant in this creature-in-flux.

Its voice reverberated within the girls. "There you are, my loves." It reached for them, but Casey stood her ground and held Rachel back.

Casey glared. "Tell the truth. Why are you here? What are you?"

"Rachel knows." Sincere brown eyes sparkled in the moonlight, the image of a boy band lead singer. "Don't you, darling?"

Casey side-eyed her sister. *Did she?*

Rachel licked her chapped lips, her breathing shallow and quick, eyes locked on its gaze.

Casey bumped her sister with her shoulder and smiled at her. "Yeah? Ask it its name?"

Its eyes widened for a second. "I love you, Rachel." It tipped its head askew, hands reaching. "You know I've always loved you. Join me. Come here."

Rachel's gaze darted between her sister and the teen idol.

Casey squeezed her sister's hand. Three quick pulses to signify "I love you." To the shapeshifter, she said, "Tell Rachel what you are."

"Rachel knows me. Don't you? You know me. You love me, too, don't you?"

Tears welled in Rachel's eyes, and her lower lip trembled.

"It's lying to you. It isn't some random cute boy hanging out in our backyard. Didn't you see it change its looks? It's a shifter of some sort, a layik, maybe, or a demon. No matter what it is, it wants to possess you."

Rachel gaped. "What are you talking about?"

"Trust me." Casey looked into Rachel's eyes, fought to hold her gaze. She pointed behind her at the thing that called in the night. "That's not human. It's a trickster, and if you go to it, it will harm you." Casey glared at it. "That's why it won't tell you its name. If you know its name, you have some power over it."

Rachel's brows lowered with thought. She turned to the boy. "What's your name?"

"You can call me anything you like. I told you that before." A false smile transformed his already charming face into a portrait of innocence. "You call me John, remember?"

Casey opened her mouth to retort, but Rachel responded first. "I called you John, but that's not your name. What's your real name?"

"I like the name John. You gave it to me, which makes it special."

Rachel shook her head. "Why won't you tell me your real name?" Rachel trembled with cold and reaction. Her mouth fell open when it didn't respond. "Casey's right, isn't she?"

"Rachel, I can tell you my name, but I can only tell you." The earnest-seeming young man glared at Casey. "Send your sister away, and I'll tell you."

"No. She's right." Rachel found Casey's hand, nodding. Tears slicked her cheeks, and her voice trembled. "Get out of here."

"Rachel, please, honey, look at me. You're all I've dreamed of, my true love."

Rachel turned away, tugging Casey. "Let's go."

"Don't you love me, too? You said you did. Rachel? Rachel, come back!" The thing's voice deepened, grew menacing, commanding. "Damn you!" It lunged at Casey.

Casey spun and stood in front of her little sister. She held up the hand mirror, forcing the thing to look directly at itself. It recoiled, but the moonlight reflected in the glass, capturing the thing's image. It tried to back away, but it slipped on the icy ground and slid, shrinking, toward the mirror, pulled toward the smooth surface.

Rachel gasped as the mirror absorbed the thing. "How'd you do that?"

Casey shrugged. "I read things like that don't like to face themselves, that reflective surfaces can trap them." She turned the mirror's face toward the ground. "Don't look at it. It can still trick us."

"What do we do with it now?"

Casey steered them toward the door. "Make sure we don't break the mirror, I guess."

About the Author:

Kerry E.B. Black writes to calm the crazy currents crashing in her head. As a result, she's authored two YA paranormal thrillers and three collections of short stories. Many of her short works have crept into anthologies, magazines, and online journals. When not writing, this HWA member sings with seniors, advocates for the disabled, and reads (and reviews) all she can.

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Whispers Beneath the Lines: *Dark Fiction's Power to Heal*

I was fifteen when my mother died in my lap on the bathroom floor.

Later that day, the school bus would whisk my geology class off on a fossil hunt I'd been over the moon about for weeks—in part because I was paired with a boy I liked. My heavy application of Aquanet had been interrupted by her fall, and the cold tiles hurt my ankles as I sat with her across my legs. She was hairless, her skin the color of burnt butter and the texture of potato peel, her frail body reminiscent of the famine victims threaded through mid-80s commercial breaks. As she looked up at me, her mouth yawed like those of the lake fish we used to catch; she was trying to speak, but it only amounted to a blend of whisper and hiss. I asked her to repeat it, but she went still.

All I recall after that is running, in willful denial, to catch that damn bus. I told no one what had just happened. I didn't want to be sent home, and anyone's sympathy would make it real. But as my crush and I mined for elusive trilobites, I was haunted by Mom's piscine lips. What had she said? It was surely something important, something life-changing. Some vital advice that her eldest child—whom she begged my father to give her in a Valentine's card she'd pasted in my baby book—was going to need in her absence. In the shocking physical horror of that moment, there was a message being delivered, one that I couldn't hear, but could feel.

Dark fiction is like that. It's been described as a genre "concerned with fear, death, and the sinister side of human nature," according to languagehumanities.org, and I revel in its ghosts, monsters, gore, taboo secrets and dysfunctional relationships. Perhaps I like to explore danger from a safe distance, or put my own problems into perspective.

But I believe it's really because of what's being whispered beneath the lines.

Just about everything in dark fiction is metaphor. The apocalypse could be a stand-in for the unexpected death of a loved one, the crushing of a long-held dream, or some other destabilizing event. The ghost that haunts a once-grand abandoned mansion represents loneliness, being forgotten, and scarring by tragedy. The monster that keeps coming back might be addiction, hopelessness in the face of challenge, or even my own anxiety. Dark fiction allows me to connect with whatever is going on in my mind and helps me process my own current or back story. Consider Guillermo del Toro's unpublished tale, "The Murmuring," on which an episode of his Netflix series *The Cabinet of Curiosities* is based (possible spoilers ahead). The title is literal, in that it refers to an avian phenomenon central to the plot, as well as the sounds of an unearthly presence a grieving mother hears while she records bird calls. But in the wake of her tragedy, she has shut off her emotions, refusing to engage with or even acknowledge them. Metaphorically, therefore, the ghost represents Nancy's soul, and the title "The Murmuring" refers to its desperate attempts at shaking her out of denial. Who among us has not been in denial over one thing or another? We're experiencing a ghost story, but what we're feeling is the last time we were in that very position, when we couldn't accept or struggled to move on from a terrible loss. In Nancy, we see ourselves, and we are either comforted knowing we're not alone, or, as she heals by the piece's conclusion, inspired to do the same.

At the recent virtual Sanibel Island Writers Conference, well-respected short storyist, essayist, and novelist Steve Almond noted that "you can't write with your heart tied behind your back." This is especially true in dark fiction. For those of us who write it, the secret to doing it well is plumbing those authentic depths into which most people don't wish to dive. If we speak to the truth of what we find there, readers will relate. My dad used to say that 'if you reach one person, then you've done your job as a writer.' These words are in all of my *34 Orchard* formal acceptance letters, and I've shared it countless times with other writers. 'If you listened to your heart when you wrote it, someone will understand and connect with it. You just may never hear about it.'

I'm blessed that I *do* get to hear about it. I'm often surprised by the messages I receive from readers of my work, and from the readers of the work we publish in *34 Orchard*. People bare their souls. The letters are affirmations that I'm doing something right, and that when it's disappointing, frustrating, or overwhelming, giving up—on my writing, or even on the magazine—is not a luxury I can afford. Those notes—full of 'thank you's and 'I feel like someone understood me's and 'I've been there's—are what remind me not to rest on laurels, keep going, and try harder. Impacting one life, shifting one perception, or comforting one person is what all this is really about.

When we're grieving, or lost, or in despair, there actually is a Balm in Gilead in the quiet messages beneath dark fiction's lines. Dark fiction allows us to listen to those painful things in the world, those emotions we'd rather avoid,

those existential crises we'd rather ignore, and, if we do it long enough, understand this complicated thing called being human.

I will likely never know what Mom wanted her eldest daughter, the one she begged my father to give her in a Valentine's card, to know on that April morning thirty-six years ago. But perhaps it's out there, somewhere, whispering between the words I write and in every story I read, and one day, I will hear just enough to heal.

About the Author:

A dark fiction writer who still sleeps with the lights on, Kristi Petersen Schoonover has had stories published in many publications, most recently including *Generation X-ed*, *Horror Library Volume 7*, *Lovecraftian Microfiction* Volumes 6, 7, and 8, *Wicked Creatures*, *Crow & Cross Keys*, *Dancing in the Shadows: An Anne Rice Tribute Anthology*, *Sirens Call* eZine Issue 58, and *Out of Time: True Paranormal Encounters*. Her novel, *Bad Apple*, will get a 10th anniversary release in February, 2023, and her short story collection, *The Shadows Behind*, will be followed by a second collection, *Songs for a Dying World*, in 2024. She holds an MFA from Goddard College, has held three Norman Mailer Writers Colony residencies, and is founding editor of the journal *34 Orchard*. She is a member of both the Horror Writers Association and the New England Horror Writers, for which she is co-editing the forthcoming anthology, *Wicked Sick*. She lives in the Connecticut woods, where she enjoys watching birds with her husband, Nathan. Follow her adventures at kristipetersenschoonover.com.

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BAD APPLE

KRISTI PETERSEN SCHOONOVER



Scarborough. That's my name. Yes, I know that's an uncomfortable name for a girl; my cousin told me I was named for the state's racetrack. "That's dumb," she said.

"Not as dumb as you," I countered. I knew her Meemom didn't do word-a-day flashcards with her during breakfast, didn't encourage her to use words like 'acerbic' in sentences while she did her chores, and didn't make her read thick books without any pictures. But then my cousin passed me a sun-faded postcard she'd found in one of Meemom's dilapidated trunks in the attic: on the front, an alpine-styled hotel room with red satin bedspreads and cut-outs of pine trees on the headboards. 'Nothing beats the Towers Hotel! Our elegant Sky-High Cocktail Bar offers Happy Hour against gravity-defying views of Scarborough Downs and the city of Portland.' On the back, her spider-script noted she was having a 'great time at the track betting on the horses with'—a name that didn't belong to my father.

Well, a name that didn't belong to the man I *assumed* was my father. I don't think he was around before I started walking, and I associated him with my first day at kindergarten. He would sit at our kitchen table—a door slapped across two stacks of cinder blocks—in the same pair of jeans and T-shirt he'd arrived in the night before, and he'd say things to Meemom like he should move in and take over running the business end of the orchard. When he did what he said, I assumed at the time he must be the one. But after I saw the postcard, which was dated about nine months before I was born, I wasn't sure. I, therefore, couldn't think of a suitable retort for my cousin, so I just crumpled the postcard, rammed it into my pocket, and demanded she go home. But it wasn't over, because from that moment, I was uncertain where I really came from—well, except from Meemom's birth canal.

So half of me was missing, and my special name wasn't a substitute. I was not a Jane or an Erika or one of the five Marys in my kindergarten class. The big boys picked raisin-fat boogers from their noses, smeared them on their pants and jeered, "Look, it's the Scar! The Human Scar!" As they got older and about as clever as their genes were ever going to allow them to get, they got creative and put a "y" at the end, as in, "Oh, you're so scary! Scar-y Scar!" Which goes to show you how stupid they were, because my nickname is Scree.

When I got older, I thought about those boys a lot. If they'd ever procreated like Meemom and whoever; if they'd be in sticky bars, swilling beer and hoping to cop a feel; if they'd have enough money in their fake alligator wallets to get some unfortunate girls—who had probably begun the night with handbags full of high hopes—drunk enough to engage in sex in the back seats of their cars.

I didn't know anything about sex when I was that age, but I did know about orgasms: Hush-hush was what I called it, and I thought of it as a game of sorts—I didn't have my first one with a boy; I had it with a stuffed bear that Meemom had saved her pennies to buy me one Christmas.

I had seen that bear in Pinky's Toy Barn; it had been made by the woman who lived on the hill above our orchard, and its fur was as downy as the chicks we used to have when our coop was still up and running.

We used to go to the county fair every August and bring home a few chicks; Meemom always bought them to try to teach my brother, Arable, responsibility. And he was good and upstanding and oh so responsible. He really was. In a month or so, the puffballs blossomed into spiteful Rhode Island Reds or Naked Necks. Until they got too big, Arable let me pet them. Even though they smelled and shit everywhere, they were my little friends. But then Arable had a fight with Meemom and moved out. When Meemom heard he'd shackled up with the antique store owner's daughter in a motel cottage on the other side of town, she stopped buying chicks. I begged and pleaded, but she just wouldn't do it. I missed them; I was friendless.

So I wanted that bear—but I never asked. I think Meemom just must have cocked an eye toward me at that certain moment, saw me stroking the bear's fur, saw me lifting it off the shelf and crushing it against the splotchy pink birthmark on my neck, and made a deal with the woman to give it to me eight months later under the Christmas tree—just an evergreen we sawed off down the back lot. And when I got Bear, I discovered how it felt when I rubbed it back and forth between my legs while I lay on my daisy-splattered bedspread. I heard the *tee-hoo, tee-hoo* songs of the chickadees outside my window that spring; I inhaled the smell of our apples in the orchard that fall; I sweated in the thick fireplace heat that winter. Bear and I became best friends.

Until one July 10th. The land seared under a broiler sun: The back row of the orchard's trees—the ones that got the least attention from the Columbus Day hordes—suffered; everything was so dry the tufted grass between the trees had crisped to shredded wheat, and the tent caterpillars, failing to complete their shrouds, were curled cinders at their trunks.

The stone well was out back by those trees, and it had kept us in water for most of my life. It had a forlorn, but beckoning quality, because the man I came to recognize as my father had spent so much time making it into the stuff of

happy endings: He was particularly dexterous, so he made an A-frame roof for it, complete with a dowel for the water bucket; in the slope of the roof, he carved out a star. He said the star was for Meemom, because she was more beautiful than his favorite constellation, Cassiopeia. He'd shown me the upside-down queen once up in her smear of milk in the sky, but after that night, I always had trouble finding it again.

I loved that well, but I loved it more in that strange, dry summer, because there was no water in its belly, so I could call my name into it, a sing-song 'Scar-borough.' The echo of it bouncing back at me was that missing half of myself weltering up from the darkness.

That summer before first grade, Bear went with me everywhere, including to the well on that searing July 10th. I had just finished my morning hush-hush and consumed my usual cinnamon bun, and I explained that the word of the day was 'precarious' as I clutched him under my arm and went out to the well to find myself. But I leaned so far over in straining to see the puzzle of bricks laddering up the sides, Bear fell in. *Bear fell in!* Not a thunk or a splash or anything, just down he went like a plummeting chestnut, and he was gone. Gone!

My mouth erupted in screams as curdling as the day the hornets had chased me from the wild blueberries; my pumping knees and green shorts were smeared with grayish dirt. "Meemom!" I was crying, but it was so dry, I wasn't making tears.

Meemom burst from our flimsy screen door, her red hair flying behind her like the ribbons of so many kites. She swept me into her arms.

"Bear fell in!" I wailed, and she set me back down again and touched my cheek. She wasn't going to say, "We'll get you another," because even if the lady had fashioned another with chick-like fuzz, it would not be Bear, and Meemom was not a parent who doted; she expected me to know the value of things, to treat something hard-won with respect. She fumbled in the pocket of her spattered apron to bring up a dusty blue tissue, held it to my nose, and told me to blow. I did, but not too hard—I didn't want her to see certain things that came from my body.

"What were you doing up there by that well? That's very dangerous, Sweet Bread," she said.

I couldn't tell her about the part of me I believed was cowering in the bottom of that well, because she would try to take it from me, ask me, perhaps, why I would believe in such things, or flat-out instruct me in the ways of science with regard to the human voice. 'An echo is not the shadow side of who we are,' she might say, 'but who we actually are coming back at us.' Then, under the auspices of her pitying expression, I would have to finally accept the fact that the half of me that was missing, the half of me that I'd been looking for since my dawn of awareness, would elude me forever. So instead, I cried some more, and she stood up, seized my hand, and led me back up the long hill; when I tried to pull away from her, I was stuck to the melted brown sugar on her palm.

The well's opening glowered. Meemom let go of me and stood for a moment, straightening her back; she had a focused look I had seen once on the trapeze man at the circus. Then, she stepped forward, braced her hands on the wall of the well, and peered in. "Bear!" she chimed. "Bear, little Scree is worried about you! Are you okay down there?"

I was old enough to understand Bear really didn't talk. He was my best friend, so if he could've, he would've talked to me. But at that moment, knowing Bear was down there, all hurt and cold and scared, I suddenly feared he might be able to, to cry for help—maybe he could always talk and didn't have reason to before this. Or maybe he had just needed Meemom to call him. Maybe she even had always known he could talk, and maybe she'd just assumed he talked to me, too. So I cocked my ear and listened for something, anything—a hiccup, yelp, or growl.

Then I was struck with the thought that maybe it wasn't a good idea that Bear talk to Meemom. *Suppose he told her about hush-hush!* Hush-hush was private; it was bad. I would be paddled. Perhaps even banished.

"Suppose he tells her about hush-hush," whispered the well.

Meemom whirled around.

"He says he's okay," she said. Then she tilted her head. "What was that you said, Bear?" She shook off her dainty, pink slippers, stepped stone by stone onto the ledge, and kneeled. I couldn't see her head anymore, just the feline hunch of her back, the seat of her dress, and the dirty bottoms of her bare feet. "What did you want to say to me?"

Oh no. He *was* going to tell her! I leapt forward, yawping wildly to cover any answer he might emit, and I crashed into Meemom.

With a shriek that echoed all the way down, she was gone. *Crunch-crack.*

My insides pinched in the grip of something worse than getting caught for throwing rocks at the Booger Boys on the playground. Oh, this was worse, so, so much worse. I waited for her to call up to me, to say it was okay, she knew it was an accident, and when her voice didn't come, the talons of her angry spirit shredded my guts into vomit on the grass. She was going to punish me forever, because I was guilty, guilty, guilty, and these were the words from my

flapping mouth: “Meemom, I threw up, I want you Meemom, I’m sorry, Meemom, I didn’t mean it, come back, I swear I just didn’t want you to hear, I didn’t want you to know because you’d go away from me...”

Then, there was the soreness of what was no more. No more love, no more warmth, no more cinnamon buns, no more lily perfume, no more bedtime art book stories. No more word-of-the-day. No more picking wild blueberries. No more. No more Meemom.

“Meemom!” I leaned over and hollered.

But all I heard was the echo, that missing half of me that I suddenly no longer wanted to find, because she was very, very ugly.

The loss of Bear and Meemom left a hole the size of an ostrich egg. The wind chimes accompanied the still-life of the kitchen, which was just the way she’d left it: an apple corer, wooden spoon, and mixing bowl were in the sink; the pie that had burned sat on the Formica counter next to a worn-through oven mitt. Her magnetic ‘Shopping List’ pad on the refrigerator reminded me that I was in my summer camp play next Thursday, I needed bright yellow tights, and I had to return my library book on hornets. At the bottom of the page, near some artwork of dancing apples, she had scrawled ‘beer.’

After we had buried her—and the pastor and the church people stopped coming around with their offers of help and bad tuna casseroles—potential new mothers began to arrive at our door concessioning “coffee just the way your father likes it” or insisting that if I had any questions about anything, I could feel completely comfortable consulting them. But none of these women were Meemom, and so the loneliness spread, tainted all that I touched, every apple I tasted. My innards were stark as the orchard fields in the January sun.

That fall in school, the Booger Boys didn’t tease me anymore; no one else talked to me, either. My teacher said it was because they didn’t know what to say. I would have welcomed Scar or Scary or whatever words they wanted to utter from their palsied mouths: Anything would have been better than the lowered voices, the turned backs, the hands thrust in pockets as they hurried past.

I slept with the lights on. Not because I was afraid of trolls under my bed or of creatures lurking amid my cousin’s hand-me-downs in the closets, but because it was in the dark that a sibillance made itself known. In the dark, a steady succession of ssssss/sssss/sssss and *Scree* or even *Scarborough* slithered from the walls and sent me clamoring for the bedside lamp. In the shadow of my striped wallpaper, the sibillance fell silent. When I asked the man I considered my father about the hissing, he said it was the aged electrical wiring in the walls cooling down. “Like the truck makes that ticking noise when we’ve finally turned it off after running all day,” he said. “Not to worry, Sweet Bread. It’s natural.”

The worst part of all was trying to rekindle hush-hush. Even when I tried to jam a roll of toilet paper between my legs and feel that rush, tears dripped down my cheeks and off the bulb of my nose like rain gutter runoff in April.

The long, somnambulant nights of winter arrived, and the man I considered my father wept, his muffled-through-pillow cries like the bleats of pheasants. Sometimes I went into his room redolent with menthol arthritis cream and cherry cough syrup, lumbered onto his bed, and held his hand. “I can’t do this without her, Scree,” he lamented, and I’d always tell him he could, because I was scared he would leave me, too. Yet each night he said it, each night I countered, and each next morning, he was still there, and so, over time, I stopped *considering* him my father—I *accepted* him as such. He became Father, the man for whom I would do anything, as long as he’d never leave me.

By the time I was in sixth grade, I’d learned there was no rest at any time of year in a fifty-eight-acre orchard. In spring, new trees needed to be planted and accumulated brush chopped up and burned; all the trees had to be pruned. The three-year-olds needed limb spreaders put on them so they grew in the shape of a bell. The top branches couldn’t be longer than the bottom. The older trees were harder because their limbs were thick, heavy. There was fertilizer to spread and weeds to chop a foot clear around each trunk.

Weather could ruin anything we did. Owning an orchard meant keeping half an eye cocked toward the heavens: Honey bees pollinated the trees, but they were fussy and didn’t like to fly below a certain temperature, or if it was too windy or rainy. Crummy weather, then, meant crummy crops. And if the weather was too good, then you got too good a fruit set, which meant that there would be too many small apples and not enough big ones. The biggest apples came from the big blossoms, called kings, and we always hoped that only the big blossoms would turn into apples and their little courtiers would shrivel up and die off.

In summers, we drove around and tried to gauge the June drop, when all the unpollinated applets fell off the trees. We tried to guess if we'd have to chemically thin out the crop so we wouldn't get too many runts. It was driving around in the truck, day in, day out.

You had to watch every day for early signs of frog-eye leaf spot and black rot; some of the trees fell to scab or blight. One year, we lost six rows—nearly all—of our Ida Reds. Father and Meemom had tried planting Empires, because they're resistant, but they just hadn't made it. Even though the soil was dry enough when the baby trees came in the rainy months, even with constant daily monitoring, even with my special job, taking clothespins and trying to train the sapling branches in the way they should grow (even when I made sure to take them off at the end of first season like Meemom said), the baby tree limbs just cracked and broke like brittle bones. Father said it was the pH in the soil. He said the land was bad, poisoned. That no apples would ever grow there again. And so those rows became the blueberry bushes that were forever plagued by bees' and hornets' nests: good for pollinating the orchard; bad for the humans that lived on the land.

The autumn days were spent milling cider. I wasn't allowed near all the dangerous, rusty beasts that thrummed and groaned and killed apples under their metal talons and cogs. I snuck down and peered through a space between two boards in the barn wall and watched Father and a couple of boys he'd hired from town torture twenty or so bushels: I was held captive by the rhythms and patterns in every step of the cider process. The prisoners tumbled, severed heads on the sorting rolls, turning green-red-yellow, flashing every part of their skins, and if I focused on one apple and watched it, there was a grand hypnosis in my brain. They vanished head-long into a blade mill, virgins teetering and then plummeting down into the mouth of a volcano, and came out on the other end as this browning, milky goo that was pressed dry of all its juices, squirting into a collection pan like blood: *Gush, dribble. Gush, dribble. Gush-spatter-dribble.* For hours. Father came back sticky. No matter how much washing he did, he was never clean.

He pleaded with me to be a good girl and completely take over preparing the meals, because being in Meemom's kitchen was still just too much to bear, and I was old enough now to help out and ease his weary bones. "I can't keep up the orchard, Scree. I'm drowning in apples."

I took over most of the domestic duties and lived in a daily caravan of dishes, cleaning products, and burnt apple pie crusts. I cooked our breakfasts, dinners, and lunches for the occasional hired help, kept the house as clean as I could, and made and packaged the baked goods to sell during the harvesting season. I did it all before and after school and on the weekends. Sometimes I was still so tired in the mornings, my muscles ached. But then I'd realize that there was no one else to do it. Father needed me. And if I hadn't gone to the well that day—

I'd get up and do it all over again.

Meanwhile, our flannel-jacketed, child-toting, plaid-scarved customers had no respect for how much work went into everything. They were positively lusty about that midsummer-autumn tradition they called "harvesting": they thought it was showing up in droves with their little kids and their wire collection baskets and wandering among the Red Delicious (my least favorite), Mutsu, and all the other kinds we had, chatting about their pies, jams, and spice cakes while they beheld the trees with critical eyes.

I always felt sorry when they picked an apple and then tossed it to the ground because it wasn't "good enough" or had bruises. That poor apple just lay there, lonely and forgotten, future helpless victim of the birds and the insects.

[Bad Apple](#), by Kristi Petersen Schoonover is available for [purchase on Amazon](#)!



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