The Sirens Call

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A Dark Fiction & Horror Zine!

Spotlight Poets: Marge Simon & Mary Turzillo

Mike Lera's Corridor of Horror: Score for Gore

Featured Artist: Anastasia Evgrafova

Featured Project: Phantom History House

Featured Poet: Maxwell I. Gold

Featured Book: 'Bleeding Rainbows and Other Broken Spectrums'

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Human Prey | ***Thomas Brown***

I had been single for nine years when I met Spider. The sky that day was overcast. I smelled fried onions, heard the sizzle of hot oil from the kebab van by the side of the road as I made my way down to the park. My wristwatch still sat on the bedside table; it could have been any time between seven and nine. The last nine years could have passed between these two hours; that halfway time after the evening but before nightfall, when clouds muddy the sky, and the streetlights seem premature. As I approached the van, I found myself wondering if there was such a thing as any other time. It didn't feel that way to me.

I often visited the park around this time but rarely this van. I liked to watch for dragonflies and pond skaters and the fat worms that emerged from the soil when the sun dipped and it began to rain.

There was no rain that night. Still, three silhouettes huddled around the light from the counter. Stronger than the streetlights and nearer, it reminded me of a lamp. Two of them hovered slightly apart. Shapeless in their vast overcoats, food held close to their faces, they stood unmoving except for their mouths. I can still remember the sound of their chewing, the gradual motion of their jaws, the grinding of pitta or grey doner meat between their teeth.

The third, a man, stood by the serving hatch while the van's occupant prepared his order. He didn't turn, but stepped slightly to one side as I came up behind him. This close to the counter, the smell of vinegar and hot Middle Eastern spices was almost overpowering. I ordered quickly, my mouth watering, eyes burning slightly from the onion and the cold.

I didn't realise he had spoken until I felt his hand on my shoulder. My flinch startled him, but his hand had startled me first. After nine years, loneliness had become a part of me. I wasn't used to being touched.

"You dropped this."

He wasn't tall, but he had a couple of inches on me. He looked older, maybe mid-thirties to my twenty-nine. A thick crop of blonde hair gave him a youthful look, as did his smile, but his eyes gave him away. I wondered if he was doing the same to me; reading my face. Still teary, cheeks flushed from the chill, I thought I must have looked one-hundred and nine.

"Here."

He extended his hand again, and I realised he was holding a tenner crumpled between finger and thumb. I took it quickly, careful not to brush his fingers with my own. Behind us, in one of the many tiny gardens squashed between the rows of terraced houses, a dog began to bark.

We spoke while we waited for our food. Mostly it was him who talked, but I replied when it was polite and, afterwards, when I wanted to. I learned he was Swedish, that he had moved here for work eight months ago. The dog didn't let up, but it wasn't unusual for dogs trapped in the small gardens here to sound off. I realised it was night. Even without my watch, we must have been speaking for hours. I had said very little, but the time had flown.

We spoke again at the park, and the week after at the Art House, a small café near town. One evening we visited the cinema where we caught a late showing of a Scandi noir. I didn't – I don't – understand the language. There were subtitles, but I didn't need them. Sweeping shots of black lakes shining with starlight and black cities lit up with little lights of their own meant more, somehow; Stockholm, Malmö, Gothenburg shivering like disturbed nests, and me with them. I had not lived anywhere else than home, except for three brief years at university in Nottingham, and certainly not abroad. When the film had finished, Spider asked me if I had enjoyed it. I told him I didn't know what it had meant, but it was beautiful. He smiled.

I will never forget the day he met my parents. I think they had grown lonely in their own way from the lack of any significant other in my life. Afterwards, I thought they seemed a little better. Though they had met him only briefly, that made me feel better, too.

It was summer again when he asked me if I would visit Malmö with him. We were drinking beer on the patio that was my back garden. The paving slabs were cracked and hot. Weeds tickled the soles of my feet. He had not said how much he missed home but I caught him looking in the mirror sometimes in a way that seemed like he did not recognise himself. I saw guilt, and an emptiness that could have been my own. My Spider. Of course I said yes.

We flew that autumn, before the trees bared their branches and cobwebs glittered with more than flies. I had never flown before, but I was not afraid. I slept most of the way; the flight passed in the blink of an eye. The last twelve months had been a blur. After nine years of struggling like one of those flies bound in silk, my life was speeding around me. I couldn't wait to explore the city; from what I could see as we navigated the roads, it actually shone. The night was black, the streetlamps tall, the architecture of a different kind to any I had ever seen before. I have never given much thought to Heaven, or imagined what it might look like, but after last night, I would imagine it looks like this.

It didn't take long to explore his apartment. One of the rooms was locked. The other two I surveyed in minutes: a living area, and a bathroom that doubled up as a storage cupboard. The main room featured a stove and several bare shelves. Dust coated the solitary windowsill like a second layer of paint. Looking back, he had seemed anxious, though I couldn't tell why. We shared a futon and a heavy duvet to keep the draught at bay. Spiders fought over dust balls by the skirting boards. I fell asleep in his arms.

In the morning – this morning – I woke up to find myself gagged. The pain at my wrists told me they were bound, although I couldn't see them from where I lay. I felt for Spider; his weight, his aftershave, the tap of his boots on the floor, anything to let me know he was still here. The house made sounds of its own, but none I could attribute to him. When I realised he had gone, I thought I was going to be sick. I didn't know what would happen if I threw up with the gag in my mouth. The back of my neck prickled and my chest closed around my lungs so that every breath was small and tight.

Outside was still black, but brightening, growing lighter with every passing hour. I am still lying here now, naked, my face in the futon, knees tucked under my chest. The door that had yesterday been locked swings slightly ajar. A mattress spring buries uncomfortably into my hip.

I can't hear the tap of Spider's boots, but I can hear other things, moving behind the unlocked door. I have been listening to them for what feels like hours, scratching in the darkness, testing the stairs. The first I see of them is a white hand, fingers curling around the doorframe. The digits are long, skeletal. I think that whoever the hand belongs to must be very Nordic or very ill.

The figures slink cautiously into the light. From where I'm bound, I can count three of them; I don't know if they are his family, but there's a likeness in their arms, their slender legs, the long curvature of their necks as they scuttle closer. They too are naked. I don't recognise their bald heads, or their mouths, except maybe to liken them to the mouthparts of newly hatched dragonflies.

They move cautiously but with an eagerness that bears them quickly across the floor. Behind them, on the other side of the room, I can see the apartment's sole window. Outside, the sky is grey, stained with swirls of darker clouds. I don't know what time it is, or where my watch is, but I know that it is sometime between seven and nine. I wonder if time sped up, if I ever escaped the spider's web, or if that was just an illusion; the distorted perception of a thing struggling its last, trapped for months, years, almost a decade in a life from which there is no escape.

I am not struggling now. Somewhere outside, a dog begins barking. Perhaps it senses my fear, but I don't think so. More likely it hears the wet chewing sounds that are filling the room; sucking, crunching, the roaring of blood in my ears. I think of two shapes, huddled around a van, nuzzling strips of grey meat, then a city doing likewise, then the world; for one moment billions of men, women, and children bent prostrate, heads bowed, mouths quick as they devour their hands.

The mattress sinks around me as they shift, biting harder, bringing me to tears, but I am not struggling, and I am not afraid. My vision blurs. I think about last night, about the city streaming past me and my place in it, tiny and awestruck. I remember the enormity of the blackness, and the lights below, like pinpricks. I think about that first conversation with Spider, and the ensuing eight months; the first and only time when I have ever been happy. This seems a small price to pay. I drift away, piece by piece, foodstuff for angels with black eyes and butterflies' skin.

About the Author:

In 2010, Thomas won the University of Southampton's Flash Fiction Competition with his story, 'Crowman'. In 2014 he won the Almond Press Short Story Competition, 'Broken Worlds'. That same year, his debut novel LYNNWOOD was a finalist for The People's Book Prize. In 2022, he was invited to feature in The Horror Zine's 'Best Of' anthology. Thomas writes dark, surreal fiction.

Author Blog: Thomas Brown
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Reawakening | ***Anita Alexanian Forman***

The sound of water woke her from a not-so-blissful sleep. It wasn't constant, but intermittent. Anxiety gripped her, the tightening of her chest and the slight nausea accompanying it. She didn't know why she feared water, but always had.

What time is it? 1:30 AM, it read on her phone.

The gurgling noises coming from the bathroom started to sound more like muffled cries for help.

Her fear of the sound of water nearly overcame her, but she sat on the edge of the bed for a moment, then dredged up the courage to investigate the dreaded sound coming from the bathroom.

Be brave, turn on the light!

She breathed a sigh of relief, no water on the floor, or gushing out of the toilet.

Not an immediate emergency, thank you! Go back to bed, try to get some sleep.

But the gurgling continued, sounding like the anguished last breaths of drowning souls.

She drew the blanket over her, cold chills running through her body as she drifted back to sleep.

***

She woke to frigid water surrounding her, struggling to reach the already over-crowded lifeboats. All she heard were the cries and screams from steerage passengers who were trying to survive. Women and children should have been first, but there wasn't enough room. She succumbed to the icy water, sinking slowly into the abyss of death once more.

About the Author:

Anita Alexanian Forman's love of horror began with her father's love of Universal Monsters, especially Frankenstein. And her children also inherited this passion for horror. She is from New York, is a devoted cat-mom, and Philadelphia Eagles fan.

Don't Look | ***Devin J. Meaney***

I was laying in bed and my limbs and neck were as frozen as the icicles hanging from the gutter by my front porch. I wanted to close my eyes, but they too were entirely stuck; fixed upon the shadows, so distant, yet so close.

I was surrounded by darkness and blackened smoke, Cheshire cat grins lurking; dancing across my walls. Their glinting eyes like hellfire gems—pure chaos. At one point I did manage to close my eyes, but that only brought the evil grins closer still. Then came the crying from under my bed, like wailing pushing forth a dance of the damned. My eyes were open yet again. I sighed to myself amidst the blackness.

"Don't look!"

The crying continued, like a baby in pain. I knew it was not a baby though—it just wanted me to look. I sighed to myself amidst the blackness yet again.

"Don't look!"

Then, in a rush, I was dragged from my bed by mighty invisible hands. I may as well have been a corpse, and as I was dragged to my floor I murmured and stuttered in agony. The sorrow filled cries did not cease, but I could not bring myself to look beneath the bed.

As I thought my end was near I burst forward to alertness. I was awake now—and I made haste to turn on my reading lamp. The crying had stopped, but the message in my mind was all the same.

"Don't look!"

About the Author:

Devin J. Meaney is an author from Cape Breton Island. He has a wonderful young daughter whom he loves very much.

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Gator Bait | ***Paul Lonardo***

Brad knew he'd taken a wrong turn as soon as he started down the narrow dirt trail. The navigation had failed somewhere along Bayou Sale Road, so he was relying entirely on his memory of a brief glimpse he got of the GPS map before leaving Mobile. He tried to clear the bugs that were now baked onto the windshield, but the wipers just spread the pulp across the glass like pâté, further diminishing his visibility and forcing him to slow his truck to a crawl. Now travelling at the same speed as the insects, they swarmed all around the vehicle like they were in pursuit.

As he navigated around a sharp bend, he had to avoid a faded, hand-painted sign that read: *Cajun Bill's Swamp Boat Tour*.

"Is this it?" Charlie asked, his voice rising in excitement. He lowered the passenger window to get a better look and several moths and a huge dragonfly entered the vehicle.

"Hey!" Brad shouted, swatting at the chitinous wings fluttering like bits of white paper around his head. "Close the window."

Charlie opened the door and jumped out before Brad drew the truck to a complete stop. He cut the engine and joined his brother-in-law outside in the oppressive humidity. The heat of the day refused to relent even as twilight approached, making Brad feel as if he was wearing a tin foil sweater. There was a one-room shack in the distance, tucked in deep shade beneath the branches of the thickly settled cypress and sprawling magnolia trees. Alligator skins and skeletons hung from its exterior walls. Its metal roof sagged in the middle and orange-red rust darkened the ground around the dwelling. The one window was shuttered with an impenetrable layer of dirt and grime like a sightless cataract eye. The muddy waters of the endless bayou visible just behind it.

Before Brad could tell Charlie that this wasn't the swamp boat tour he called, the sound of a door opening and closing drew his attention. Brad looked up and saw a shape exiting the cabin, a rotund man waddling out of the darkness toward them. The man was holding what appeared to be a drumstick in his right hand, taking a bite out of it as he continued forward at a sluggish pace. When he stepped out of the shadow, his features became visible. A mop of coarse white hair poked from the sides of a moth-eaten straw hat. His round face was sun scorched and leathery. Small, raised bumps were clustered on the tip and bridge of his bulbous nose as well as along the blades of his cheeks. He wore khaki coveralls caked with dry clay, no shirt underneath. The mud on the rubber galoshes he wore was fresh, leaving wet prints in the crushed rock walkway behind him. A hatchet attached to a handmade leather holder dangled from his waist belt. Squinting into the setting sun, the man's eyes were narrow slits.

"Are you Cajun Bill?" Charlie asked.

The man stopped in front of them. "One in the same," he said with a thick drawl. A trickle of blood mixed with saliva ran out one side of his mouth, and Brad suddenly realized that it was not chicken that the man was chomping on, but the remains of a large bullfrog. The man bit down again on the amphibian, taking most of the remains into his mouth. Cajun Bill's cheeks bulged as he mashed the bullfrog with his teeth, the innards popping and the tiny bones crunching between his jaws. He was left holding one meaty leg, the tiny muscles twitching involuntarily, as if from some futile last-ditch effort to escape.

"What can I do fer y'fellas? Y'all lost?" Cajun Bill said as he popped the leg down his gullet, swallowing it whole.

"We ain't lost," Charlie said. "We came for a boat tour of the bayou. You got any of them rare red gators in these parts?" Charlie asked. "Supposedly they have a taste for human blood."

"You spend too much time on the internet," Brad told him.

"What about all the reports of shoes found floating in the bayou with the feet still in them, but never a body? Explain that."

"That's just a myth," Brad said.

"Ain't no myth," Cajun Bill said, his eyes opening slightly and sparkling in the dim light. "Them gators come straight from hell. Skin's red hot, what makes 'em ornery. And tasty." He smacked his lips. "T'ey practically cooking in their own skin. T'ey the only gators I hunt. I can take'ya up close to one if'n ya want."

"How much?" Brad asked.

"Twenty each, first hour," Cajun Bill said. "Fi'teen ev'y hour af'er."

The price was cheaper than the swamp tour Brad booked, and since he hadn't paid any money in advance, he shelled out the cash.

Cajun Bill went back inside the shack to get a couple waterproof suits for them to wear and came out a few moments later with them in hand. Brad's fit him perfectly, but Charlie's was much too small. The proprietor invited

Charlie inside to try on some others that might fit better, and after they left, Brad wandered out back to the swamp, stopping in a grove of wild daisies on the edge of the shore where a small airboat was moored to a dilapidated dock.

Suddenly Brad heard screaming and dull impact sounds coming from the shack.

He looked up, feeling an artery in his neck pulsing, his heart rate increasing. He tried to dispel the image of Cajun Bill's hatchet from his mind as he made his way to the structure. Picking up his pace, his vision started to blur and he felt a little woozy.

As he got closer, he looked around for a weapon of some kind; a rake, a shovel, a sturdy branch, but there was nothing. Reaching the door, he pushed it open and entered.

"Charlie?" As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he saw his brother-in-law sitting up on the floor, his back against the wall. One of his wrists was shackled to a steel loop cemented into the ground and he was bleeding from a gash on his forehead.

"Help me," Charlie pleaded, barely above a whisper, his eyes fluttering in their sockets and on the verge of unconsciousness.

Brad noticed that his brother-in-law's left leg had been hacked off at mid shin. Both lower leg bones were exposed, the ends splintered. He felt his gorge raise, and as he staggered back in dismay, something came out of the darkness behind him. The blunt end of the hatchet struck the back of his head.

"Gotta be live, or'day won't bite," he heard Cajun Bill say as he lost consciousness.

When Brad came to, he was sitting on the deck of a flat-bottomed boat that was swaying gently atop the brackish water. He was propped upright, his back leaning against the cage of the propeller, which was idle. His shoulder was throbbing and his legs tingled, but he couldn't move. It was full dark, but a magnificent hunter's moon blanketed the bayou in spectral silver light, Spanish moss shimmering in the trees like ghostly veils. Standing directly in front of him at the bow of the boat was Cajun Bill, who was baiting a treble hook. It was one of numerous lines that were hanging from trees all around, suspended a couple feet above the waterline to attract gators. Brad couldn't tell what was being used for bait, but it was some kind of meat.

Brad suddenly thought about Charlie and horror instantly paralyzed his brain. He didn't want to consider what Cajun Bill had planned for him. He resisted the urge to look down at his own body, but he found it impossible, and he finally gritted his teeth and lowered his eyes. What he saw was worse than anything he could have imagined. His left leg was skeletal, completely denuded of flesh and muscle, picked clean off the bone. Only his foot remained. Half of his right thigh had been hacked off, a neat wedge carved out of his leg, like slices from a birthday cake that had been parceled out to party guests.

He opened his mouth to scream but nothing came out.

"Gotta be live," Cajun Bill said, standing over him. Holding an oversized treble hook in one hand and the hatchet in the other, the shapeshifting creature brought the weapon down with sudden, swift ferocity, cleaving through the upper thigh of his captor's leg, notching out a chunk of meat. The blade got caught in the femur beneath and Cajun Bill had to step on Brad's fleshless ankle to yank it free, then he grabbed the slab of thigh meat and threaded it onto the hook.

"Gotta be live," he repeated and laughed as he set another trap and waited for one of the flesh-eating red gators to come along and take the bait.

About the Author:
Paul Lonardo is a freelance writer and author with numerous titles, both fiction and nonfiction. Paul has placed short fiction and nonfiction articles in various genre magazines and ezines. He is a contributing writer for *Tales from the Moonlit Path* and an active HWA member.

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Snow Woman | ***Hilary Ayshford***

Winter is her time: time to revel in the cold, to dance on the drifts and glide on the wind. Seven long months Yuki-onna retreated with the thaw to her ice cave above the snow line. Now she returns with the first winter storm, ready to hunt, to feed.

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He didn't intend to stay long. The storm warnings had been increasing all day, and when he arrived at the bar the first soft flakes were drifting through the frigid air, tumbling and turning in the stiffening breeze. A couple of beers, then he'd head home.

Two drinks turned into four before he made it to the door. Six inches of snow was already lying, deeper where it had drifted. The wind cut through his clothes like a machete, tempting him to return to the shelter of the bar. But it was only a fifteen-minute walk if he took the shortcut across the park.

From the tree-topped knoll, Yuki-onna watched him approach. The heat radiated from him like crackles in pond ice when a rock is dropped onto the fragile surface. Her hunger reached out, eager to seize him, hold him, enjoy him.

The park was a white expanse of nothing, no landmarks except the shallow mound with its stand of trees. His footprints had almost disappeared, scoured by the wind, but he'd been meandering in loops and circles, crisscrossing his own tracks without noticing. He set off toward the small hill in the hope that from the top he'd be able to get his bearings.

It was as if her longing was drawing him in. Yuki-onna trembled with anticipation.

The soft, downy flakes had given way to spiky ice crystals that struck his exposed flesh, numbed his skin and grazed his cheeks. His vision was dazzled by dancing white lights that flashed and sparkled. Out of the corner of his eye he thought he saw things moving in the blizzard, phantom shapes that loomed then faded when he turned his head. He closed his eyes against the stinging snow.

Yuki-onna drifted out from among the snow-speckled trees. Head bowed, snow-blind, he didn't see her until she was upon him. Her hair was black tendrils, writhing and twisting in a smoky halo; a filigree of silver slivers made frost-fern patterns across alabaster skin so translucent he could see the blue veins beneath. She took his hand in her long, delicate fingers. Her touch scorched his numbed flesh sending rivers of fire through him. The heat of desire was on him, a burning fever that must be quenched. Their coupling matched the fury of the storm. She shredded his lips with icicle teeth, flayed his skin with rime-tipped claws, sucked the warm breath from him until he was empty, spent.

A trail of discarded clothing led them to his frost-coated body three days later. They grimaced at the ragged flesh, muttered about hypothermia and animal predation. Drawn by the warmth of their exhalations, Yuki-onna waited, unseen among the snowdrifts, sated for now.

About the Author:

Hilary Ayshford is a former science journalist and editor based in rural Kent in the UK. She writes mainly flash fiction and short stories and has been nominated for Best of The Net and Best Small Fictions. She is currently working on her first novella-in-flash. She likes her music in a minor key and has a penchant for the darker side of human nature.

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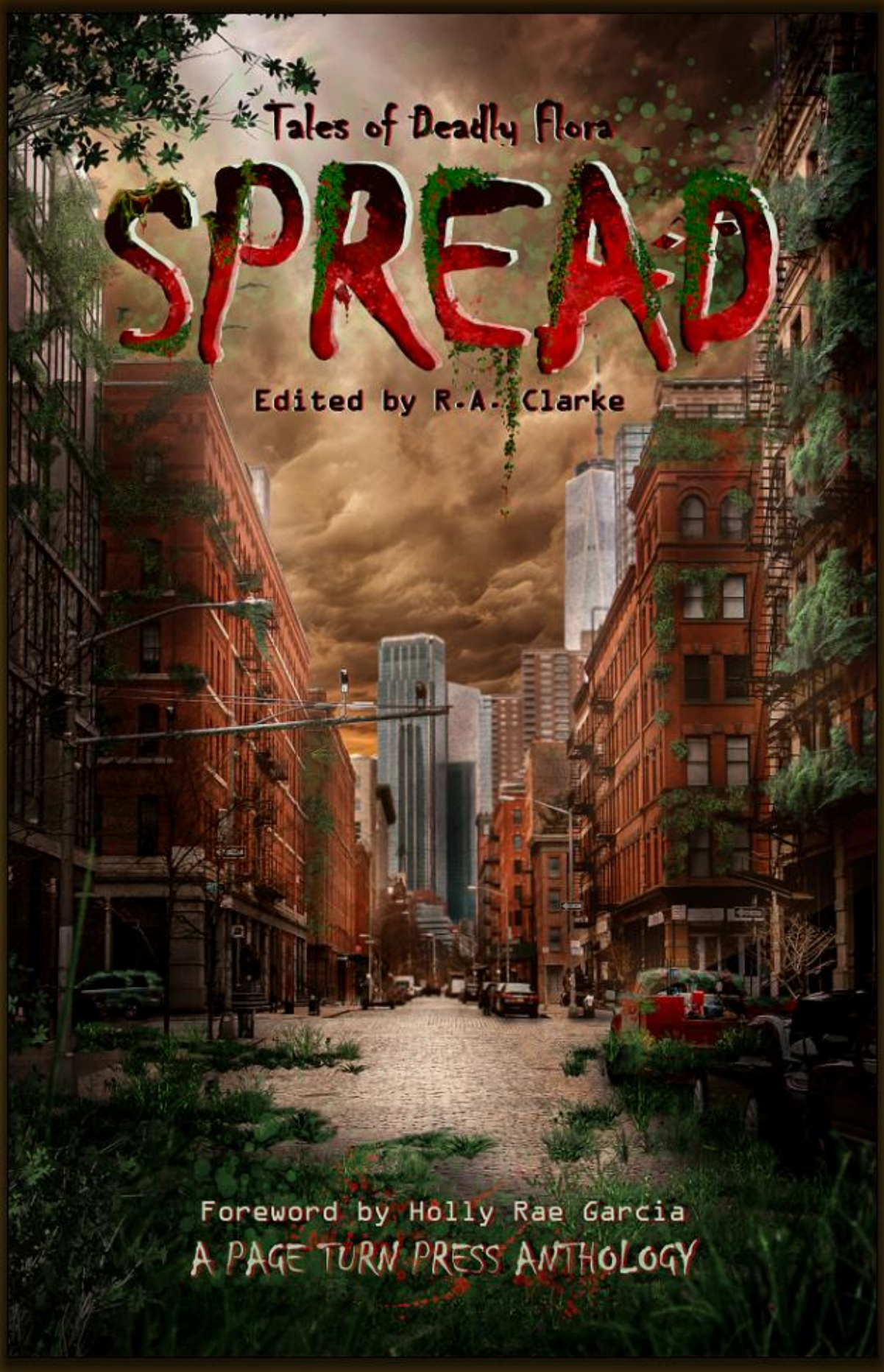
Are you ready to experience the plant-pocalypse?



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Death by Donation | ***Joshua Skye***

The hunchbacked old woman could have been anyone's grandmother. She had a face etched like an antique map, the wrinkles of age had granted her a strange commonly pleasant appearance if you didn't pay attention to the eyes. There was nothing kindly about them. Dark and devious, the brown was nearly black and the whites were yellowed. They held profound and dark secrets, harbored curious horrors, you could just tell. Where you might dismiss her in public as some frail, ailing old thing passing you by, spending time with her would shatter such preconceptions. Her presence exuded a unique authority, arrogance, and a disturbingly concentrated malice. She had power, not of a physical nature, but the sort she wielded behind closed doors in particularly insidious ways. I was no mere guest. So heavy and haunting this place that my shoulders tensed up toward my ears. I had a terrifying suspicion that should I not fulfil the reason for my presence in her laboratory, I could be ordered dealt with without any hesitation or dispute from the proverbial powers that be.

What in hell was going on in this unnerving facility with its unassuming facade and queerly lighted innards? It was almost as if it had been crafted by a fan of neon-drenched '80s genre films. Reds and greens and extensive shadows dominated various stations where silent drones in medical attire went about their singular assignments perhaps clueless to what their colleagues were doing, definitely ignorant of their superior's disconcerting true goals as evident by the exponentially increasing security measures I was encountering along the way, all of which my host passed through without lifting a finger.

Dr. Helena Sandoval was not unknown to me, she was popular in her particular circles, those small fringe medical factions forever seeking fundings for their research that was widely-believed to be questionable and nefarious. She was not well-respected outside them in those orbiting scientific realms she probably viewed as bothersome and unnecessary. I was one of those satellites apparently. Well, a satellite of a satellite of a satellite really. I wasn't a peer so much as a critic, a rising expert in my own right, the morals and integrities of Death by Donation and its dubious sisters Imminent Death Donation, and Prolonged Living Donation – a state of being most people were blissfully and thankfully unaware of. I'm speaking of medical organ endowments, of course, and the ethics behind harvesting them from – shall we say – benefactors in various stages of life and death. Although I hadn't been told specifically why I was there, I'd been in similar situations and knew well enough what was going on.

I was being used to sign off on research that frightened the moneybags that funded it in the high hopes of immortalizing themselves in some way or adding to their already bloated fortunes. The biggest difference between this and those other circumstances was Dr. Sandoval herself and the stomach-turning influence she had among those that walked in the shadows. Homicidal corruption in science wasn't unheard of, but it wasn't something I had ever been involved with before. There was a reason I stayed far away from the slithering cold-blooded brood of the world's aristocracy, politicians, religious institutions, the military, and celebrities among other snakes. The rich and powerful in every one of Hell's Circles would welcome you with open arms when they needed you, and then be rid of you just as effortlessly and quickly, often in the harshest manner imaginable. Character assassination was quite the favorite form of exile, but you could be scapegoated for their iniquities, and that could be worse than death. Nothing, no matter how unscrupulous or even unimaginable, was off the table for those that believed themselves earthbound gods. And I had family that could be threatened too, used to the benefit of the elites.

There was no doubt in my mind, as Dr. Sandoval led me deeper into her nightmarishly illuminated realm, that I wasn't the only one in danger. Areas where her assistants worked with vials and microscopes gradually gave way to walls of caged animals that were disquietingly silent. Even if in a rage within their tiny confines, slamming themselves against the walls, pulling at the bars, beating their heads against the floors, monkeys, dogs, cats, and other creatures twisted their faces in grotesque contortions, eyes like saucers and mouths agape, no sounds emanating forth. Even animals with their vocal cords cut made pitiful noises, these created no resonances at all, not even breathy rushes of air. There were no screams, no whimpers, no whines, no distressed inhuman pleas for help or shrieks of existential horror. It was terrifying, but as horrific as that room was, the next was even worse. In a crude and sterile provisional environment perhaps meant to be some generic home right out of a vintage sitcom, there were children…zombie-like children.

I'd been accosted by two of Sandoval's henchmen immediately after leaving the stage of a debate I'd attended on the semantics and ethics of Prolonged Living Donation during a symposium on Assisted Suicide in a

country where such practices were already legal. There'd been nothing subtle about them, having the appearance and demeanor of stereotypical Men in Black, pale skin, flawless suits, stoic expressions, emotionless voices. It was the weird start to an excursion that would only become more and more surreal as it continued. I was whisked away to a private runway and a ten-seat plane attended by a skeleton crew offering absolutely no refreshments at all. How rude, especially considering the way I'd been invited to this consultation in a completely different country. The music playing over the dated, scratchy speakers was exactly what played for those dead-eyed children in that windowless lab deep inside Sandoval's netherworld, eerie variations of '70s hits sans the vocals that sounded like old cassette tapes stretched from overuse. After an hour of listening to the mind-numbing music, not a single word from the henchmen or crew members, not even a word from the pilot, I couldn't take it anymore and had to at least attempt conversation…

"Did you know that where once we could only keep a body alive for a few weeks after brain death we can now do it indefinitely with the use of simple computer programing?" There was no reaction from my flight companions, none at all. I continued, mostly to fill the air with something other than the goddamn depressing music. "The utilization of complex artificial intelligence isn't needed, merely an unpretentious program that a kindergartner could use and successfully maintain. And it wouldn't be a motionlessness sack of tissue either, through simple commands it can move, a smile, blinking eyes, a head turn, hand gestures. Researchers in Munich were able to get a body to stand and walk around the room. Sexual arousal has been achieved as well, erections in males, the swelling and moistening of the vagina. Of course, there were studies that had to be shut down in France and China when it was discovered that bodies were being sexually defiled, but the research continues unabated in Switzerland, Japan, and South Korea, almost no oversight at all."

I realized I was rambling, nearly incoherently, but a combination of my spectrum disorder and a lack of sleep from twelve-hour stints during the symposium encouraged me to continue the course, speaking as if prompted and at times in absence of segways. It really wasn't off-brand for me to be staring at the disturbingly well-behaved children of Sandavol's lab while reviewing and criticizing my word vomit on the plane, being repulsed and shocked by one while cursing myself for the other. My antics and thought processes were often cringe-inducing, it was a battle to keep them and myself in check, hoping that no one would be able to figure out something was wrong with me. There wasn't technically anything wrong with me, being autistic is not some irreclaimable embarrassment these days, but the ignorant and careless way I'd been raised had gifted me with an entrenched self-loathing and social anxiety. I would fixate on my foibles especially during the most inappropriate times.

"This, naturally, leads to pondering the ethics of such practices. It goes beyond questioning philosophical meanings of life and death. What is one? What is the other? Can there be one without the other? The debate is not a binary, there are so many sides it's almost dizzying, not only for the families of the deceased…and even that is up for debate, the state of the body. Is the person deceased? The body is clearly functioning, is unconscious operation life? Science isn't the final word on it, we must take into account spiritual beliefs, and the fundamentalists of every flavor are certainly letting their opinions be heard. I'm sure you've read about the riots in the United Kingdom mirrored by the protests in the United States. Pro-life vigilantes are proving how not very pro-life they actually are in violent attacks so noxious they make the bloodshed over abortion rights seem like flippant disagreements. Christian Evangelical and Muslim extremists took out facilities in London, San Francisco and New York recently. Huge explosions. No survivors. Speaking of, we're not going to…"

A flight attendant interrupted me, "We're already here, sir. Fasten your seatbelt for landing."

I hadn't unfastened it. Relaxing as much as I could, I turned my attention out the window to the spray of city lights below trying to figure out where I'd been taken. I didn't have a clue, and no one bothered to tell me. As I followed the vile old woman through her child-abusing hellscape, I played the whole ordeal over and over in my mind, from backstage at the conference to the plane landing, my every word and thought between, but was only pulled out of my gratuitous mental self-flagellation when the eyes of one child shifted to stare right at me. Until that moment, they'd only stared blankly at whatever was directly in front of them. Some were propped up in front of a television playing creepy black and white cartoons from long ago, others might have been reading the books in their hands if they were actually looking at them, and a few had been given well-worn toys to not play with.

The one that looked at me was being examined by three of Sandoval's drones, two touching and poking and listening while the third took notes. He was a boy, they all were I just realized. No matter the thought gymnastics I

engaged in for those few seconds I'd locked eyes with that child to rationally, scientifically explain this, nothing made sense other than Sandoval's blatant misandry. She was known for it, though she was hardly a champion of fellow women either. She'd as soon run a female colleague over as she would a man, but took particular delight in lording over males in even the pettiest of ways. I'm sure whoever her financial benefactor was that had required my input for peace of mind, perhaps even legal reasons, had truly and profoundly pissed her off at merely suggesting me let alone demanding my involvement. I had to proceed with the utmost caution and give the scientist no outwards displays of my objection to the horrors she was clearly engaged in, no easy task. I'd always struggled to control my facial expressions. There was one more security point to go through. What nightmare lay beyond? Goosebumps rose over my body, but I held back a shiver that would have certainly given my contempt away.

I was not prepared for the innermost sphere of Sandoval's compound. It was at once both an eyesore in its complexity and bizarrely beautiful in its singular purpose. As the rest, the setup was bathed in neon reds and greens, the purpose of which eluded me, but although otherworldly it was certainly not for aesthetic reasons. There was definitely intention there, but I couldn't find my voice to inquire. As my eyes moved along the countless tangles of tubes that spilled from the ceiling, walls, and lowly buzzing machines down to the man they were all – to put it crudely – plugged into, my throat went instantly dry, my tongue felt made of sand. I'd become one of her voiceless minions, struck dumb by the shock of what she was doing as opposed to a paycheck she signed. As previously mentioned, I'd been asked to offer philosophical excuses for what many believed to be inexcusable several times before, but as Sandoval explained the Death by Donation beginnings of this patient's decent into her madness, for the first time, I felt abject dread, a gut-wrenching tearing at the walls of my own existential fragility. Had this man really volunteered for this, and if so how utterly hopeless had life been for him to come to such a self-prescribed conclusion? And worse, did any of it actually matter?

From his chiseled facial features to a body born to inspire hauntingly sensual Renaissance paintings, he was objectively beautiful, runway model handsome in every imaginable way. Naked and uncovered, lips slightly parted, cheeks just this side of a glowing blush, penis seemingly at half-mast, testicles slowly tightening to the shaft and then loosening to hang over the edge of the seat, he could have been sleeping in that radiant clear acrylic chair dreaming perhaps of romantic rendezvous. But I didn't need the heartless old crone to tell me what was happening inside his cranium. Two monochromatic fluoroscopy monitors sluggishly revolved around his head, the most advanced equipment of its kind I had ever seen. All the usual structures were there on the screens, bones, eyes, tendons, teeth, tongue and other innards…all except a brain, and yet the skull wasn't empty.

Something hideous squirmed in there.

Sandoval's scratchy smoker's voice took on an unsettling cadence akin to exhilaration as she told me of the lifeform's discovery during a privately funded expedition to the Gakkel Ridge, it's lifecycle that for some reason includes human males, and the Pentagon's rabid desire to weaponize it. And there it was, the exact origin of my presence. There wasn't a military official alive who cared about anything beyond his own warmongering power, pragmatic consequences be damned. This was the result of a political oversight committee's frantic yearning to ease its collective conscious in pondering future budget requests, as if the ever-hungry military industrial complex wasn't consuming most of our tax dollars to begin with. And yet all of these realizations were but fleeting thoughts. I dwelled on none, instead far more transfixed by the creature twitching on the rotating screens.

It was unlike anything I'd ever seen, I scarcely have the proper vocabulary to describe it. There were endless sneering mouths of needle-teeth that opened and closed and melded into each other, sometimes crafting a bigger one, other times producing connected orifices fighting for dominance. The number of them were matched by eyes that slithered along the coiled limacine body bumping into, but never coalescing with the fang-filled apertures. From the wormy trunk there were shuddering proboscises, infundibulum tips slurping at the inner bowl of the skull. And there were human-like genitalia, a baker's dozen of them, swarming along the outer flesh with the other organs. Some were closed and flaccid, others wanting and engorged, distinctly not the small tightened mounds of fetuses.

This thing was an adult.

I was startled when Sandoval leaned in close giving me the displeasure of feeling and smelling her hot rancid breath, a stench that reminded me of buttered garlic and sweaty armpits devoid of deodorizer. What the hell has she been eating? She was wide-eyed and grinning from one massive ear to the larger other. "It's

fascinating, isn't it?" she asked as if expecting me to be in love with it. Needless to say, I was not at all spellbound by the grotesquery, but quite repulsed in every way, up to and including the surely dubious way the patient had been obtained for this outlandish and extremely unethical experiment. Never having been one to easily keep my facial expressions from hiding my thoughts, the doctor recognized my disdain immediately and it was not what she'd craved. Doubtlessly, she'd heard of my reluctant approval of various other projects that wouldn't necessarily fly with the general public and had hoped I'd sign off on this nightmare, perhaps looking beyond the Death by Donation controversy in favor of the potential benefits, certainly in this case being the military applications. She was disappointed and I knew that wasn't a good thing, definitely of no advantage to me. As she opened her mouth to indubitably threaten me or mine, the handsome guinea pig's skull erupted!

It was a deafening explosion of bone and blood, my sight going red and ears instantly ringing. I knew I was screaming, but couldn't hear it. I knew there was chaos, but I couldn't see it. Instinctively, my hands went to my face to wipe it free of the warm lumpy tissue and I urgently blinked away the crimson cataracts. Holding itself aloft by the unfurled proboscises, the monster loomed above us letting out its otherworldly birth-shriek. Eyes rolled about to watch Sandoval's minions scattering while the old hag herself just stood there gazing up at it with an expression that was distinctly not horror, but one of a proud mother…that is until the body of the beast turned inside out to expose yet another mouth, one that ran its length, one with even sharper and longer teeth set inside a set of jaws that suddenly launched forward like the tricky maw of a Mitsukurina Owstoni to bite her head off in its own shower of gore.

The ringing in my ears started to fade, but was replaced with the slurping and crunching of the monster eating its Mother Frankenstein, a sickening sound and accompanying sight that shattered my very sanity. My disgust became amusement and my screams turned to laughter as I fought against whoever it was that had grabbed me and dragged me from the room. Anger rose in me, scorching and uncontrollable, when the doors closed and I could no longer see the preposterous consumption of Sandoval. I remember little of what transpired in the immediate aftermath, violently hostile toward my savior through the many rings of a mad scientist's cold inferno, the arrival of the military and the subsequent sweep of the building, and the capture…not elimination…of the fiendish lifeform. Stark and dreary reality gave way to wet and ghastly imaginings of the monster's initial meal. Oh, how I wish I'd witnessed it all.

When my wits finally reemerged, albeit not with any semblance of sanity, I was in an icy white room with padded walls, floor, and ceiling. The powers that be, the ones that hadn't gotten my approval but would certainly continue their deceitful deeds utilizing the Pentagon's dishonorable lost trillions in taxpayer funds, had found a way to eliminate me without shedding my blood. Who knows how long I'd be locked away in a facility that in all likelihood had no name and was completely unknown to even the most well-informed conspiracy theorist. Would I stick to my laurels and insist upon my story or would I feign rationality and ignorance? Neither would make any difference, not really. I'm not meant to leave this place, this prison of white. The music playing over outdated, scratchy speakers was exactly what played for those dead-eyed children and that beautiful naked man in those windowless labs deep inside Sandoval's netherworld, eerie variations of '70s hits without the vocals. It sounded like old cassette tapes stretched from overuse, stretched like my tongue, stretched like my arms and legs, stretched like my genitals…stretched like my mind. As my thoughts clung to images of the fiend's first feast, I couldn't help but wonder…

When will I be the next Death by Donation?

About the Author:
Joshua Skye is the author of 13 books, including *The Angels of Autumn* and *Cradle*. He lives in Texas with his husband and their son.

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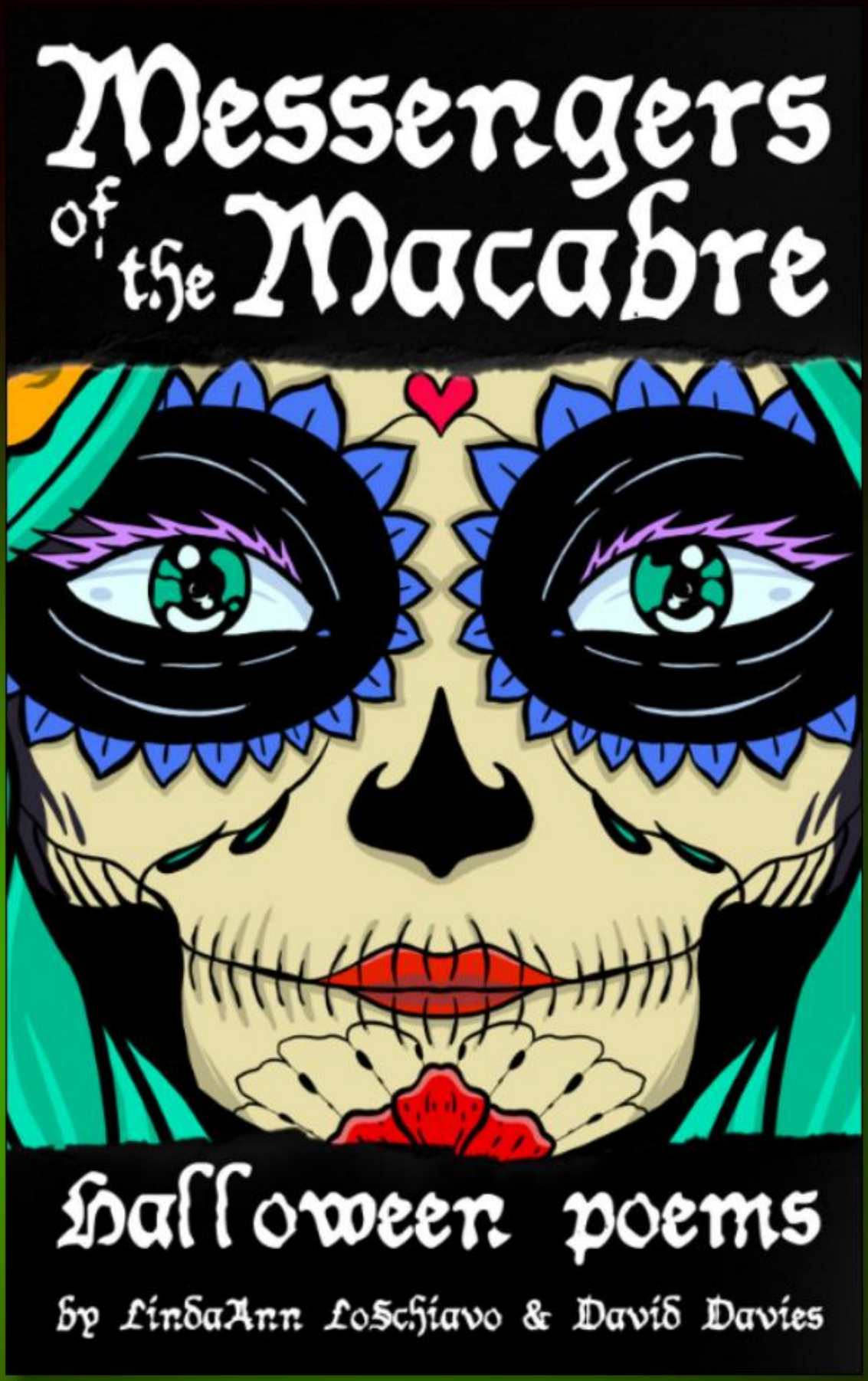
Step inside and embrace a haunted harvest of verses embracing bewitchment, boneyards, and all things that go... *Boo*!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Trapped | ***Celeste Zerai***

That boy was a nightmare. He ran through farms stealing livestock and crops and laughed when the farmers could not tell what belonged to whom. He broke into people's homes to knock over their furniture and destroy any fine ceramic art. He pushed kids as he walked by and mocked them when they started to cry. He pulled the pants down of adults, used knives to cut their shirts, and put mud on their shoes so they would never shine again. At night, he sometimes took a blade and cut off women's hair to revel in their screams the next morning. Once, he convinced the town a ghost was haunting it by setting people's belongings on fire in the middle of the night and leaving them in town the next morning as an omen to their demise. The worst part about him was his hunger. He stole pies from windows and left not a crumb for the rats. He picked all the apples and oranges from even the tallest of trees. He ate the freshest of breads right from the pan. He drained the milk of cows and hoarded all the eggs of chickens without so much as a thanks to the farmers. Of the crops he stole he ate half of them in broad daylight. Yet still he complained about never being full.

Everyone in town said the boy should be punished. He should be thrown into prison, hanged, or burned at the stake to drive out the evil inside him. But either by luck or skill, they could never fully prove him to be the culprit of his crimes. So instead they went to his mother, begging her to discipline her child. They told her he's a monster, and if she does not discipline him then she is fostering its stay. She agreed that he needed to learn a lesson, and in front of the masses she scolded her child often, however she never disciplined him on her own and fostered his destructive desires.

One day, the boy stole every last scrap of food from a neighbor two streets down. This neighbor just so happened to be his mother's mother and father. That was her final straw. As soon as her son came home with blueberry-stained hands and pockets full of pastries she took him to his room and locked him inside. To make sure he couldn't get out, she barred the door and sealed his window shut. Now his only way of escape was to gain her permission. For that, he would have to learn to control himself and to treat the townsfolk with the respect they deserve.

The first couple days the boy screamed and kicked and cried to be free. He banged and scratched and clawed at the door but the mother would not relent. She only opened the door to give him food twice a day, then it was locked and barred back up. Even as her child begged, cried for her, she would not open the door. Not until he apologized and promised to be better.

At the end of the week, she learned she had to leave town for a while. She couldn't very well let her son out while she was away, not until he learned his lesson, so she asked the townspeople to watch over him in her absence. Check on him, make sure he's okay, feed him, anything a parent would do with a child locked in their room. Many agreed to help, some even promising to visit thrice a day to keep the boy company. With many thanks and even more prayers, she left the child in the care of her town and left.

The town, however, had other plans. To them, inside that house was a monster living inside the body of a boy. A miserable creature, and the town pitied his mother for caring for it, but they wouldn't dare go near such an evil presence. Because of their own fear and disdain, none would approach the house that held the boy. Children would cross the road or pick another route to avoid passing the house. Men and women alike would scoff or shiver when they walked by. They all listened each day and each night as the child screamed and screamed. Many nearby went without sleep as his howls filled the night.

During the time the boy's mother was gone, some would stay outside the house and cast their prayers over his room to banish the demon inside him or to protect the house from his rage, but their prayers fell to deaf ears as the screaming drowned out their voices. The boy begged for his mom, he begged to be free, but of everything he begged for some food. For some bread or meat or fruit or milk. For even a small slice of cheese he begged all those who passed by. He screamed out promises to be better so long as he could have some food. But the town never believed him. They knew the boy better and knew to go inside that house was to open Pandora's box. So, he stayed in his room, locked away, screaming at the town that kept him imprisoned.

***

Four weeks later, the mom returned to a quiet town. Children played in the streets. Adults talked and laughed. Elders sat and watched the sunset from their homes. No one cried. No one jumped. Everything was as it should be.

She spoke with one of the people she entrusted her son to, happy that the town was getting along. Surely her son was better tempered now!

"Your son?" The person laughed. "Yes, your son! Our prayers worked, they finally worked! After days and days of nonstop screaming, he finally quieted enough for our prayers to reach his ears! That wretched monster has been quiet ever since! We've had a whole week of nothing but peace!"

The mother beamed. "Oh, that's wonderful! Thank you for sending someone into the house to pray for him! I'm sure those words helped him calm down!"

"Send someone in? Oh no, no, no, dear, we sent not a soul inside! The boy cannot be trusted with something as fragile as one's life! We had someone pray outside, just beyond his window!"

All at once she was stunned. "You mean to tell me no one went to check on my son?"

"We passed by the house from time to time, but no one dared go inside. We had to put our lives over his! I certainly did not want to lose mine!"

"No one thought to check on him? To feed him? He hasn't had any food since I left?"

At this, the person grew pale. No, no one thought to feed the child. "Could he not have gotten it himself?" They asked in a whisper. All those listening began to murmur.

The mother cried out at this. Of course the boy could not! He was locked in his room, shut out of the rest of the house! She asked for the town to feed him twice a day and nothing more because of this, but instead they avoided her son and neglected his needs. Before anyone could argue with her or defend themselves, she ran to her house to be sure her child was alive.

When she opened the door, the smell of blood overpowered her senses. Everything was still. Too still. She begged and pleaded to whatever god existed that the boy be alive. Even if he was a monster, he was still her child. She ran to the door of her son's room. From the other side, she heard… chewing. Tearing. The occasional hiccup. She tore the bar off the door and swung it open.

The last remaining rays of sun shone on a dark, dust covered room. Dried and fresh blood spattered the floor, the walls, the bed sheets of the room that belonged to her son. The boy sat in the middle of the floor, hunched over himself, biting into something. Though he faced his window at first, he turned around at the sound of the door opening to look at his mother. His left hand bled from the stubs of where his fingers used to be. Both his arms had holes from where he tore into his own flesh, his left arm still dripping blood from what must be a new chunk of flesh. Blood dripped from his mouth, down his chin, and onto his now red and black shirt.

"Hi, Momma…" His words held no emotion as he spat blood and chunks of flesh onto the floor. "I was good, Momma. Good all the days…"

The boy's mother stood in shock, her trembling hand covering her mouth.

"I'm hungry Momma…" He stood to reveal more holes and bites in his legs. "May I have some food now?"

About the Author:
Celeste Zerai is an amateur writer interested in a variety of genres, from horror to romance to fantasy to everything in between. She reads and watches anything with a well-written plot, captivating character stories, and an immersive setting. Celeste also attends university as a full-time student, currently aiming for her bachelor's degree in Psychology with a goal to receive her PhD.

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Voodoo | ***RJ Meldrum***

They were in a scruffy, dusty antique market, the shelves laden with old pottery, brass and other bric-a-brac.

"Well, what do we have here?" asked Sam.

It was an incongruous sight, sitting amongst dusty toys on the shelf. He picked it up. It was a small, crudely made fabric doll, with buttons for eyes and a tuft of hair stapled onto the head.

"This is in the wrong section. It's not a toy, it's a voodoo doll."

"It's creepy," replied Angela.

"I like it."

She didn't, but she was used to him collecting all sorts of junk. No doubt it would end up on a shelf in his office. He took it to the check-out. The owner glanced at the label.

"Interesting piece. Picked it up at a house sale a few days ago. Came from a collection of the weird and grotesque."

The owner took the credit card and swiped it, then placed the doll into a bag.

"Could it be real?" she asked.

"Wouldn't surprise me, "said the owner.

"But it looks almost brand new."

"It is definitely not old, but that doesn't mean it isn't real. Voodoo rituals still take place on some Caribbean islands. That hair will have been taken from some poor soul. Controlled by the voodoo priestess, he'd be made to suffer, forced to commit crimes. Killed even, if the heart was pierced or the doll was burned or crushed."

She thought of that person, living in terror of a priestess who controlled their fate. Where was that person now? Were they still waiting for the next bolt of pain or the next command to commit evil deeds? She shivered at the thought. How horrible.

At home, Sam placed the doll on the shelf in his office, just as she had predicted. It sat there, grinning at her.

"I hate that thing."

"Don't be silly, it's perfectly harmless."

"I wonder what the victim is thinking. Is he wondering why nothing has happened to him recently?"

"Nonsense, it's just a doll. I'm sure that hair is fake. It isn't linked to anyone. The owner was just teasing you."

"No, there's something about it. I think it is connected to someone."

"Don't think about it. You'll forget it's even in the house."

Days turned into weeks. Angela didn't forget. Instead, the obsession burrowed deeper into her consciousness. She dreamt about it. She felt the fear and hatred of the victim. She was furious Sam didn't seem to care. He kept telling her not to worry, not to get stressed about it. It was just a doll.

Over breakfast one morning, her head pounding after a night of nightmares, she pleaded with him.

"Please get rid of it!"

"For the umpteenth time, no!"

"Why not? If you loved me you would!"

"No, not this game again. First, it'll be the doll, then it'll be my other collectables. Then what, will you expect me to give up my office? I live in this house too, you know, and I'm entitled to have my things here. I don't criticize all the crap you keep around the place!"

She stared at him in disgust. She hated him, hated his arrogance. If he wouldn't do something about the doll, she would.

The next day she waited until he left for work, then entered his office. Unwilling to touch it, she used a pencil to knock the doll into a bag. She headed back to the store where they bought the doll.

"I want a refund on this."

The owner pointed to the sign next to the cash register.

NO REFUNDS.

"Well, can't you just take it back?

"If I remember correctly, it was your husband who bought this item. I'm not sure it's yours to return."

"It isn't."

A voice spoke from behind her. She turned to see her husband.

"Sam…" she faltered.

"We'll talk about this in the car."

They left the store and started the drive home. He overtook a slow-moving truck.

"I'm not even angry, even though I deserve to be. I thought you might do something like this, so I took the morning off work and followed you."

"Nice to know you don't trust me,"

"I know you. I knew you'd try to get rid of it."

"Well, I don't like the thing. I loathe it."

She felt an uncontrollable, rising disgust. She reached behind and grabbed the bag containing the doll. Before he could stop her, she opened the window and threw it out. He braked and pulled onto the verge.

"What are you doing?"

"I can't stand that thing! It's vile! I won't have it in my home again."

"We've discussed this a million times! It's just a doll."

"It's not! It's part of a human being, someone is linked to that hideous thing."

He glanced in the rear-view mirror and saw the dark smudge of the doll in the middle of the road.

"If you believe that, why did you toss it out? Imagine the pain you just caused them."

That statement brought her back to normal.

"I didn't think."

"Let's head back and pick it up. It was too expensive just to throw away."

She started to object, but he interrupted.

"You've won. I'm taking it back to the shop. Maybe he'll give me store credit. But do me a favor, after we pick it up, handle it with care. You don't want to cause any more harm to the poor victim who is, no doubt, now in considerable pain."

His tone was thickly sarcastic, but she responded seriously.

"No, you're right. I've changed my mind. Let's keep it. At least if it's sitting on your shelf, it won't come to any harm. And if it isn't damaged, then the person it's linked to will remain healthy."

He began to turn the car, but before he could complete the maneuver, she shouted in alarm. The truck, the one they'd just passed, was rumbling down the road towards the doll.

About the Author:

Richard is originally from Scotland, but now calls rural Ontario his home. When not writing or caring for a menagerie of animals on his hobby farm, he works as an academic in Toronto. He is a proud part of SCP and Pen of the Damned, and is an affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association. He has had over 200 drabbles, short stories and novellas published since 2015. His work has appeared in a number of anthologies and magazines, including The Sirens Call.

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The Garden | ***Annie Zamparelli***

Olivia awoke to darkness, having neglected to turn on the lamp prior to dozing off with a thick, innocuously bound novel. It was a love story. Not her favorite, but it seemed fitting this evening.

She sighed. Her lungs filled with sweet vanilla and stale man-stench.

It'd been hours, yet his scent still lingered in this room. Sweat and cheap after shave, not anything like the others.

Olivia fingered the base of the lamp to switch on its low wattage. Freakish shadows climbed walls, speckling the ceiling like jagged cut pieces of a grotesque mosaic. Flowered upholstery on the loveseat and a matching accent chair seemed too large and cartoonish in the faded iridescence.

Two teacups sat on the little glass table between them; one was empty, still encrusted with herbal residue from its last sip.

"I'll have to clean that up," she murmured to no one.

A *snap* against the window caused her to twist around. The darkness on the other side stared back at her stout reflection, and she paused momentarily to admire her thick shapely form.

Her mouth lifted slightly as she noted the spark of satisfaction glinting in her eyes.

As she moved to the window to close the drapes, Olivia paused and stared out into the garden. Once a thriving array of colorful flowers and neatly manicured shrubs, she had allowed her plot to decay; evergreen branches lopped over wooden balusters and the various deciduous plants stretched their long bare limbs up the side of the house as if begging attention.

Despite their grey pallor in the blackness of night, little buds peeked from their stems in what she could only assume to be a feeble attempt at survival, oblivious to the neglect and indifference of its proprietor.

Reluctant eyes were drawn to the center of the lawn. She no longer visits there. The gazebo lay empty, and the once beautiful Zephirine clutching the splintered wood have branched out like spindly fingers suffocating any life that may have grown at its feet. The scratched gray and weathered timbers just waited there, perhaps anticipating the return of two lovers who once sat on its bench.

The mound of fresh earth beyond the structure appeared to have bulged and become slightly more pronounced than when she had finished hours before.

Confident she'd patted the soil flat, she made a mental note to check in the morning.

Another *snap* of the glass caught her breath, and she jerked her head back.

Olivia studied the glass briefly, making sure it hadn't cracked. It was probably just settling as the evening air cooled the panes.

Grabbing the linen drapes, she pulled the folds together to block out the night.

The moaning started so low, just a decibel within what the human ear could decipher, she barely heard it. Or maybe she thought it was the muted whisper of the breeze through the briars and bushes that she'd ignored and now lay straggly over forgotten earth. An empty sigh of mourning for the death of the living and perhaps those who were yet to join them.

An unmistakable howl reverberated through the house causing Olivia to stagger and fall against the sofa.

All was suddenly quiet. She listened and waited.

Steps clunked on the wide-planked floor, and she found herself facing the window again.

She reached out to gently pull back the curtains and leaned forward to see. Her nose so close to the rail of the sash, warm breath fogged the glass.

There was little light from the waning gibbous moon, yet she glimpsed movement near the beleaguered structure.

Olivia blinked into the murky night.

No, no. That can't be. It had to be someone else.

But why would there be anyone on my property right now? Maybe someone saw something and came to investigate.

Beads formed on her scalp.

There had been no one around all day. Well…except for *him*. She'd checked and was sure she would have noticed unwanted visitors lurking around. Heard them, at least.

I'm just imagining things, she thought, and smiled at the absurdity, turning to leave the room.

A light tapping at the window seemed innocuous enough. Bushes, just beginning to bud, too close to the house because she'd not trimmed their scrawny gnarled branches months ago. A rhythmic beat to sooth even the most sensitive of hearts.

She thought so little of it, she picked up the teacups and headed for the kitchen.

The low growl stopped her at the threshold. Teacups clinked against saucers in her shaking hands, and the lump in her throat protested as she tried to swallow.

Olivia turned to face the shadowed space, the faint light of the kitchen down the hall stretching her silhouette to the far reaches of the room.

The faint *tap* gradually increased into a pounding that surely would break the window, allowing whatever was creating such beastly sounds entrance into the house. Framed artwork of meadows and butterflies bounced viciously against paneled walls, precariously jostling side to side. Wooden planks buckled and slammed repeatedly into the floor joists below.

Olivia backed against the door frame.

When all bedlam suddenly stopped, she hesitated to breathe, fearful of making the slightest noise that could awaken what lay beyond those walls.

"Olivia," a voice gurgled, almost inaudible.

She dropped the crockery. Objects in the room appeared ghost-like, phantoms of the benign that only gave pleasure during the light of day, taking on the anthropomorphic attributes of the corporeal.

Maybe she hadn't done a thorough job this time.

No. She was good at determining body mass to extract the precise portion required. She was consistent in her measurements, and he'd finished the entire cup.

Looking down at her hands, she willed them to stop trembling. Whether it was *he* trying to exact revenge, or a nosy, albeit ambitious passerby – as unlikely as *that* could be – she had a task to complete. How he had managed to rattle the entire house was a mystery, yet she could think of no other explanation.

Olivia rushed to the kitchen and grabbed the serrated knife. It was a sloppy method, but she had to be sure.

Pulling open the back door, she poised for action, lips pursed and welding her weapon tightly in hand.

He was going to be sorry.

She stood on bare earth, her feet sinking into its soft, muddy pillows and eyed the newly filled grave. It had risen about a foot, yet was still intact. Perhaps his body was beginning to bloat.

That was unlikely. There hadn't been enough time lapse for the putrefaction stage of decay.

Olivia quickly scanned the garden and was about to return inside when she heard air hissing and belching.

The lifeless soil surrounding the gazebo bulged and breathed. Every mound that she had dug and painstakingly buried her treasures within erupted, spewing its contents.

At her feet, the soil ruptured. She jolted backward. Discordant voices overpowered the pounding in her ears.

He emerged from the dark orifice that was once his final resting place. A skull appeared first, absent a mandible, attached to a spine blackened and fractured. Radius and clavicle surfaced at once, each skeletal part exiting their grave in no particular order and assembling in a patchwork of distorted patterns, no longer decipherable as human.

Olivia merely stood there, her heart thudding against her chest, bile collecting in the back of her throat. She tried to move, run away, but her shaking legs would not budge.

Others slithered from their graves, no longer the empty husks of men who had the misfortune to dine in her home, but a hodge podge of disjointed bones and rotted flesh, knitting together as one beast. A beast of the damned.

The last of them, the one who had just sat in the parlor for his last cup of tea and who had barely time to grow cold and succumb to the stiffening rigor that befell his predecessors, crawled to his feet trudging heavily to unite with his brethren.

They mingled and moaned as though every connection of joints bore them unimaginable pain. A jumble of decaying flesh cemented together with marrow and the blackest of blood that once ran red in vigorous masculinity, awkwardly jostled into place, one piece upon another, erecting an unfathomable creature of the dead. Multiple

sets of eyes from every deceased suitor positioned themselves in the front, rolling wildly within round sockets, tethered only by sinew and cartilage.

The latest victim became the mouth. Disproportionate to the rest of the body, it sat obverse to all other of its parts, prepared to gorge and satiate its glutenous appetite. A gaping black hole surrounded by multiple rows of teeth, sharpened with vengeful acuity, eager to take in all that dare come before its grisly splendor. A perpetual serrated grin.

Without warning, a long bony appendage reached out. A network of femurs and fibulas intertwined with decomposing fibrous epidermis, wrapped its length twice around the stunned woman's neck. The crackle of bones and slosh of dying flesh did not drown out the deep chuckle that spewed from within its depths.

"You have released me, Olivia." Its demonic voice rattled her bones.

Drawing her close, her face inches from a sea of eyes, the abominable creature moaned, a tortured breath of agony that peeled skin from her cheeks.

"As your reward, you shall be the first."

Its teeth clamped onto Olivia's right arm. A burning sensation shot through her torso as she tried to pull away. Each jagged tooth penetrated her skin and muscle, digging further into her flesh before hitting bone.

Olivia choked on her own scream.

"Please, stop! Please, I'll do *anything*!" Her pleads slurred through saliva that could not be swallowed.

A crack of a bone, and pop from a shoulder socket, her extremity was freed from its torso. She watched with terror-filled eyes as it chewed and munched, the knife still clasped in the deadened hand, the silver blade posing no deterrent for the massive beast.

Weakened, her eyes blurred as she felt the sticky fluid from the jagged orifice at her mutilated shoulder spread through the fabric of her shirt to gush downward and feed the soil.

Soon after the mangled appendage vanished into the depths of the beast, its jaws fastened against Olivia's left shoulder, jerking its muzzle to loosen and separate with a tear and another pop.

Olivia could not protest, could not recoil from its hungry advances, as it proceeded to dismember her limbs and delight in each fleshy mouthful before gulping the remains of its morsel.

Suspended above the ground, Olivia sensed life's blood rushing from her open wounds, her body withering and contorting into a mass of skin and bone.

Realizing her fate was inevitable, she could only watch the approach of an immense orifice, its center a black void, rancid with the multitude of carcass fragments, before it closed over her head and clasped its bones around her crown, pausing momentarily as though relishing the anticipation and feeding on her fear.

Olivia squeezed her eyes shut as her crunching cheek bones and cranial plates ruptured, splattering mangled tissue and splintered corona.

The beast completed the task, tossing the remaining carcass down its gullet, a mechanism of phalanges and scapulas in synchronous motion to swallow the condemned into everlasting darkness.

Dripping with the ravenous desperation of a million souls, the abomination slunk to the ground and trundled through the open earth where men once had lain, moving clumsily as crackling bones rubbed one against the other, seeking the damned for repentance and consumption.

The desire to feast became more desperate as Olivia's bones wove within its structure, connecting each to another. Her uncontrollable cry shriveled into nothingness, scorned by the tortured souls within the hollow shell who shrieked and howled their own anguish and pain. She knew there'd be no forgiveness, no respite as she tasted its emptiness and insatiable hunger.

About the Author:

A.H. Zamparelli lives in New Jersey, U.S. with her husband Rick, and enjoys writing, reading mystery novels, historical biographies, and sketching. Two magazines accepted Annie's work over the last three years, and she has published two books of short stories in 2023. Annie is currently working on several WIP including a novella mystery with a supernatural twist, and a science fiction novel.

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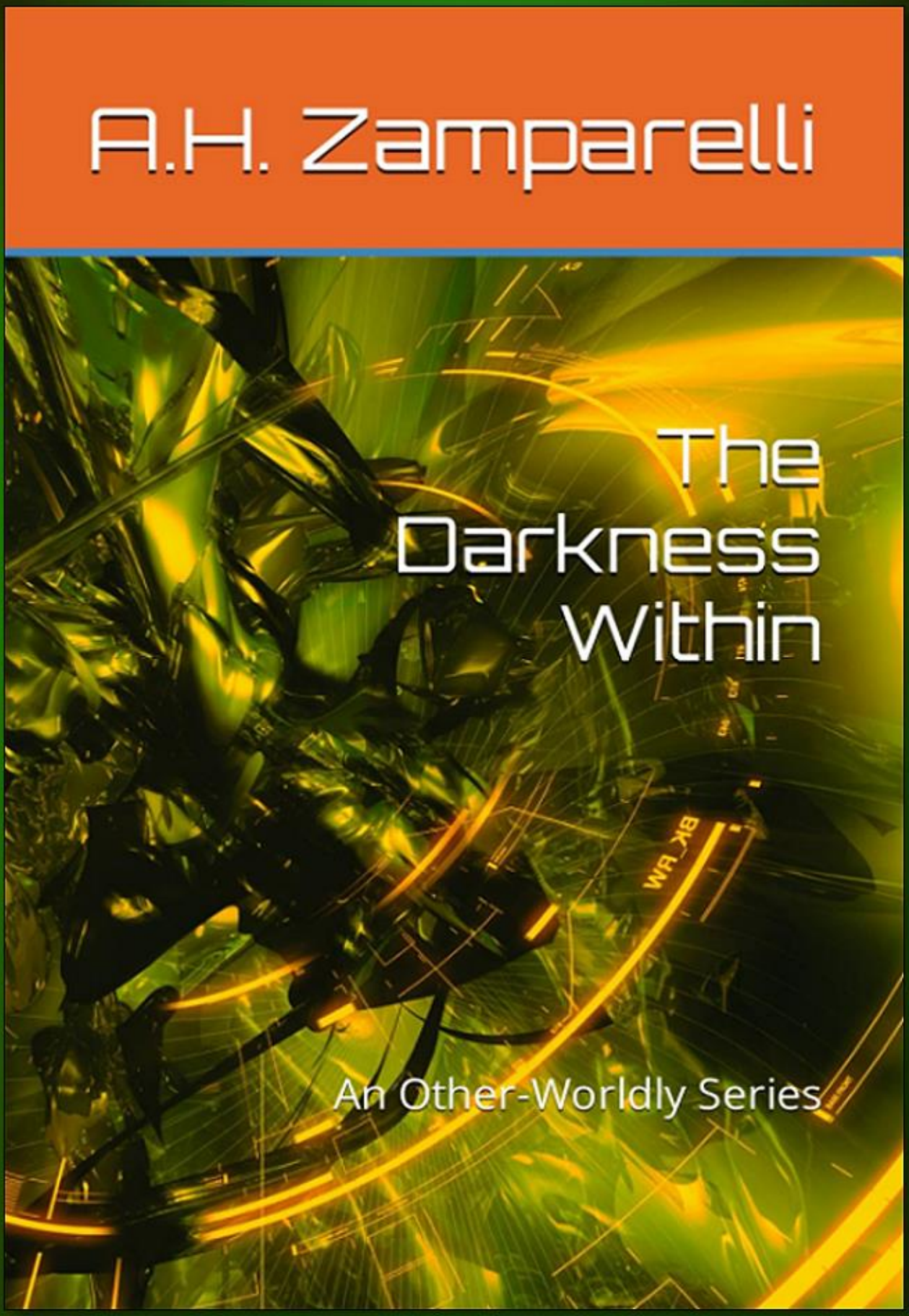

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The New Girl | ***Fariel Shafee***

What a poor little girl Tara was! When James and Lily saw her large gray eyes filled with the sadness of the ocean staring at them from her pale oval face, they immediately felt connected. It's the way you feel for a kitten left out in a stormy night. The childless middle-aged couple wanted to pick her up and give her new colorful clothes, a good bath, and a new home. "Do you like puppies?" Lily asked, glowing. The girl did not reply, but smiled.

"She had an unfortunate life," the mistress of the orphanage, Ms. Navarro told Lily as she prepared the documents. "Both her parents died. A horrific case, still unsolved. You might have read the papers." Lily looked at her curiously. Ms. Navarro looked at the smartly dressed woman with short brown hair pulled to a bun and wondered if she should tell the rest. Finally, she did. "The girl was in the room. She did not speak for months. Later, people asked her many times what had happened. She did not remember."

Lily felt a little uneasy. Jack looked straight at Ms. Navarro, trying to read further. But the room was poorly lit and the drapes were closed. "We will give her a good family, the life she deserved," Lily said. Jack did not say anything. He had decided to support his wife ever since she had the last miscarriage.

***

Tara loved the puppy. Tommy, the little white poodle, followed her all over the house. "Best friends," Lily would smile, setting the table and filling up a little bowl for the dog.

But Tara's lovely bond dissipated again. The dog died. The girl watched from far away when James found his little pet's paws and bones in the shrub when he was gardening.

"Who could have done it?" Lily screamed as Tara walked over and held her new mother's hand tightly.

***

The orphanage was quieter on Sundays. Ms. Navarro was always there, though.

"I have to know more," James demanded.

Ms. Navarro was tight-lipped. "I have already told you all."

"The paper!" James knew.

A special permission to get to the archive took a week. The news was on the front page: *Man and wife found dead. Little girl, 5, stood terrified in the room. Both the corpses had scratches and lacerations. Chunks of flesh were missing. Is there a beast in the town?*

James thought of the puppy. "There is something with the girl. Maybe a demon follows her where she goes," he mumbled, taking out his mobile. He would ask Lily to get out.

But no one picked up the phone.

Back at home, in the kitchen, Lily stood terrified as she watched the little girl who had walked in for some water suddenly grow fangs and blue slimy tentacles.

"That's how I was born," the monster whispered. "Humans do fall in love with us, like my mother did. But I can eat up the world."

Ethan's New Life | ***Fariel Shafee***

About ten miles off the coast of a peaceful village, Blue Moon Island lay filled with rough stones and prickly cacti. There were some birds that preyed on fish, and some large rats. It was a barren land that people left alone because there was nothing to hunt or gather there, and because no one had returned from that island alive.

Ethan had swum off to that island when he was ten. The mob was surely going to stone him to death if he hadn't not jumped off the cliff and disappeared. "Stay away from these people, my son," he had heard mother's faint voice as he traversed the cold blue water.

Mother had always tried to protect him, knowing well he was different. People did not like his small, speckled face and the large red spots on his arm. "He was born that way," mother would beg. "Black magic," the people would respond.

There was a mountain in the middle of Blue Moon Island. On top of it was a tree with fiery leaves. Fishermen at times saw thick fog obstructing that mountain while something moaned. "It's a large bird with claws," some would say. "An enchantress," others would confirm.

Ethan's hut was near a swamp filled with frogs, away from the mountain. He chopped up frog legs and steamed fish caught from the ocean. The man, now in his thirties, was not afraid to dive into the water. He had, after all, never

encountered that mythical creature with a long spiny tail and a large scaly body covered with greenish slime that fishermen thought ferociously ate up the men who never returned.

But Ethan did know that bird. It was about three feet between the tips of its wings, featherless, with tarry skin. The bird left Ethan alone. Once or twice a month, Ethan himself would walk up to the mountain top, whistle.

"You understand me, don't you?" he would whisper to the creature while taking off his black plastic mask and the long blades that acted as claws. The bird would circle above his head before diving down to the corpse. They had a pact. They knew who liked what and they split the flesh amicably.

"Even mother did not get me. But we know that's how it works, that's how we were born," he would assert to the bird before moving back to his hut with a little bone.

There was a wall of bones in his back yard. Each dead man or beast had something to remind him of how he was different from others, how this was the way of life. He even had little feathers stuck onto that wall. Some were from chickens he had killed when he was young, when he still lived in the village. There were rats and dogs in the meadows there. But how hungry he still was, especially when the moon shone through the fog!

Linda's Cats | ***Fariel Shafee***

What a beautiful cat it was – long white hair with little orange spots curled at the corner like a puff ball. But how scared the little creature was! It was dirty too. "Did someone throw this poor thing into the swamp?" Linda shrieked.

Jodie, Linda's friend, looked at the animal with her wide green eyes and cowered: "Look, there's blood with the mud, and scars. Something's wrong with this cat! Someone wanted to kill it."

Jodie had more suggestions: "I got a nice new puppy from the pet store," she said. "Mr. Baker told me my puppy, Teddy, is a new breed. How clean and healthy it is!"

Linda felt sad about the comparison. Yet she picked the cat up, took it home and cleaned it, gave it warm milk, and then named it Mini.

The new pet of the house was a jolly new creature. She played in the yard and chased the little mice that infested the storage areas. "What a busy little hunter!" Not only Linda, but mother too was soon very proud of the new member of the family.

As Linda played with Mini in the lawn, she often heard Teddy bark. "The dog is difficult," she heard Jodie's mother complain to her own mom one evening. "It barks night long at times, even when there's no one around. But Jodie won't let go."

The day Mini gave birth to a pack of kittens, all white with small orange specks, Linda cried out in joy. "We will have to see if we can keep so many here!" said mother.

"I promise to look after all of them,"

Linda pleaded, crying. That day, another cry was heard. Teddy was dead. The creature had tried to break free from the leash and had strangled itself. Small birds lay bloody in the lawn next to the carnivore. "I think Teddy jumped and grabbed some of those poor birds before killing himself," mother exhaled.

"Linda, you can keep two kittens," mother was firm. The girl promised to take the rest to the pound and get the other feline friends fixed.

She, however, took the little kittens to the swamp-side in the back, put them in a box, and took warm milk every hour. "I'm not sorry," she said to herself. "I used my own savings for the milk.

It was several months later when Linda was at her aunt's house that mother went to the swampy area to pick berries. There were white cats with orange specks sitting on the branches, prowling like leopards. Two cats rested with packs of kittens. Several birds lay on the ground, dead, bloody, next to scattered bones.

Mother shrieked and started to run. But cats were all around, and hungry little kittens. "Why are their eyes glowing?" mother screamed. "Leave me alone!"

But there were too few birds left in the swamp to sate the hunger they were born with.

About the Author:

Fariel Shafee studied physics at MIT. However, while studying science, she also realized the complexities of human behavior and the unpredictable nature of the world filled with unsolved mysteries. She loves to write and paint impossible or magical worlds.

Author Website: Fariel Shafee

34 Orchard

Darkness is just across the street.

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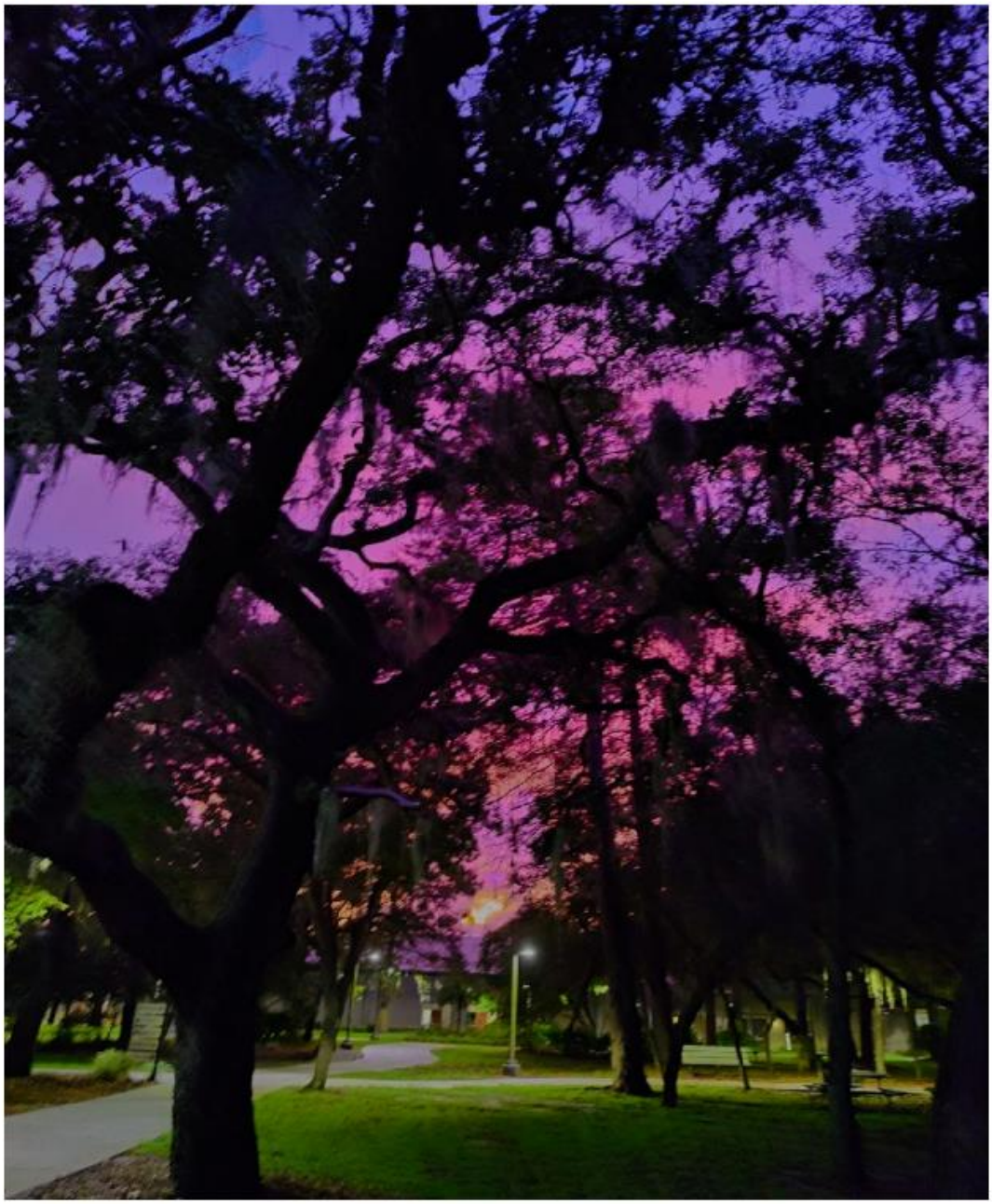

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Red Is the Color | ***Sumiko Saulson***

It was a hot, dry Arizona summer, and the desert heat seared her lungs. She sat alone in the coolest corner of the sidewalk cafe. The white wrought-iron chair was uncomfortable, and the thin, floral print cushion tied didn't help much. A matching dandelion yellow umbrella kept the direct sun off her skin, but her fine lace fan couldn't keep the beads of sweat off her cheek.

Margarite enjoyed dining alone. She winced when a man appeared as if from nowhere in the chair directly across from her. "My name is Marco."

Leaning forward, he dabbed a tear from her cheek with his handkerchief. As he blotted it, the tip of his white silk handkerchief flushed red. Margarite turned to look in a nearby mirror. A single, blood-red tear rolled down her pale cheek. "Haemolacria," she explained, eyes downcast with embarrassment. "It's a disease…"

"Lacrimis Sanguinis," he smiled, brilliant white teeth flashing over plump, luscious lips. "Tears of Blood, they are called where I come from. They are a sign. You are truly blessed."

Margarite laughed. "Blessed?" What an odd one he was, and what a strange notion. She squinted. Were his irises crimson? That couldn't be right. They must be brown, and her own eyes deceiving her. She was finding herself increasingly sensitive to the light.

"Indeed," he said, handing her his lace-tipped pocket square. "A sign you are most special. Chosen."

"I see," she scowled, pulling away. "So I have been blessed with a stigmata of the eyes." She scoured the room, looking for a waiter to rescue her from her unwanted suitor. When she turned back to face him, there was a chill in the room, and the strange man was gone.

No one seemed to know what was wrong with Margarite's eyes. It started a month before that bizarre incident at dinner. Immediately following that strange night, she developed a new symptom: her eyes were constantly bloodshot. Her optometrist diagnosed her with uveitis and she had to use eye drops constantly.

The morning after receiving this diagnosis, she went into the bathroom to brush her teeth, and when she looked in the mirror, her eyes were beyond bloodshot. Everything but the irises and pupils were cherry red! Alarmed, she reached for her drops. She felt the cool, soothing fluid as it dripped into her eye, redness dissipating as the pearly drops slid over the surface. As the whites cleared, she noticed that the brown part seemed slightly reddish. Was she imagining it?

She had things to do, so she finished getting ready for work. Pulling on her overcoat, she grabbed an umbrella in case of rain and headed out the door.

There was a little blond girl on the sidewalk. The kid looked up at her, eyes wide.

"Didn't your mother teach you not to stare?" Margarite snarled, shaking her head.

That's when the kid started to scream. The neighbor's door opened wide and the child's mother ran out to get her.

"I didn't do anything!" Margarite protested.

"What's wrong with your eyes?" the mom yelled, snatching her child indoors.

Margarite sighed. She felt like crying.

As the neighbor went inside, her tall, lanky teenager, a pale kid with spiky red hair in a spiked collar, massive platform boots, and a black velvet dress, popped their head out the door to see what all the fuss was about.

"Cool sclera contacts!" they gushed. "Where did you buy them?"

"What?" a confused Margarite asked. "I'm not wearing contacts."

The teen raised an eyebrow and laughed. "Alrighty, then."

Margarite ignored them and headed for her car. She was just about to open the door when she felt a strange presence behind her. She turned around. It was Marco.

"Would you like breakfast?" he asked. "You must eat."

"How did you get in here?" she demanded, fiddling with the tiny can of mace attached to her keychain, caught up imagining if she'd have to spray it into his pensive chestnut eyes, turning them as bright red as her own, chemical tears slipping over his thick, luscious lashes.

"You have to eat," he repeated. "I'm here to help." His voice was a beautiful, mesmerizing baritone. Why hadn't she noticed it before?

"I have to go to work," she said, pressing the button on her keychain to unlock the door. "If you want to take me out to dinner, it'll have to be another time. Just give me your number."

He stepped closer. "There's no time! You have to eat, now!" She didn't know what cologne he was wearing, but it smelled wonderful, like caramel or dulce de tres leches. Something delicious. Ignoring the intoxicating scent, she slipped into the car, and quickly locked it.

Eyes widening, he quickly slid a paper rectangle into the space between the window and the car door. She flipped the ignition switch, and backed out, hurriedly driving her sports car to work.

The mouthwatering aroma was gone, but her appetite was not. She felt hungrier by the moment. But she had to get to work, right away. There wasn't any time for breakfast.

Margarite worked at an advertising firm in a tall, glass skyscraper. Pulling into the office carport, she parked her cute little red Corvette. Hopping out of the car, she fetched Marco's card out of the driver's side window slot. Looking at the mysterious silver object, she saw no writing, but a raised imprint in the shape of an exquisite bird, and below this, a QR code. She stuck it in her pocket, exiting the parking lot, heading for the elevator.

When she arrived, Marco was standing there, running agitated fingers through his jet-black curls with one hand. In the other, he held a red satchel emblazoned with the same bird emblem, wings tipped in flames. A phoenix, perhaps?

"You can't go inside! You must eat first!" he pled, his voice thickening with urgency.

"There's no time," Margarite responded, pressing the up button repeatedly in agitation, as though this action could make it arrive any faster. It worked as well as it ever did.

"Here," he said, handing the bag to her. "You can eat breakfast at your desk."

"How thoughtful," the baffled Margarite replied, taking the bag from her handsome stalker. Seconds later, she was in the elevator. Sliding into her office, she pressed the button on her intercom and called in her assistant Chloe to fetch her morning coffee.

The moment her assistant stepped through the door, she knew something was wrong. Chloe smelled so… delicious. Mouthwateringly so. Images of tender flesh, rent asunder with sharp, hungry teeth flashed through her mind. She licked her lips and felt a hot, angry tear slide down her cheek in yearning.

"Oh, my God!" Chloe screamed, "What is wrong with your eyes?"

Margarite leaped from her chair, chasing after her frightened assistant in a ravening, mind-numbing hunger as the young woman backed her way out of the door. She was mere feet away from her when he appeared… again. There, holding the door.

"Dr. Marco Arguello," he told Chloe reassuringly. "I have an appointment to see Ms. Margarite."

"Yes, yes of course…" Chloe said, quickly excusing herself from the situation. "I'll tell reception to hold all of her calls. Feel better soon, Margarite!"

Marco entered, closing the door behind him. "You must eat, now! You are in danger."

"I thought you said I was blessed?" she responded, narrowing her eyes.

"You are," he said with a smile. "Blessed with life eternal, blessed with renewal, to return, as the phoenix, after death. But to live, you must eat." He quietly unbuttoned his shirt, revealing a phoenix tattoo on the back of his neck as it slid off and was abandoned on the floor. Before Margarite could protest, he opened the mysterious red bag and removed from it, a short, sharp ornamental blade. He drew it over his neck, and it dripped down his chest, oozing a font of marvelous, scarlet blood.

Margarite ran her tongue over a row of ever-rising, razor-sharp teeth that sprung fresh in her mouth. The hunger swept over her, and she dove across the room, latching her mouth onto his throat, tearing into it, drinking… eating shreds of torn flesh, swallowing greedily. Her nails grew to talons, tearing through clothes, and skin. Marco made not a sound but stoically bit his lip as she destroyed him.

"Feed…" he gasped finally, before crumbling to the ground.

Hunger sated, Margarite leaned back against her desk, fresh wet tears sliding sanguine down her cheeks as she looked down at the mess she'd made, maroon stains on the floor, vermillion clumps of flesh the consistency of raw hamburger clinging to shattered bone. She was wondering how she was going to clean up the mess when suddenly, what was left of Marco burst into long tongues of red, orange, and amber flames. They licked up toward the ceiling and then crashed down into a pile of ashes.

Something squirmed in the middle of the pile. Margarite walked over and bent down to pick it up… a chubby infant staring up at her, with the same jet-black curls, and red-brown eyes Marco had. On the back of his neck, was a silver tattoo in the shape of a phoenix.

About the Author:

Sumiko Saulson is a Bram Stoker nominated poet and award-winning author of Afrosurrealist and multicultural sci-fi and horror, and author of the Bram Stoker nominated *The Rat King: A Book of Dark Poetry.*

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The Thing in the Mirror | *DJ Tyrer*

"Wh-?" mumbled Jack as he looked up from the sink. For a moment, he thought he'd seen… *something* in the mirror: a sort of long, dark shape that twitched. He blinked his bleary eyes and decided it must've been his hair flopping as he lifted his head.

He remembered to spit and turned to reach for the hand towel to wipe his lips and, again, caught the dark twitching movement at the corner of his eye. He turned back. No, just him.

"I must get you cut," he said, flipping back the section of fringe that was to blame. He left the bathroom and headed to his bedroom to finish getting ready.

***

Jack swore.

"You okay?" called John from the other side of the cubicle wall.

"Uh, yeah. Spilt my damn coffee."

That was true, but that wasn't why he'd sworn. As he sat down, he was almost certain he'd seen something in the reflection of his screen. He'd jumped. His nerves were jangly: on his way into work, he'd caught movement on the edge of his vision in window reflections and the shiny bonnet of a car. It was ridiculous!

Jack took a pair of scissors from his desk drawer and gave his fringe a rudimentary trim.

Only, that didn't seem to work: he went into the men's and, as he washed his hands, thought he saw something twitching in the corner of the mirror. As he raised his head, it was still there.

He watched for a moment: it was as if he were looking into a fish tank in which some weed was agitated by the pump. Then, he blinked and it was gone.

Heading back to his desk, Jack saw John coming towards him between the corridors.

"Hey, you okay?" John said, stopping dead. "You look ill."

"Um, I'm not sure," mumbled Jack.

John planted a hand on his shoulder and said, "Right, I'm buying you a coffee and you can tell me all about it."

The stuff the vending machine vomited into the plastic cup that was laughably called coffee tasted vile, but Jack was grateful for the chance to unburden himself.

He told John what he'd been seeing.

"At first, I thought it was my fringe, but I cut it off."

"Oh, I thought it was a snazzy new haircut."

"Very funny." He almost chuckled, then his face clouded again. "But, I'm still seeing it; like, I dunno, seaweed waving in the corner of my eye."

John sucked his lip for a moment, then said, "Sounds a bit like those bits people get floating in their eyes. You should make an appointment to get your eyes checked, make sure it ain't anything serious."

"Good idea." He swallowed the dregs of his drink, said, "Cheers for the help," and headed back to his cubicle to call his optician.

***

It was getting worse – and he was beginning to think it was nothing an optician could help with.

The something he kept seeing in the mirror was very definitely *a thing*. He was seeing black tentacles – he couldn't think of a better word to describe them – twitching up and down behind the glass in the mirror. He could see them as clearly as he could see his own reflection – the reflection they appeared to caress.

"I'm going mad," he told himself and headed for the phone to call for help.

***

Cutbacks meant that even when he'd spoken to his GP, it took weeks for a referral to a psychiatrist.

"It might be a bit quicker if you were a threat to yourself or others," his GP had said with a shrug.

Jack wondered how long you could suffer such weirdness before you decided to do something desperate. He'd got rid of all his mirrors, along with his TV and anything else reflective, and kept his curtains pulled tight, just in case. He avoided going out if he could – he was burning through his sick days and was relying on his old Mum to bring food round. His entire life was on hold.

"I just want to get back to normal," he told the psychiatrist when finally he saw him.

"Well, that's what I want to help you achieve," he replied.

Unfortunately, it seemed his idea of helping him involved long-term goals and the provision of anti-depressants.

"Let's see if they can get you in the mood to get back out into the world," he beamed, as if it were depression keeping Jack at home, not fear.

Jack trailed out of his office, desperately attempting not to look at any reflective surfaces: the thing was bigger than his own reflection now and its tentacles appeared to be wrapped all about it.

"I'm mad," he muttered as he walked along the High Street and wasn't surprised when passers-by looked at him as if he were. They could tell, he was certain.

It started to rain, as if the world felt walking home feeling as he did needed a soaking to complete it.

Slowly, sodden, he stumbled on, wondering if the psychiatrist could help him at all.

A car sped past him and sent a spray of water over him. Jack turned and swore after it. Then, with a shock, he looked down and realised he was beside a large, agitated puddle.

Something moved beneath the ripples. He knew he ought to look away, but couldn't, just stood as if transfixed: he could see the thing entwining itself about his reflection.

Then, there was an explosion of water as if another car had struck the puddle and black tentacles shot out and seized hold of him.

Jack only had a moment to struggle and didn't even get to utter a scream before he was pulled forwards and dragged beneath the water, vanishing into his own reflection. Then, the water was still and showed only the dark, cloudy sky high above it.

Hunger | ***DJ Tyrer***

Gargoyles crouch in readiness across the church facade. One, filled with malice, slowly creaks to life, dust trickling from joints unused to movement, leaves its perch.

After so many years of dribbling water, no longer wishes a role as a gutter drain, longs for liquid more viscous, tastier: Blood.

Down the wall it clambers and off into the night in search of prey, some lone walker, a reeling drunk. Pounces, bites, drinks. Blood slobbers down its chin.

Next morning, worshippers are shocked to see that gory ornament clinging once more to its place, staring down at them with unseeing eyes.

Meteorite | ***DJ Tyrer***

Light burns the night sky. Explosion rips the still.

In the silence that follows, they come to gaze into the crater in awe, watch the meteorite within pulse and throb.

It cracks! Startled by the sound, the crowd stumbles back, then steps forward once more, craning necks to see.

From the broken meteorite, *things* pour; a tide of snapping jaws, rending and tearing flesh. People flee, pursued.

With only one thought – *to sate their hunger* – the creatures flood over the land, eating everything: people, cars, houses, trees…

Finally, having fed, they pause. Eggs are laid in millions. They hatch – *hungry*…

About the Author:

DJ Tyrer is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing*, editor of *View From Atlantis*, and has been published in *The Rhysling Anthology 2016*, *Dwarf Stars 2022*, *Speculations II and III*, *Gargoylicon* and *Vampiricon*, and issues of *Enchanted Conversation*, *The Horrorzine*, *Journ-E*, *Lovecraftiana*, *Scifaikuest*, *Sirens Call*, *Spectral Realms*, *Star*Line*, and *Tigershark*. *SuperTrump* and *A Wuhan Whodunnit* are available to download from the Atlantean Publishing website.

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Reflections | James Everington

Wrapped up in a heavy coat to protect himself, he walked the beach and watched a flock of terns hunting in the waters of the bay. From this distance he could see their crucifix shapes narrow and straighten as they dived down into the sea, dozens at a time, before returning to the large flock above. Again and again; how was the shoal of fish not depleted? In the terns feeding it was easy to see something needless, rapacious—but of course that said more about *his* species than arctic terns. His species were the ones who over-hunted, killed for want rather than need. Seeing that in these birds was anthropomorphism; he was seeing a reflection that wasn't there.

***

Sitting deep in the shadows of his balcony, he watched a pied wagtail dart and hunt on the green lawn below. It barely stood still, and even when it did it bobbed and jerked hyperactively. Again and again it jerked and ran back and forth across the grass. It came to him there was something desperate in the bird's unceasing movement, the tired franticness of a creature forced to fill the hours with activity, with fake stimulation, obsessed with the idea the grass was always greener somewhere else. But no, he was doing it again. Nature wasn't a mirror in which to see himself clearly.

***

An owl shrieked in the night, as he dabbed at his lips with a napkin after eating. He turned his head to the window, saw the silent, pale shape of it above the long, sharp dune grass. Ethereal, ghostly - something seemingly dead itself and, in its swift and silent and clawed descent, a symbol of the death of others. But no, no. These creatures he observed lived a fraction of the time he did, felt a fraction of the emotions he did. He would do well to remember that.

***

He watched the people stumble from the light of the dwelling opposite, where someone had been hosting a house party, although he hadn't been invited in. They were giggling and laughing, stumbling and reaching out to each other for support. One woman was sick into the gutter; two others kissed then looked at each other as if for the first time; one man punched another on the nose, and from where he watched he saw the blood on the victim's face and hands. Almost like they had real feelings, these short-lived mayflies; almost like they had not just reflexes but emotional states as rich and complex as his own and his own kind… But no. Just, no—projecting again, seeing without that which only existed within.

He looked into the mirror he'd never removed from the wall, saw nothing. For his kind saw no reflection; at least, not of the literal kind.

About the Author:

James Everington mainly writes dark, supernatural fiction, although he occasionally takes a break and writes dark, non-supernatural fiction. His second collection of such tales, *Falling Over*, is out now. He's also the author of the novel *The Quarantined City—"an unsettling voice all of its own" The Guardian*—plus many novellas and stories. He's edited multiple anthologies including the BFS Award nominated *Imposter Syndrome*.

Author Blog: James Everington
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A Chat with Horror Movie Composer Everett Young on Making Monsters Through Music

What would *Halloween* be without John Carpenter's iconic theme sound? Or *Jaws* not having the famous John Williams ostinato? Or *The Shining* missing its chilling score by Wendy Carlos and Rachel Elkind? As awesome as these horror films are, it's safe to say they would not have the same impact and terror without one key ingredient: *music*.

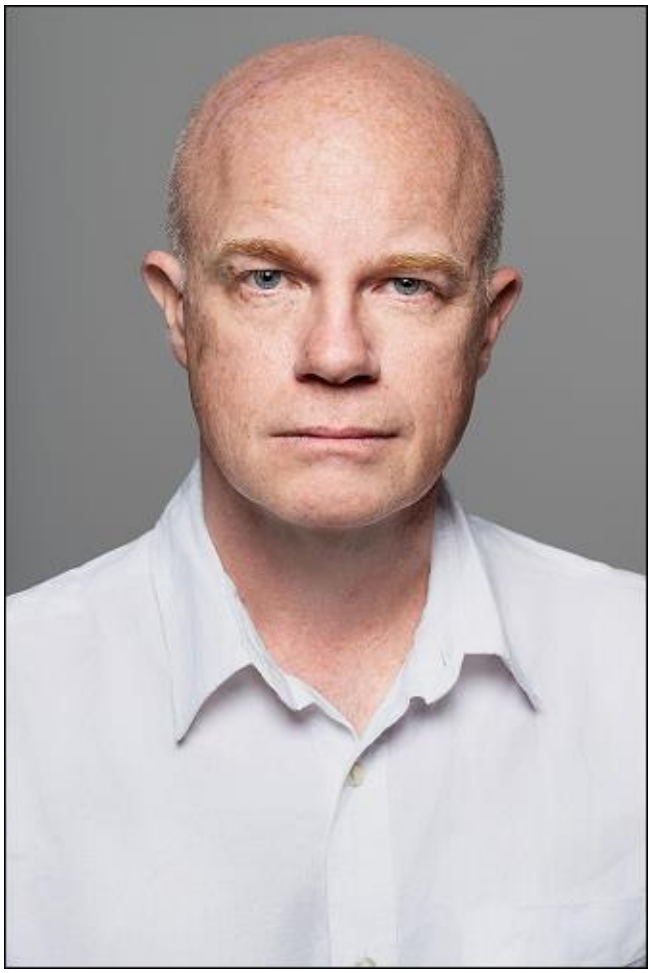
Directors, actors, screenwriters and SFX artists are often pinned as the 'heart' for successful horror films. Yet we forget the 'blood' that brings life to these movies are the sounds of their composers and scores. Much like the memorable monsters and villains in horror movies, music is equally important, creating certain nuances that burrow themselves deep into our psyche and remain there forever!

"Somone once told me that music can make you see better – and I believe it," stated John Carpenter, director and composer of such classics as *The Thing*, *Escape From New York* and *They Live*.

In recognition of the power and influence music can have on audiences – scary movies especially – we shall spotlight one particular composer, Everett Young, whose modern and classically-themed scores have brought a string of slasher and supernatural films to prominence.

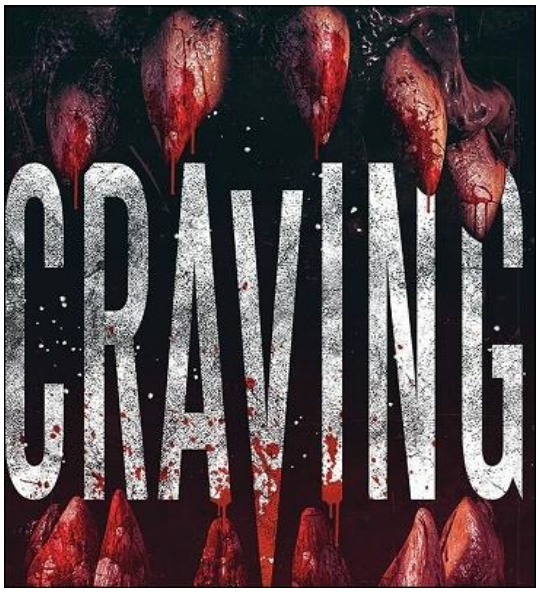
A Tallahassee, Florida-based professional composer, singer and songwriter bent on setting the right moods and creating big emotions, Everett has experimented with jazz-influenced pop sounds since the early 90's, having released four solo records, including two under the name 'Kicklighter'. Everett's recent works include *Scare BNB* (film series), *Craving*, and the upcoming *A Hard Place*.

Without further ado, I now present to you scorer of scares Everett Young.



***Mike Lera*:** Your work has certainly attracted the attention of horror filmmakers in recent years. What are some 'key ingredients' in your music that has been drawing in directors and fans of this genre?
Everett Young: For me, it's the same thing that goes into putting together a good score for *any* film, whether drama or comedy. I want an underscore whose mood reflects what's happening on screen. Now, that could mean different things for a particular scene, because we can use a score to shine a light on one aspect of a scene or another. For example, in a tense situation where there's threat, but a very sympathetic character facing a difficult situation, the score might shine a brighter light on the threat, or perhaps might try to shine a light on the sympathy we feel for that character in the face of threat. Or the score might do both things within the same couple minutes of run time, so we can subtly direct the audience's attention to different elements of a scene by using score.
We are telling a story, and the score is there to help highlight the emotional elements of the story.

ML: Tell us about your upcoming action/horror/thriller, *A Hard Place,* and working with director J. Horton (whom you've also collaborated with on the horror film *Craving*).
EY: I have not yet seen the footage for *A Hard Place*, but after reading the script (which, I must say, is incredibly ambitious), I think I'll probably go with a few more electronic elements that I did in *Craving*, which was a fairly heavily orchestral score. With those electronic elements, I can perhaps get a little more propulsion going, which, based on the script, this film might need.



J is great to work with. We talk about what each moment of the film needs, and he mostly leaves me alone to create. He allows me to take the film to a place that may be a little different, even, from what he envisioned.
I've been pretty honest about what kind of composer I am, which has probably cost me a job or two, but has led to working with directors who aren't surprised when my music comes out sounding like, well, more or less like the music they heard when I first sent them my reel and they decided to work with me!

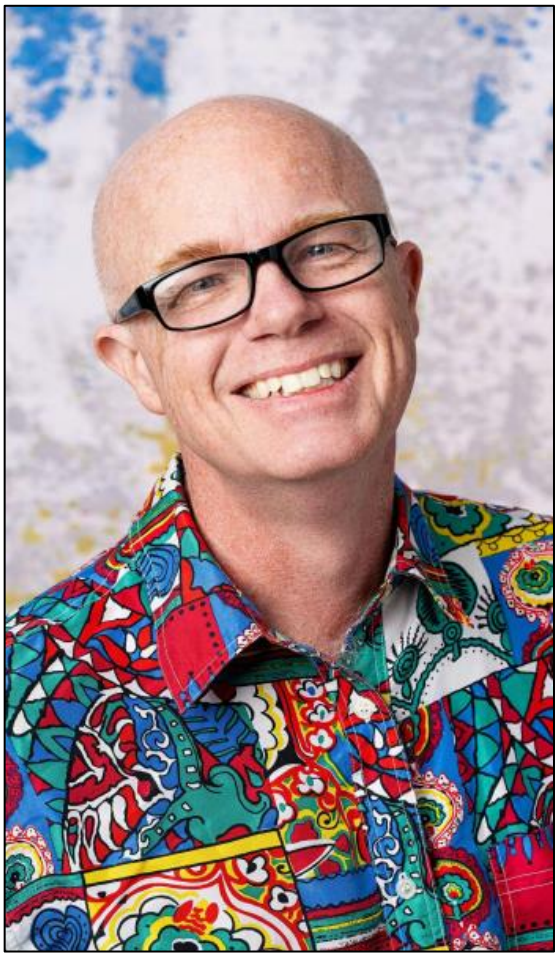
ML: What's a typical routine for you when taking on a project?
EY: When I first read a script and watch the film, however rough a form, I make notes about what kinds of themes or motifs I think should form the *backbone* of the score. I ask myself, "What characters should have their own motifs?" "What other kinds of themes do I need?" Maybe a couple of characters get their own leitmotifs. Maybe a certain relationship gets a love theme. Perhaps some sinister force gets its own theme. Then I like to sing lots of ideas into my phone's voice memo app, and later, I'll go through all the voice memos and pick maybe 10 ideas that I like.
I'll next have a formal spotting session with the

director, where we discuss the needs of the film moment-by-moment. I make lots of notes during this session, which usually occurs over two or three zoom calls, with both of us having the film playing on our computer screens.

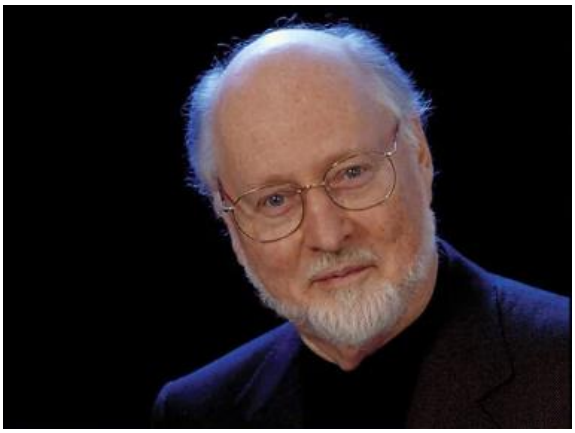
Then, I go through the film and write the whole score on piano using a digital piano sound, as I cannot write a score straight into an orchestral template (A lot of modern composers do this, but I'm a dinosaur). I prefer to first write the piece of music, and *then* orchestrate from that. I find that it results in a cohesive piece of music. Orchestration becomes much easier when you already have a score that is working with the action on screen.

ML: Aside from being an accomplished composer, you also hold a Ph. D in political psychology, somewhat rare to see. Can you tell us a little bit about this dichotomy?

EY: I came to a crossroad in my 30's, and I felt like I needed to do something to make money, because the recording studio I was running just wasn't successful. Also, I had a marriage that wasn't working out. Since I was terrible at business and was a good student in high school and college, I figured why not stay in school forever and be a professor. This was right around the 2000 presidential election. I was not the most politically aware person, but I knew that my strong emotional reaction to that particular election was telling me to learn more both about American politics and what was driving me to feel so strongly about it. So I worked my butt off and earned my Ph. D in political psychology at Stony Brook University.
However, my academic career really didn't go anywhere. It was very hard to get a job. I taught as a visiting professor at Washington University in St. Louis for one semester, and a few classes at Florida State. If I had loved political science as much as I love music, perhaps I could have made a career of it. But after a few years, I walked away and declared myself a musician once again!



ML: Tell us about your origin story. Who would you say are your biggest influences?
EY: As early as age nine, my favorite musician was John Williams. I taught myself how to play the *Superman* theme by ear when I was in fifth grade.



John Williams

As I got older, I thought by writing and singing pop songs, I'd achieve some kind of popularity and could probably get girls. Well, that sure didn't work! I didn't have the stage presence and the charisma to be a lead singer. I tried a lot of different things in music – singing, songwriting, running sound for a band, running a recording studio and producing bands. I wasn't able to make anything happen with any of it for many years, and was unfortunately given wrong advice from my music teacher (and who knows if I would have listened to it anyway).

Eventually, I found my way back to what I loved when I was nine. And even though it took me until I was in my late 40's to get into film scoring, it was really right there in front of me all along.
So many people go their whole life and never find their little place, but this is most definitely mine.

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 *Dark and Evil II*, *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* and currently writes for *Horror Nation*.

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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MIKE LERA'S HORROR SHORTS
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Maternal Instinct | ***Dawn DeBraal***

Two months before her due date, Nora walked away from her life. Catching her husband Curt with his co-worker was more than she could bear. After years of trying, they finally got pregnant. No, she was the pregnant one, Curt only boasted about it.

She cried the first hundred miles. Sorry for her child who wouldn't have a father, but then no father was better than a cheating one. Nora stopped for gas, paying with the credit card, knowing she would use them until Curt cut her off. She didn't know what she would do after that.

After eight hours of driving, the adrenalin she'd been running on petered out and a spent Nora pulled into a wayside. The sign said, 'No Overnight Camping'. but nothing told her she couldn't take a nap. Parking the car in an out of the way place, she climbed into the back seat, pulled a blanket over herself, and fell asleep.

She'd walked in on him and Debra something, she suspected a few months ago. Curt scrambled out of bed, while Debra screeched and ran into the bathroom.

"How could you? And in our bed?" Curt stood mute, unable to defend his actions but had the decency to leave with his girlfriend while she packed. Nora left her cell phone on the table, so he couldn't call her.

She woke with a start, checking her watch. Nora had slept eight hours, and was surprised that it was midnight. Stretching after getting out of the back seat, Nora walked into the building to use the washroom, splashing water on her face. Taking money from her purse, she bought snacks from the machines and carried them outside. It was a warm night for April; a slight breeze moved the trees, and the wind was refreshing after being cooped up in the stuffy car. She munched on the chips and drank from the bottle of water when the tears came. How could she mourn him? She didn't miss Curt, but she missed what they had: a beautiful home and a reliable relationship. That was until it was tested with endless fertility clinic visits, shots, egg retrieval, the sorrow of not having a baby, and now when they finally accomplished what they hadn't been able to do naturally after ten years of trying, he strayed. She supposed part of it was her fault, her moodiness, blaming him when she knew something deep within her couldn't have a child. She'd given up after the first failed insemination and didn't want to go through any more, but Curt desperately wanted a natural child. They would find a surrogate if this one didn't take. Amazingly, the line on the test showed positive. She supposed that was about the time Curt discovered his 'surrogate'.

A twig snapped behind her. Nora stood, surveying the woods around her. The overhead parking lot lights illuminated patchy spots. Her baby shifted in her belly, and her hand instinctively protected it.

"Who's there?" She felt foolish calling out. It could be a brave squirrel wanting a chip. But the thing that came forward was not a squirrel. It was a distorted humanoid. Its facial features were barely distinguishable. There were holes where the ears should be, it lacked a pronounced nose and its mouth looked more like a sucker. It appeared to be almost translucent despite its gray skin. Nora wanted to run to the car, realizing her feet were stuck to the ground when it approached her; all the while, the message repeated in her mind.

"I will not harm you. Your baby is about to abort itself. I will help you bring this child into the world." Nora tried to look away, but her fear of losing her baby was more than her fear of this creature. Six long fingers with suction cups put themselves on her belly. Tears flowed from her eyes, the only thing that could move. The creature glowed and pulsed. She felt energy surge through her body, and the thing was gone when she woke.

Rising from the ground, Nora hurried to the washroom pulling her shirt up, looking in the mirror. Six circle burns appeared on her enlarged belly, perfectly placed. It hadn't been a dream. She felt energized and her strength had been renewed somehow. Not waiting around, Nora pulled out of the wayside at three in the morning, hunched over the wheel, driving through the rest of the night, stopping for a healthy breakfast at a diner. She was ravenous.

"When are you expecting?" The waitress asked. Nora looked down at her belly and was surprised at how much it had grown in a day.

"I have a few weeks yet," she replied to the waitress paying her check.

"Well, good luck. It looks like you could deliver any day!" She couldn't believe the difference in herself since last night. Her physical and mental wellbeing had changed, and she had hope for her future.

She crossed the Wisconsin Illinois border, but Radisson was a still a long way. Nora was glad she'd left the phone behind; by now, Curt would be calling her demanding to know where she was and threatening to take their child. It had been hard to see how much she had curtailed her life to fit into his. The distance she'd put from Curt helped her to see the cloud she had been living under.

Three hundred miles yet to get to the cabin. Nora would have to stop at a grocery store to pick up supplies, although she did have a trunk full of dry goods. When she was less than one hundred miles away, Nora felt the first contraction.

"No," she grabbed the wheel tighter, praying they were just Braxton Hicks. She'd read all about them. It was the body's way of flexing the muscles to prepare for the delivery. All she wanted was to get to the cabin. Nora felt sure that the stress of the last two days had brought this on. She didn't feel any more and a sense of peace came over her when she pulled onto Birch Lane.

Nora sighed with relief pulling into the driveway, seeing the serene log cabin perched on a hill overlooking the Radisson Flowage. Towering pines and sprouting white birch trees overlooking the lake were lovely, with the season change. Nora didn't park in the garage; she pulled up to the front door, bringing in her canned goods. She would go to town to get food tomorrow, she was exhausted. As daylight faded, she struck a match to the preset fire in the fireplace they'd left behind months ago. The flame took hold, and she could feel its warmth. Nora filled the cabinets with canned goods and ran the water for five minutes. She opened a can of soup and heated it on the stove. Gathering a blanket, she took the mug of soup and sat outside, watching the moon over the lake, taking in the quiet and peaceful mood, deciding she made the right decision coming here.

After a hot shower, Nora felt grateful for the small gifts the cabin gave. During the night, she woke having another contraction. The nearest hospital was forty miles away. Nora had no phone to call for help and she regretted for the first time, leaving her phone behind.

The baby was coming too early, and she tried to slow her thoughts down to do what needed to be done. Moving to the bathroom, Nora grabbed several towels, and then went to the kitchen, pulling out some garbage bags to protect her bed and a pair of kitchen scissors, being too advanced in her labor to drive a car, she mentally prepared herself to deliver her child.

Nora gave birth in the early morning hours. The baby didn't cry, and she held it upside down by its feet tipping its head back. The baby made strange sounds as it coughed up mucus and she was relieved to know it was breathing. Reaching over, Nora turned on the light next to the bed, disgusted at the abomination she had delivered.

It wasn't human; it was otherworldly, and the memory flooded back to her of meeting the alien at the wayside, its hand upon her belly and the energy that pulsed through her body. Somehow, the alien had inserted its DNA into her womb to save the fetus. She remembered it telling her telepathically that her body was about to abort her child and that this would save her baby, and how quickly her belly grew after that encounter.

The creature appeared to be fully formed. Nora could not take her eyes off it. She had taken the pair of scissors and cut strips from one of the towels, tying it in two places on the umbilical cord and cutting between them. She wrapped the baby in one towel and the afterbirth in another.

It cried, and she wrestled with herself. What did the creature eat, and did she want to feed it, or should she let it die? But it was her child, maternal instinct told Nora to hold it to her breast, where it sought her nipple and suckled. She was amazed at the strength it had and at its will to survive. She would not name it for to name it gave it a place in her heart deciding to call it, Little One.

Several days went by. Nora and the child were surviving while she regained her strength. She didn't know how to leave the cabin to purchase things at the store because Little One would draw attention anywhere she went, and she couldn’t leave a newborn home alone. Nora used towels and t-shirts as diapers. She couldn’t believe how fast the baby grew daily, definitely not human, and she had come to accept how the child looked.

In the wilds of the north woods, she was separated from other humans, and Nora didn't miss their company. She needed time to lick her wounds, amazed when a car pulled into the driveway, Curt had found her. She moaned and put the baby back into the drawer she had turned into a crib, meeting him at the door.

"Curt, what are you doing here?"

"Nora, what the hell, you leave without telling me where you are going and leave your cell behind?” He held her cell phone and she took it knowing it was a way to survive in the cabin. Groceries could be delivered. “You have no right to take off."

"Are you kidding me?" Nora tried to shut the door, but Curt stuck out his foot, stopping her. He reached out, grabbed her arm, and forced his way inside. Nora shouted in alarm. Curt looked her up and down, and his mouth dropped open.

"You had the baby? When? Where?"

"Stillborn," she said. Curt dropped his hand.

"Nora, I'm so sorry."

"Brought on by the stress of seeing my husband with another woman and driving six hundred miles to escape him." Curt had the decency to put his head down.

"It was a mistake. It didn't mean anything. Nora, it's you I love." Curt grabbed her shoulder to make her hear him.

"Leave me alone!" She shouted, stopping when the baby cried. Curt's mouth dropped open.

"You told me it died!" He pushed Nora aside and opened the bedroom door. Curt stood there stunned when the creature flew out of the drawer, attaching its suction-cupped mouth to Curt's eye.

“God, get it off, what is it?” Curt bounced around the room trying to remove the Little One from his face. Nora shrank back in fear realizing the baby was protecting her from Curt and was feeding off her energy. How was the child able to get around so quickly, it was a newborn?

"Nora, help me," Curt begged desperately, but Nora did not pity the man in his torturous death, remembering how she used to think he was her life.

The baby's sharp tongue forked into a spear, driving itself into the newly exposed eye socket in Curt's face. Twelve-suction cupped fingers held Curt's head to its mouth, and she heard the suckling sound as it liquified Curt's brain in its frenzied feeding.

She hid in the corner of the room trembling, unable to take her eyes off the creature as it efficiently dissolved her husband. When it finished, the baby cried for her. Nora wanted to run from the house screaming, leaving the abomination behind, but her maternal instinct was so strong that she crossed the room and picked the creature up. The baby nuzzled into her neck, seeking comfort, and she obliged it with a mixture of love and fear.

"There, there, Little One. It's okay, we're safe now," she cooed, but she knew there was nowhere in this world they would fit in. Anytime the creature felt threatened, it would do what it had done to Curt. And what would happen when she disappointed the Little One, would she receive the same? Nora held the baby tight while her mind formulated a new plan. The baby nipped her cheek, and she gasped in pain pulling her hand away that showed she was bleeding.

Scrambling back from the baby, panting in panic because she realized the Little One heard her thoughts and was punishing her for thinking about its demise. She closed the bedroom door while it slammed itself from the other side. Nora had no choice, she had to do something. Piling wood in front of the bedroom door, she struck a match on crumpled newspaper and the kindling started. It wasn’t long before the entire bedroom door was burning.

Little One squealed and she heard the bedroom window glass breaking. Nora grabbed the keys to her car and escaped with only the clothes on her back. She hoped the authorities would think Curt died in a fire, and that Little One wouldn’t survive the wild, but she had her doubts.

Driving down the highway she saw firetrucks heading toward the fire and Nora pulled to the side of the road letting them pass. She prayed that the house would be fully engulfed by the time the trucks got there, destroying all the evidence. She was about to pull out on the highway when she heard a noise from the back seat. Nora looked in the rear-view mirror saw the featureless face pop up.

“Oh, God, no,” she moaned. A long spear of a tongue protruded from Little One’s mouth snaked its way to her throat, and plunged into Nora’s neck.

About the Author:

Dawn DeBraal lives in rural Wisconsin. She has published over 600 short stories, drabbles, and poems in online ezines and anthologies. She leans into the horror genre, making her life look so much better. She was the 2022 Horror Story contest runner-up, Author of the Month and Contributor of the Year Spillwords, and Nominated for the Pushcart award by Falling Star Magazine 2019.

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Night had fallen over London and with it, a pall of fear such as I have never known.

The morning newspapers had been full of the horror which had occurred in Queen Anne Street, the street where my practice now stood, but few know of the true particulars. The public may be aware that a man, a physician—like myself—had been murdered in an alley just up the street from my surgery. What the public did not know, was that Inspector Lestrade had asked me to aid in his investigation of the body. It seems the police surgeon had become ill and could not continue his task. I soon learned why.

The body had been torn to shreds. The face was a mass of tissue and bone—completely unrecognizable.

"We've identified him by the calling cards in his pocket. He is…was…Dr. Paul Ames," Lestrade said.

"Dr. Ames? The renowned botanist?"

"The same." He shook his head. "What could have done this, doctor?"

I stared at the man lying upon the cobbled stone of the alley. "It looks as though he's been savaged by a dog or…" I trailed off, unwilling to voice my suspicions.

"Or what?"

"A wolf," I replied.

"Impossible. There are no wolves in London." He sighed. "This is the third murder in as many weeks, doctor, and I don't mind telling you, I wish Mr. Holmes was here. Has his business in the Americas concluded?"

"It has. He should return within a fortnight."

"If only it were sooner."

***

Lestrade's words haunted me later that evening, as I stepped out the doors of my practice and turned the key in the lock. I could not help but agree with his sentiment. I began my journey home, my footsteps echoing through the fog.

I had not gone far when an eerie sound filled the air. It was a howl, one not unlike that of the dreadful hound which had menaced the Baskervilles. It seemed to come from all about me, chilling my blood. I froze, listening.

Soft footsteps, like the padding of some great animal's feet, drifted toward me from the surrounding fog. I pulled my revolver from my coat pocket. Something snarled to my left and I caught a glimpse of glowing, yellow eyes.

A beast crept out of the mist. It walked on two legs.

I stared in horror at the strange amalgam of man and wolf which stood before me. The beast was covered with fur, and possessed the muzzle of a wolf, yet its body still resembled that of a human being. It howled and rushed toward me. I fired my revolver.

To my horror, the bullets did not affect the beast. It charged me, ignoring the lead which struck home in several places. I emptied every chamber of the revolver into it, and would have used the weapon as a club, had not several shots rang out. None were my own.

The beast howled in pain and clutching its chest, fell. I turned to see two men emerge from the fog. Both held revolvers in their hands. One, was my friend, Sherlock Holmes. The other was a masked man clad in the style of an American.

"Are you quite alright, Watson?" Holmes asked, rushing to my side. I nodded, gripping his arm.

"Thank heaven you've come," I replied. "Holmes, that beast, it was—"

"A werewolf, old fellow. One we've followed from the shores of America. He bears the doctors of London a grudge. None would treat his condition, and when he found the cure, it was too late."

"Mr. Holmes," the masked man called.

We joined him at the side of the beast, which had begun a strange and horrifying transformation. Hair receded into the thing's body and the muzzle shrank and became more human. The creature opened its blue eyes and regarded us with something like contempt.

"You have bested me, Holmes," he said.

"Where is the cure, Glendon?" Holmes replied. "We know you took it from Dr. Ames."

"There is a man who may yet be saved," the masked man added.

"You will never have it," Glendon replied. These were the last words he would speak. He died, a smile frozen upon his lips.

"He's dead. And he's taken the secret with him," the masked man cried.

"Do not despair, Reid," Holmes said, kneeling beside Glendon's body. He examined the hands of the corpse and the soles of his feet. "The soil beneath his nails can only come from a place north of London, a place known to house the

finest greenhouse in all of England—Falden Abbey. It is there that we will find the Mariphassa blossom and the cure for your friend. If you will fetch the cab, Dr. Watson and I will take the body to his surgery. We can leave it there until the constabulary calls to collect it."

Holmes and I returned to my surgery with Glendon's corpse. When we had left it there, covered by a sheet, I turned to Holmes.

"How has this come to pass, Holmes? A man who can transform into a wolf?"

"It is a long tale, old fellow, one I shall divulge on our journey to Falden Abbey. You will come?"

"Of course. But will you satisfy one question before we go? How did you kill the werewolf? My bullets had no effect upon it."

He pulled a bullet from the pocket of his coat and held it out to me. It glimmered in the gaslight.

"Silver? A silver bullet? Where did you procure such an item?"

"From our friend, the masked fellow. Though, I'll wager you know him by another name."

About the Author:
Naching T. Kassa is a wife, mother, and writer. She's created short stories, novellas, poems, and co-created three children. She resides in Eastern Washington State with her husband, Dan Kassa. Naching is a member of the Horror Writers Association, Mystery Writers of America and The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association. She is the Talent Relations Manager at Crystal Lake Publishing.

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Clutch | ***Lee Andrew Forman***

A hairline crack starts along the side—one of many. It branches out in fractal patterns; the shell begins to split. Where fractures spread, a layer of mucus thins as it's pulled apart by the breach. Tiny claws puncture the soft membrane and its mewling escapes into the air for the first time.

This newborn pulls itself out of the egg from which it hatched and looks upon the unborn. Its head pivots left and right, pointedly observing the rest of the clutch. It then feels something new, a deep wanting within its belly.

Predatory eyes see heat radiating from thin shells. Its mouth waters with instinctual preparedness. One hesitant step forward leads to the increasing urge to feed, which it follows without restraint. It sniffs its brethren as its eyes widen with elation. One by one, it tears each spawn open and feasts upon their new, unrisen flesh.

About the Author:
Lee Andrew Forman is a writer, editor, and publisher from the Hudson Valley region in New York. Lee has published three books to date, *The Bury Box*, *Zero Perspective*, and *Fragments of a Damned Mind*, along with numerous short stories in multiple anthologies. He is a co-owner of *Sirens Call Publications*, a regular contributor to *The Lift*, and writes non-fiction pieces for various periodicals.

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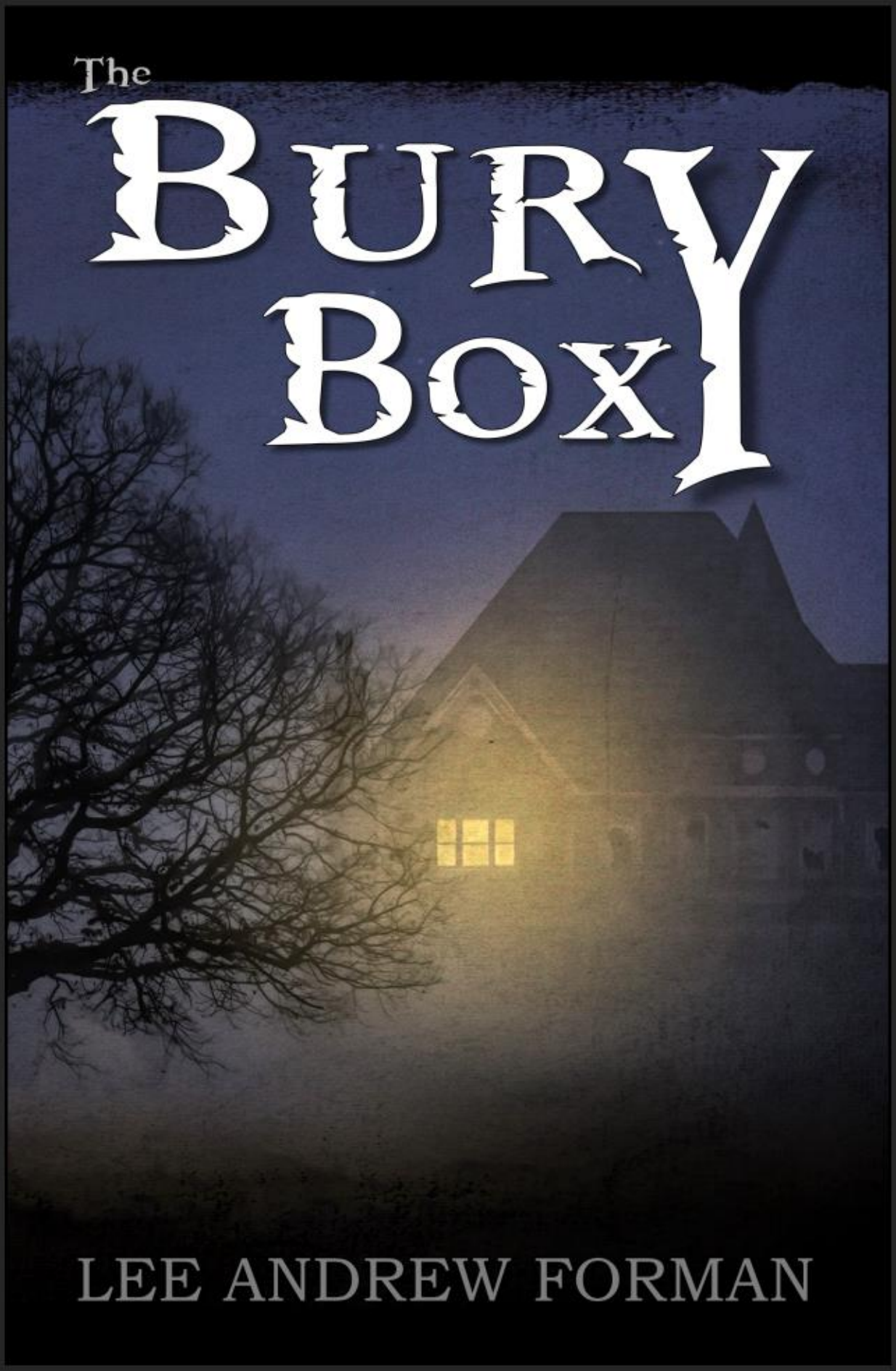

Available on Amazon

Ice emerged from the crater, winter wind welcoming the newest arrival. Yellow eyes peered over the edge. Cold, large, and ravenous, it climbed out searching for food.

An aroma assaulted its nose, something sweet and savory, making its proboscis twitch. Born fully grown, it took the place of its brother who'd died in this hole.

Now to find sustenance.

***

As I made my way to my car, the wind bit at me like an arctic monster, my gloves as effective as paper in holding it back. The gusts stole my breath and kept blowing the hood of my jacket back, annoying me further. Thankfully, it was attached, or I would have lost it by now, in the gale's attempt to hold me back.

The pavement, as slick as the oil in a used car salesman's hair, prevented me from rushing to my car no matter how much I wanted to. Breaking any part of me was not how I wanted my weekend to start. Tomorrow was my day off so it was worth getting the spreadsheet done, that way Jaime, my boss, couldn't complain I was taking the day for myself.

My car lights flashing as I hit my key fob was like a beacon of light in the empty parking lot. Trust me to park in a spot with the lights out, the closest two lamp posts boasting shattered bulbs.

"Didn't expect to be leaving so late," I mumbled to myself.

Ice coated my windshield, like frosting on a cake, and was just as thick. Temperatures had dropped low enough for a polar bear to need an added coat with his fur. As soon as I got home I was going to search online for thermal underwear.

The frozen liquid dripped down the car when the sun shone today, and now the tendrils attached from the bottom of my car to the macadam, like fingers that had solidified as they reached down.

I didn't want to spend any more time out here than necessary. Two women from the area had disappeared at night. The police found no trace of them, just their cars left in parking lots with no DNA to help them find the criminal. They were probably dead, and I'd end up the same if I didn't get my ass in gear.

After I managed to clear the windows, I hopped in the car. Warmth welcomed me as I snuggled into the seat. I sat staring out at the menacing trees along the lot behind the office. Was that movement? I was letting my imagination get the better of me. Damn Jaime and damn me for agreeing to stay so late.

Of course, Jaime had parked out front in the VIP lot. He was probably long gone by now. Winter clothing wasn't the only website I was perusing when I got home. FindWork.com was the second.

"Thanks for making sure my car started," I mumbled to myself; the sarcasm lost on Jaime, who wasn't here. He wasn't known as the chivalrous type around the office.

I pushed my coat hood down and glanced in the rearview mirror. My black hair looked like a tornado hit it and red marred my face from the beating it took from the gale. Tired brown eyes stared back at me, and that's what I was, tired.

Screaming out in fear, I jerked back when someone knocked on my window.

"Hey, you okay in there?"

A police officer shone a flashlight in my face, but then lowered it so I could see.

Lowering my window, I placed my hand on my chest. "You scared me, officer!"

"Sorry. But you shouldn't be out this late alone. Don't you know two women have disappeared already?"

"I know. I had to work late and I'm just getting out." My heart slowed its beating pace as I felt security from the presence of the officer.

"I can follow you out if you like."

"That would be wonder—"

We were cut off by the screech of his radio which spouted a bunch of letters, numbers, and a location.

The officer responded and gave me an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, Ma'am. I have to go. Make sure you head out and keep your doors locked.

"Thank you." I felt calmer as I watched the officer drive away. "I was in my car and the door was locked. I would be fine.

When my hands warmed enough from the heater, I put the car in gear. I eased on the pedal so I wouldn't slide on the ice. The car didn't move. Pushing harder on the pedal, I figured I couldn't hit anything here in the lot with no one around if I slid.

"What the hell?" The car didn't budge, not even a slip of the tires. "Just what I need." Looking in my rearview mirror, I saw no sign of the police car.

Grateful I was inside and warm, I put the car in park and waited. For what, I don't know. Slipping the gear into drive, I tried again. No luck.

Thump, thump!

"What?" It couldn't have been the ice; the sound was more of a thud than a crack. Could something have fallen off the car? Letting out a frustrated breath, I put the car in park and got out. My eyes almost bulged out of my head when I saw icy fingers holding my car. When they moved, I stepped back, falling to my butt as I slipped.

Yellow fiery eyes glared at me and when I say fiery, I mean literal flames danced in them. I wanted to look away, but I was frozen, all I could do was whimper in terror.

The fingers connected to a humanoid creature. Blue covered his skin like a giant Smurf, but this was no Smurf. White hair and eyebrows stood in contrast to his body. But those eyes. The flaming eyes caught my attention.

The yellow eyes never moved from me as I recoiled, shaking my head back and forth in disbelief. The translucent fingers were getting close to me and solidified as they grabbed my ankle. As soon as they touched my skin, white spread across the surface. It burned me bone deep.

The digits pulled and I slid closer to the car as arctic razors sliced my skin. Blood oozed before it froze, crusted by the cold, mid-drip. A whimper was all I could manage, shock and the frigid air making me shake.

It was then I saw the hole in the pavement as the beast drew me under. A yawning, gaping cavity, like a portal to Hell.

My fingernails broke and crimson formed on my fingers as I tried to grasp the pavement to save myself.

The cold grew over my body as I froze inch by inch.

I finally found my voice, my scream echoing through the night as I was swallowed into the hole, going god knows where.

***

Two men with a tow truck stood attaching the car to lift onto their flatbed.

"What happened to the owner? Somebody said she disappeared one night like the other two." He scratched his forehead under his cap.

"Don't know. Maybe she ran away with her lover." The second towman chuckled and his partner didn't notice the yellow glow of his eyes as his lips turned up in a wicked smile.

About the Author:

Merry Marcellino lives in New Jersey in the US and works a full-time job as the Coordinator of Ministries at her church, while writing in her spare time. She has recently been published in Siren's Call Publications, Halloween Issue, 2023. She currently has self-published her first novel, Demons and Shifters and Me. Oh My! Her writing focuses on paranormal romance.

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Among the Trees | ***Ngo Binh Anh Khoa***

I watched the trees outside the window sway, imagining them as giant hands that waved at me, for only in dreams would I see someone doing so from outside the orphanage.

Only in dreams would I see someone happy to see me.

Sighing, I stared at them a while longer until I spotted a thin silhouette that seemed to be twitching in the moonlight, taller than most of the nearby trees. Two glowing eyes stared as a misshapen hand waved at me. Its grin stretched from one ear to the other, growing wider as it shambled closer toward its prey.

Nightmare | ***Ngo Binh Anh Khoa***

I wake up from a nightmare with a scream lodged in my throat, my flesh clammy with sweat. Pressing a trembling hand against my chest, I try to calm my racing heart down.

I don't remember most of the nightmare. The only detail that stands out is a massive yellow eyeball that stalked me from afar, causing my body to freeze up in sheer terror.

Shakily, I walk toward the balcony for some fresh nighttime air, and the last thing I remember as the curtains part is a harsh glare of yellow that looks down upon me, transfixed and hungry.

Replaced | ***Ngo Binh Anh Khoa***

I watch mama gently putting the adopted brat to bed, my fists trembling at the softness in her gaze.

Why does that fussy thief have something I never got? I wasn't fussy. I was always a good child. An obedient child. So why him and not me?

"It's not fair," I growl, grinning when Mama's startled by the levitating objects around the room before she finally spots me, the son she lost in the fire that her negligence caused.

"I won't be replaced, Mama! You're mine and mine alone!" I scream at her pale face before everything comes crashing down.

A Nocturnal Dance | ***Ngo Binh Anh Khoa***

Shadow shifted beneath the moonbeams as a black cat trod across the empty graveyard, parting the darkness with its amber gaze and quietly navigating the maze of stones and fog with only the weeping angels witnessing its unwelcome presence.

Midnight came, and the creature's silhouette began to change, assuming a shape that was neither man's nor beast's as a mysterious chant left its lips to ride the cackling wind, calling the imprisoned specters to emerge and madly dance across the space till daybreak, when silence at last returned, and death once more cast its somber shroud upon this desolate place.

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 Star*Line, Weirdbook, Spectral Realms, and other venues.

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His watch beeped incessantly, willing him to stop his newest obsession known as jogging. Josiah checked his time and nodded his head. He had an hour to shower and dress. The luncheon was today. Didn't those auxiliary women know how to make anything Keto friendly? All those fatty casseroles and dump cakes kept the weight on him. Buying the new Brooks Brother's suit wasn't cheap. At the beginning of his career, he wore Sears. Having retired from the Attorney General's Office with a sizeable pension, he'd treated himself.

Although out of the office environment, he enjoyed dressing for church. After all, his son Kaiden was behind the pulpit. His years of studying theology had finally paid off. Josiah hadn't worked and sacrificed all those years to produce an errant son. Proud of him as he was when he was working at the Dollar Stretcher during college, this was different. His dreams for Kaiden had come to fruition.

It wasn't everyone that could pull into His Holy Circle church's parking lot beaming with pride. The church was struggling, but he was sure once Kaiden turned it around, he'd receive a calling for brighter things. He was already on two of the conference boards. The Bishop himself had written a letter praising his efforts to improve the qualities of the CED department and the CYC. With his help, he would make Kaiden into the man he knew he could be. Big things were coming their way. Josiah could feel it.

Life was sadder now without Katie. She'd been by his side for twenty years, before the cancer. Now he was entering his sixties a single man. He needed to step up his game. The new clothes and sleek grey Corvette offered some comfort. Honestly, he hadn't been in this good of shape since they'd met all those years ago at the same country church. Things have changed a lot since then. Their money worries were behind them and their son was a pastor. He wondered if she was proud of them. Looking up at the sky, he imagined her smile among the autumn clouds. It was harder to remember, without looking at her photo on his nightstand. Time was erasing everything. Unsure as to whether he liked the idea, began to move into a trot and increased his speed. His feet moved like pistons as he fired down the cobblestone path toward his driveway. He'd only afforded to pave so much before, but soon, it would be all smooth and perfect, just as he'd promised Katie.

As he reached the porch, his stomach growled loudly at the thought of the luncheon.

***

Josiah sat in the front pew closest to the door. He loved greeting the guests as well as every Sunday folks.

Kaiden was practically vibrating at the pulpit. Josiah relished him bringing across a great message. He practically gleamed. With his blonde hair and green eyes, he was a younger version of him.

"Do you hunger for the lord today?" He shouted. "Are you ravenous?"

The congregation yelled back at him gusto. Josiah's heart pounded.

"Let's hear it again!" Kaiden screeched, practically having no voice left to stir them. "Do you hunger for your lord today?"

"Amen! Amen!" Rita Clark garbled out, sitting nearest to Josiah.

He stared at her as if he were observing a five-year-old. Filled with vigor this morning she was, yet last week, hardly able to get to the bathroom unescorted. Truly, she was a pain in his ass.

***

Leaning over his way, his glasses half fogged up. Tears formed as she grabbed his arm.

"Isn't he wonderful?"

"Of course he is." Josiah smiled back. "God is pouring out of him."

"Amen to that, brother Josiah!" Eddy Davis leaned over the back of his pew and yelled his stale breath into his ear. "Can I talk with you after the service? I need to get another check from y'all. I seem to have run a bit short on my gas bill."

"I'll get with you after the luncheon." Josiah shot back, wondering what he'd done with the last check he'd written for him. He was his payee rep and Eddy was constantly pestering for money that he didn't have for cigarettes and lottery tickets. It was difficult telling these people no. He regretted sometimes getting so entrenched in their personal business.

"Josiah, do you still have my china teacups?" Rita voiced loudly during one of Kaiden's lulls. "Mrs. Patterson wants to borrow them for her nieces' birthday party."

People turned intently but shook their heads and went back to their business, realizing that it was just Rita being a bother again.

“Shhhh!” Pandora shot at them from the opposite side of the pew.

Josiah motioned for her to turn around. He couldn't stand his daughter-in-law. She tried poorly to play the part of the pastor's wife. With her long dark hair and pointed nose, she resembled a witch. He thought her just that, but with another letter at the front of the description. Why couldn't Kaiden have found someone more of his ilk? He wished he'd left her at the Dollar Stretcher with the rest of his past. She was poisonous to their family.

She glared at them as she turned around in the pew, refocusing on her husband.

"Pandy, would you join me up here at the piano?" He called down to her. "Let's do the last two verses of ‘Stir up a Hunger’.”

Her indignance was evident as she practically trudged up the two steps leading to the piano. It was as if she was doing everyone a Herculean favor. Her fingers were like sausages on the keys.

“At the close of the service we will head on over to the fellowship hall.” Kaiden smiled. “I think I spotted Mrs. Patterson’s famous lemon dump cake over there, am I right?”

Josiah leaned back to spy Mrs. Patterson nodding her round head wildly. “What a cow,” he said under his breath.

“What was that, Josiah?” Rita asked, loudly enough for the whole congregation to hear.

He smiled sardonically and muttered, “Oh, wow!”

“That’s right!” Kaiden smiled down from the stage. “We have lots of tasty treats to offer up, so please stay and join us.”

“Wonderful.” Josiah sighed. Now he was going to be stuck for another hour eating tuna noodles and bullshitting with these people. As long as he was out of here by two, he'd have plenty of time to head over to Paris Coffee. He had an engagement to make. Having taken a chance on a Christian dating site, he'd swiped right and managed to ascertain the number of a lovely widow named Clementine. He figured they would have much to talk about and he wasn't going to spend the best hours of his afternoon knee-deep in church nonsense. Today he’d let that to Kaiden and Pandora.

Unfortunately, he closed with a sloppy prayer. Josiah would make mention of that later.

The congregation rose and made their way forcefully to the fellowship hall. Addy on a walker shoved Rita out of the way.

“Addy, I nearly lost my life last month because of you. You’re going to run someone over trying to get that first slice of dump cake. These meals are for the old and the needy, not the young and the greedy.”

Eddy sidled up to Josiah. “Don’t forget, buddy, about my gas bill.”

“You won’t let me forget, Eddy,” he said, rolling his eyes.

Falling into step with the rest of the hoard, he was set to devour the dump cake.

***

The inside of the café was crowded. It was the typical after-church crowd. There were scads of whiney kids in strollers and busybodies staring over the backs of booths. He scanned the mob for a sign of Clementine. Her soft red curls and blue eyes should be easy to distinguish among this dog-faced lot.

Making his way through the tables and chairs, he grimaced. Was he too late? Glancing at his watch, he heard someone calling his name. His eyes darted to a small café table and chairs. A woman waved at him furiously, smiling a soft smile. She barely resembled the picture.

“Josiah!” she exclaimed, rising to meet him. A soft kiss brushed against his cheek. “You look exactly like your profile.”

He sank into the chair next to her already deflated. She looked at least twenty years and twenty pounds different.

“I ordered us two black coffees. No sugar.”

“Thank you,” he said softly, still amazed by the sham of her appearance.

The rambling began. She bent his ear for twenty minutes about her dead husband and her huge, needy family. The thought wasn’t promising for him. Having Kaiden and Pandora to look after was enough. He practically made all their phone calls for them and managed their accounts.

"Josiah," Clementine said sharply. "You seem glazed."

“I was thinking about my son. He gave an amazing sermon this morning. Sometimes I can’t believe he’s my kid.”

“He sounds wonderful. I’ve been seeking a new church. Perhaps I’ll visit next Sunday. Which church is it?”

“His Holy Circle,” Mrs. Patterson screeched from behind him. “Pastor Kaiden is the best!”

Josiah was at a loss as she pulled a chair over to their tiny table and plopped down.

“Who’s your friend?”

“This is Clementine.” Josiah offered. “We’re having a coffee date.”

“Well, isn’t that nice?” Mrs. Patterson winked. “I’ve been divorced for nearly three months and this dashing man has yet asked me to coffee. Here you are though, deep in coffee and conversation.”

"We just had a conversation at the luncheon," Josiah smirked.

“You sat with Rita though.”

“We were discussing her new apartment,” he said, glancing towards Clementine. “I help many of the congregants manage their finances. Some of them have difficulty keeping their lives together.”

“Many are retarded or without families,” Mrs. Patterson piped in with a smirk. “Isn’t that right, Josiah? He has power of attorney over most of them.”

Josiah cleared his throat and shot her a look. He’d been trying to get both her and Addy off the board for some time now. They had been asking too many questions.

His phone chimed and he read the text from Kaiden. What did he want now?

“Ladies, I’m afraid I’m needed at home. Clementine, it was lovely meeting you. Mrs. Patterson, would you walk me to my car?"

Her face lit up, “Certainly.”

There was no kiss on the cheek or as much as a handshake for Clementine. The sooner they exited the café, the better.

He pushed Mrs. Patterson towards her red sedan with a forced smile.

“What’s the big idea?”

“That’s no way to speak to the head trustee.” She huffed. “Since when have you reverted back to calling me by my married name?”

“Fine, Wendy. Why follow me here?”

“I wanted to see where you disappeared to in such a fuss. Now I know. Mind you, she’s not all that. I fit into my slacks better.”

“That night together was a one-time thing.” He whispered, opening her car door. “Don’t bother me outside of church again.”

“You think you are clever Josiah, with your little side hustle. People need to know the truth about you. You are poison.”

He slammed the door on her and readied himself for what waited at home.

***

His driveway was big enough for only two cars. One old Bronco he lent out to Eddy to run errands and the one he was driving. Exasperated by the sight of him, he scowled.

“Rita’s shit filled the garage!” Eddy yelled through the window. “I can’t back up any further or I'll smash the china cabinet.”

“Just come on out of there!” Josiah scolded. “You said you had someone coming to pick that up.”

“Not until next Tuesday. Got my check?”

Eddy stumbled behind him into the house. Fuming, Josiah rifled through the drawer full of checkbooks, finding his.

“Once spent, it’s gone. You’re smart enough to sell goods on the computer, but incapable of handling your own finances. I don’t understand you people.”

Eddy was becoming a liability.

No sooner had he left in a huff, did Kaiden pull in.

“What now?” Josiah asked. “I was on a coffee date. You and Pandora need to start taking care of your own nonsense. On a side note, your closing prayer was a poor excuse for an otherwise brilliant sermon.”

“Duly noted.” Kaiden scowled. “I’ll remember that the next time. Which thanks to you, might not happen!”

“What?”

“The Bishop has informed me about the several complaints regarding the management of the congregant’s accounts. It’s become common knowledge that you are praying upon the weakest and most dull-witted of the lot.

“Pandora!” Josiah hissed. “That woman will be our undoing.”

“Our undoing?” Kaiden shook his head. “She wouldn’t stoop so low. I’d be more akin to blaming Addy or Rita. Who knows how many others you’ve cheated and angered. Someone was bound to turn on you. I don’t blame them.”

Josiah waived his hand. “I’ll call the attorney and make it all go away. Just concentrate on our futures.”

“My future!” Kaiden snapped, stopping Josiah in his tracks. “I’m afraid I have to ask you not to come around anymore. The Bishop will be contacting you.”

“But…. Son.” Josiah stammered. “I made you.”

“You’re going to need that attorney," Kaiden said grimly, hopping back into his car.

***

Josiah slumped at the kitchen table, a cup of coffee to comfort him. Who was he, if not the pastor’s father? That was his church!

The sound of Eddy pulling the Bronco back into the driveway surprised him.

“Josiah.” He called out, practically running up the stairs. “Mrs. Patterson sent this for you. She said she’s sorry.”

A sappy card and a beautiful carb-infused dump cake were set before him.

Josiah chuckled, his stomach growling. “Care to join me for some?”

He pulled up a chair and brewed some coffee to share. Then the eating began. Calories be damned.

“She was right, Eddy. This is the best dump cake in the county. A bit heavy-handed on the almond flavor this time though.”

Eddy swilled his coffee and smiled.

Josiah gestured to him. “You don’t like it?”

“Not hungry," Eddy stated flatly. “Mrs. Patterson offered to pay my gas bill for a year if I delivered it.”

Josiah suddenly felt his throat tighten and his guts churn.

“She said it would be quick and painless.”

He nearly choked on the vomit boiling up from his guts. Wiping his hand across his mouth, he struggled down the steps to his car.

Sitting covered in bile behind the wheel of his beloved Corvette, he realized that he’d blocked him in. Without resolve, he slumped against the horn, setting it to blare.

Eddy met him at eye level. “We rid the church of the poison.”

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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Appetition | ***Gregory L. Steighner***

“Adrien, I need to kill tonight. Someone pretty. Someone young. Someone that is not owned by a cat," Joëlle tightened his slate gray tie. Her anxious olive-tinted eyes captured his heart. "Please."

He reached for her flock charcoal coat. She gave a sigh as he slipped it on. "We will see, my dear Joëlle.”

He picked an odd piece of lint from her coat. His sister inspected the triple reflections of them in the mirror. For a moment, she played with her chestnut-hued hair. Adrien briefly toyed with his darker strands that stood out from their golden kin.

“Surely we can find someone tonight at the Venue?” Her starved voice remained soft.

Leading her towards the parlor door, Adrien glanced at the paintings and pictures hanging on the velvet oak walls of the Victorian room. The following gaze of their forbearers strengthened his resolve. “Yes, it is a fruitful place.”

Joëlle stepped ahead, “We should not arrive too late. That is unbecoming.”

***

Nestled in one of the quaint suburbs of Pittsburgh, the Venue resided within an old Gothic-style building built in the fledgling years of the twentieth century. Born as a school, it grew into a space tailored to its sponsors. A place between the shadows were they could act freely.

The Crépin family donated generously towards them, especially the Venue. It fulfilled their needs beautifully. It was a valued asset for the community; it provided a library and a theatre, bringing in art and culture. Especially for the outsiders who remained on the fringe of societal acceptance. When the unaware were happy and content, they never noticed those who fell into the shadows.

Adrien watched Joëlle work the crowd. She chatted with a teen boy with an athletic physique, which moved with practiced grace. The lad could be suitable. They preferred those with endurance last a week, as a single night would be unsatisfying.

Joëlle broke from the boy and pressed through the crowd to join him. With a heavy sigh, she said, “A loathsome creature, ugly and uncouth. We need better.”

"You set a high bar. Perhaps the red-haired woman in the dirty grunge jacket?” His finger pointed at the shapely woman dancing near the raised stage.

Joëlle’s white-gloved hand gently caressed the black velvet of his. "No. She is owned by cats."

He nodded. They could act freely but within limits. Crossing those borders would anger dangerous personalities. Once, by accident, they almost took a scion of the Master of Owls. A simple honest mistake as she cloaked her true nature as masterfully as the twins did. Nevertheless, the family never risked the ire of Parliament of Owls again.

Yet they starved for the kill, to nurture pain into a flowering of suffering. Adrien felt it as acutely as Joëlle.

She leaned against him, “We are too choosy. People are not the same anymore. Twenty years ago, they had hope and joy, always looking for a good time. Their eyes were unaware of what stalks them in the shadows. These bleak years have spoiled their souls. The world brought up horrors that overshadowed us. They are apathetic.”

“There must be one here. That girl there, the one dressed in those baggy men’s clothes?” Adrien asked.

"I spoke with that one. She longs for death, and makes a lazy effort to hide it from people who don't care to see." Her head shook negatively. "No. I need one with the fire to live. To fight for her next breath, to keep his heart going for one more beat, I want one to scream for Mom and Dad to save them, not begging for a blade against the throat.”

Could his sister be right? He considered the ramifications if she was. Bloodletting was not enough for them. It needed the flavor of emotions to make it sustaining. The raw primal feeling a person could produce. Anything else would be tepid water.

A sensation drew his attention towards the curved marble staircase to the balcony floor. A young teen thundered down the steps, dodging stagnant patrons in her way until stepping onto the main floor. She crossed the lobby under the neon lighting that energized the rose-tinted highlights of her golden hair. The teen’s attire showed off her physique, a tight fizzy black and white sweater that barely concealed her chest leaving the task to a black leather jacket. She wore black shorts so tight that the spider print leggings seemed to make one piece. The teen approached a table serving drinks and snacks. She tossed a wad of crushed bills onto the table and strolled off with a water bottle.

"Oh," Joëlle cooed, her hand slipped up his arm. "Such a wild beauty. She would make a pretty sight, down in the basement, hanging upside down with her arms tied behind the back, her feet pierced with iron hooks, blood streaming from hundreds of pinpricks on her naked body."

“Yes, indeed.” His voice resounded with anticipation of teasing the teen’s agony. Savoring her haunting squeals for mercy as the minutes dwindled to her end.

Adrien fixated on the girl for several minutes until her sharp azure eyes caught his gaze. She lifted up the bottle, sucking out the remaining water with the tip deep in her mouth. Some of the water leaked over her lips, which she licked with a coy smile. While keeping her sights on him, the teen walked into the main theatre hall.

Joëlle leaned closer, and whispered into his ear, "I am jealous."

He scoffed at her taunt to walk into the theatre. The band played on the raised stage as people danced fiercely below. Adrien wondered who enjoyed the performance more. In the mix, the teen worked herself in a frenzy of motion. She flowed with the thunderous music, twisting between sweating bodies. As the set progressed, she plunged into bliss.

When the musicians climaxed, she dropped to her knees, arching slightly backward, looking upwards to the mosaic sky. As the mosh throng scattered, the teen scanned the room and smiled at Adrien. She scrambled up from the floor and walked towards him.

She pressed up against him, slamming hard onto the wall. Her sharp clear eyes focused on him. “I don’t want to be fucked just by those emerald eyes.”

***

“I prefer Ayla. It’s more exotic than Agnes is. What's your name?" Ayla asked and then took a gulp of water.

"I'm Joëlle, and this is my brother Adrien." Joëlle cracked a smile, and Ayla began to chuckle. For a moment, she seemed to be fighting the urge to break out laughing. Joëlle frowned, with an annoyed tone, asked, "Our names amuse you?"

She set the water bottle on a convenient shelf. “I’m sorry. I just knew you were vampires.”

The air around them chilled. Adrien felt sweat turn to ice on his skin. Joëlle stiffened, ready to flee or perhaps fight. “How do you know this?”

“Oh, come on. You’re dressed in Anne Rice cosplay. Are you cosplayers? Or are you larpers? Lifestylers? Whatever you are into is fine by me.”

Adrien relaxed. Their kind and the others kept up a masquerade among people. It helped that some tried to emulate them. It’s easier to hide among those pretending to be like them.

“So,” Ayla turned towards him, almost grinding against his tailored coat. “What are you tonight?”

Joëlle crept behind Ayla. Her sharp eyes glared at the teen's bare throat. She tasted the smooth skin with the tip of her tongue. Ayla barely fletched, instead gave out the deepest of sighs,

“I believe a bit of all three,” he said envisioning how they would remove Ayla’s clothing. It depended on her personality, how the situation played out, and what mood captivated the siblings.

Seducing her would be fun. Ayla stripped away her clothing for an evening romp while slowly being drugged. She would awaken dangling like butcher's meat in the cold dark screaming for her mommy and daddy.

Not this one, no, he thought. Ayla was a specialty dish. Unique, like fine wine pressed from rare grapes and fermented in a cask of exceptional wood.

Joëlle stepped away from Ayla. Her eyes were wide and wild. “Adrien, a moment please.”

He broke away from Ayla who scrutinized them with a hard eye. “Don’t be long. I bore easily and leave quickly.

Adrien joined his twin within a side alcove where once a statue stood, they talked in serious whispers.

“Adrien, she is different.” Dread tainted her soft speech.

Although he did not doubt her perceptions, curiosity flamed his questions, “Is she one of the others? Could she be claimed?”

The curtain protected others, creatures of the night, spirits of myth, and beings of nightmares called werewolves, faeries, ghosts, and vampires. Could Ayla be one as well? If so, how she could not recognize them?

“Could we go now? This is boring, let’s go someplace fun.” Ayla slipped between them. She guided his hand along her bare belly. Joëlle’s hand went further down.

Adrien waited for his sister's guidance. They stumbled into a bad place. Joëlle smiled softly, removed the awkward hand, “Of course.”

The trio departed the hall and proceeded down the long flight of stairs to the street below. The area around Pittsburgh was a maze of valleys and hills hiding boroughs, parks, cemeteries, and desolate ruins within walking distance. They guided Ayla to a broken, green space filled with the rusted skeleton of a playground.

Ayla stepped ahead, not so far to run away, when Joëlle spoke. “We are going to kill you here.”

Adrien froze. Why did she do that? Maybe she wanted to stir up fear in the girl. But, Ayla did not express any terror. Instead, she became stoic.

"I know. I felt it in the theatre. I believed it was over, and to my surprise I found Cainites."

The word hit hard. Joëlle retreated to his side. The night turned on the twins. Ayla outed them. Everything they held dear was in danger.

“I’m Lyslian. I request sanctuary.”

The twins exchanged looks while understanding that within mere seconds bedlam erupted. Ayla was family, a very distant cousin to the twins. Like them, she was a descendant of Adam and Eve's children, one of Cain and Lucialla's younger siblings, Lysle and Norah, whose line survived.

Adrien's voice faltered, "Sanctuary from what?"

Ayla scanned the darkness, "I'm being hunted. It killed my twin sister weeks ago. I've been running since. I'm exhausted."

The wind stirred up the dead leaves. The long whine of a train echoed in the valley. Joëlle asked, "What is hunting you?"

"A Scion of Judas."

Adrien closed his eyes for a second as Joëlle swore. What they intended for Ayla would be a mercy compared to the vampire. A progeny of the great betrayer they were among the cruelest and loathsome of vampires. They savored and enjoyed inflicting pain on their victims. Although his family suffered Cain's lust for the kill, they did so without malice. They had to feed from Seth's Children. Unlike undead vampires, Cainites remained mortal.

A silence fell around them. The wind ceased. Cold dropped in the playground as any hint of warmth fled. Ayla spoke with frozen breath and said, "I'm sorry, it's here."

A tender clicking came over the park. Methodical steps that echoed around the trio. Adrien pulled Joëlle close and she pushed Ayla behind them. Shadows danced in the dark, merging with the rising fog. The neon streetlights flickered without an electric buzz.

"Adrien," Joëlle touched his shoulder, directing his attention to the granite stairway.

It stepped deliberately downward, the light reflecting off its silver ebony skin. A slim feminine physique flaunted a trim-tailored black and white business suit enshrouded by a black valet cloak. Her almond-curved eyes shimmered a slick dark goldenrod that captivated Adrien. Her beauty matched the aura of her dread.

At the final step, it halted and smiled. Sharkish fangs glimmered with a platinum sheen. It was a brawl between predators, primal and feral to the death.

The Scion lunged at the trio. Adrien countered, throwing his weight into tackling her body squarely. They grappled; he felt her clawed nails break into his skin. Her mouth gaped open with a hiss. She spat blood on his face. The taste enticed him as the blood of the undead was savored over the living. Cainites loathed undead vampires. Cain's mark cursed them into repentance to hunt them.

She tripped his foot, flipping him aside against the metal jungle gym. The sharp metal splintered into his back. The Scion stalked closer to Joëlle and Ayla. It didn't care for the twins. Joëlle just couldn't leave her alone to end this fight. She would not violate the custom of hospitality. She stood steadfast in front of Ayla.

The Scion laughed, a muffled raspy sound that grinded the ears. It rebuffed Joëlle's attacks to seize her throat. By one arm it lifted his sister off the ground.

"No!" Ayla screamed, she unleashed at the creature without any effect save to annoy it. She was not a fighter. It effortlessly clutched Ayla to throttle her.

Adrien pulled himself from the metal bars. They didn't come for a fight. He had no weapons. One of the rusted bars broke in half. With scorching strength, he ripped the bars out. Unseen, he raced up to the Scion to plunge the bars into her back.

With a scream, she dropped the women. While it struggled to remove the metal, Adrien pounced on her back as Joëlle leaped on the front. With their fangs extended, they tore into its flesh. The Scion's hot blood surged strength into them.

It collapsed. Adrien sensed its demise. Joëlle staggered to her feet. Her smile dipped with blood, "She was young, pretty, and foolish."

Adrien kicked the body. "The dawn will burn the body. What about Ayla?'

Joëlle glanced at their Lyslian cousin, "She has sanctuary. I am sure she is willing to accommodate us, later."

"Yes, I believe so."

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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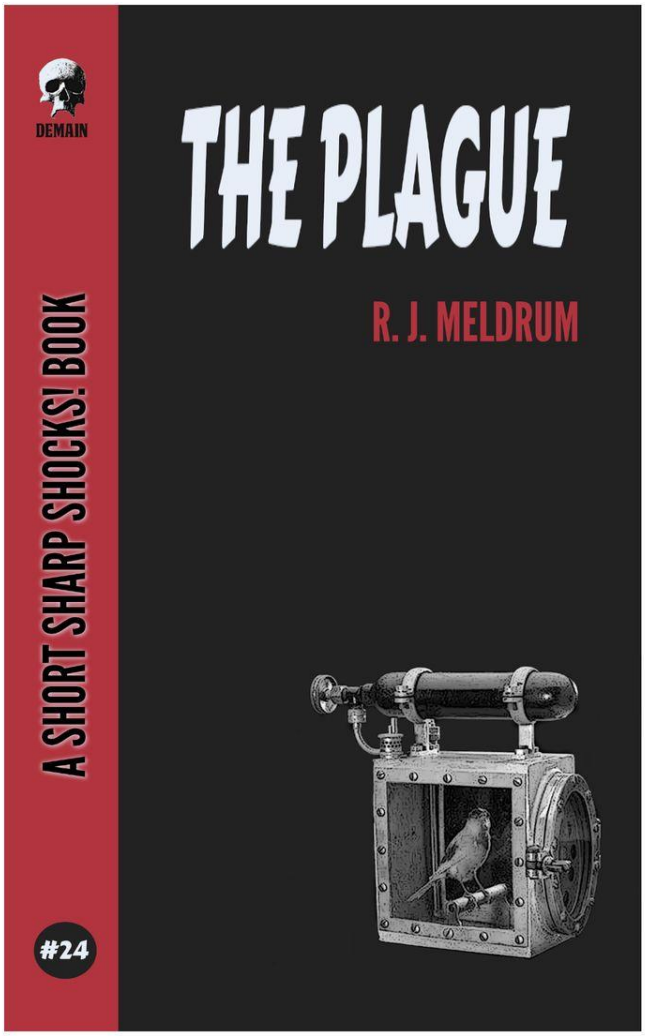

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Family History | ***C.C. Winchester***

Tears streamed down Bella's face as she gulped down another glass of Woodbridge Merlot while watching an episode of *Supernatural* on Netflix that she had seen a thousand times before. It was the one where dead loved ones 'phoned home' to their grieving relatives. One of them even used AOL Instant Messenger because the episode originally aired in the mid 2,000s.

Bella hadn't showered in two days, and she lounged in the same pjs for said two days. She wreaked. Every time she caught a whiff of her own rancid breath, she took another swig of wine. There were two empty wine bottles on the TV tray next to her recliner and a third one already half empty. Empty Cheetos chip bags were strewn about the floor around her and the current bag of Ruffles that she was working on was in her lap; a lap that was covered in chip crumbs and spilled wine. Her greasy hair was pasted to her equally greasy face. Nobody ever came over anyway. She sighed and retrieved another potato chip with orange-stained fingers.

This season of *Supernatural* featured the beautiful, but troubled character also named Bela, except with one l. But the name was more fitting for that character because she was beautiful. The Bella who lounged in her own filth was middle-aged, fifty pounds overweight and alone. She regularly had her gray hair touched up with blonde highlights, but she put no effort into anything else on her aging, sagging body. She had given up on wearing makeup long ago.

Bella shoved more chips in her mouth as crumbs showered over her lap and then washed it down with more crappy, red wine. As she watched the dead contact the characters on the episode, she entertained a crazy thought. She found herself in this current state of despair because her grandmother had just died the day before. Even though their meetups often ended in arguments, she had genuinely loved the old woman.

Bella's iPhone was on the TV tray amongst the army of dead soldiers that had done their duty and given their lives in contributing to her current state of sloppy drunkenness. She set down her wine glass and carefully removed her cell from amongst the sentinels. The back of it was sticky with wine residue, but Bella was too drunk to care. She typed in her passcode and after two failed attempts managed to type it in correctly. She swiped through her calls. The third one down said, Granny. They spoke with each other frequently since neither of them had any real friends. Granny always said that the two of them were honest and the rest of the world doesn't like to hear the truth.

She looked at it for a moment and then pressed it and placed the phone to her ear. It rang a couple of times and Bella was about to put the phone back down because even in her current mental state, she knew she was being stupid and crazy…

"Hello, honey," the familiar crackling, Texas accent belonging to her Granny said through the phone.

Bella jumped from her chair, chip bag flying from her lap and phone launched from her hand as if it were on fire.

Bella trembled all over while Netflix continued to the next episode of *Supernatural* as if nothing had happened. Her phone lit up and vibrated. She watched the phone move about the carpet, while she remained frozen in place. Her heart raced as she stared at it. The phone went dark and just as Bella had convinced herself that she had imagined the whole thing, the phone resumed its antics.

"Fuck it!" Bella swooped up the phone and answered it.

"Hello?"

"Why did you hang up on me, honey?"

Bella was sobbing now as she listened to the familiar voice.

"Bella? Why are you crying?"

Bella got herself under control and asked, "Is it really you, Granny?"

"Of course, it's me, honey,"

"But, but, you died…"

"Well yes, but there is an afterlife, honey. You know that," Granny answered.

"There are phones in the afterlife?" asked Bella.

"Not exactly, you're actually imagining all this, honey."

"Imagining this? I'm not really talking to you?"

"Oh, you are talking to me honey, but not on a cell phone."

"What!"

"The caoineag has you," said Granny, "She's bringing you to me."

"Bringing me to you? What's a caoineag?"

"Have you heard of a banshee, honey?"

"Yes, everyone knows what a banshee is, but banshees just announce upcoming deaths in a family. They don't take the living anywhere."

"Well, think of this caoineag, as a souped-up banshee. She's been with our family for centuries. She came over to America with our Scottish ancestors. She harkens all the way back to our Norse origins. She is Ragnailt ingen Amlaíb, granddaughter of Godred Croven, King of the Isles. She was a great queen who was relegated to the history books as simply the wife of the ruler of southern Hebrides when he had her murdered and took control of their kingdom. Being a descendent of Odin, death could not stop her. She has stayed with the women in our family, growing stronger with each passing century…"

"Why have I never heard of her before?" asked Bella.

"It just never came up," said Granny.

"Never came up?! A creature haunts our family, and it never came up?"

"Well, the conversation never took that direction."

"What? Oh god, I am so drunk! I'm joining AA tomorrow, I swear!"

***

Bella struggled to open her bloodshot eyes. She rubbed them without mercy before opening them a second time. A hag wearing a shredded, sooty gown loomed over her. Bella slid from the recliner; her ears filled with her own bloodcurdling screams. The monster's thick white hair hung in voluminous waves around her ghoulish face. She hovered in the room between the TV and the recliner. She looked down at Bella, opened her gaping, toothless mouth and wailed.

Bella's screams and the wails emitted from the creature became a gruesome symphony that had no audience. Bella's screams reached a crescendo as every bone, ligament and tendon were ripped to shreds from the creature tearing her body apart. Blood, guts, and sinew joined the chip crumbs and wine stains strewn about the once cozy den.

The last thing Bella heard was the theme music as the *Supernatural* episode ended and the caoineag whisked away carrying her soul to join that of her Granny's in eternity.

About the Author:

C.C. Winchester's love of horror began at the tender age of five, when she started sneaking into the living room late at night to watch zombie movies with her parents. Her mother said that though her infiltration was discovered, and she was promptly removed, she would return in what she thought was stealth mode, only to be removed again. She currently writes in Dallas, Texas.

Website: multiversedream.com
Twitter: @MultiverseCC

Corey | ***Gabriella Balcom***

"Please let me go with you this time," Corey pleaded. "You always leave me behind and it's not fair. I want to see all the places you talk about for myself. I want to do the things you get to do."

"Little bit, we love you and enjoy your company," Larus replied. "But you're a small wind, not big like us. Someday you'll be fully grown, too, but that day hasn't arrived yet, so you can't go."

Corey sniffled. "I miss you terribly every time you're gone. I'm not as young as I used to be. I'm bigger now, and I promise to be good if you take me. Please..."

"I'm sorry. You have to stay home for now. But you can have fun here with the others your age, like you always do." Larus affectionately blew a trickle of air at his baby brother.

"I want to travel and go adventuring, too," Corey wailed.

"We know," another of his brothers, Tebur, said, giving him a brief hug. "And you'll be able to when you get bigger."

"Please don't leave me," Corey begged, his eyes tearing up.

Larus, Tebur, and the others exchanged glances before drifting away.

"They'll return for visits," Mama told him gently. But, her tone grew stern. "You're my last-born and you're staying."

He knew from experience that nothing but *nothing* would change her mind when she sounded like that.

She smiled at him. "I want my sweet baby home with me."

***

Over time, resentment ate away at Corey until he grew sullen and bitter. He thought about his absent siblings all the time, and continually wondered about the fascinating places he wasn't getting to see and the experiences he was missing out on. He couldn't help but think his brothers must not have loved him like they'd claimed. If they really had, surely they would've taken him with them, no matter what.

He used to enjoy watching the humans below going about their day-to-day activities. In the past, he'd blown things out of their hands again and again, giggling as they'd frantically chased after the items. Something else he used to enjoy was creating breezes to make their hair lift and swirl, whipping around their heads in a frenzy. But he had no desire to do those things anymore. They just didn't appeal to him. He couldn't even summon enough interest to watch other young winds laugh and play like he used to.

One day, Netia followed him from place to place and wouldn't stop.

"Everyone else is taking a boring old nap," she sulked. "My parents told me to take one, but I'm hiding from them. Come do something fun with me."

"Go away," Corey snapped at her. "I don't want to play. Just leave me alone."

She continued to hound him, though, insisting he do what she wanted, begging him to play.

Exasperation growing, Corey growled, surging toward her. He only intended to scare her away, but found himself unable to stop, completely engulfing her. At first he was shocked at his actions and began to pull away, but stopped when he realized he felt a bit stronger.

Within seconds, Netia ceased to exist, and a new energy and power surged through him. He studied himself as best he could from all angles, and realized he was slightly bigger.

Netia's family appeared after a while, calling out for their child, asking if anyone had seen her. Corey played dumb when he was asked, and wished them luck with their search.

He replayed what he'd done in his mind afterward, smiling as he thought about the details. Recalling the sensations he'd felt, he shivered, and imagined feeling them all over again.

He lured another youngster to a remote spot a few days later. Overpowering her was easier than he'd thought it would be, and he didn't feel any guilt when she winked out of existence.

Corey deliberately sought out other little winds, overwhelming them and merging their essences with his own. He took special care not to be caught and kept his distance from anyone who might notice him changing, especially his mom and former friends.

As he grew in size and strength, his mind returned to his newest passion time after time. He couldn't keep himself from thinking about it, and the more he indulged, the more power he craved.

One day, an idea popped into his mind, and he could barely breathe as he considered it. He couldn't wait to see if it would work, and drifted down to earth. Within seconds, he'd successfully engulfed a dog and two trees.

While he was in the process of swallowing a small shed, a man stumbled upon him and yelled, attracting the

attention of a nearby woman. Corey grinned, pleased by the perfect timing. He changed direction and overpowered both people before focusing on other things.

His form changed until he was no longer a wind at all. Everything he'd absorbed blended together to form a large mass which undulated in midair. Trees stuck out at weird angles, as well as concrete slabs, chunks of tar ripped from roads, and parts of structures. Fresh and rotten body parts from animals and humans alike were melded into him, too.

That night, he left his homeland altogether, heading straight for a metropolis. He attacked it, sucking up homes, buildings, skyscrapers, roads, and people — devouring everything in his path. Afterward, a river caught his eye and he inhaled it, too.

Corey continued to travel and grow, becoming massive in what felt like no time at all, stretching hundreds of miles wide and just as high. The bigger he got, the more he admired himself, and he twirled around and around, laughing with glee.

He approached another large city but found people waiting this time. They didn't flee like all the others had, but fired on him with weapons, rockets, and tanks. Although they did little damage, Corey felt sheer disbelief at the thought of anyone trying to stand in the way of what he wanted.

He felt himself growing warm, then hot, as his rage grew, and flames broke out all over his body. Throwing some one direction, then another, he blasted people and weaponry alike, and chuckled.

But when he remembered one very disturbing thing, he turned around and surged toward home.

His mother approached as he was gulping down the ruling Council of Winds. She beseeched him to stop, but Corey blasted her into particles.

"You'll *never* hold me back again!" he bellowed. Then he set off in search of his brothers.

The Hungry Child | ***Gabriella Balcom***

"*Food!"* the small boy wailed, fat tears rolling down his cheeks. He gulped loudly and sniffled before crying out once more. "*Food!"*

"Don't cry," Charisse murmured, keeping her voice calm and soothing. "We have plenty, don't we, Ty?"

"Yeah," her boyfriend replied. He frowned as he looked around at the thick forest surrounding them. "But where'd this little guy come from, Hon? He couldn't be more than four years old. Five at the most."

"His family must've brought him. He probably just wandered away from them."

They searched for several minutes, taking turns going in different directions. However, despite their calling out for other people repeatedly, no one answered. And the boy began to cry again, demanding food.

"We can search more later, but in the meantime…" Ty grabbed the hot dog he'd made for himself earlier, and held it out.

The child inhaled it, then wolfed down two more in quick succession.

"Wow," Charisse exclaimed. "He's really packing the food away, isn't he? Where do you think it's going? His legs?"

"Could be." Ty grinned at her. "My mother used to say mine were hollow. But that's enough for him. We've gotta eat, too."

Eyeing their unexpected visitor, who looked expectantly from one of them to the other, he said, "That's all for now. I wish I had some candy for you, but I didn't think to bring any along. I'm got the fixings for s'mores, though, and we'll make them later. If your parents have shown up and gotten you by then, they can bring you back for some."

The boy ignored him and snatched up the remaining hot dogs, cramming them into his mouth raw. He grabbed the bag of buns next. When Charisse tried to take them from him, he bared his teeth, and hissed at her.

"Stop that!" Ty snapped, voice stern. "It's not nice."

Snarling, the child glared at him, eyes changing into a dark red. His teeth changed, growing sharp and jagged, and his hands lengthened, morphing into paws tipped with long claws.

"That's no child," Charisse blurted out. "*Run!*"

Ty positioned himself between her and the nightmarish creature, but it leaped over him, and ripped out Charisse's jugular. Ty scrambled backward, eyes wide and staring. Before he could run, the creature slashed his head from his shoulders.

"I'll give you something else," Charlene offered. "Something much better."

"*No!*" Bregga snapped. "We already agreed on my prize, and that's all I want."

"But surely there are other things you'd like. I have access to a great deal of money, more than I could spend in a lifetime, or even two. You can have beautiful designer gowns, jewelry, and fine furs. Fast horses, every electronic you could imagine, even your own private theater."

The other woman merely shook her head.

"Maybe you'd enjoy a huge yacht, or your own plane and a landing strip. A sports car, or two or three of them. You could have a Lamborghini if you like, or you could travel the world. I could even build you a new home."

"I have no need for any of that." Narrowing her eyes, Bregga stalked toward Charlene. "Or have you forgotten who and what I am?"

"No, of course not. You're a witch."

"Yes, and I'm extremely good at what I do. You have no idea of the extent of my power. Because of me, you got what you wanted. The beautiful castle you now call home, your jewel-studded baubles, and the hand of the very King himself. He wouldn't have fallen in love with you if not for me. You'd still be a slave."

"All of that is true, but I *love* our children."

"I'll love them, too."

"You don't need mine. Thousands of women are out there, and you could get some from them. For you, that would be easy."

Moving so fast her body blurred, Bregga flew toward Charlene, pinning her to the wall by her throat. She waved her hand, and their contract appeared in the air, the former slave's signature glowing blood-red. "You came to me," she hissed. "Not the other way around. I didn't force you to sign this. You begged for my help and I gave it to you. If you don't honor our agreement now, I'll skin you alive and roast you over a fire. Your husband will be next."

***

Later that evening, Queen Charlene hugged her eleven-month-old daughter, Kaylin tightly, then did the same with her son Jarod, who was two.

"I love both of you so much," she said, voice breaking. She turned to the watching Bregga. "You told me years ago how badly you wanted children but couldn't have any. So I know you'll cherish mine."

"Cherish?" the witch raised her eyebrows. "That's not the word I'd use. I'd say *savor."*

"Savor?" the Queen blinked, expression blank.

Without warning, Bregga grabbed the youngest child, ripped her into pieces, and gnawed on one of her tiny arms.

"*No!"* Charlene wailed. "My sweet baby… You said you'd love them."

"Not them. Their *taste,"* the witch sneered, blood trickling from her mouth, running down her chin. "Young flesh is tender. And royal flesh is tangier." She bent to pick up the dead girl's head and raised it, letting blood run into her mouth. Then Bregga bit into the face.

About the Author:

Gabriella Balcom lives in Texas with her family, works full-time in the mental health field, and writes fantasy, horror, romance, sci-fi, literary fiction, children's stories, and more. She has had 475 works accepted for publication, and has five books out: On the Wings of Ideas, Worth Waiting For, The Return, Free's Tale: No Home at Christmas-time, and Down with the Sickness and Other Chilling Tales.

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In uncharted and forbidden tracts of space, ancient evils awaken...

"The Temple" by Joseph Sale
"The Station" by Lee Mountford
"Graveyard of Stars" by Dan Soule

Five Years of Fame | *Alex Grehy*

It started some thirty years ago, when I was a humble talent scout cruising the city's bars and clubs for new voices to exploit. Sorry, to *develop*. The exploitation came later.

I didn't find what I was looking for on the barely lit stages. No, the real treasure was in the audience. I remember the night I first worked it out. I caught a glance of them, the women, sitting at tables, homogenous smears of sequins and lip fillers, waving their flutes of prosecco at the stage. They were wolf-whistling the act, Rick someone or other, all tight trousers and generic good looks. I didn't think he was that special, but he sure got the ladies going. The women seemed harmless enough, yelling for a piece of him, but they didn't mean anything by it – a kiss, a grope – easily satisfied. Then I spotted the women sitting in the shadowy booths, watching Rick intently. You couldn't see much of their faces, apart from eyes glittering with…hunger. I looked at Rick. He didn't seem as afraid as I thought he should be. Maybe he couldn't see beyond the stage lights or was flattered by their attention.

Flattery. One of the greatest forces in the universe. Know that, and you'll rule the world, or the part of it that has cash, anyhow.

For several years I worked on my idea, sitting with groups of women in bars and clubs, from seedy to high end, discussing their preferences. I became acquainted with the shadow women, as I like to call them, though they were slower to disclose their needs. I've always been good at getting people to talk; I'm a listener, and I never give away what I'm thinking. I'm a small man, unthreatening, and I've been told I've got a bland face, forgettable. Which is just as well. The more I learnt about the women and their hungers, the more I wanted to fade into the background. Let the showmen satisfy them.

I had been working for a huge production company and thought of pitching my idea to them. But I don't know what scared me most – the board burying my idea under a ton of morality, or running with it while I, the originator, got nothing. I set up my own company – it was an expensive business, but I got a few women interested in investing, drew in a few corporate backers and launched my new talent show – *Five Years of Fame*.

***

"Aaaand WELCOME to FIVE YEARS OF FAME! Please give a big hand to our judges. As always, our panel is made up of the winners from the last five years. Please give a huge welcome to last year's winner, Jed. How's your first year of fame been?"

I watch from the studio floor. Levi, the best compere in the business, has the audience in the palm of his charm.

Jed jumps onto the judges' table and gyrates his hips in a rehearsed move. Levi laughs and turns an indulgent, knowing expression to the camera. "...and finally, Zander, who's just coming to the end of his FIVE YEARS OF FAME. How are you feeling?"

"It's been an amazing ride, Levi. I've found my voice and, thanks to the generosity of my backers..." Zander waves to the block of women sitting together in the spotlight. The crowd cheers wildly. I nod to the women sitting offstage in the shadows, they've waited a long time for this moment, five years, in fact.

"...yeah, thanks to my backers, I've already lived all my dreams. I've performed in all the big arenas, supported my sister's education and secured my mom's retirement, plus I have enough cash left over to keep me in luxury for the rest of my life."

"And what do you plan to do with the rest of that life?" Levi asks, his teeth gleaming like the mirrors on a glitterball.

"FIVE YEARS OF FAME!" Zander waves to the audience. The noise of their applause is immense. After a long minute, their cheers subside, and he continues. "It's time to ride off into the sunset, enjoy the rest of my life on the beach." The camera pans to the previous years' winners, who look doubtful. "Guys, five years is enough, it really is. I've proven everything I ever wanted to prove, I've got enough of everything, I AM enough!" The audience cheers again.

He sounds so convincing, but I'm expecting tears later. It's hard to give it all up so publicly, but the lure of the win is all-consuming – no one remembers the names of the losers in these competitions. Though I do take care of the losing contestants. I offer them a sweet deal – they don't get the fame, but I give them all the money they need in exchange for, let's call them EEG's – Exclusive Entertainment Gigs. I had to do something. The women who were backing the show wouldn't wait for a return on their investment. Most of the contestants went for it, which was a lifesaver – for me. The losers kept the women going for those first five years, until the show got established. Nevertheless, they get restless and impatient for the big payoff at the end of each annual series. I can appease them with EEGs with the losing contestants, but the rush of energy that fame brings to winning contestants is what they need. It adds a certain savour, apparently, the tenderness of performers who have given it their all is unparalleled.

I turn my attention back to the show. My set designers have outdone themselves this year – there are more sequins, lights and pyrotechnics than ever before. There are sixty new contestants and over the next six months they'll compete in knock-out rounds. They're predominantly singers, some instrumentalists and a few novelty acts. But never ones with animals, ever, that would be immoral.

"Welcome to our next act, Ansgar, all the way from Sweden. What's your story, Ansgar?"

"I'm a classical singer," he says, a little nervously.

"Like opera?" Levi prompts.

"Almost," Ansgar replies. "I have an operatic voice, but I love to sing ballads, like Sinatra."

"And why did you sign up for FIVE YEARS OF FAME?" Levi gestures to the crowd and they cheer. He's trained them to respond, like dogs, or maybe sheep.

I hear a stir. The women in the shadows are leaning forward, licking their lips, their eyes luminous as the stage lights flash on and off in sync with the music. I move a little closer and whisper, "So he's hit the spot, has he? Let's hope he goes all the way for you…to you." They sit back, fixing me with their intense stares. I feel a stab of fear from my throat to my balls. They funded this venture and if I don't deliver, well, it's me that will pay the price.

"I come from a very poor family. My late father was a heroin addict, and my mother was forced into sex work and died when I was very young, so my grandmother raised me. It was her idea for me to apply for the show – she believes in me more than anyone in the world. I'm so grateful to her for giving me a future." The camera pans over to a sweet old woman sitting in the audience, Ansgar's grandmother. She's one of my investors, though Ansgar doesn't suspect. She sold his mother into sex work, and now she's selling Ansgar.

I look at the women in the shadows, they are licking their lips. Ansgar has awakened their appetite like no other. There will be ferocious bidding to become his personal backer. The return on his grandmother's investment will be beyond her wildest dreams.

***

I usher Zander into my private green room at the aerodrome. His final show ended a few hours ago and he's crying, as I predicted. The show's closing sequence was spectacular, and legions of fans waved him off as he got into the limousine with the half-dozen women who outbid the others to take this ride with him. I'm not surprised he's emotional – they paid for a full-service seduction and will have worked him hard on the ride here.

"What happens now?" he sobs. "How can I let all this go?"

I hand him a glass of brandy – the most expensive in the world. The investors have very strict terms – they don't allow drugs or alcohol during the five years of fame. It's given my show a reputation for clean living and high morals; performers come in with some sob story – addiction, poverty, criminal records – and emerge rehabilitated, transformed. My company has won awards for its social conscience. The shadow women find this hilarious. They say I'm a *good boy*. My creativity has sated their appetites *and* protected their reputations. And while I'm a *good boy*, I get to live, in style.

I shake my head to clear it. Zander is a five-year investment. I need him to deliver.

"You WILL let it go. For one, you signed the contract, and my company will no longer support your career, lifestyle or family if you renege. For two, all you're missing is the public exposure – from this aerodrome, my private jet will take you to an island in the Pacific where you can live out your days in total luxury. You can live well, as you have done over the last five years, or you can go crazy with wine, women and song, as it were. No one's watching anymore."

I watch him toss down the brandy as if it were water. I flinch, a liqueur that special deserves to be savoured, but the shadow women won't care. Despite what TV chefs tell you, it doesn't matter whether you apply your seasoning a grain or a spoonful at a time; it's the flavour that matters.

"If you fulfil your contract you'll be like the best firework, giving everything in a glittering display before vanishing into the dark – they'll never forget that. Do you really want to linger around, scratching a living singing in pubs to people who'll say, *wasn't he famous once?* before turning back to their beers?"

He looks at me sharply, but I find a reality check usually works at this point.

"OK Zander, your plane is ready. Are you ready? You've worked hard for this, kid, time to reap the biggest reward."

He nods. We really have paid for his sister's education and neither she nor his mother will ever have to worry about health insurance or housing or anything. I convinced the shadow women that the way to avoid controversy is to keep the families happy. It works for most, apart from a few dependents who accused us of stealing their sons. But we

can rely on greed as a motivator, so for the most part we can buy their happiness. Failing that, we can ship them off to live on a luxury island with their once-famous sons.

That's a euphemism, obviously. Only the winner's bones will ever reach the island, and that's only if they're washed up by a freak wave in the Pacific. But that's unlikely. The ocean's only getting deeper, and its slow tides keep many secrets.

I lead Zander up the steps to the plane. The interior is plush, exactly as you'd imagine a private jet to be, all blood-red leather and swivel seats. There are ten shadow women on board, Zander's biggest backers. They are beautiful, their smooth faces do not betray their age or intent. They have a magnetism about them, and Zander's stage charm rises as he allows them to lay him down on a couch and strap him in for take-off. I nod to the shadow women in the cockpit – it's time to go. I wish Zander *good luck,* but he's mesmerised by the women, who are stroking his hair, his hands, his feet. They tell me this is an appetiser; his energy is delicious and whets their appetite. I turn away and signal to the co-pilot to close the door.

I've got no stomach for what will follow. The women who invest in the show, the ones whose hunger drove its development, feed in many different ways. The lesser investors take their payment in energy – the performer's adrenaline-fueled excitement, the hysteria of the human audience. Invest a little more and they get to feed off the envy of the crowds when they're out with their new plaything and take energy from the sex that follows.

But the serious investors, the shadow women, they need it all – the life force and the flesh that drives it. I've heard it's a frenzied ritual, but their obsession means that there's never much to clean up afterwards – they don't like waste and leave only bare bones for the sharks.

I leave the aerodrome and ask the limo driver to take me back to my office. I need to plan for the next episode, the next series – it's a relentless process, even though it only delivers one winner every year. When I arrive, a group of shadow women are waiting for me. Their eyes are red-rimmed, and they keep licking their lips. I feel that visceral fear again, but I hope that I am of more use to them as a provender than a snack. I notice that they are all wearing promotional "I LOVE Ansgar" stickers. I invite them into my office and sit down, reassured by the heavy oak desk that stands between me and my guests, even though I know they could tear through it like tissue paper.

"About the show…" their spokeswoman says, and they all lean forward. I remember that these ladies are not at Zander's feast and their hunger is keen.

"We need to change the format, make it quarterly, monthly even. We need to spread the fame."

"But ladies, that will dilute the concept. It's just about perfect now, with the mania over the Christmas chart toppers, the merchandising and a six-month gap between series is important. Our success is as much in the anticipation as the delivery.

"We are prepared to throw money at the show's development." their spokesperson says.

"It's not about money," I remonstrate. "It's about humans and the nature of fame – it's an illusion, a facade – it takes novelty and pizzazz to generate public interest, it's not just about money. Maybe I could arrange more EEGs for you…"

My voice fades as my throat dries. The shadow women are staring at me, and I can feel them draining my vitality. I grip the edges of my desk, which now feels as insubstantial as the fame I'm trying to sell.

"No!" their spokeswoman says, "we have become accustomed to a richer diet. How to sustain it is a pretty problem, *your* problem. You weren't thinking of letting us down…were you?"

Alex Grehy

Alex Grehy's (she/her) work features in a range of zines and anthologies including Aphotic Realm and Spread: Tales of Deadly Flora. Her essays on being a "Lady of Horror" have featured in the Horror Writers Association Newsletter and The Horror Tree blog. She is a regular contributor to the Ladies of Horror Flash Project and is known for her vivid prose and thought-provoking poetry.

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Automation Regrets | ***Ken Poyner***

When the war was over, we wondered what to do with all the busted machines. They were stranded just where they went haywire. Every so often by thumping this or that or pushing up what seemed pushed down, we could start one doing something, though seldom could we guess what it did. No mechanics were left, and the theorists were in hiding. We became common townsfolk with an embarrassment of machines. Machines had simply wanted to be independent of us. A child kicks what looks like a corn harvester and a once pinned cob tumbles out. We won. We lost.

Becoming Community | ***Ken Poyner***

Quibble has his next-door neighbor, a wolfman, over for a light pre-dinner drink. He seems pleasant enough, but has to use two paws to hold his glass. Quibble notices the neighbor sheds profusely on the couch. Whether it is nerves or simply natural, Quibble does not know. After the neighbor leaves, Quibble's wife uses a lint brush to collect the hair. She discovers how fine and soft it is. What a filing for a throw pillow it might make! The question of whether the shedding is natural or nervousness suddenly enlarges: the wolfman will, over time, grow comfortable with Quibble.

Impractical Magic | ***Ken Poyner***

The lady living in the shack just off the abandoned lumber road is rumored to be a witch. She exists largely unseen. She does not seem to come into town. Small glimpses of her add up to fodder for gossip. The cautious say she eats children, though no one can name any missing spawn. Perhaps she imports them from beyond our information sphere. Nathan at least once a week fires up his barely ready third-hand truck and drives his annoying little brother out there, leaving him to peer in the shack windows. His brother is always there when Nathan returns.

Lore | ***Ken Poyner***

There is a rumor about a body in the trunk. In some tellings, it is a drunkard uncle. In others, a girl whose madness by the family could not be claimed. In another, a postman who grew too curious. Quibble moves the trunk each year in his annual attic cleaning. It grows yearly heavier. The excuse for not throwing it out is that it could never be muscled down the stairs. The real reason is stature. Would he rather head a family with, possibly, a body in a trunk; or, like other patriarchs, just family skeletons to wrangle in closets?

Appreciation | ***Ken Poyner***

Being unseen and unheard is the worst of it. Quibble thought lurking about the ladies' restroom, leaping out at women he thought promising, might be the highlight of being dead. But for all his efforts, he gets no notice. It makes the entire process worthless. Next Tuesday he will go back to the Registry of the Dead, uncheck selection 'ghost', check 'flesh-eating zombie'. That might allow him some impact. At least some might recognize that the dead have their hobbies, too, and it is best to indulge their less murderous ones. Then again, to hunger once more might be nice.

About the Author:
Ken Poyner's eleventh book, "Winter's Last Apple", is just out. Eight of his previous ten books are still in print. He lives in Virginia with his wife of 40+ years, assorted rescue cats, and various betta fish, traveling to support his wife's world stunning power lifting career.

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13 Conbini | ***Echo Ishii***

Open 25 hours a day. Irrashaimase!

That's the whimsical catchphrase, in English no less, to the song that pumps through the speaker system at 13 CONBINI convenience stores, during every twenty minutes of piped in background music. Chiharu has gotten used to it as little more than white noise; but every once in a while it breaks through to the surface of her awareness and she hums along.

Chiharu wishes she could sing the store jingle. She has a wonderful singing voice—most lesser deities such as herself do. Perhaps if she works at 13 CONBINI long enough and becomes manager, or district manager, or worldwide CEO they will let her sing the theme song.

Probably not.

Chiharu goes up to a shabbily dressed man in the refrigerated aisle, shuffling cartons around as if he's reimagining the store shelves on his own personal order. She hates when customers do that. It's an insult to her and all the dedicated employees of 13 CONBINI who carefully display every item to create an overall shopping aesthetic.

So, she goes up to him, plasters a smile on her face and says, "May I help you sir?"

He smiles back at her, handsome, alluring, and cold…like all vampires. "I can't find the brand with the triple heart on it," he says, his fangs making his pronunciation slurry.

"That was special for Valentine's Day," Chiharu says.

"I liked it. The blood was fresh, pure, sensual," he shivers as if caught up in his own orgasmic experience.

"Well, I'm sure we'll have something just in time for cherry blossom viewing," she says cheerfully, as she scoots around him, rearranging the shelves to the previous order. He moves out of the way, and selects some of the generic brand cartons on the lower shelves.

Tokyo was brimming with vampires. Most were turned during the boom time, when the Japanese yen was strong, and everyone indulged. Alas, since vampires are immortal, they stayed when the money went.

It's a relatively slow night. A nest of wraith wander in, clinging to each other, making a mess of the snack aisle. Chiharu gives them a glare. A few werewolves came in the door. One hadn't even bothered to change his face. Another was in full wolf form, but on a lead, so Chiharu was okay with it.

Chiharu smiles as the door opens, and she sees a beautiful, one-eyed demon woman come in for a shipment of fresh eyeballs. 13 CONBINI has expanded as a delivery pick up point for the online sellers of exclusive goods for the paranormal community. Sometimes, Chiharu likes to imagine she can hear the eyeballs roll around in the box—a joke they both share—but they both know it is packaged with bubble foam. Chiharu's hand brushes against the soft, delicate hands of the cyclops as she hands over the package. How she wishes she could get off of work early; and meet up with the alluring demoness with her brand new eyeball, and talk books and share a laugh.

She's on shift, so romance will have to wait.

Before 13 CONBINI expanded to several convenient locations serving quality food for the ravenous folk of particular dietary needs, they had to stick with the high-end private entrees or black market sellers. Vampires with money or the dragons with hoards had it easy but everyone else had to scrounge. 13 CONBINI makes it easier to fulfill those cravings for blood or fresh prey—because who doesn't suddenly have cravings at strange times at night?—all at affordable prices.

A pregnant woman wanders in, patting her belly, and mumbling to herself as she fills a basket with assorted snacks. The mother is completely human, but that baby in her belly isn't. 13 CONBINI gave her a pre-paid membership because the paranormal community supports its working mothers.

Chiharu hears the roar of bike engines in the parking lot, and looks out to see riders circling around like hyenas, ready to jump. She's seen her share of vermin in her centuries of living, and these are some of the worst. There are signs politely asking people not to idle their cars or congregate in the parking area. 13 CONBINI Corporate Holdings strictly enforces such policies with dire consequences.

The gang can't come in, Chiharu knows. They don't have the app that scans and unlocks the doors, and anyway, management throws up a magical barrier as a precaution. Plus, this is Chiharu's place, and no one steps in any territory she claims without a fight.

She walks over to the door humming the new tune she's thinking up for 13 CONBINI. Something more with a little more dance step vibe than the older jingle. She hums, she whistles, she grabs her sword as she walks to the front door.

It's a full moon out, with a slight breeze, and the scent of imminent rainfall in the air. Chiharu's senses have dulled over the centuries of urban living, but she still knows when a storm is brewing. It gives her a skip to her step. She's ready for a fight.

She swings her sword, first at a man coming from the left, cutting him cleanly in half. The next vermin loses his head; a third his arm and legs. Chiharu takes no joy in the blood splatter or the screams and certainly not the damage to property of 13 CONBINI Corporate Holdings. She is a loyal employee who will write up a detailed incident report as soon as she closes up at daybreak.

A group of ghouls float out from under the fluorescent lights. Chiharu doesn't stop to watch, and barely registers the sounds of ripping and gnashing of teeth as she goes back inside to her frozen foods and stocked shelves.

She hums along with the 13 CONBINI song as she happily continues her shift.

About the Author:
Echo Ishii is a writer of all things paranormal. She is also a fan of audio drama and B movies. Currently, she spends too much time rewatching Blake's 7. Originally from the US, she is a long-time resident of Japan.

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Resurrection | ***Shelly Redd***

Snowdrops bobbing their ghostly heads in the moonlight, watch over the grave as frost rimed earth cracks and shifts.

Clawed fingers reach, questing for purchase, another hand follows, pale arms, dirt grimed, lever on the edge as the head erupts, spewing a loamy avalanche of grass clods.

Teeth gnashing, it tastes the chill air, head swivelling towards the metallic tang of the blood offering, a low moan of need escaping its decaying mouth.

The voice of its master fills what's left of its brain. There is no thought but of blood and the compulsion to rise from its resting place.

Blood is Life | ***Shelly Redd***

Shivering, hugging her knees, the girl huddled as far away from the stone coffin as she could get.

In inky blackness nothing could be seen, and she had felt her way around every inch of the locked tomb seeking an escape.

Taken from the orphanage as darkness fell, she could still taste the bitter sleeping draft, and remembered snatches of conversation.

"The Master specified the spring equinox…virgin sacrifice… Nobody will miss her."

Stone scraped, deafening after the silence. Irrational, all-consuming terror overwhelmed her.

Fangs sunk into flesh, the copper tang of her blood filling the air. She screamed.

About the Author:
Shelly Redd, after winning a national fantasy TV story competition when she was 9, has been trying to have those fifteen minutes of fame ever since. After being thoroughly entertained by the supernatural from that early age, she was inspired by two published writer friends to let her imagination out to play, and play she did.

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Hide and Seek | *Keller Agre*

Maggie said we could hide anywhere, but we all knew there was one house that was off-limits. No one ever explained to me why we couldn't nestle ourselves within the darkness of the large trees that stood in front of the house next door to mine, but the overgrown grass and chipped paint were usually enough to steer me into picking a different spot. Still, I had never won a game of hide and seek in the dark, and I knew the flashlights would never reveal my position if I hid in front of the empty house.

"Ready for another game?" Maggie asked.

"Yeah!" Rachel said. "One more, then I have to go home."

"You *always* have to go home first," Maggie said.

"It's not my fault." Rachel scrunched her eyebrows, wrinkling her forehead.

"Whatever," Maggie grumbled. "But the game's not over until everyone's found."

"Fine. I'm the best seeker anyway." Rachel looked up, fluttering her eyelashes, and touched her chin to her shoulder.

Maggie rolled her eyes and said, "Ready? Go!"

Maggie and Ben, my younger brother, ran down the street toward the cul-de-sac. I ran in the opposite direction toward my house. The downstairs lights were on, but I didn't see either my mom or dad inside. One of the two rooms above the garage was bright, reminding me of a pirate with an eyepatch.

I held my breath and took my first step onto the empty house's yard. I didn't want to step on the cracked driveway because I thought it looked too much like an extended tongue. I imagined the garage door opening and the house swallowing me whole.

Most of the house was hiding behind the tall trees like someone shielding their eyes with their hands. The dead leaves and sweet gum balls knocked against my shoes as I searched for a place to hide as close to the road as possible. I stood behind the massive trunk of one of the trees and looked out at my street. Further down, I could see the glow of a flashlight. As I sank my nails into the bark, I heard a noise behind me. It was the creak and snap of a screen door shutting. I turned around quickly but only saw the door lightly hitting the frame as it settled and sat quietly. My legs felt heavy, and my feet were glued to the ground.

"Hello, little one," said a scratchy voice.

"Hello?" I asked, searching for the voice's location.

A short and wide woman in raggedy clothes emerged from the shadows. Her skin was bumpy, and she walked with a limp, as if one leg was shorter than the other.

"I know you. You're one of the Richardson boys. I want to thank you for burying all your pets under the same honeysuckle bush in your backyard," she said. I could see her mouth stretch into a wide smile as the light from the lampposts reflected off teeth that were a little too big.

"Although," she paused. "I wish you'd had more of those toads. Two just wasn't enough!" She began to laugh. It was a horrible coughing and snorting cackle that made me shiver. I pictured her insides completely dry and filled with dust.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Me? I don't remember my name, that is, if I ever had one. I've been here for a long time. I saw your parents move in. I know you stay up too late and that your mom and dad sleep in different rooms. I know your brother, Ben, takes your clothes and wears them when you're not home." She took a step forward, and her eyes reflected the moonlight, making them look hollow and animalistic.

"I know you want to be a chef more than anything else in the world," she said.

I swallowed dryly and said, "So?"

"I can help you. I've been cooking for many years. In fact, I'm finishing up a recipe right now. I just need your help with the final ingredient. Will you come inside with me?"

I took a cautious and numb step forward. A bright light blinded me from the right side. I put my hands up to cover my eyes.

"Found you! Told you I'm the best," Rachel said.

I looked back toward the house. The yard was empty and quiet except for the faint tapping of the screen door.

About the Author:

Keller Agre is a new horror fiction writer originally from Overland Park, Kansas whose work has appeared in Haunted Words Press. He is a member of the Atlanta Writers Club and the Spooky Book Club of Atlanta, Georgia where he lives and works. When not writing, he enjoys hiking and playing folk music on his guitar.

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Soul Pond | ***Hayden Robinson***

Under the blaze of the midsummer sunshine, I watch souls scream endlessly in the pond at the end of my friend's garden. The souls, once alive now dead, do everything they can to push themselves out of the water. The waves and ripples they make in their attempts shimmer under the glowing sunlight. The surface is like a block of ice to them and their quests to escape are to no avail. Inside the pond, there are no fish, no lily pads, not even leaves or bits of wood fallen in. Just a clean, green pond filled with shimmering faces crying and begging under the surface.

Shelly, my oldest friend and the top student in our high school, grins in a smug way. It is her garden and these are her collected souls.

"Took me so much time to collect them all," she says.

Everything in me feels both light and heavy at the same time, like I'm floating underwater as these poor beings are. I had heard of this kind of thing happening. Souls being caught like dogs on the street by hunters and collectors. Finding out that Shelly is one of them makes me nervous to be near her. And yet, I'm fascinated by the sight of these things.

"How did you manage to catch them?" I ask.

"Ancient magic," Shelly says. "Given to me by my aunt. She gave me a book for my birthday. Or should I say Christmas Day? Whichever sounds better. I usually take their souls with a special bottle."

I blink. "A what?"

"A special bottle. Like a water bottle."

It sounds weird to me, but I just nod and take her word for it. "And you have been doing this for months?"

"Yes." Her grin widens. "Aren't they so precious?"

I stare at the pond. *Precious* isn't the word I would describe the sight of the souls. They all look like cheap ghost molds made into rubbery green Jell-O. I see tears floating from their faces and my heart sinks. I had never seen a soul cry before. I knew about them, but seeing it makes me feel sorry for these poor things. But I can't let Shelly know about that. She is already eyeing me with a weird look, like she's evaluating my reaction. I will just have to play along and then head home, never to come back. This is too…strange? No, not that.

I clear my throat and say to Shelly, "I'm surprised you were able to keep this a secret at school."

Shelly runs a hand through her long dark brown hair and shrugs. "It's not something I talk about. It's still frowned upon, isn't it?"

I nod. It has only been five years since souls were discovered to be real. All the science that proves they weren't has been discarded and now souls roam free and open among us. Many of them have to hide away though. Hunters and collectors ran around everywhere trying to catch them for money, for bragging rights, or just because they felt obliged to do so.

"Want to know how many I caught?" Shelly asks.

Turning my head to her, I notice a change in her, one I have never seen before. Last year, she had been serious and stern, almost humble in her actions. She achieved top grades in almost every class and she was never late or absent. Now she has turned into this giggling schoolgirl with a playful smile and shining dark green eyes. The way she just asked the question only adds to the feeling in my gut that my friend was not to be trusted.

When her giggling face turns to an annoyed frown, I stand up and smile nervously.

"Heh," I murmur, "how many? Like twenty?"

"More."

"Thirty? Forty?"

She smirks. "More."

I blink. More than forty? Surely having so many souls was immoral, if not downright illegal. But then what is the legality of trapping a soul? There isn't one because no such laws have been put into place since souls were discovered to be real.

I gulp. "Erm…unh…sixty?"

Shelly laughs. It isn't a soft, pleasant laugh like someone hearing a funny joke. It's a hard, forced, sadistic laugh of someone truly evil.

"My dear friend," Shelly tells me. "I have been collecting more souls by the day. I have so many methods to do it. Some of them are messy, but then again who is going to suspect me, right?" She holds up her arms. "They started out just being bad people. Like murderers and abusers, some of them even politicians. But then again, you know me. I like to overachieve. So I collected more and more people. Some of them were homeless people. Some are even just mums taking

their kids for a walk. I even managed to catch an ice cream man once." She laughs that horrible laugh again. "Oh, it's so funny. I even caught some soul collectors too. And I got the souls they captured along with them! What a way to build up my collection, huh?"

My body tenses and I am still as a statue. I stare at my friend, trembling. My chest feels heavy. "So…how many have you caught, Shelly?"

After a pause, Shelly confesses. "Over five thousand souls."

My eyes bulge in shock. My mouth opens and closes, trying to form words that won't come. I can't believe she has done this. I can't fathom that Shelly would get so greedy with *souls*. People who used to be alive. She is collecting the dead from everywhere and she looks proud of herself for it.

"Shelly!" I finally shout. "If your mum finds out, you'll get it! You'll—"

"She already knows," Shelly says, waving her hand away. "We patched things up."

Before I can think of what she means, something catches my attention from the pond. A woman's face screams up at me. She is mouthing my name, pleading for me to get her out somehow, some way. The wrinkles on the top of her forehead tell me right away who it is.

"Shelly…you took…your mum's soul…"

"She yelled at me for getting a B for Spanish. Figured I'd give her somewhere to scream inside for a change." She eyes the pond. She looks distant and cold as if none of this bothers her at all. "I managed to get to twenty-one in two days when I took her."

"*Twenty-one*?" I shriek.

Shelly points. "Our art class. See?"

I look and indeed the faces of everyone from our art class – every boy, girl and nonbinary kid – bellowed in horror and pain at the surface above. Whether they want to warn me of something or to tell me to run away, I don't know.

"Of course," Shelly whispers. "I missed one."

I look up at her. She has her hands behind her back. It is then that I realised I had missed art class yesterday to run home to get ready for a doctor's appointment.

"You know," she says, stepping towards me, "I didn't like that you got an A in English instead of me. And you got an A+ in art. It makes me feel stupid. So…I guess we should stop that from happening again."

Before I can answer, Shelly brings her arms forward. A flash of silver blinds my left eye. Something strikes my chest, deep into my heart. I gasp and choke. I stare at Shelly who gives me a soft smile, an almost apologetic smile, before she laughs again.

My fingers grip at Shelly's shoulders, but she pushes me away with ease. I fall to the edge of the pond. Fingers from the water reach out to me, wanting to help but having lost the power forever.

Shelly kneels down to me. I begin to fade away, just catching her pull what looks like a water bottle from her pocket. She opens it and holds it to my lips. I try to turn away but she holds my head in place. When I attempt to bite her finger, she puts a knee on my neck. I choke for the last time.

The last words I hear from my friend are, "Try and not look so gloomy, okay? I want to see you smile when I eat my dinner by the pond tonight."

Then she places the bottle in my mouth and my life becomes hers.

Soon after, I am here under the surface, trapped among souls, watching the world of the living above me. I don't cry or beg or plead. I just look up at the moonlight. Shelly watches us from her perch, eating cake and laughing that horrible laugh. I can hear her too, but she can't hear us. None of us can make a sound in this pond. None of us can feel the warm air or enjoy the stars or go on holiday under the sun. We are just prisoners of a strange and dangerous girl.

I curl up into a ball. It is the only human thing I can do now.

About the Author:
Hayden Robinson is a British writer and poet. He writes in a variety of genres, mainly in horror, fantasy and poetry. His themes often focus on trauma and neurodivergence. His work has appeared in various publications, including HNDL, Re-Route Magazine, Diverge Magazine, Colour Theory, and HorrorScope Volumes 3 and 4. He currently lives in Decatur, GA with his wife, their dog and their two cats.

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Bubble Guts | *L. Stephenson*

"It's not as dark and scary under here as I thought," Benny realized as he lay curled up under the bed like a puppy all tuckered out from a day of playing and running around.

The young one's eyes moved slowly along the carpet until they rested upon the body crumpled up at the very back where the floor was its darkest.

"Happened much faster than you thought it would, didn't it?" said the clown who lay across from him.

"Yeah," came the thoughtful reply as his little mind examined the nearby corpse.

Its skin was a pale gray with a heavy speckling, left there amidst those few frenzied moments of furious bloodletting. The belly was missing, the body barely one piece as its own fractured spine and a few jagged wads of caved-in midsection were the only things holding it together. And its face, what was left of it, was Benny's.

"*See*," Bubble-Guts beamed across the shadowy divide. "What did I tell you? Nothing to be afraid of down here. And remember your promise that you'll stay with me. And you can't go out to that world. I know you want to. But it's more fun under here with me."

The clown's smile was a pitch-black crescent void beneath a head of rippling blue hair. From the throat down an ill-fitted suit bore a great red and purple spiral that fed into its center. If you looked at it too long it would start to spin on its own.

Spin, spin. Let it pull you in. The words were embroidered into the path of the swirling vortex that appeared to glow, even in the absence of light.

"I feel dumb," the boy said with a defeated yet wistful sigh.

"Oh, don't be all mad at your sisters," the clown tittered. "They don't mean you no harm."

"Then why didn't they want me to come down here?"

"They are just jealous because you get to play with me. Bubble-Gut*sss*." The clown bared its wide mouth of huge teeth in a goofy grin as it hissed the final letter.

The boy stayed a playful but defiant glare as he held back a burst of laughter. But a gloved hand shot across the divide, tickling the child's armpits and tummy. Squealing in surrender, he collapsed into convulsive hysterical giggles as he rolled back and forth.

"Stop it! Stop it!" he cried, coughing and spluttering as he fought for breath.

Halting suddenly, the clown gasped as it looked towards the lamplit floor beyond Benny. "Your sister is coming!"

"What do we do?"

"We can't let anyone find your body just yet," Bubble-Guts spoke hastily, its gloved hands pushing the boy towards the light. "You need to go out there and stall her."

"You said I can't do that?"

"I will let you." The clown's dark eyes glimmered. "Just this once."

"But how can she see me like this?"

"All you have to do is concentrate," Bubble-Guts reassured him, "and everything will be just fine and dandy. You'll see."

With a nod of determination, Benny pushed himself out from under the bed.

Slowly, the bedroom door creaked open just a crack as little Sarah's face appeared.

"Are you okay?" she whispered sweetly as she suckled on the tip of her safety blanket. Wearing a pink onesie with yellow polka dots, she crept into the room as gently as possible and soundly closed the door behind her. "I heard you making scary noises. Did you have a scary dream?"

"Take that out your mouth." Benny reached for her blanket. "It looks stupid."

"No!" she wailed, ducking away from her big brother's advance.

"You're too old for it."

"No, I'm not." Sarah shook her head angrily, trying not to cry.

"Shut her up before she gets us both caught!" Bubble-Guts growled from the other side of the room.

"Who's that?" Sarah asked before her eyes widened at the sight of her brother. "Your nose is bleeding. You need a hanky."

But Benny's nose wasn't bleeding at all. It was turning red. It was swelling. Right before his sister's eyes it changed into a perfectly round clown nose.

The growl came again, "Your disguise is slipping! Concentrate!"

"I'm *trying*," Benny growled back over his shoulder. And as he turned back to his sister he sprouted a long mane of lizard-green hair.

Sarah's mouth fell open in her amazement. "Wow… How did you do that?"

"Do what? Oh! Uh… Well, I'm not really Benny," the boy said, the pitch of his voice climbed higher the longer he spoke. "I'm actually a girl, like you. And a clown."

"Don't tell her the truth!" Bubble-Guts rasped. "You're supposed to lie!"

"I know what I'm doing, so shut up!"

"There are girl clowns, too?" Sarah could not help but smile at this fascinating new discovery.

"That's something that a lot of people get wrong," the little clown told her. "What everyone doesn't know is that all the real clowns in the world are really girl clowns."

"You're telling her everything!" Benny's bed shook as Bubble-Guts raged beneath. "I can't believe this! My own daughter has gone and lost her mind!"

"I said *shut up*, *Mother*!"

Sarah started screaming as the little girl clown lost control, erupting into that of a seven-foot clown creature. Its silver and black sequined suit shimmered in the light of Benny's bedside lamp as it loomed over the terrified child. Its menacing mane of lizard-green hair wept around her like the rotted branches of a dying willow tree.

Snarling, the clown reached for the girl with clawed, gloved fingers. And when it grabbed her, they both began to sink into the floor.

Down, down, down they went, through carpet and floorboards, into a tunnel that ran below Benny's bedroom, a tunnel made entirely of pillows and cushions, thousands of them.

Sarah's squeals were muffled by the ceiling, her head still remained above ground, right by the door as she had tried to make a run for it. Beneath ground, her fingers clawed at the soft, pillowy roof of the tunnel as her body dangled from it from the neck down. Her tiny body froze in a moment of panic when she realized she had dropped her safety blanket, but that only made her scream and kick and claw even harder.

"What have you done!" Bubble-Guts fumed as she crawled from the shadows. Rising to her full height, the mother clown was ten feet tall. "Her parents will hear her for sure!"

"That's what I'm counting on," the lizard-haired clown smirked wickedly. "I left her right by the door. So, when they hear her screaming and they come running to save their precious baby from danger…her little neck will go *SNAP!"*

Bubble-Gut's eyes welled up with tears as she placed a gloved hand upon her daughter's shoulder. "I'm so proud of my little girl."

"Thanks, Mom," her offspring smiled triumphantly to the sound of heavy footsteps fast approaching.

"Sarah!" a man's voice cried from above as he tore down the hallway towards Benny's bedroom. "Sarah!"

"Daddy!" Sarah shrieked, her tear-soaked face poked out of the carpet as she watched the door only mere inches away from her head, waiting for her father, her protector to rescue her.

She saw feet appear at the door.

She heard the sudden squeal of the handle.

She took a breath to call out to her daddy again.

The door burst open and—

"D-"

SNAP!

About the Author:

Since emerging in 2018, L. Stephenson's horror writing has appeared in 5 anthologies, with more on the way! His first novella, *The Goners* was published last year, and he is currently signed up to release his debut novel. He prefers Caroline B. Cooney and Richard Laymon over R. L. Stine and Stephen King, but admittedly finds greater inspiration in the world of movies.

Instagram: @l._stephenson

Waltzing to Memory | ***Will H. Blackwell, Jr.***

Purely visual narrative can be difficult to interpret.

An old man is slowly dancing with himself in this empty ballroom. He might have been a dancer, though his steps are uneven in this seeming 'Hesitation Waltz'.

Is there hidden reality here? Or is he just 'listening to the beat of his own drum?' as people say. Perhaps there is a story behind this—something that once happened—or maybe a fable, indulged until believed?

Quickening slightly, he is now doing a passable waltz—to imaginary music—at least, I can't hear music. His left arm extends outward, slightly upward, hand grasping a pretend-hand of a pretend-partner. His right arm rounds, holding something envisioned—something, precious?

He maintains frame and posture—sustaining the 'hold' of his vacant arms, almost expectantly, as he turns—again—again—circling the ballroom-floor. The rise-and-fall of the dance somehow suggests both the flush of life and hollowness of death.

After 'going through the motions' for a time, he suddenly livens! The dance becomes more animated—the canter doubled, as in a Viennese Waltz—soon seeming magical, as though someone is, lovingly, helping him dance like a younger man.

He continues dancing—happier—happier—appearing to speak, as if a partner were there.

After minutes of delighted dance, his mental music seems to stop. He lowers his arms sadly, and walks toward me. I am, as I can tell, still the only other person present.

Standing in front of me, he says, in a voice reflecting deep affection and deep pain, "My wife was Prima Ballerina with the National Ballet. She was elegant, beautiful—graceful beyond description. Her long, full legs caught the eye of many a man; but she chose me, among them. I was handsome then, charismatic, not as you see me tonight.

After marrying, it bothered me the way men still looked at her, including some who danced with her professionally. She was always kind to everyone. I tried to hide my feelings.

I was not a dancer. She taught me ballroom-steps, so we could dance together. The waltz was her favorite dance; it became mine too.

Every spring for forty years, on the anniversary of her passing, I've come to this deserted ballroom to dance with her memory. But it's more than memory. Though no-one can see her, during the dance she materializes in my arms. We dance together till the descended music lifts back up—beyond the balcony—vanishing into the heavens with her.

She knows how badly I want to see her, just one more time, each time.

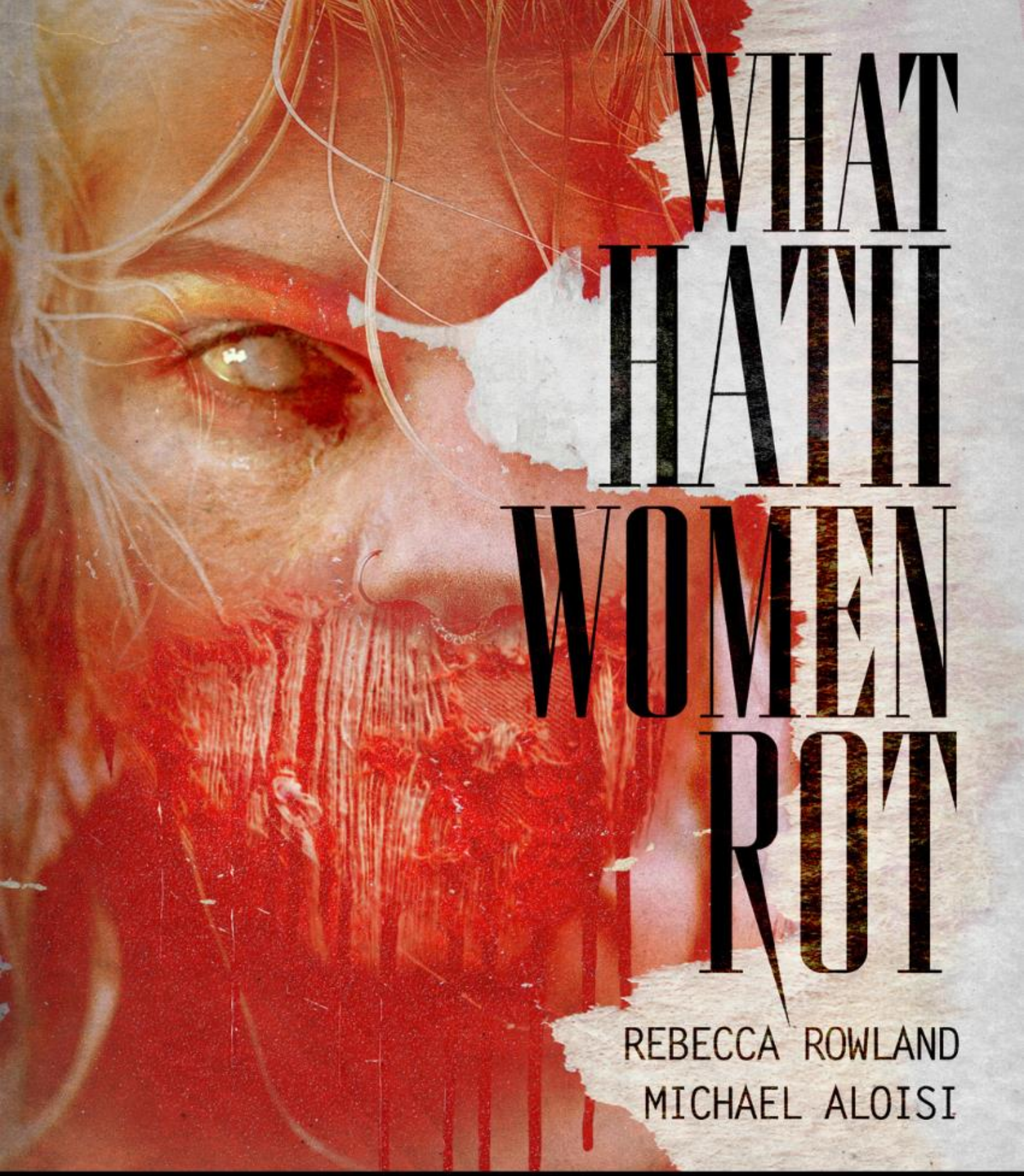
I want my hands to hold her gently, forever—not strangle her lifeless, as I did in jealous rage.

She forgave me, by that first spring following her death. She is since content in her celestial rebirth.

Time for me to vanish also—tragically in a direction counter to her eternal path, save the one night a year I'm allowed back here. There is no spring, no rebirth, where I now return."

About the Author:

Will H. Blackwell Jr. is a retired professor (botany), residing in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. His fiction has appeared in: Brilliant Flash Fiction, Disturbed Digest, Outposts of Beyond, Shelter of Daylight, 365 Tomorrows, and Trembling with Fear.



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Consumers | ***Jeff Durkin***

For decades, Autumn Oaks Mall was the retail hub for South-Central Ohio. It closed in the wake of the 2008 economic crash. That particular financial calamity was only the final straw – the camel was terminal for some time, killed by big box stores and online shopping.

Although empty for 15 years and counting, Autumn Oaks still stood. Occasionally, a developer would look at the land and think – 'what this world needs is another gated community'. But those plans never materialized and Autumn Oaks would last another year, a hollowed out reminder of the Golden Age of mass retailers and collective consumerism.

On a clear night in late September, the parking lot was a little less empty. A single car – a black Mercedes SUV – was parked next to a dead lamp post. Six teenagers were standing around the car, discussing their plans.

"Come on, this is dumb," Mike, driver of the birthday-gift SUV, said. He was leaning against the lamp post, hands shoved into his coat pockets. "Let's just go back to my place. The parentals are out doing whatever the fuck they do."

His sometimes girlfriend, Jane, elbowed him lightly in the gut. "Language," she giggled. She didn't like what she called 'Coarse words', one of the few things, good or bad, she picked up from her mother.

"Look, this will be dope." Everyone looked at Amy. The tall red-head was the reason they were parked in the dark lot of an abandoned mall. "I know how to get in. We'd have the whole place to do – whatever."

"Yeah, freeze our asses off with all the rats and meth heads," Mike said.

Amy sighed. "Jesus, crawl out of your vagina." She raised her hand. "How many people vote to go back to Casa del Bored-As-Fuck and watch Mike play Mario Kart?" Taneesha, captain of the school soccer team and lifelong friend of Mike, laughed and shook her head. Her boyfriend Darren, the school's star quarterback, was just sick of standing around talking. Jane was looking forward to exploring the mall and getting some content for her TikTok stream. Reading the group, and knowing he was a minority of one, Mike looked sheepishly at the ground. He knew that Amy usually got what she wanted. "Democracy has spoken."

Amy's girlfriend Sydney grabbed her arm and pulled her close. "Meth heads? I do not need that shit."

Amy gave the diminutive – although most girls were shorter than Amy's willowy 6 feet, Sydney was only 5' 1" – blonde a hug. "Girl, no one is in there. All that shit about homeless people and druggies is just talk. This place is locked up tight. That's why it'll be dope to get in."

"And the rats?"

Amy shrugged. "Everyone needs a place to call home. Even Ratus Americanus."

Sydney gave her blonde hair a toss that shimmered in the moonlight. "The things I do for you."

Amy kissed her, a short peck on her forehead, followed by a second. "It's because you love me."

Sydney laughed. "Is that what this is? I thought we just liked to fuck."

Amy grinned. "That too."

"Hey," Darren said, "Are we doing the thing or not?"

"The thing will be done," Amy replied, heading back to the SUV. "Let's go." She guided Mike to a shadow engulfed loading dock. "Park here and wait." She got out and walked to a windowless metal door.

"How does your girlfriend know about getting in here?" Darren asked Sydney.

"I think her parents own the land or something."

The door opened and Amy waved them over.

"Great," Mike said, "Looks like Amy gets her way – again." He grabbed a backpack perched on the front seat island – the beer cans inside clattered – and the SUV emptied.

Amy held the door open for her friends and followed them in. The door slammed shut, the loud metal bang echoing in the cavernous stock room. The interior was gloomy, but not pitch black. The 'Exit' sign glowed dull red, providing some vaguely disturbing illumination.

"Okay, we're in the Sears stockroom." She dug into her stylishly ragged denim and canvas purse and pulled out a handful of Mini-Maglites. She handed them out, one for each person. "There will be lights on, but just the emergencies. We might need these."

"Look at you, all prepared and shit," Mike said. He clicked on his light, pointing it at Amy's face. "How come you know about the door or what the lights are like?"

Amy cocked her head to one side. “Because I’ve been in here before, silly.” She lightly pushed the Maglite away and grabbed Sydney’s hand. “Come on, let’s stop dicking around.”

She led her friends through the empty Sears. The only signs it had even been a retailer were the built-in wall shelves and an island of dusty glass display cases. The entrance to the mall was obvious – a rectangle of pale white light, the gate rolled up into the ceiling.

“Okay,” Sydney said as they entered the Mall, “this is pretty cool.”

Three floors overhead, the roof was made of glass plates. They were dirt stained from neglect, but still let in the moonlight. The vaulted central hall glowed silver, looking less rough, but more menacing than it would during the day. The dust and debris of a lost decade were smoothed over by the soft light – but the shadows were impenetrably black and the impression of unknown depths made the group uneasy.

Except for Amy. She ran ahead, dragging Sydney by the hand. “Come on. I have something for you. It’s up here.”

“What the hell is she talking about?” Mike said.

Darren slapped him on the shoulder. “Only one way to find out.”

When they caught up, Amy and Sydney were standing next to a dry fountain. It was at the center of the mall. Four shop-lined halls radiated from this nexus, each ending in a defunct department store.

“Since you guys were so nice, it’s only right to distribute party favors,” Amy said, reaching into her purse and pulling out a baggy of light grey gel capsules.

“Now, that’s what I’m talking about,” Taneesha said, recognizing the pills as Molly.

“Why didn’t you say we were coming in here to get high in the first place,” Mike added, dropping his pack with a metal clatter. He sat down, pulling Jane to the floor next to him. “Set us up.”

Amy smiled. “Does this mean we’re friends again, Mike?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Now, hand over the Molly.”

Amy threw him the bag. “Happy trails,” she said. She looked at Sydney. “I have something else for you.” She held her hand out to Sydney. In it was a capsule of Molly. “But first, candy for my baby.”

Sydney snatched it a little too desperately. She liked drugs and Molly was her favorite.

“Come one,” Amy said, as the others popped pills and started making out, “let’s go.”

“Where to?”

Amy bent over, her green eyes locking onto Sydney’s pale blue ones. “To take more drugs and fuck,” she said, “Need any more details?” Amy took Sydney’s hand. “Okay you kids, be good while we’re gone.”

She led the way down one of the spokes. Most of the stores were empty shells, stripped of all identity. A few signs were up, an indication of the last holdouts. They were local stores – the chains gave up on Autumn Oaks years before its demise. They had names like ‘Maddie’s Notions’, ‘The Shoe Emporium,’ ‘Big N’Tall 4 Less’, and ‘Great Grounds’.

Amy pointed to Great Grounds. The defunct coffee shop’s gate was jammed half-open. “Here we are.”

Sydney barely heard her. The Molly was kicking in. She was focused on Amy’s hair. The copper color pulsed in the diffuse light. Sydney wanted to wrap herself in the color – it looked warm and safe, but holding barely contained passion. Just like Amy, she thought.

“Watch your head,” Amy said as she ducked under the lip of the gate.

Sydney ran her fingers over the metal slats. They felt cold and greasy. She fought the urge to start licking them. They’ll taste like winter, she thought.

Amy saw Sydney’s goofy smile and dilated pupils. “Hey, don’t bliss out on me yet,” she said. She wrapped one arm around Sydney’s midsection and used her free hand to push her head down. She then pulled her into the cafe.

“Not so rough,” Sydney said. Her voice was dreamy, far away and small.

An unrolled sleeping bag was in the middle of the empty cafe. A tarnished and dented espresso machine lurked in the shadows, the only indication of what used to be here. Sydney sat down heavily on the sleeping bag.

“How did this get here?”

Amy was surprised that she even noticed. When Sydney was on Molly, she usually was so intent on the physical sensations that her rational mind went on a little holiday. Amy sat next to her. “I was here before,

remember? I wanted to make sure it was safe for us." She patted the nylon bag. "I also thought you'd appreciate not being on this dirty-ass floor."

Sydney cupped Amy's face. The warm skin felt like it was merging with hers. "You're so thoughtful." She leaned in and kissed Amy. The wet touch of Amy's lips sent tingles down Sydney's back, spreading through her body. She broke the kiss and said, "I cannot wait to go down on you."

Through the blissful haze of drugs and sex, Sydney saw Amy's face. It was stony and sad.

She sat back. "What's wrong, baby? Did I do something?"

Amy shook her head. The long red hair sparked in the broken light. "No. Everything is fine. I just–"

There was a scream. Jane's voice, high and screechy.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Amy said. She sighed. "Sorry, Syd. Have to move this along."

"What – what's going on?"

Amy slipped her hand under the sleepy bag for the other item that had been left for her. A stun gun.

"I had hoped for one last fuck."

She pressed the metal prongs against Sydney's throat and triggered the electrical charge. Sydney let out a little yelp, stiffened and collapsed.

Two figures in heavy merlot robes emerged from the back room of the cafe. Their faces were covered in featureless silver masks. They glided to the two women.

"Good job," one of them said to Amy, his voice muffled by the mask.

"No shit." She stood up. While the men picked up Sydney, Amy stripped off her clothes. She reached into her bag, pulled out a black ceramic jar and unscrewed the top. The odor that spilled out was vile, a mix of rancid meat and spoiled milk.

She dipped her fingers in and scooped out a greasy paste. She smeared the red and black streaked unguent over trembling skin. She wasn't cold. And she wasn't uncomfortable.

She was excited.

She finished the preparations by slicking her hair back. She thought about how good it would feel to take a shower and get this disgusting crap off. But that was for later.

She left the cafe and headed back to the dry fountain. She glistened in the moonlight. The red grease looked black in the silver light. Gathered around the fountain were other men and women in robes and masks. Her friends were bound. Darren was lying on his side, blood flowing from a gash on his forehead.

"What happened?" Amy said, prodding his body with her toes.

"He put up a fight."

Mike tried to stand. One of the men shoved him back to the floor.

"What the fuck is going on? Is this some kind of joke?"

Amy squatted in front of him. "Is anyone laughing?" She punched him in the nose, hard enough to start blood streaming down his face. "I never liked you, Mike. You're a complete dick." She stood up and smiled. It was a cold expression. "But you're going to serve a purpose. What's about to happen is something your tiny brain can't comprehend."

"That's enough," one of the robed figures said.

Mike recognized the voice. It was Amy's mother. "Mrs. Lassiter?"

"Amy, stop talking to it," Amy's mother said.

Amy stood up. "Fine," she sighed.

The robed figures led Amy to a circle drawn on the floor in chalk. She knew what it was for – to summon, bind, and control. She took her place in the center, while her parents and the others joined hands around the circle.

"Mammon, Great God of Prosperity," Amy's mother said, "we gather in this fallen temple of commerce to offer payment. Five souls against the debt we owe you and to secure your bounty for the years to come."

The other people began a murmuring chant, soft, wheezing sounds that grated the ear and made the bound teenagers scream and cry. Amy felt a rush of ecstasy. Her body loosened, limbs soft and boneless. A passage opened within her, a way between this world and another. She let out a luscious moan and ceased being human. Her flesh swelled. Her head retreated into her torso, until only her eyes, solid green and bulging, remained. Arms and legs twisted and elongated into ropes of muscle. A final hideous feature formed – a fissure opened up along

what once was Amy's stomach, a wet maw of clashing teeth. The heaving mass surged hungrily in the circle, waiting for release from the magical barrier.

"Mammon, I bind you to the contract, as you bind us to yours."

The thing that had used Amy's flesh to gain entry to our world didn't care about the words. But it understood the power behind them, felt it wrap around its body like waves of ice water. It hungered for the sacrifice, but understood that there were limits to the momentary satiation of its hunger.

A deep moan of acquiescence issued from Mammon.

"Then I release you from the circle – but not from the contract."

The robed figures parted. Mammon pulled itself towards the teens. Buried under a kaleidoscope of alien thoughts and all-to-human hunger, Amy watched through changed eyes. One focused on her friends. The other turned to the Moon, a vast, glowing disk, that stared back at her. The moonlight held a message, one that only her new eyes could see. That everything was meaningless, a long slog from the illusion of possibility to the reality of oblivion. All that mattered was filling the void within.

Mike went first. Mammon's bulk rolled on top of him, pulverizing his bones, but leaving him with just enough consciousness to feel its teeth digging into his crushed chest.

Amy felt a pleasure she never thought possible as Mammon's teeth ripped and tore Mike to pieces.

She felt less when the others were killed. Jane and Taneesha – screaming and begging, words blurring into a primitive howl. Mammon ate them quickly, hunger building with each bite. Mammon moved on to Darren, who only regained consciousness when his right leg was torn off. For a few moments, he stared wide-eyed at the bloated, gore-covered creature gulping down his flesh. Then Mammon bit him in half.

Mammon turned to Sydney. She was awake, having recovered from the stun-gun. She curled herself into a mewling ball, her back crammed against the fountain, eyes closed, whispering, "Not real, not real, not real."

For a fleeting instant, Mammon hesitated. The part of it that was Amy felt a twinge of remorse, a whisper of humanity in the alien cacophony. Mammon showed her a glimpse of the future. Riches. Fame. Success. Built like all great things, on blood and sacrifice. The whisper stopped.

Sydney opened her eyes.

"Please, Amy, I lo..."

Mammon surged forward, its jagged teeth crushing Sydney's skull.

Later, Amy was sitting on the edge of the fountain. Her body looked normal again. After eating Sydney, she lost consciousness. When she woke up, she was in the chalk circle, lying on a bed of gristle and gore. Now, she was wrapped in a terry cloth robe, drinking an energy drink and watching the robed men and women clean up evidence of their presence.

"Should be a beautiful day," Amy's mother said, sitting next to her daughter. She had traded her robe for a red Chanel suit. "How do you feel?"

Amy closed her eyes. She saw her friend's terrified faces, felt the crunch of their bones and tasted hot blood washing down her throat. She felt the thoughts of Mammon, a lingering sense of horror and ecstasy, something that she knew would always be there, connecting her to her god. But mostly, she felt its hunger, endless and greedy. She would spend a lifetime feeding it, reveling on the edge of the pit Mammon had opened within her.

Amy opened her eyes, green picking up the faint light of the dawning sun, sparking with joy. She smiled and said with pure contentment, "Hungry."

About the Author:
Jeffrey Durkin is a writer living in Arlington, Virginia. He has published short stories in the science fiction and horror genres. His next novel – book one of The Curia Chronicles – will be published by Collective Ink in January, 2025. Jeff also co-hosts a podcast, Script Slayers, in which he reviews and rewrites movies. You can find Script Slayers on Apple and Spotify.

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His Bad Dreams | ***JB Corso***

January 14, 1866

The dreams feel so real. I sit here at my desk, drenched in sweat. Carmen sleeps like nothing is wrong. For her, nothing is, I assume. She'll find me awake once more at the table with the lamp burning. She won't be pleased that I'm using so much of our whale oil. I don't care. I can't close my eyes again. At least until I have no option.

January 21, 1866

The valerian roots from Mr. Klepp's general store keep me unconscious, which makes Carmen happy. She's not aware of the sores springing up across my legs. The older ones grow deeper into my flesh, especially over the last few days. Pusing ovals. I can't stand to look at how they pulse as if living on their own. Exactly where the dream children gnaw on me. I dare not show Carmen. I've had to be creative with my excuses when I refuse her advances in bed. When her wifely patience runs out, she'll have one more reason to be as mad as a March hare at me.

February 1, 1866

I'm out of roots and Carmen's left to be with her mother until my legs heal, though I think she can't stand to be around my napping fits and short temper. I want to solve this so I can send a message for her return. I fear that I'll not sleep well ever again.

The dream children sing songs of waiting for my return as I break out of slumber. They're always mocking me, reminding me how I can't run from their teeth forever. Their mother stands deep in the shadow lands, encouraging them to feed. Her voice. Her voice is familiar. Someone from my past? I can't know. I'm too tired to remember. When was the last time I actually finished a good night's sleep?

February 10, 1866

My time is near to be finished. Sores multiply under my backside. My legs have become extensive logs of rot on this bed. Carmen and my marital bed. A place our family should've been conceived on. Our dream has become a nightmare set off by dreamland jackals. I won't ever know her touch again.

My sheets are drenched with all manner of waste. I wish I could get up for even a moment. The stench is unbearable. I fear the dream children move in my bedroom shadows. I'd burn the whole house down to be rid of them if I could dare to walk.

My stomach groans with pain. I've not had a drop of water in days. She will send someone, probably her nephew, to check on me in a week or so. I'll have decomposed something awful by then. My eternity with the dream children will have begun in earnest. I'll be no longer a husband, yet a father to an intangible brood of nightmare children.

About the Author:
JB Corso is a healthcare professional working to better the lives of vulnerable people. They enjoy spending time with their supportive wife, writing daily, and finding joy in the world. Their author's motto is "Developing stories into masterpieces." They have been published in both fiction and professional outlets.

Facebook: JB Corso

On the loading dock, the scent of freshly baked bread lingered in the air around Glenda's Goodies for four city blocks. Braedon breathed it in as he sat on the forklift, one leg dangling over the armrest. After his twelve-hour shift of toting huge sacks of flour for the vats where workers made bread, croissants, and other goodies, Braedon's feet hurt like fire. A vague drizzly fog swallowed the taillights of all the employees leaving after their shift until only three cars remained.

A door slammed, making him jump.

Then he relaxed as he saw wispy little Linda skittering out of the building toward her car. In her frumpy gray clothes, she reminded him of a mouse avoiding a cat as her eyes darted around on the watch for danger. Braedon waved as she puttered out of the lot, but she didn't acknowledge him. Never did. Eh, with his muscle-man arms, he never had any trouble getting a date.

Rachel, now—she was another story. She flirted back and forth with him 'most every shift. She was usually gone by now. Besides his ride, Mark, hers was the only car left. Where could she be?

Ahhhhh. There you are, he thought. Rubbing his scratchy chin in appreciation, Braedon watched Rachel's svelte legs teasing him from the split in her skirt as her tiny shoes clicked along the sidewalk. She didn't look at him. She hadn't since they'd broken up over Braedon's other girl. Tonight, Rachel looked like a haunted soul with her upscale rain hood framing her face. Braedon checked his phone. *Where was Mark? He was never more than twenty minutes past shift time.* Rachel's head jerked as her dented car lurched out of the lot.

He chuckled. "Still can't drive a stick." He jumped down from the forklift and kicked it. "Come on, Mark," he complained. "I've got a date."

Minutes ticked by.

***

The people have gone, Mother.

Yes. And I'm finished, my pretties. Feed. Grow.

***

On the loading dock, Braedon stared at Mark's blue Mustang—his ride home—waiting all by its lonesome. Mark was finishing whatever managers do after second shift. It was taking longer than usual.

"Come on, Mark! Hurry up, man. I'm . . . Hey! What the . . ." He looked around, ears sharpened, trying to pinpoint the clicking, scuttling noise that had startled him. Fear crept into his bones as the hairs on the back of his burly neck stood on end. He saw nothing. *Probably a dang raccoon*. He couldn't quite shake the feeling, even with his bravado. "Dang, Mark. You're taking forever." Shuddering, he drove the forklift in through the huge garage door of Shipping and Receiving.

***

Mother, he's in. Two meals tonight?

Keep watching, darlings.

***

As the garage door came down, Braedon said, "Man. That's weird," Braedon said, as he jumped down from the forklift. "Who turned off the lights?"

The scuttling noise filled the room, and the big door unrolled and slammed to the ground.

He jumped, hitting the back of his head on the metal shelving holding pallets of baked goods.

Darkness strangled the room and echoes met their death as he massaged his hurt head.

He made his way to the door leading to the interior of Glenda's Goodies but hesitated with his hand over the bank of light switches. "Mark! Hey, Mark! Where are you, man?"

A sudden scuttling answered like a crashing wave and fell quiet.

***

Now, Mommy?

Wait for it, my darlings. It will be his choice. Be ready.

***

Sweat beaded on Braedon's forehead. It felt as though thousands of eyes stared at him.

Must be my imagination. He didn't turn on the lights. It took the dang things a bit to turn on anyway, and he

needed to find Mark somewhere in the main building. Instead, he threw open the door and clunked his steel-toed boots down the long, glass-block-walled hall. Moonlight filtered in, casting ghostly shadows. He called for Mark at each room but found nothing except the lingering scent of baked bread. Somehow, that usually intoxicating smell was making him feel a little sick.

***

Go ahead of me, my pretties.

Oh, mommy! Thank you—thank you--thank you.

***

He darted through the building. Mark had to be somewhere. As he passed the last factory room, something like a hailstorm hitting a tin roof exploded overhead. Clicking and scuttling rained around him. An iron-fisted terror gripped his heart. Braedon ran full out. Halfway to the open managerial office door, he slid in liquid left spilled on the floor. He flailed, trying to keep from falling but clothes-lined himself. As he went down, he realized something and been strung across the doorway.

Everything went black.

***

Now, mommy?

Now darlings.

***

When he woke up bathed in a thick goop, Braedon didn't move. Couldn't move. Around his trembling body, the air breathed. A strange black shadow hulked over him. A hand—cold as death—seductively clawed up his jeans and across his T-shirt.

Goosebumps engulfed him.

A chilling pressure traveled up and down his body. It let go. Then it grabbed his upper thigh, tight as a vice.

Way. Too. Close.

Way. Too. Tight.

He wanted to scream, wanted to jump up and run. Yet he was frozen to the warm, wet, sticky floor. His breath caught in his throat as two points pressed against either side of his Adam's apple. The scent of blood overwhelmed him.

Without warning, the attacker withdrew and melted into the shadows.

Something metal crashed to the floor. Then, above him, whatever was there dragged something down the hall with great heaves and pauses, like a knife screeching across a plate.

His hands slipping in the liquid on the floor, he rose unsteadily to his feet, fighting his own mind to stop the room from spinning. "Can't be blood," he mumbled. "Just can't be." He knew it was, but his mind couldn't deal with it. He wiped his hands on his jeans until they just felt sticky. Shivering, he whispered into the now-silent offices, "I'll wait for you at the car, Mark."

A drop of blood splattered onto his forehead.

Braedon zoomed down the hall and banked right at Shipping and Receiving. He hit the bar across the EXIT at a run. The door flew open.

He stopped cold at the edge of the lot.

Mark's car was running.

Braedon hesitated. It hadn't been running before. He would have seen it. Heard the blasted thing.

The 'Stang beeped. Twice. Mark's shadow sat in the driver's seat.

As if he were marching away from Hell itself, Braedon walked to the 'Stang and jerked open the door. He slid into the passenger's seat with such relief, it felt like a warm blanket descending upon him. For a moment, the rugged engine vibrations soothed his tattered soul. He forced out a laugh. "Man, where've you been. You wouldn't believe . . ." When he tapped Mark, his fingers hit something hard like bone but gooey and slimy.

He screamed, loud and long.

Mark, once a guy as hefty with muscle as Braedon, sat in his car looking—for all the world—as though ready to drive. Except his skin hung off his bones like a kid wearing his dad's clothes. Blood and grayish-yellow goo dripped from dozens of thumb-sized punctures. His eyes were gone. His mouth hung open in perpetual surprise.

Something underneath the skin moved.

No.

Many thousands of somethings.

Braedon's body refused to move. The entire world shrunk around him.

The car lurched as a monstrous aberration—the size of a person—landed on the hood. It had a brown spidery face and body with a woman's set of arms. It stood on the blue hood on *three sets* of legs—dead ringers for Rachel's—except they had sharp, bristly pincers at the ends.

Though screaming, his body would not move.

The spidery woman primped, finger-brushing dark-brown hair growing in the shape of a violin. Her eyes burned within her long lashes while golden venom dripped from the enormous, bloodstained fangs she kept thrusting in and out of her jawline.

She leaned closer and smiled.

I've so loved our times together these last few months. The voice was familiar, like a lover's painted with maliciousness.

Braedon's eyes and mouth flew open as the blood-scrawled words on the windshield came into focus: "Aren't you glad you didn't turn on the lights?" He instantly knew she would have killed *him* in the building if *he* had turned on the lights. But now …

She smashed the glass with two of her legs and jumped up and down on the hood.

In response, thousands of bouncy-ball sized spiders poured out of Mark's eye sockets, his mouth, and the punctures. They crawled all over the car like spilled paint. Spiders with human-like faces and arms yelled in small, high-pitched, utterly evil voices:

Mommy! You did it! We feast tonight!

Yes, darlings!

Braedon scrambled out and ran, batting the creatures from all over his body. He booked it straight into the street and turned to watch the beastly woman spider rocking the car. He never saw or heard the midnight bus going to Main Street.

Until it hit him.

But Rachel did.

She sat on the hood, crossing her svelte legs while people filtered out of the bus to help Braedon. She pulled her human facade over her head and drew four of her legs against her belly.

***

Come, my pretties. Time to flee.

Her babies collected along her body, latching on with their sweet little legs, until she looked like a woman again. When she reached her car parked around the block, she slipped back into her clothes. She drove off to find a new job in a new town before she and her babies needed to feed again.

***

Three days later, Braedon opened his eyes in a darkened hospital room. He didn't move. Couldn't move. Wires elevated his broken leg. IV poles beeped. Full casts imprisoned both his arms. His jaw was wired shut.

He felt a slight tickle in his ear. In his hair. Under his casts.

His stomach twisted.

Very distinctly, a thousand voices whispered, *Daddy*, as they sank their fangs into his body, making him burn like fire. One, the size of a drain fly stood on the end of Braedon's nose. *We drink our daddy's flesh and blood.* They ripped open his skin and crawled inside. As they dissolved his muscles and turned him into a gooey blob of bones, he heard echoes of their gleeful cries of *Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!* Then he shrunk into darkness, never to reawaken.

About the Author:

Fileccia Spiderion lives with her family and dogs in the woods, where her imagination wanders along creepy trails and blooms in the dark corners of readers' minds. While enjoying chocolate, wine, or coffee, she reads anything from psychological thrillers to grotesque horror to ghost stories she can share with her 8th grade students.

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Get lost in this luscious vampire tale.

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Ship's Carpenter | *Celeste Plowden*

Captain Fairchilds and his newly expanded pirate crew docked their vessel on a white beach island with green tropical groves and mud huts, and a small, dove-grey church which topped a blanched hill at one end of the shoreline. It was one of many such islands which swam in the great South Seas. He did not remember its name, nor the names of the missionary and his wife who had come out to greet them as they landed.

The crew had purposely beached their galleon on the dry sand, for it was in need of repair after having been tossed about the ocean waters in a terrific storm soon after having been seized from an English merchant crew. The ship's carpenter, a member of the original crew, many of whom had been pressed into service by Fairchilds and his minions, introduced himself, and offered his services to the new captain. The native women waiting nearby, smiled dutifully and left, returning later with more golden-skinned girls carrying baskets of luscious fruits, colorful fish, and other sea creatures sliced open and ready for eating.

Working with machine-like steadiness over only a few days' time, the carpenter restored the damage to the galleon. He informed the captain of its seaworthiness, expecting praise for the swiftness of his work. But Fairchilds was loath to depart so quickly, for there were many more shellfish and mangoes they had not yet enjoyed, and an abundance of sun-kissed girls, so refreshing in their ways, that had yet to board the landed ship. The only member of the crew who seemed anxious to take to the waves was the carpenter, who had worked with unusual urgency to ready their vessel.

The carpenter shrugged and climbed the sandy hill in order to offer his services to the missionary couple and their plain grey church, so square and somber amidst the sway of voluptuous flowers and grasses of the tropical landscape, topped by a sky which hung over the tiny paradise in large folds of deep azure. But the goodly couple had barely a squeaky door, nor floorboard which needed nailing down in their tidy church. He repaired what little there was, trudging back down the sandy hill to the ship, where he waited in boredom for a sign from the captain that they would again set sail.

He ate little, for he said such food did not agree with his English innards, nor did he enjoy the jasmine fragrance of island girls, so happy to greet all the men with their smiles and liberal kisses. Besides, he was feeling poorly from the heat of the sun and the oppressive heat which hung about the land. He much preferred the atmosphere of the sea, its waves and breezes which cast sparkling sea mist over their faces and cooled them on hot, sunny days. Impatiently, he looked about for want of what to do. His hands must not be idle in any case, and he carried his tools to the edge of the forest and began some strange project which some say was influenced by the juxtaposition of two different paradises: the wonders of the island tropics and its lustful inhabitants, and the reminder of an English god and his hard, pale missionaries with their empty house of worship. Or else an island fever had got hold of him, which drove him into the coconut groves and gave him delusions for the imagined project.

From the ship's damaged planks he carved a series of grave markers, as many as a score or more, and offered the nameless batch to the preacher. The baffled man of God eyed the unusual gift of hosts of angels and lambs, crosses and skulls, commending the carver's workmanship, stating that he had no use at present for them, for not one soul had passed through Heaven's Gate since his arrival, nearly a year ago.

The delirious carpenter argued that every churchyard must have a graveyard, dead parishioners or no. He, himself, had no need of a graveyard, for he would have a sea burial one day, which would be his paradise, yet a church on land could not be whole without a proper graveyard. The preacher, with hedgy politeness, reminded him that a grave cannot be dug for a nameless soul, and so the disgruntled carver of head markers took his load back down the hill.

A day later the preacher's wife, who had just opened her curtains to the dawn, peered out her window into the churchyard to see the carpenter digging out shovelfuls of sand and placing his markers into the ground. He even heaped the unwilling sand in a play of mounds in front of the markers, though the sand would not stay well where he thrust it, and lazily slipped downward off the newly formed 'graves', giving the garden of angels and skulls a bumpy, uneven look. The woman shrieked to her husband, who ran out to view in awe, the other man at his work, his calling if you will, preparing the empty graves for they were indeed graves without names, but something stranger still.

"Numbers, Sir. I gave 'em numbers in place of names. Numbers like prisoners, Sir, for that is what they are here, on this sandy bit of earth. Every church needs a graveyard."

Later that morning, the toiling man collapsed over his graves, and was eventually buried in one of them, which number it was, is now forgotten. His name was carved thereunder, and the carpenter was laid to rest in the dead sweat of his labor, the graveyard of his own creation. His shipmates departed without his infected corpse, and made a sober retreat from the tropical delights even as the preacher said prayers over the deceased body of their carpenter. The ship

rocked over the waves with a view of the lush flora and its church, now appearing as a misplaced smudge of dust against a brilliant sky.

About the Author:
Celeste Plowden has been a fabric designer, real estate title examiner, fine artist, showroom model, blues singer, dog lover, and student of early modern history, writing romance tales with dark connections to supernatural beings in historical settings in places she has lived, New York and London. Amazon best sellers: *Mirth,* short stories; *The Harpsichordist,* vampire novel; *Blue Jay's Nightclub, A Romance of Prohibition New York.*

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Another April Fool | ***LindaAnn LoSchiavo***

When the mountains thawed, so did apprehension. Stoked by renewed passion for comely Giselda, the miller's red-lipped daughter, my desire for easy fortune surpassed warnings by the elders. Legends centered on a cave, a treacherous lair harboring a beast whose existence manifested in the missing limbs of adventurers who'd dared to disturb it.

Fear ruled the small republic of our town, aligned with curiosity, because inside the creature's lair shone mineral deposits. Crevices in bedrock winked gold—a treasure never spent, enrichment to be claimed only by the bravest.

By activating bold stupidity, ignoring commonsense, and with prospecting tools around my waist, I entered, vowing, "No turning back!"

As my headlamp pierced the darkness, foul odors assaulted my senses but solitude evoked an unsettling calm. The cave floor revealed bounty in the form of black sand, small quartz, pyrite, and garnets that ignited exuberance. A thirst for wealth intensified.

Beside the glittering gems, a pool of water shimmered, possibly unwholesome.

When my thumb stirred the strange liquid, energy surged through me, tempting me. One cautious sip, then a gulp bestowed sudden vitality. My weary arms felt muscular, powerful. Energized, the quest for riches drove me deeper into the cave's gold formations—hammer, chisel, and pick axe warming my fingers as I toiled. Thirst compelled me to the pool repeatedly, each sip renewing an intoxicating strength.

Within an hour, however, an insidious brain fog possessed me. Soothed into foolishness, I remained. The words "Impending Doom!" could have been scrawled on the cavern walls—but the bewitching beverage cast its spell.

My drunken madness obstructed sensibility. I crawled towards the pool to nap, though aware of changes, a leoparding of light.

As I lay there, suspended, water transformed into a throat. Such a voracious, dark maw — which decided to show off its gleaming treasure: sharp gold teeth.

About the Author:
Native New Yorker and Elgin Award winner LindaAnn LoSchiavo (she/her), a four-time nominee for The Pushcart Prize, was also nominated for Best of the Net, Balcones Poetry Prize, an Ippy, a Firecracker Award, and the Rhysling Award. She is a member of the British Fantasy Society, HWA, SFPA, and The Dramatists Guild. Books: "Messengers of the Macabre: Hallowe'en Poems"; "Apprenticed to the Night"; "Vampire Ventures."

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"He's going to take us out to kill our friends eventually. Maybe even kill us. We have to leave before he makes us go against all of our community's beliefs."

"Where will we go? How will we survive on our own?"

"We have each other. We'll go back to the commune to be with our people. Live the way Mom taught and wanted us to live."

"I miss her."

"Me too, and we can't let him nullify all of her ideals with one of his hunting trips."

"We'll probably have to ki—"

"No. It won't be us. It will be them. And it will only be what he deserves. He'll have brought it on himself." Acer cupped his brother's face with both hands and leaned in until his forehead rested against Ash's. His identical twin raised his hands to mirror Acer's act.

"For Mom," Ash whispered.

***

Wesley had known his boys were up to some unnatural shenanigans in the woods, often heard them, voices raised in song. He'd paid it no mind as long as it didn't interfere with their chores and schooling, glad they liked being outdoors instead of in the house playing video games or watching TV like most of their peers. It was one of the only redeeming qualities they'd carried with them from the commune.

Except he'd had no idea they were up to this!

They didn't have on a stitch of clothes! Standing in some cultish circle made of stones, their joined hands raised to the sky, some incomprehensible chant spilling out of their mouths like a meth addict's teeth.

Stark naked.

He couldn't help staring at them, entranced the same way he had been by their mother thirteen years ago. Her with her big dark eyes, long wavy black hair, and cinnamon-brown skin—as iridescent as their sons' light caramel complexions beneath the full moon.

She'd bewitched him. Then she left.

And these boys were the product of their union. Engaging in some heathen rot their mother had taught them in that highfalutin commune she'd taken them away to. Damn cult.

He'd thought he'd gotten them away from those people in time, that their teachings hadn't been so ingrained. But by the time their mother had died—God rest her soul—they'd been twelve, the well already poisoned. And it didn't seem these last six months they'd been with him had changed much.

It wasn't enough she'd given them some persnickety pansy names and raised them to be tree-hugging vegan hippies. What else had she taught his boys to make them gallivant out in the woods, peckers out for all the world to see?

He shook his head, tearing through the brush from where he'd been watching the pagan spectacle, and grabbed each of them by their scrawny biceps. Both seemed underfed from not eating any meat or dairy or anything else that vegans didn't eat. Looking at him like *he'd* killed their mother, trying to make him feel guilty whenever he grilled a steak or had a burger. "This just tears it! You're both going out with me tomorrow. Participate in something useful in these woods. Learn to hunt like real men instead of playing at devil worship!"

"We're Wiccans!" The boys chorused, voices a musical lilt. They sounded and looked so much like their mother it was painful to be in their presence sometimes.

She'd left him like some cheap trick, holded up somewhere and had the boys like a cat dropping a litter under a bed and spirited them off to raise on her own…in a cult.

He and his 'conservative, prehistoric views' weren't good enough for her or their boys.

It didn't have to be this way. They'd forced his hands. Much like their mother had.

"I won't have my children raised by a Neanderthal!"

Neanderthal. Hmph. A Neanderthal she hadn't had any problems fornicating with.

He had finally found her with the help of a P.I. and by then she was six months pregnant with *his sons!*

She'd had the upper hand because what rights did he or any man have when it came to their unborn back then? Not like today with so many states *thankfully* limiting what a pregnant woman could do with her unborn child.

And like a deer senses a predator in the woods, Calanthe had disappeared again before he could confront her after he'd gotten her address from the P.I.

He would have been good to her and the boys, if she had only let him. He had more than enough money, a nice secluded place in the woods the way she liked. What had been so bad about him?

He stared at his boys now, almost shuddering at their defiant brown glares. Demon children. “I don’t care what persnickety names your mother and that commune call what you do. It ain’t proper behavior for God-fearing Christians.”

Acer sneered. “We’re not Christians.”

“You think you’re better than a Christian? Better than me?” It wouldn’t be the first time he’d gotten the sense these boys looked down their liberal commie noses at him. Their damn mother had taught them that along with all their other pagan ways.

“No, sir.”

Wesley stared at the boy, not believing one word out of his mouth. This one was stubborn and confident like his mother. He’d teach both of them a thing or two about respecting their elders. He’d been soft on them so far. But no more.

“Go back up to the house, put your pajamas on and go to bed. We’re getting up bright and early tomorrow for an overdue hunting trip.”

***

The next day dawned with an early spring chill, the morning crisp and energizing, still dark outside by the time Wesley and the boys clambered into his SUV.

He drove a ways down the road, parked the vehicle at one of his favorite spots and ushered the boys out.

The first thing they did was tilt back their heads to admire the quarter moon visible against the starry night sky. The sun wasn’t due to rise for another hour.

Just for a moment, he regarded the look of wonder on each boy’s face while they paused to enjoy their environment. Their mother must have taught them to smell the roses around them, enjoy the little things. It wasn’t a completely bad way to be.

The boys moved as one toward a tree at the threshold of the forest proper, squatted to play with a scurry of chipmunks. The animals chirped as his boys petted their striped coats, all of them seeming to communicate with each other on a level beyond speech. His boys were a couple of Doctor Dolittles.

Wesley grabbed the rifles from the back of the vehicle, tossed the boys reflective vests to don over their outer gear. Safety first. Though giving his sons loaded weapons after the little row they’d all had last night, might not have been the safest idea.

They wouldn’t dare!

“What now?” Acer asked after zipping up his vest.

Wesley handed him, then Ash a rifle.

He watched as they skillfully checked and loaded their weapons, proud they knew how to do that much. They weren’t bad shots either, but shooting at inanimate objects like a bottle wasn’t like shooting a living thing. He’d tried to get them to shoot a watermelon to give them the sensation of putting a bullet into something with soft flesh, but even that was repugnant to them, as much as it was a waste, they’d said.

Wesley’d had more practice with putting a bullet into human flesh than he cared to admit. Sometimes, killing was just necessary. To protect family, home, and country.

Had they been old enough during the draft, his boys probably would have been conscientious objectors who spit on returning war vets in the street.

The boys protested killing for any reason, but especially hunting for sport. They didn’t understand death by hunter was on average far less painful than death by predation. He was doing the animals a favor. Not to mention hunting preserved the precious ecosystem they were always going on about.

He’d explained to them one could kill without having hunted and hunt without having killed. He’d known some unlucky hunters that went season after season without bagging an animal. Personally, when he killed an animal he felt a somber union with and respect for the natural world, not pleasure. Not that his boys believed that. They thought only the worst of him, that he was an idiot redneck and only they and the people in their commune understood and valued ecology. If that wasn’t the meaning of arrogant—what they always accused him of for killing sentient beings—he didn’t know what was.

Wesley now led the boys deeper into the mixed hardwood-conifer forest, past babbling brooks, appreciating the mystical aura of the aspens’ signature dance in the wind as much as the boys did. Sometimes there was something to be said for all the woo-woo drivel.

He settled behind an old live oak tree, peering into the clearing ahead as his boys settled on either side of him. It didn't take long for a huge buck to appear about thirty yards away, a clear-cut target.

The boys were perfectly still beside him, staring at the animal in awe for entirely different reasons than Wesley stared in awe, he knew. He recognized they were too mesmerized to act without a nudge and quietly touched Acer's shoulder. Though the boys were identical twins, Acer was the older by a few hours and the natural leader. Sure enough, he heeded Wesley's signal and raised his weapon.

"Now get him in your sights," Wesley whispered and waited as Acer followed his instructions. A long moment went by with Wesley holding his breath before he realized the boy wasn't going to fire his weapon.

"Pull the trigger, boy," he growled.

"I can't, sir."

"You have him in your sights. Do it now or you'll—"

"I won't!" Acer turned on him, pointing his weapon to the sky and firing.

The buck darted off, as majestic a sight departing as he had been standing still.

"Dammit, boy!"

"I'm sor—"

Wesley had back handed the boy with such force, his slim body flew through the air before landing hard on the ground.

Ash crouched beside his brother, giving Wesley a hateful look over his shoulder.

The baleful glares from both boys made his skin crawl but he dared not let them know that they got to him.

There'd always been something eerie about them from the first time he'd met them when Child Protective Services had brought them to his home from the commune. Maybe it was because they were twins and had that fabled connection where they silently communicated with each other without saying a word. The same way they had communicated with the chipmunks.

"You can't make us kill our friends, sir," Acer said.

"Friends?" Wesley frowned at them, as Ash helped his brother to his feet.

Ash spread his arms to encompass the forest. "All of them are sentient living beings. We can't harm them."

"What are you, a couple of fairies?" Wesley curled his lips in disgust. "They're just dumb animals and trees."

"Just dumb animals and trees?" Acer gawked. "Animals feel pain just like we do. And without trees we wouldn't have enough oxygen to breathe."

"Spare me the Science Guy lecture. You let a prime animal get away."

Acer shook his head. "You just don't get it." He wiped the blood from his nose and mouth. "And now you've fed them."

Wesley watched the blood drip from Acer's hand to the ground as if in slow motion, the dirt and grass seeming to absorb the boy's life fluid like a sponge absorbed water.

Suddenly, the boys' gazes locked on something behind Wesley before his rifle was torn from his hands and slammed down against a nearby boulder, breaking into pieces.

Wesley turned to see the large oak, branches spread just a little less wide than earlier. He leaned close to get a better look, heart drumming in his ears.

Impossible. The tree had *not* just snatched the rifle from his hands!

"Dad!"

Something skewered Wesley from behind and he felt himself first being dragged backwards, then lifted and flung against the tree. He glanced up to see the buck, his blood glistening on the animal's antlers beneath a suddenly full blood moon.

Impossible.

The boys stood just behind the buck, frozen like woodland creatures caught in headlights.

"You bastards did this," he rasped, beginning to drown in his own blood.

The boys barely had time to shake their heads before more animals slowly stalked past the children, converging at the oak.

As if the tree is the ringleader. Not my boys.

A mountain lion, a grizzly bear, a wild boar, several more bucks and deer—predators and prey, large and small—all moved toward him as one.

With a single purpose.

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"I can't look." Ash buried his face against his brother's shoulder.

"It's okay." Acer rubbed and patted his brother's back as he watched the carnage for both of them, his father's blood-curdling screams echoing through the woods, drowned out by the barred owls hooting, the gray treefrogs singing, the crickets chirping, wild predators snarling. A macabre choir. The nocturnal cacophony like nature's symphony. Music to die by.

The wild animals ripped their father limb from limb, the mountain lion trotting away with a leg in his mouth like a trophy, the grizzly bear taking an arm and devouring it like a chicken wing. Even the deer and smaller forest dwellers got into the act to stomp and chomp on their father's near lifeless torso.

Their father gurgled, reaching out to Acer with his shredded, remaining arm as the wild boar tore into his stomach, burying his snout in their father's entrails to feed.

The live oak towering above them groaned and shifted as if in approval and pleasure, their father's life blood seeping into the ground, nourishing its roots, making it grow taller and lusher before Acer's eyes. Grisly sustenance.

"More."

He shuddered at the ravenous timbre as his father finally fell still and silent at the base of the oak.

"Is it over?"

"For now." Acer hugged his brother tight.

They hadn't wanted this. They'd tried to warn their father, so many times, but he hadn't wanted to listen to their 'hippie vegan drivel'. He'd brought this upon himself.

The blood of a hunter that had killed so many of the forest's brethren, better than a drenching rain, richer and more satisfying.

The forest around them moaned like a man pushing away from a table full of rich Thanksgiving fare to pat and rub his stuffed belly hanging over his waistband.

Acer knew, however, their father had only been the appetizer.

About the Author:

Native New Yorker, Gracie C. McKeever has authored several novels, novellas and series most of which can be found at Siren Publishing under multiple sub-genres beneath the erotic romance umbrella. Her work has also appeared in the anthologies *Sensuality: Caramel Flava II* and Bold Strokes Books' *In Our Words.* Control Alt Delete appeared in *Allegory Ezine* and *Metastellar* and is Gracie's first published non-romance story.

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Marbles | ***Jose Ángel Conde***

The traction field passed near the planet, tearing out the eyes of all its inhabitants. Their global vision was tossed in a master roll of millions of tiny spheres spiraling towards the galaxy insides. The consciousnesses that remained within them began to cry blood when they realized that they were only part of the marble collection of a blind child entity from outer space.

About the Author:

Jose Ángel Conde Blanco has developed an extensive literary underground career in narrative, poetry and journalism, collected in many anthologies such as *Gritos sucios*, *Beyond the Flesh*, *CyberTerror*, *Crimini amorosi* and magazines *Tentacle Pulp*, *El Tunche*, *Círculo de Lovecraft*, *Materia Oscura*, *The Wax*, *Serial Killer Magazine*. Moreover, he has published the novels *Pleamar* and *Hela* and four digital poetry books.

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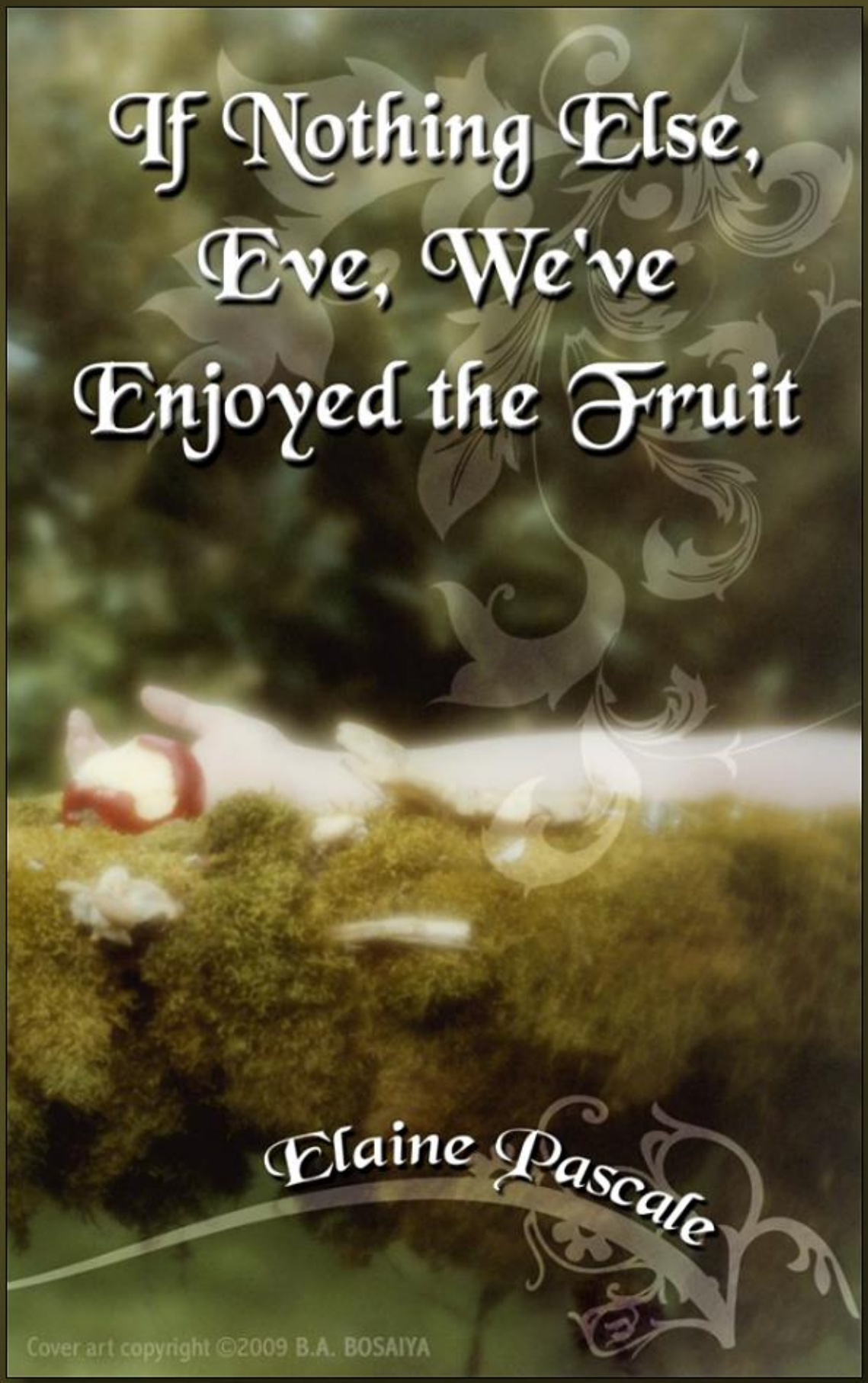
What happens when a kept woman refuses to take her ridatemp and begins thinking for herself?



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Gulaplast | ***Maxwell I. Gold***

"For a thousand unparalleled eons, as the ocean brine lapped across the ancient bedrock, a protean creature growing fat, thriving on human waste and refuse had finally stirred awake."

—Flavius Gauntius, *The Grimorium,* ca. 1157 A.D.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm on a ship full of monsters," I said to myself, taking a sip of warm sludge that was meant to be coffee.

There were many misgivings about the nature of our journey, though none of us really had any say in the matter. Nonetheless, the sea remained relatively calm. Crisp navy-blue walls of foam and saltwater slammed into the iron hull of the converted tanker S.S. *Lorde,* now turned exploration vessel, sailing onward under gray clouds through cold winds toward a misty horizon. I'd always been afraid of the ocean, friends likened it more to a hatred; but my mood varies often these days, swiftly and terribly as the seas, and it's so hard to keep track of anything anymore. The reader of this account may not be able to retrieve an accurate or sound depiction of the awful events that have occurred. But I will do my utmost to ensure, despite the trauma inflicted on my mind, that a sane person can understand my aquatic delusions.

President James Winthrop, of the New American Party and descendent of the very same figure who implemented the existing Lethal Chamber Program, commissioned the establishment of *our* program through the new cabinet Secretary of Earth Policy, Chad Asher, a thick-headed blond automaton, rubber-stamping whatever Winthrop desired of him. Ironically, it was no surprise that our entire expedition was terribly underfunded, but most of the ragged dregs aboard the ship were more interested in monetary gain than in any glimmer of altruistic dignity.

Our expedition continued near the New Philippines, in an effort to study and, perhaps, curtail the growing problem of plastics filling the oceans. The islands had been all but destroyed by a new category of typhoon, leveling most major infrastructure leaving the islands at the mercy of the seas and the wanton pollution that filled them. In an act of good faith and mostly, military and political strategy, President Winthrop ordered his puppet, Asher, to send aid to the Philippine government, and as one might assume, this resulted in a new pacific territory for the power-hungry American regime.

My sludge was becoming cold. The cheap ceramic mug on my lips made my entire body quiver.

Most of the crew seemed tense, fidgety, and eager to make port. "Jesus, how long have we been on this rusted pile of shit?" One of the sailors moaned.

"It's only been three weeks," I said.

"*Only* three weeks," he shot back. "It's 2035. A trans-Pacific crossing shouldn't take three weeks. It's because Winthrop is a cheap ass and they're using a twentieth century converted oil tanker. It doesn't have the same speed as the modern vessels. *Only* three weeks."

We left the port of Los Angeles three weeks ago and were on schedule to reach our destination at Manila, crossing over the *Pacific Garbage Patch.* The swirling mass of waste, random plastics, and other artificial receptacles was such a depressing thought. It gave me little hope for the future of humankind and our ability to repair an already broken planet. From the great metallic city of Columbus, Ohio, to the feted corporate wastelands of Old Dallas, the sea felt like nothing more than a dumping ground; though to me it was a sanctimonious refuge, away from a world consumed by greed and a palpable taste for globalization.

What else could I say? This was our world, but some crewmen found it entertaining to tease and prod me.

"You really don't get it, do you?" the sailor continued.

"What do you mean?" I said.

"The Winthrop administration, Secretary Asher, none of them don't give two shits about you, this mercy mission, the ocean, or anything if it doesn't benefit them. I've heard you talking on video conferences with administration puppets, and I almost feel sorry for you. *Almost.* It's like you're beating yourself against a wall, expecting it to break and shocked to find yourself covered in blood."

I stood there, unsure how to react, my body cold, trembling with fury.

"That doesn't change the fact that our planet is dying. And that we have to do *something* or else," I said, holding my cup of sludge.

"Or else what?" he said, cutting me off. "We all get swept up in mother nature's righteous fury? I say it's what we deserve, let her take back what we stole. Take back her dignity."

Holding the metal thermos, my hands shook as I stood silent.

"And what do you expect us to do? As far as I'm concerned, I'd rather sit back and get a good seat for the end of days. Sitting at home with my family, watching Netflix, Hulu, or even listening to my husband's complaints about where to hang a piece of art, rather than try to fix something that can't be fixed."

Sludge was almost gone. There I was, standing there with a half empty cup, how fucking poetic. "So that's it? We sit back in our plastic shelters, drinking cheap artificial foods, placating ourselves and our futures because it's easy and because hopelessness is a shorter road to oblivion?"

"I mean, that's my plan," he said without emotion or care, the pessimism gnawing at my innards. Truly, I lived on a planet of monsters. "You need to stop trying, Professor," he said, taking my cup of sludge replacing it with a fresh one. "Here, you'll need this. It gets pretty fucking cold at night."

I grabbed my backpack, watching the sun slowly retreat behind the clouds as the night swallowed the rest of daylight. The smell of rusty pipes, salt, and chemicals filled my nostrils, which seemed to be the only pleasurable scents and feelings that could console me after my recent exchange with the sailors. I found my way to my personal cabin; the accommodations were far from being luxurious, but at least I was lucky enough to have my own private room. My ears were filled with echoes of dripping water and the scratching tones of the frustrated ocean beating against the outside of the hull.

"Garbage, they're all garbage!" Furiously I began to scribble some notes as I sat down at the metal desk, taking out my tablet getting ready for my nightly Zoom call with the Winthrop puppets. "Maybe he's right. Maybe this is what we deserve," I sighed, attempting to quell my anxiety as the groaning against the ship grew worse, in a manner eliciting some primal terror inside me. The old freight began to rock with an uneasy sway, more so than usual. There must have been a storm. I really did hate the ocean, not out of malice, but because of a misplaced sense of paranoia and a fearful respect of the immense power lurking in the dark of the water.

During my time at Wallace College I was under the naïve impression there were darker forces at work on our lowly planet—ones that had been subsisting on the muck and waste of our species like some ancient scavenger. After graduation, such thoughts seemed juvenile, played on the strings of the fantastic and obscene; but in the age of the self-made pragmatist and big-box pessimists, the concept didn't feel that farfetched.

Strange, there it was again, I said to myself, noticing my second cup of sludge was empty.

"Can everyone hear me?" I said, logging on, the screen full of talking heads in suits, comfy and snug in their offices and corporate retreats.

"Yeah," the collective static coughed, as I clicked my volume higher, my monitor seizing in and out, the connection trying to keep up with the worsening storm outside.

My whole body seized, chills rupturing my skin, "Sorry, the connection is pretty bad out here so I might drop off. Anyways, we're making progress to the site as instructed. There's been some uneasiness about the mission. And, with all due respect, I have some questions about the nature of this *mercy mission.*"

The sailor's conscientious objection was getting to me. Moving faces in the pixelated hemispheres swirled, but no noise. Static, black chirps, like something was eating in the stillness of the cyber dark.

"Okay then," I sighed, "What are we really looking for? You know as well as I do there's no new evidence other than what's already been confirmed by data as evidenced by the pollution collecting in and around the Mariana Trench. We know what's there. Everything else is, well, pseudo-science if you excuse the phrase. Stories really. Stories of a monster that devours monsters, something so corpulent in girth, heavy in dank mass that there was no probable reason or conclusion for its biology to have originated on our world. Local legends called it *Gulaplast*."

"And your point?" a robotic, baritone voice crackled through the screen.

"What are we really looking for, sir? I mean, it sounds like the Winthrop administration has us searching for fucking aliens, pardon my French. I mean, doesn't it? I feel like I'm in some Indiana Jones film," I said, losing any sense of decorum, feeling like a hired goon as the sinister villains sat in their leather chairs, snickering.

The screen froze, their chiseled white faces and bleached hair stuck in time as I attempted to fix the severed connection. "Hello? Can you hear me?"

No answer. "Fuck."

The iron hinges of my cabin door squealed as they rolled open, revealing a familiar face. "You alright, Professor?"

"What do you want?" I sighed, noticing the sailor from earlier stepping into my cabin.

"Sounds like you had a rough time, *Indy*," he winked.

I twisted around on the old wooden swivel chair. “Great, you too?”

“So, that’s what President Winthrop has us looking for? Aliens?” A grin cracked underneath his five o’clock shadow. “Seems appropriate. Sorry, I couldn’t help it. For what it’s worth, I respect you for doing this. Not many people left in the world who really care, you know. Aliens or otherwise.”

“Thanks,” I said, sulking a bit, looking at my empty cup of sludge, eying the extended hand before me. “Name’s Timothy, by the way. Timothy Moondown,” he said.

Holding the empty cup, he was the first friendly face I’d seen in a long time. “Nice to meet you.”

“Figured you could at least use a friend in all this mess. Besides, someone’s going to have to keep giving you coffee at the rate you’re drinking. I brought you some more. Noticed you were out.” We both laughed.

“You call this coffee?” Smiling, the first time I had smiled in weeks.

“Yeah, more like toxic sludge, eh?” Timothy quipped.

“I know, right?” Easing against the chair, it was a sweet, serendipitous moment, “I appreciate the sentiment. Everyone else here seems to be a little too salty for my tastes.”

Timothy waltzed to the door, his slim figure gliding across the metal compartment, the sounds of his boots clicking over the floor, “Trust me, I understand. Sometimes it can make you insatiable for what’s on the outside,” he winked. “If you ever need anything, just let me know.”

As the metal door came a close, Timothy’s face peered back inside, “And if you need your *sludge* topped off, I’ll be more than happy to oblige.”

Friendship and sludge.

Two stimulants to dissuade my imagination from the possibilities of what might be slithering underneath those blue waters. The thoughts persisted though, thriving like parasites on fear simmering in the moldy confines of my consciousness, wrapped in brain matter, constricted by irrationality, my imagination reveling in unspeakable possibilities.

Stepping outside, the storm was calming a bit. Rain misting on my cheeks as the wind blew with forced gust, while the blackness of the night hung vast and ominous. Standing by the rails, watching the waves lapping over one another, their ancient dance foaming under the clouds until everything suddenly amassed in a whirling Cyclopean pool as if being sucked down into the abysm of the sea. It happened slowly, with deliberation and a great dutiful movement as the entirety of the ocean around the ship twisted into a gaping whirlpool, like the yawning gnashing of some great beast below.

Suddenly the P.A. system ruptured my awesome worship, cracking the salty air with a muffled call. Timothy was just here, and I swore he turned the corner, but no one was in sight. Not him, nor any of the sailors.

“Brace yourselves! Rogue wave!” A frenzied screech erupted, followed by horrifying static.

***

From that moment, history was blurred like a distant memory. I went to put on my lifejacket, struggling with the plastic buckles when suddenly blackness swallowed everything except for the voracious sounds of a calamitous thunder, as if steel girders bending and the gnashing of great teeth slamming outside. Screaming followed by electrical sockets exploding, shedding their last blue tears. Time stopped, where coldness and the watery dark coiled around my body, surrounded by the embrace of a weightless, airless atmosphere as my lungs seized under the immense pressure of a black aquatic void. The sudden pounding against my head from the strange bluish-black ether rendered my senses useless. The slow, somber march of silence followed, bubbling and blue.

I awoke the next morning, roused by the annoying squawks of seagulls and a generous yet uncomfortable portion of sand that found its way into my ears, mouth, and nose. After regaining some center of gravity, I saw the splintered remains of a few lifeboats, yellow vests, oars, and ceramic cups that once held *sludge,* all snapped and broken like twigs by the angry ocean. The cool sand was refreshing on my bare feet, my clothes being mostly intact, tears on the bottom and arms, but the whole thing felt strange and alien to me. It was as if my mind had blacked out some hideous trauma to protect me from something even more sinister.

Based on my own estimations and the nature of the foliage, I knew I wasn’t far from the Philippines. Possibly near the Mariana Islands. It was hard to tell. With no radio, cell phone, nothing, I ventured toward the wrecked lifeboats to search for something.

“What the fuck happened,” I said, “where’s the wreckage? It’s like our freighter never even existed.”

Twelve hundred souls aboard, and I heard nary a shout, a scream, nor a call for aid. Yet the wrecked lifeboats, the snapped oars, the displaced medical kits, and the fucking sludge cups were all the empirical evidence I needed that

the ship had met its end. The boats were new, their paint scarcely worn save for the tarnish from the salted ocean, and the oars were made specifically for their parent boats.

"What the hell is going on here?" I panicked.

I needed some answers, more specifically to find a way off this island.

"Hello? Is anyone there? Timothy? Anyone?" I said, approaching one of the broken lifeboats. No answer.

Only the sounds of the sea breezes and cold winds greeted me, brushing against the edges of my tattered jacket. *Could I truly be the only one left? Was it a rogue wave? Did we run aground?* Even as these thoughts crossed my mind, primal urges of terror and immense loneliness coupled with a need to survive began to dig into my stomach. The realization that there were no survivors was no longer an opaque vision but was becoming a crystalline portrait. Using one of the emergency radios, I called out into the silence, but the only responses were sparse tones and broken static.

"Is there anyone there?" I called.

No answer.

"What the—?," I said, looking back at the radio, my hands trembling slightly. "Hello? I said, is anyone out there?"

Static bubbles came through the speaker, followed by gurgling noises like . . . *sludge*.

Rummaging through the supplies, I gathered what was essential and made my way toward the inland portion of the island. *There has to be some remnant civilization here,* I thought. With the continual and ever-creeping blight of globalization spreading and corroding, it was highly unlikely that this island would be truly remote or isolated from the metallic society surrounding it.

As the sun reached its zenith, I noticed queer and unusual vegetation growing on the island. Twisted-looking palm trees with blue spiked fruit or eggs hanging on purple vines dotted the landscape. I'd never seen anything like it. The wilted greenish-black leaves swayed in the stale ocean air, bathing in the afternoon glow of the daytime star, while they brushed against one another in a symphony of scratching and hushed breezes. If I hadn't felt more unsettled from the mere sight and sounds of the foliage, the ground itself gave me chills as my bare soles pressed against the soft dirt, mixed with sand and other particulates. It felt like a malleable surface, almost fleshy and plastic, though it was as soft and fragile as a pile of dust in my hand. A gentle wind blew the grayish-white sand into the sky as I meandered deeper toward the island's center. The light retreated as rolling clouds swallowed up the last pathetic atoms of light.

I had walked for two hours, and the beach had all but disappeared. My senses were deceived, as the island was certainly much larger than I had anticipated. The blue-fruited trees swayed in the wind as I approached a series of fallen rocks, leading toward a steep cliff face. They had strange markings and gashes etched onto their surfaces, as if some long-dead race wished to leave a warning for those of us in the future. It felt as if some genetic urge or collective primordia was pulling me back to a place out of time, where colossal beasts dragged blocks of white marble for the purposes of some unholy construction, screaming from the whip of their zombified masters. Cities that once bowed under the Hyades' glare, now a salty and dead pile in the shadow of their new gods. In reality, the stones were monolithic, the size of small apartment buildings, and I couldn't help but marvel at their unmistakable uniqueness. Even more remarkable, possibly unnerving, was the remnant ruins of other civilizations scattered amongst the elephantine blocks. Sumerian, Egyptian, Babylonian, and perhaps others even undiscovered by modern archeological standards. It was as though the pit were a refuse for civilizations, left here to rot and die. Peering deeper, it looked as if the cavern stretched hundreds, if not thousands of feet or more into the rocky innards of the planet.

"God, I need to rest," I sighed, taking a sip of water from my canteen. "This is unreal,"

From the position of the sun, dusk was nearly here.

Even though the climate appeared tropical, the lack of sunlight would surely make a frigid night. The rocks were moist, borderline slippery as I slid scaled the dank walls, creating a temporary campsite, shielding myself from the unforgiving coastal winds. The moss-covered cliff felt cool against my feet; my body shuddered as a gust of hot wind from below with a miasmic odor left an aftertaste of sulfuric bitterness.

My body shivered, almost like a belch of . . . *sludge.*

Far off in the shadowy night, I could hear distant echoes of black waters shatter like glass over the volcanic rocks. A recent geological survey from the Under-Secretary of Energy's Office determined there were no active fault lines or underground volcanoes near this area, so naturally I had to know more. Down into the black depths I climbed.

Into the wells of lost time, where veins of igneous stone flowed along the earthen pathways of a hollowed cave artery, I felt as if I stumbled into a damp watery void. The tunnel stretched for miles, and I noticed the same strange plastic dust lining the walls. I was probably the only organic lifeform to breach this darkness in thousands of years, ever since the disappearance of the civilization that may have once inhabited this island. A chill gripped my spine as a deep

flushing bass reverberated off the dark bluish-black monochromatic cave walls; my limbs shook, and I felt I was never meant to be here.

"Weird," I said to myself as my stomach bubbled. "Really, indigestion now?" The unflattering tone reverberated off the cave walls, mimicking the noise in my stomach.

As the winds subsided, my heart grew heavy, and I was reminded of my own insecurities, the coldness, and how I retreated to dusty books in school back at Wallace College. Despite their evil nature, it made my lack of self-esteem for being an outcast just wash away. My amateur exploration of the cave continued, feeling the smooth substrata of the earth against my bare skin. It almost felt as if I were grazing the surface of a plastic bag, fake and artificial, mixed with the texture of some reptilian creature from a bygone era. I couldn't believe my own sensory organs, being so infatuated with the cool texture.

"Only half full," I said, taking a sip of water from the remainder of my canteen, chuckling, "At least I'm reminded of the *sludge* from the ship."

The winds picked up once more, like deep breathing, toxic and vile. The farther I went, the more humid it became until I tripped over some what looked like some kind of large hematite stone, or obsidian, but there was something more sinister at work here.

"The heck? This doesn't look like any rock that I've ever seen," I said, taking one of the emergency flashlights.

It wasn't a rock at all, but some deformed composite of steel, aluminum, ceramics, and other metals fused with the cold, humid earth, slowly corroding over time, "Damnit! The one time I wished I had a recorder, or paper and pen. This is amazing, it looks almost as if it's been fused together, like," touching the hunk of metal, it was still warm, bubbling slightly, "oh god," I said, the indigestion returning. "like it's being digested."

My feet squished over the alien terrain until I spied markings on another peculiar hunk of ceramic sticking out from the earth. *"S.S. Lor—"* it read in smudged lettering, covered by grime and a plastic-looking slime dripping over the chipped handle.

"The hell," I said, "This can't be happening."

My mind was racing with every terrifying outcome and impossibility. Walking toward the other end of the soggy corridor, I fell over another piece of waste that had somehow been mucked up inside the polluted tomb. Clutching my ankle, I looked at the offending object, using the flashlight, noticing it had been a life vest, the yellowed fabric all but deteriorated from the corrosive sludge eating away at the nylon. The smell was horrendous, giving off mildly toxic fumes squeezing my lungs, throwing me into a coughing fit. With a sudden burst of adrenaline, I overcame the miasmal vapors filling the corridor, paying no attention to direction or distance. My primal fight or flight instincts taking control.

All at once, my foot caught in a crack in the earth, where a bloodcurdling noise of of bones twisting and snapping filled my ears. Screaming, the sudden trauma throughout my body wrecked any control I might have had as I tumbled through an open crevasse.

***

Several hours later at the bottom of a deep trench, a chorus of noises swirled about my head: immense flushing, washing, and gurgling like liquid through a hollowed-out pipe. My head was throbbing, most likely concussed from the fall.

"Where in the hell am I?" Attempting to sit up, my body had other plans, reacting with a sharp, blistering pain bolting from my ankle.

"Fuck!" I shouted, trying to move. *Must have broken it on that fall.*

I had fallen into what could only have been an underground lake, deep in the Hadean bowels of the earth. The concaved walls, illuminated by some bioluminescent plastic, stretched high above me, probably three hundred feet at least; and at the apex, a circular causeway let countless gallons of water spill into the cave's center with a thunderous blast. The water dumped into an underground lake, as if it were preparing to cleanse something, leaving me to wonder at the true nature of the place I found myself in. I had some dark theories, though I continued to let rationality prevail for the time being.

I noticed more debris plummeting from the causeway, marrying with the toxic sludge at the bottom, gurgling into the seafoam. There was no light, apart from some bioluminescence caused from the sludge and other fungal creatures that probably flourished in this abysm.[11] All along the upper bowl of the lake I spotted hundreds if not thousands of tiny holes or vents dotting the sediment, as if to relieve buildups of pressure. The humid blast of air and those same foul noises suddenly filled the cave.

"Really? Now?" I felt the same feeling inside of me as I released another belch.

As I attempted to move with my broken ankle, the waters began to overflow from the causeway with rage and fury, making the thunder seem like a meek squeal.

Then, deep gurgling erupted from below the main pool, eliciting a hot acrid blast of air near my face. As if part of an alien anatomy or some demented elephantine creature, reacting to an unknown bacterium, the plastic slime began to drip from the thousands of vents. My mind was screaming at me *get the fuck of out here*. Suddenly I saw it, large chunks of corroded metal falling from the bluish black waterfall, splashing into the mucky tarn. I was able to catch a glimpse before the acid had completely swallowed it.

"S.S. *Lorde* . . ." I said in hushed tones. "Just like my cup - my cup of sludge."

A monstrous cry—primal, inexorable—filled the cave. My body shook with an unnerving dread. Soon, rushing water and slime from the causeway stopped, while the vents contracted and exhaled seeping excess liquid from tiny little mouths. Another tremendous crash, another moan, evolutionary orchestrations beating in a guttural urgency as if a hunger thirsting had been lingering for untold aeons ready to be satiated. I couldn't move, despite my brain pounding in my head begging me to flee.

I managed to crawl toward one of the vents, sliding in the muck as the deep moans issued again, this time as if they were right on top of me. There was nothing that could stop the true hunger of a monster as ancient as *It* was. I feared that my realization came too late when gazing up at the entry once more. There I saw them, to my horrifying dismay. What had been damming up the water: ivory-colored rocks as tall as buildings and as sharp as a thousand steel blades—teeth. Thousands of layers of calcified, crooked teeth; swirling inside of a rocky mouth smiling down into the deep gaping hole of the Earth, smiling at me. A primordial beast preparing to suddenly devour me.

How could this be possible? I thought. To attempt to discern *Its* existence was enough to drive me mad. The roars rapidly, followed by the teeth opening, welcoming millions of gallons of water flowing from the causeway. Soon the water that was gathering around my legs had quickly risen toward my waist, and at a very accelerated speed. I felt the oily sludge-like water against my skin, burning at me, corroding my flesh particles. In that moment, the thousands of vents exploded with the same mixture as if the entire underground lake were preparing to fill up and relieve its earthly bowels. My body was quickly swept up in the acrid liquids in a violent tidal thrashing as I saw the teeth slowly expand and contract, with a rumbling from immense calcite jaws thundering like Herculean boulders, as if the thing were waking up.

I struggled to keep my face above the black liquid as the tide pulled it into a whirlpool around the waterfall. As I drifted in and out of consciousness at this stage, moments seemed to flash like lightning, sparking my neurons with brief lapses of light and reality, then disappearing back into the visceral darkness. Shadows danced in my peripherals like smaller-winged serpents swimming in the black lake. There was little time to react or to think, when a sudden pressure slammed into my chest, thrusting me upwards with great force.

The glory of silence then crowned my unconsciousness; but far in the distance of the bleak oblivion of my mind, I heard the rasping screech of that terrible abomination of the seas.

I could feel the heat of the sun against my burnt face, its subtle glow in the early hours of the morning almost too much for my eyes as I was reluctant to open them. I still had no idea how I managed to resurface from the Hadean tomb. Towers of stone and ivory like teeth barely visible to anyone who didn't know what they were looking for, sunk back into the fathomless depths of the sea. As the orange star began to creep above the horizon, I saw the island had all but disappeared, only a few shallow reefs and foaming gurgles of the ides scarred the surface. It was as if nothing was ever there.

"Don't worry, you're going to be okay, buddy," the naval rescue officer said, warbling voices throbbing.

"Wait, what about everyone else?" I said.

The officer paused, "There was no one else."

"What about a crewman," I said, "Timothy? Timothy Moondown was his name. Please, you have to check." It hurt me to cry. My tears mixed with the burning remains of acid and blood that stained my cheeks.

The rescue officer looked away, ruffling through some papers, lifting his visor he peered down. "I'm sorry, sir. There was never any crewman on this ship by that name."

Rummaging in his pocket, he pulled some discarded junk displaying his hand, "We only found a few things when we managed to rescue you."

"No! No! Get it away from me! Get that fucking thing away from me!" I cried, swatting away the broken coffee cup from his hands, crying. Sludge and tears. The sea was filled with sludge and tears.

Although I recounted my exploits to my rescuers, they maintained it was merely a symptom of the extreme trauma I'd suffered during a horrific and tragic sinking. A rouge wave, to be exact. I really despised the seas; but in truth it is not the sea I hated or its majesty, but rather the truth I would be forever terrified to mention. The sounds of helicopter blades filled my charred ears, and the smell of freshly brewed sludge penetrated my nostrils as I floated atop the gentle waves, which made it all seem like a bad dream. A nightmare that would soon pass, and any mention of the Great Gulaplast would fade into darkness.

About the Author:
Maxwell I. Gold is an acclaimed Jewish-American cosmic horror poet and editor, with an extensive body of work comprising over 300 poems since 2017. His writings have earned a place alongside many literary luminaries in the speculative fiction genre. His work has appeared in numerous literary journals, magazines, and anthologies such as Weird Tales Magazine, Startling Stories, Space and Time Magazine, Other Terrors: An Inclusive Anthology, Chiral Mad 5, and many more. Maxwell's work has been recognized with multiple nominations including the Rhysling Award, the Pushcart Prize, and the Bram Stoker Awards.

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Extraordinary | ***Shannon Acrey***

Ordinary.

That's what they call me. Tried to make me believe. But how does someone only ordinary feel the awe of a sunbeam filtering through a forest? Sees within that single sunbeam the dust motes dancing and swirling in the light? Magical and graceful they seem.

Ordinary.

Tried to beat my spirit down, to laugh at my dreams and call me plain foolish for wishing for the stars to be closer and swept up in their arms.

No, I was never meant to be *ordinary*. Born with a ravenous passion to see the good in everything, I reach out to be the glue for those fragile broken pieces of pottery. But how was I to accomplish this? How was I to become *extraordinary*?

First, I decided I must shed my skin. To transform into something else. To grow wings so I can reach those stars and feel their distant burning heat.

Oh, don't be alarmed! It's too late for regrets. This was what you wanted, to squash my appetite for the goodness to prevail. To stop seeking hidden truths buried beneath lies. You have helped mold me into a new creation. Taught me to be patient in the shadows while you held the sunbeam dangling…just out of reach.

I only have you to thank for making me.

Yes, you.

These dark wings and teeth are very strong, I assure you. The shadows of the forest have twisted and bent them into a better shape. There is no stopping me—the monster of the night.

I'm quite hungry right now.

And you look extraordinarily worthy for my first feast.

About the Author:
Shannon Acrey, from northern Indiana, likes stretching her creative skills with writing, beading, and painting with stencils. She enjoys spending time with her husband and two daughters. She has had multiple motivational poems published in *Wingless Dream Publisher*, several horror poems and short flash fiction horror stories published with *Sirens Call Publications*, and lastly multiple poems published with *Pan-O-Ply*, a local Michiana publication.

Facebook: Writings by Shannon A.

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Scarlett | ***Anthony D Redden***

The night was unending. Dark and cold. A silver moon hung full and unerring above the village for as long as anyone could remember. A dense fog had drifted in from the surrounding forest and taken residence, creating a permanent ghostly flesh for the land. The promised warmth of breaking dawn was little more than a myth. Emaciated folk crept amongst the weathered buildings; their hoods pulled low, their backs hunched under the burden of fear, as they scurried about their business of survival like petrified rats.

Behind the wooden shutters and barricaded doors, families existed by candlelight and whispered prayers of repentance to a God that had forsaken them. Upon the hill loomed the big house. The Manor where once Lord Rose had lived with his family, presiding high above the village. But the Lord was now dead.

The Manor had appeared to fall into ruin at once as if it were itself in mourning for the loss of its master. Sorrow spilt from its foundations and engulfed the land in a veil of darkness and tears. So strong was that veil that the surrounding forest became dense and impossible to navigate, and the overwhelming sadness was inescapable.

Despite the oppressive atmosphere, a cruel jubilance circulated in the air – a chilling breeze penetrating every nook and cranny, whistling 'I see you' in the shadows. These winds came as squeals of joy and playful fun as if mocking the misfortune of any that heard it. It was a dark time, and dark times require sacrifice, each person accepted that fate. More often than anyone wished, dues were taken, not offered. Nobody wished to die, but all expected it. The chosen would be taken to the sky where their screams would mingle with the winds and their bodies enveloped by angry clouds. The air would fill with the perfume of death and the sky would weep a crimson rain. Salty and warm and fresh. Eyes would search the sky for the crushed husks of humankind as they fell back to earth, devoid of life and blood. This served as a reminder to all that life was so easily taken in this land. With no rhyme or reason to their choosing, it was always best to stay hidden. To stay quiet.

In the darkness, one light shone bright, like the morning star, high on the hill, from the uppermost window of the Manor. The nursery. It never faltered and was never extinguished. A beacon of reminisce of a once happy home and where a girl would be with her playthings.

Scarlett Rose was her name. She was all that remained of the Rose family. She was as beautiful and innocent as the Lord's heart had been pure. She had been the very reason for her father's heart to beat, and he had been the sun that nourished her soul. When her father died, Scarlett was plunged into an eternal twilight. Unable to bear the weight of her grief, she retreated into the sanctuary of her nursery and a world of make believe, where she could remain a child, forever untouched by the cruel hand of fate. But little did the girl know that by locking herself away she had not only reduced her world to the confines of her room, but she had also trapped the entire village within her desperate fantasy. Each toy house, each doll and stuffed animal were effigies of the world outside her window, reflecting the darkness that consumed her young heart.

With each passing day, the dolls would take on a life of their own, their porcelain faces contorting into grotesque masks of pain, their vacant eyes mirroring the anguish that plagued the villagers. Scarlett, oblivious to the horror that surrounded her, would chase after them with childish glee, her laughter echoing through the silent hallways of the manor.

She loved these games; they consumed her days and were a distraction from her grief. She never questioned what force guided her playthings, nor mused upon their relevance. She relished the chase as if it were a sport, she loved to hunt out her darling toys as they hid from her anew each day. But more than anything she loved the way they felt when she squeezed them in her hands. The way they would squelch and squirm like over-ripe plums. The feeling of the flesh-like skins rupturing and bursting within her grip and the way the juicy innards would erupt between her fingers and spray into the air would fill her with joy. A warm luxurious abundant spray that would rain down upon the girl and the whole nursery.

A hushed whisper caught Scarlett's ear, revealing secret activity near the doll's house. To her delight, she discovered a small group of soldiers, armed with makeshift knives, plotting to storm the house. The girl at once scooped up the naughty soldiers with glee and danced around the nursery, savouring the feeling of their delicate forms burst within her grasp. Her giggles and squeals of delight echoed beyond the house, her footfalls shaking the very land. On the window of the nursery, a downpour of warm, salty crimson rain battered against the glass. Scarlett always liked to dance in the rain, it always reminded her of her father.

About the Author:
Anthony D Redden is a writer of horror and science fiction short stories and serial novellas. He graduated with an MA in Creative Writing in 2019, and has interests in disability representation, paranormal investigation, and cheesy horror b-movies. His body lives in the lush green countryside of England but his soul forever resides by the sea.

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The Mannequin Factory | ***Lance Manion***

On the face of it, there seems to be very little need for a state-of-the-art security system to protect a rundown old factory that makes mannequins, but you'd be surprised. Nobody is breaking in to make a killing with all the loot inside, you can be sure of that. There's almost nothing of value to steal.

But that doesn't stop them coming.

And no matter how well you try and stop them getting in, they will find a way. Once inside, they will slink around in the darkness and some of them will walk from bow to stern and emerge on the other side without even a story to tell. They're the ones that knew from the outset that they were in a factory that just makes mannequins. Plastic and fiberglass. Inanimate dummies used to display clothes at the mall. It was empty because it was nighttime and it was dark for the same reason.

Nothing more. *They* knew all that in their heads and their hearts and they had a very anticlimactic evening.

Then there were the others who weren't quite sure.

Out of breath, *they* would burst out of the other side with stories of how creepy it was and how they were certain that a few times they saw or felt something moving around in the darkness. Their friends would laugh, they would climb back into the car for the long drive home, and eventually the entire incident would be forgotten.

And finally, there was a third group of visitors. The ones that wanted to believe there was more to it. More to everything. A shadow that lurked behind things and occasionally would let itself be known.

As soon as they crawled through a window, they regretted the decision. Knowing that they would have to walk the length of the factory floor, their hearts pounded in their chest and *they* knew beyond a doubt that every time they looked in one direction, the mannequins standing on the opposite side would slowly turn their heads to look at them. When they whipped their heads back in that direction, they would almost, but never catch the movement.

Although it wasn't a coincidence that these mannequins would always be staring right at them.

Then the noises would start. Footsteps. The sound of objects being dragged or dragging themselves across the floor.

Always just out of sight.

And then, finally, the heads lined up on the shelves that surrounded them would begin to smile. And cry and gasp, and they would feel a mix of terror and validation. Something had been revealed. Adrenaline surging through their veins as things that were always just out of sight made their way into view.

Horrors beyond description, everything that had ever scared them made real. Shuffling towards them like nightmarish children learning to walk. Some missing limbs, some without heads.

They run. They always run. Not knowing where they are running to. Just happy to be postponing the inevitable. Putting some distance between themselves and what they fear most. Bumping into everything, giving away their location with every crash and muffled scream.

Until they are cornered. Surrounded. Internalizing the definition of inexorable.

Until they finally see something that makes their hearts simply stop.

And they never emerge from the other end of the factory. Another car to be towed away the next morning.

Of course, some of their friends notice a vague similarity between them and the new mannequin at Bed, Bath & Beyond, but *they* know it's just plastic and fiberglass so they shrug and keep shopping. That Neato D8 Intelligent Robot Vacuum with LIDAR Navigation isn't going to buy itself, you know.

About the Author:

Lance Manion is the author of twelve collections of flash fiction, the most recent of which, The Forest of Stone, was published in January. His stories have appeared in 50+ publications and have been included in over a dozen anthologies. He has been posting daily stories on his website since 2012.

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Between Shadows and Dreams: A Journey into My Fantastical World

In the vast, shadowy realms of fantasy and horror, I have found a space where my imagination runs wild, a sanctuary for the eerie and the enchanted that emerges from the depths of my mind. My journey into this world began in the margins of childhood notebooks, where my first creatures and landscapes took form, simple doodles that hinted at the passion that would come to define my life. Drawing, for me, was as natural as breathing, a means to bring the exciting visions of my imagination into reality. Inspired by the twisted narratives of Stephen King, mesmerized by the surreal landscapes of Salvador Dali and the captivating figures of Boris Vallejo, my art has become the border where the bizarre meets beauty.

My path to becoming an artist was as twisted as the tales that inspired my work. As a child, I found solace and freedom in drawing, a way to capture the monsters lurking under my bed and the dreamscapes that unfolded behind closed eyes. These early sketches were my first journeys into a world that felt more real than the one around me. However, as the years passed, the clarity of this calling became muddied by the expectations and practical aspects of life. It took decades for me to realize that my passion for drawing, for creating worlds filled with the fantastical and the terrifying, was not just a hobby but the essence of who I am.

Each piece I create invites the viewer to explore the shadowy depths alongside me, where fear intertwines with beauty. My art is not just an expression of my deepest fears and wildest dreams. It is a dialogue with those who dare to look closer, to see beyond the surface. In this space where fantasy and reality collide, I am both a guide and explorer, constantly seeking new horizons within the dark, enchanting universe I call home.

About the Artist:
Anastasia Evgrafova is a self-taught artist and illustrator from Ufa. Now she lives and creates her art in Belgrade, Serbia. Anastasia is known for her drawings and illustrations that focus on fantasy and horror themes. She uses her imagination to bring to life scenes that are both magical and a bit scary. Her work has a unique style that catches the eye and tells stories that draw people into other worlds full of wonders and fears. Through her art, Anastasia shares her passion for the unseen and the mystical with everyone who sees her work.

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ANASTASIA EVGRAFOVA

ILLUSTRATOR & COVER DESIGNER

Poetry

Waiting | ***Tina Hudak***

Hunger lurks in the dark alleys, the gritty
gutters of urban streets, even along narrow
bucolic fields' footpaths.

Hunger compresses littered compassion into
countless painful pebbles underfoot; ones
kicked away without a thought. Hovering near.

Hungry gods gather starving creatures into their
endless wide, round mouths. Hear the crunch of
soft shells. The crack of hard bones. The sucking
sounds of marrow and bile; sweet and sour.
Never sated. Never full. The bloated bellies of
hungry gods cast a warning to the endless cycle
of greed.

Will the blossom bloom this spring?
Will you hold its beauty close to your heart and
then, walk away?

About the Author:
Tina Hudak is a visual artist and sometimes writer. Living in a 1901 farmhouse with her spouse and two cats, she continues these avocations quietly. Her poetry books & artist's books are included in the Library of Congress and in other collections around the world.

Author Blog: Tina Opines
Amazon Author Page: Tina Hudak

Company Man | ***John Grey***

So here I am,
in the company
of the world's true brutes,
stranglers, garrotters,
brigands, devil-worshipers
and lords of human sacrifice.

By day,
I share a ratty
flea-ridden apartment.
I'm surrounded by stale
cigarette smoke,
walls of candied smut.
I walk on urine floorboards.
I sleep in a dead hooker's bed.

The last good high
says it best:
Smash the gin bottles.
Crank up the fire
with whatever furniture
is left.
Spare the needle
and spoil the arm.
Throw up in the sink.

My roommates
are the drunken me,
the druggie me,
the angry me,
the violent me,
and the demon me.

The last one
ventures from this place
at the damnable stroke
of midnight.

Regarding the Succubus | ***John Grey***

A demon
with sensual lips,
sensational curves,
coral pink skin,

slithers her hands
all over my
pulsing, sweating,
pleasure-bursting body.

Succubus is such
an unflattering name.
Why don't I just
call her Amy.

One Last Hand | ***John Grey***

Luke plays poker out on a bare rock in the desert.
Sun slips behind the mountains,
crowns the peaks, yellow, red and orange.
Shadow drops from leather brow to five random cards, ten high.
Wind picks up, flutters the other player's hood.

The game is going badly.
Like the rain in these parts, cards don't fall right.
Numbers won't match up. Suits can't get together.
May as well be the five of cactus, the seven of stone,
the queen of rattlesnakes, the jack that's baked hard earth.

It was a losing game once his foe shuffled the deck,
dealt the hands from his withered palm, skeletal fingers.
And his opponent's deep scars turn up like smiles
as the chips on the table move inexorably his way.
Up next, solitaire. Luke won't be playing.

About the Author:
John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in New World Writing, North Dakota Quarterly and Lost Pilots. Latest books, "Between Two Fires", "Covert" and "Memory Outside The Head" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in California Quarterly, Seventh Quarry, La Presa and Doubly Mad.

Facebook: John Grey

The Baby's First Meal | ***M.J. Szpalek***

Her skin tears in red ribbons for the hideous bulge of a shirt-shrouded balloon.
People look on in pinch. They sneer and snide.
Cowed to their homes by Lovecraftian fear.
"What creature fattens in her womb?" They hiss,
"I know the bones of the starved but I don't know *her*."
She wears her skin so thinly the glow of her soul lures moths like a flame.
Her body is nought but food now. Feeding the plump, pink fists of buried teeth, of chewy bones and shelled eyes.
Will it be winged? Will it be clawed?
Will the sky be its nursery, where its lessons of play will darken the moon? — The Great Old Ones.
As a hand worms to the light, her knuckles whiten at the cry like Mother's life-giving milk.
With fingers like umbilical cords her baby is born and she severs herself from it.
She throws it to the nightingale's nest. It sits large with her life's blood.
A wicked screech as she brings her babe to her breast, he crawls to become a millstone around her neck!
The nightingales flap and fly as the creature from her womb feasts on its creator.
She slashes and scrapes for blood to coagulate in clumps
Under her fingernails like spiders.
Spiders that crawl and itch
To scatter and sprawl
And fate themselves to fire.
She feels them move inside her,
One after the other like rats in the gut.
Feeling her blood drain
And her spirit be swallowed.

About the Author:
M.J Szpalek is a writer based in Shropshire, England. She mostly writes poetry, but is currently working towards her first novel. When she isn't reading Stephen King, Sylvia Plath or H.P. Lovecraft, she can be found having a midnight snack with the monsters under her bed.

Wicked Things | ***Lee Clark Zumpe***

Follow me
down a red earth road
in Northern Georgia –

weedy fields
and dark wood
dripping moss –

fill me with loathing
and mistrust,
sate me with your fear.

Bury your corpses, here;
rest your troubles
on oak tree limbs,

submerge them
in the muddy
swirl of swift creeks.

I crave your sins,
come feed me
wicked things.

blackberry patch | ***Lee Clark Zumpe***

now, down in the hollow,
nothing but palpable dusk:
shards of Erebus
sprinkled amidst the hemlock and spruce;

and a two-story stone chimney
abandoned to the wilderness,
splotches of moss
gradually scaling the shaded tower;

and a coal black cauldron
deserted near the fire ring:
tangle of residue,
decomposing into anonymity.

now, down in the hollow,
nothing but unmarked graves:
piles of bones,
clutching fingers in the blackberry patch.

Seven Sisters | ***Lee Clark Zumpe***

the fields lay in the gap
on the eastern slope where she
fell off at a slight grade,
where the mountain favored
seasoned settlers;
the forest took it all back, long ago.

opposite the farmlands
on the western side –
looking down over Bone Valley –
the Appalachians wrote another story:
the earth pushed up
silvery yellow slate and flaggy sandstone;

here, the land is steeper
than a mule's face – scoured clean
by cloudburst or hellfire,
a purging of life before our time;
we always kept to our side,
and let the devils have their haint.

Godless | ***Lee Clark Zumpe***

i.

the gods, indifferent and lacking
the resources to intervene,
watch the universe degenerate into chaos

while apologists construct intricate
structures from abstract thoughts,
trying to explain the incomprehensible

ii.

in perpetual darkness we gather
waiting for illumination
as if the gods controlled the light switch

blind Azathoth sleeps unaware
and in every shadow I see
the ghost of my own condemned soul

Brown Widow | ***Lee Clark Zumpe***

Hovering above the bed, stealthily,
tucked in some shadowed recess –
where lamplight fails to purify.

Gliding near the ceiling, patiently,
an ambitious unseen nomad –
audacious in its bluntness

yet disregarded as a genuine threat.
Frozen in time, observant –
teetering on a tightrope of

nature's own sadistic design.
A wrinkle on the fringes of perception –
a dark whisper in the back of our minds.

More furtive than any vampire,
more calculating than a serial killer
and less tangible than any ghost.

Beguiled into complacency
as erroneous experts claim
he is less sinister than his notorious cousin.

The shut-ins, loners and hermits he favors
might dispute those findings
given the chance to speak from the grave.

Select victims, resigned to fate,
enshrouded and anesthetized,
provide sustenance for his sizable brood.

About the Author:
Lee Clark Zumpe, an entertainment editor and movie reviewer with Tampa Bay Newspapers, earned his degree in English at the University of South Florida. His poetry and short stories have appeared various publications, such as *Tiferet, Zillah, Weird Tales, Modern Drunkard Magazine*, and *Main Street Rag*. Lee lives in Florida with his wife and daughter.

Amazon Author Page: Lee Clark Zumpe
Facebook: Lee Clark Zumpe

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the heartless gift | ***Mathias Jansson***

On Valentines Day he received a package from Peru
sent by his wife on a long botanical expedition
a heart-shaped seed from an unknown orchid

After all the quarrels and their frosty relationship
maybe she had changed her mind
and started to love him again?

He planted the seed in a pot
and after a few weeks a fantastic plant stood in his window
an orchid with a large red flower bud
glowing red in the darkness

One night the flower started to unfold
a seductive intense fragrance filled the room
the strong scent made him dizzy and numb
and drawn by its spell he leaned closer
to smell the large red heart shaped flower

He barely felt the quick hard stab
when the flower shot out its sharp jaws
and snatched the heart from his chest.

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

Author Website: Mathias Jannson
Amazon Author Page: Mathias Jannson

Sourdough | ***Lauren Alwyn***

As I eat,
as umami of truffle
dances on my tongue
and the pungency of pepperoni
delights my nostrils,
I hear a gasp behind me.

A wine glass drops to the tiled floor and shatters.

I ignore it.
Nothing to do with me.
Now and then I stab
a plump, green olive
with a cocktail stick,
place it into my mouth
and chew with deliberation

as I recall the argument last night with my lover.
His wife will never permit him to leave.

The room becomes
as silent as a crypt,
bar my knife
as it scrapes my plate.

I hear a hiss.

A yellow and purple patterned head
slithers into my line of vision,
its forked tongue flickers in and out
as it sways from side to side.

The hiss becomes plural,
weight forms on my head,
becomes a writhing,
seething mass.

The revulsion of the other diners
burns into my back.

I finish my meal,
turn to gaze at the family behind me,
half out of their chairs
as they morph into granite,
the children's hands splayed mid-air
in a futile attempt to obscure my face,

their expressions of terror
frozen for all eternity.

I stand, leave my payment –
with a tip, of course,
the risotto was excellent –
and I walk out of the door
into the night.

Poppy | ***Lauren Alwyn***

He wouldn't listen to me.
I told him again and again.
I want to see Poppy!
Not in my best interests, he said.
Could make my condition worse, he said.

Worse? How could it be any worse?
I've been here since I was 17.
I'm a bad girl. That's what they said.
A degenerate.

I'm not bad. I just want to see Poppy.
Where's my Poppy? Don't let them take her!

I wish that lot would shut up.
SHUT UP!
That nurse, he knows
where Poppy is. I can tell.
Those sly looks he gives me.
Simmer down Dot, he said.

I screamed.
He gave me a jab in the arm.
I kept telling him, it was an accident,
never meant to,

but he wouldn't let me see Poppy.
He knows where she is. He knows

I like my knitting, it keeps me calm.
So why bother me then?
It's his own fault. He could've waited.

There I was, minding my own business
knitting my Poppy a coat,
for when they bring her in.

Corn field yellow, delicate tiny
buttons with a star shaped middle
just right for a little girl.

So gentle in his manner –
that's the devil's tongue for you.
He talked in such a soothing voice.

Told me it's not good for me
to see my Poppy,
so I plunged it in. Didn't mean to.
Didn't mean to hurt him,

Red like the poppies in the field
among the yellow corn.

He screamed
like a teenage girl in labour.
What a kerfuffle.
Then alarms,
people running, shouting.

Poppy will tell them
I didn't mean it,
when she comes,

won't she?

The Yew Casket | ***Lauren Alwyn***

I trace the grooves
such fine, delicate work,

ivy twines around monkshood,
rue and belladonna,

carved all those centuries ago
by one who adored her.

There is no lock.
I have tried so many times to open it.

Hundreds.
Not that I have kept count.

A snap!
It's open.

Upon midnight
blue velvet

lies an index finger
as pale as a birch tree

and as smooth as a pebble
washed by a mountain stream

over millennia.
The nail, more of a talon,

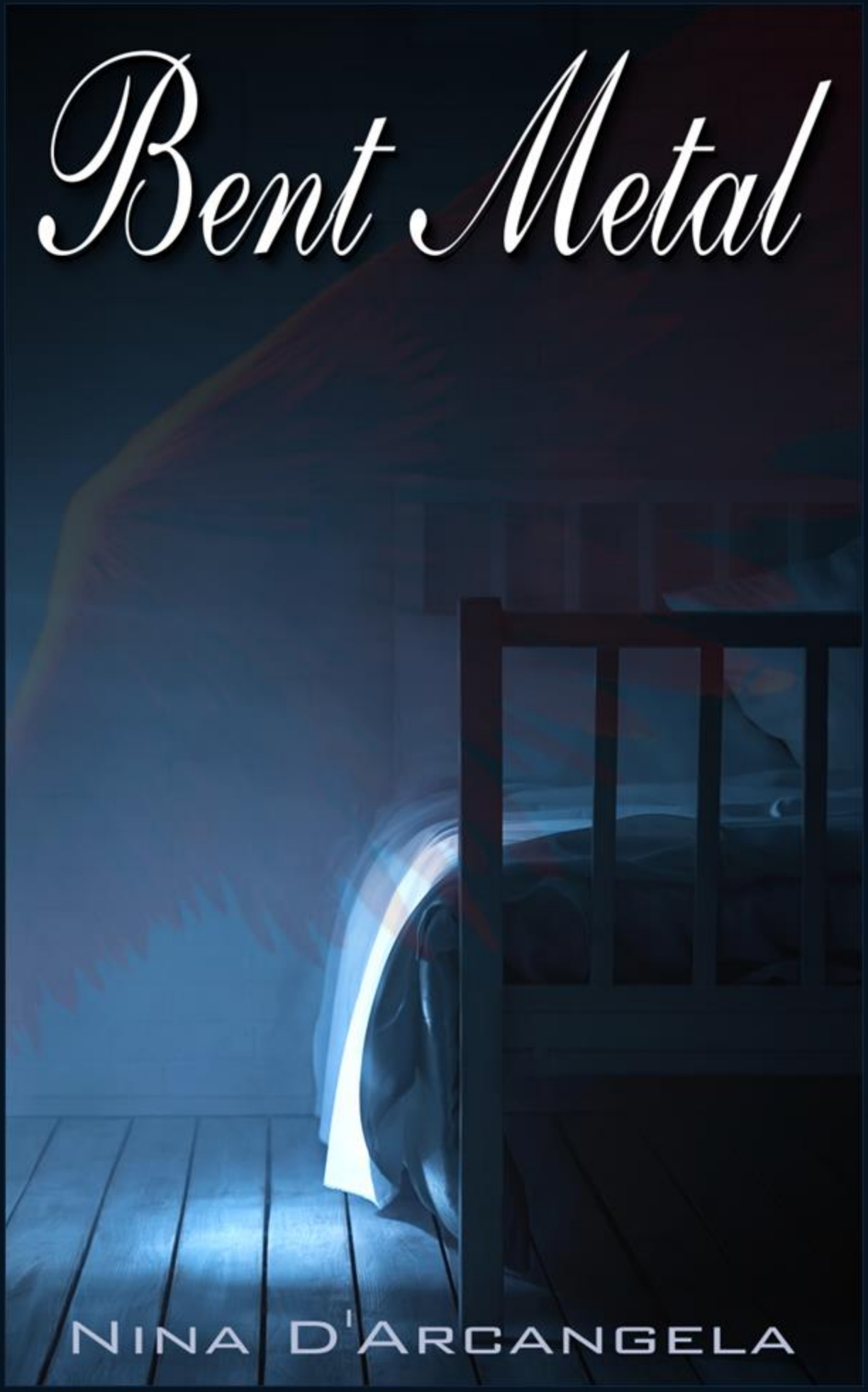
a crimson drop
forms at the severed end,

as fresh as the day
they burnt her.

I lift it to my lips.

About the Author:
Lauren Alwyn is a poet, short fiction writer, musician and artist from Charnwood, UK. These three poems are influenced by the wayward girls and wicked women of authors such as Angela Carter and the everyday evil of Stephen King. A lover of lonely places and midnight wanderings. Drummer/vocalist in The Cars that Ate Paris, a garage-punk band with a B Movie obsession.

Instagram: @laurenmfosterartandstuff
Author Website: Outside the Door



Available on Amazon!

Not Made of Stone | ***Maggie D Brace***

The blood seeped slowly,
as rings of congealing ichor
engulfed the gargoyle's stony visage.

Brought to life
by stonemason's touch,
the horned grotesque had stood for eons.

Now a demonic vessel,
infused with the artist's acrimony,
the monster perches hungrily in wait.

It feasts at will,
on unsuspecting cathedral admirers
who, unguardedly, venture much too close.

Unquenchable in hunger,
the beast forewarns its onslaught,
with terrifying growls from its insatiable gullet.

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

Instagram: @maggiedbrace

Forest Bloom | ***Andrew Darlington***

this forest holds its secrets,
every tree was once a person,
when the breeze blusters in
from the woods, townsfolk hiss
warnings not to inhale seeds,
yet thoughtlessly they yawn
gulp, and unknowingly swallow,
spores germinate within blood,
ligaments and bone stiffen,
skin wrinkles into bark crispness,
fingers become twigs, toes tubers,
and the forest calls to them,
hear their haunted whisper in
the high wind-driven leaf ripple,
feel the arthritic arboreal pain
of deep branching root systems
as they strive to reach the
warm pulse of another's touch
frozen to dryad timber stillness
of a thousand year isolation…

The Wraiths | ***Andrew Darlington***

they say don't go to rushing dell,
I know the tales, I know them well
the warnings that the old folk tell
about the climb of rushing dell
where in childhood I would play,
children are too small for prey
they let them go upon their way
but times have changed, you've been away
and now you've grown, the old folk say,
I laugh as they cautiously intervene
and climb beside the rushing stream
where fungus grows in tiers
a scent drenched in childhood dream
and filled with ancient fears,
as I circle just below the crest
I stumble upon a smile of bone
and sit me down to take my rest
knowing I'm no longer alone
this is where the revenants dwell
I see each approaching phantom face
they said don't go to rushing dell
now I know I'll never leave this place

About the Author:
Andrew Darlington has walked the magma crust of the Nisyros volcano. James Lowe of the Electric Prunes is his Facebook friend. And Kink Dave Davies answered his Tweet. He writes about music for 'R'N'R' (Rock 'n' Reel), and counterculture for 'IT: International Times'. His latest poetry collection is 'Tweak Vision: The Word-Play Solution To Modern-Angst Confusion' and his Scientifiction Novel 'In The Time Of The Breaking' are both from Alien Buddha Press, USA.

Author Website: Eight Miles Higher
Facebook: Andrew Darlington

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siren of the lake | ***Linda M. Crate***

wondered how
they always forgot about
her gnawing hunger
once the ice thawed,
and spring woke her
with warmer waters;

the waters that felt like
paradise to swim through—

yet the humans always came
with their boats, floats,
and sometimes simply swimming
in the waters;

perhaps it was easier for them
to forget their losses,

blame a freak accident
or curse out
some ancient nameless god
they no longer prayed to—

all she knew was she never was
going to look a gift horse
in the mouth,

as she watched them thrashing
in the water she surveyed the area
deciding who her first of many
victims would be.

About the Author:
Linda M. Crate (she/her) is a Pennsylvanian writer whose poetry, short stories, articles, and reviews have been published in a myriad of magazines both online and in print. She has twelve published chapbooks the latest being: Searching Stained Glass Windows for An Answer (Alien Buddha Publishing, December 2022).

Facebook: Linda M. Crate
Instagram: @authorlindamcrate

The Quiet I Longed For | ***Ivanka Fear***

The quiet at the end of the day —
coming home to an empty house
where ghosts inhabit the haunted void
and apparitions of happiness lost rudely intrude
where vast space echoes its unwelcoming refrain
and the swinging of the pendulum reminds me
of the absence that now assails me.

The hunger that never abates —
a dinner for one is never easy
when the empty table taunts the memories
and the microwave announces supper is ready
when the junk food fails to satiate the ravenous appetite
and the soul longs for the sweet sumptuous taste
of laughter and the clatter of cutlery.

The boredom of one without another —
a soliloquy for an audience of none
how books fuel the need for companionship
and visions on screens supplant flesh and blood
how music drowns out the silence of nothingness
and daydreams transport to an alternate reality
of love and a life worth living.

The vast expanse of the queen-sized bed —
sleeping alone is the loneliest phenomenon
how much darker the night threatens as it consumes
and the monsters devour all hope of salvation and joy
how cold the sheets that no longer swaddle contentment
and the comforter that holds no solace
for the heart that beats for no one.

Raison D'être | ***Ivanka Fear***

You
come to me,
your broken body lying
buried in the ground,
in my dreams (lately AKA nightmares).

The knock on my door last evening
jolted me in my ever expectant state,
my mind automatically thinking the worst.
The grim reaper came to call.

You
speak to me in your silence,
"I want to dance."
And I long to see you twirl again.
But the stage is taken,
a long line of performers
awaits their turn.

Last night's horror movie still fresh,
blood on the wall, flowing red on the floor,
rushing through my ears.
No one escapes.

You
grow anxious waiting.
Anticipation, a nightmare.
I, your greatest fan, smile
at your porcelain face, and dream.
Clutched in your hands,
a china doll from your childhood,
head in one hand, body in the other.
"She needs someone to put her together."

It's all connected somehow. And so, we go on.
On the world stage, together.
You dance, I smile. I smile, you dance.
And that's reason enough to be.

What I See | ***Ivanka Fear***

Vibrant reds, golds, purple, and orange
mixed with evergreen
nature's bounty spread out just for us
alive and pulsing with colour

Dull shades of yellow and brown
mixed with green bile
human waste splayed at my feet
dead matter clinging to the earth

Crisp and clear air
a respite from the burning fire
the start of something cooler
the rains cleansing

Damp and foggy
a chill running through my very soul
the end of warmth
the rains drowning

A promise of a wonderland
in each and every facet of life
embracing the winds of change
jumping head first into a pile of wishes

A promise of dark days ahead
in each and every eerie corner of my existence
shuddering as cold fingers close around my throat
wishing I could jump backwards into the past

What they see is tainted
by rose coloured glasses
by optimism and fantasy
What I see is clouded
by the pessimism of reality
by shades drawn over my eyes
What I wouldn't give
for a brighter vision
new lenses to blur
what I see

Saving Light | ***Ivanka Fear***

I open the curtains to invite the morning
into the recesses of my darkened home,
flooding my world with colour.
Evergreen endures against baby blue,
lemon sun kisses emerald grass,
apricot leaves hug goldenrod.
But that's not what catches my eye.

Swarthy trunk stands strong,
barren branches wave goodbye
to dead offspring plucked from her arms
as they scurry away from she who gave them life,
bright and beautiful, taking flight.
Soon they, too, will be buried
as they enter the winter of their life.
The mother tree dressed in mourning,
laments the sprouts she nourished
and longingly awaits new buds to spring into existence.
But that's not the first thing I see.

An ashen form on silver lined road
stands guard, peering through the window
into the lost soul of the one left behind.
The watchman. The guardian. The sentinel.
Ice cubes run down my spine, frozen blood
seizes my cold heart, no longer beating.
The bogeyman has come to whisk my broken body
away,
the grim reaper waits to collect my waning spirit,
a demon possesses my mind, rendering me mad.

But only for a moment. Then I recognize you.
The dawning brings enlightenment
on this, the first day of the last day
of daylight savings time.
Who will save me? Who will save my soul?
You. Stalwart, standing by, as usual. Watching over me.
Your shadow cast by the unexpected light,
on the capped chimney you bricked in this life.

Sleep of the Dead | ***Ivanka Fear***

The sleepless nights they haunt me
tossing my empty shell across the bed
slapping me from right to left, back to front
feasting on discarded cells and blood,
my fingernails carving into flesh as I
long to escape the confines of my skin.
I itch for freedom from what pursues me.

A little white pill slipped under my tongue
to assuage the assault
travels through my bloodstream,
offers momentary respite,
then transports me to darker depths.

Everyone is gathered in my dreams.
A celebration of life.
A nice spread on the table.
One by one they fall, the nightmares consuming me.
The last supper.
Poison. A knife cuts the heart. Murder.

Death spares no one.
He watches my eyes fly open.
I fumble with the curtains,
artificial light spills into the room.
He doesn't flinch.
I stumble to the light switch,
his shadow large and looming behind me.
ON. OFF. ON. OFF again.
If only it were so easy to flick from dark to light.
Dissipate the shadows.

I slide under the covers, close my eyes,
pretend he isn't real, turn my back to him.
The shadow splayed on the wall above my bed
gorges itself on my night terrors, growing fatter as I sleep.

I wake and rise, eager to spill words onto paper.
If I can spit them out in time,
their yellowed teeth yanked out with a vise grip,
they lose their power to devour me.
Until the sun sets once again
and darkness brings the shadow.

About the Author:

Ivanka Fear is a Slovenian-born Canadian author. She writes poetry, stories, and novels. *The Dead Lie*, *A Blue Water Mystery*, was her debut novel. *Lost Like Me* is the second book in the series. Ivanka is also the author of *Where is My Husband?, A Jake and Mallory Thriller*. She is a member of International Thriller Writers, Sisters in Crime, and Crime Writers of Canada.

Amazon Author Page: Ivanka Fear
Author Website: Ivanka Fear

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Consumption Curse | ***Lynn White***

I can hardly remember my early life
when I wiggled and wriggled
embryo-like
blindly consuming
all before me.
I know I sensed the warnings
not to bite off more than I could chew,
but consumer of cliches that I was,
I carried on regardless
making a meal of everything
I could swallow,
even the words.
I could feel
that
change
was coming
and eventually
it happened!
I made it happen!

My curse became a blessing
and I broke out
of my hard carapace,
split open the shell
that had become my prison,
did my best to leave it behind
to have a look at the world outside
and continue my cruise of consumption.

Nothing was sacred I ate it all
and grew fat.
too fat.
So fat I felt ready to explode.

And then it happened!
It was like a nuclear explosion inside me
all the dust and debris of decadence
solidifying into something unspeakable,
mushrooming into something unintelligible
to be spewed out of my big, accursed mouth.

I don't know what
will become of me now.
I don't know what
I will become now.

About the Author:
Lynn White lives in north Wales. Her work is influenced by issues of social justice and events, places and people she has known or imagined. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy and reality. She was shortlisted in the Theatre Cloud 'War Poetry for Today' competition and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net and a Rhysling Award.

Author Blog: Poetry – Lynn White
Facebook: Lynn White Poetry

County Hospital | ***Christopher Hivner***

I can see the head push keep
pushing the shoulders are almost
out breathe breathe breathe one
more hard push yes there
are the arms and the tiny fingers

with claws why are there claws no
don't push something is wrong what
is that coming from the ribcage

tentacles dear God in heaven what
did you do . . . push I think
push it's almost out where are
the legs there are no legs just
a tail it's out and breathing

I'll cut the umbilical
cord . . . it's already detached
and it's hissing

Sustenance | ***Christopher Hivner***

One drop of blood
from your lips
to mine,
one tear
from your eyes
to my tongue,
one breath
from your lungs
into mine.
One piece at a time
I will collect you
inside of me
and feed
until my
black soul
consumes you.

The Wild | ***Christopher Hivner***

Bliss of the wild
inside my belly,
the moon smirks
at my arrogance
but there

lays the evidence
sinewy and moist,
a sloppy, wet kiss to the stars above.

I lick the salty-metal taste
from my teeth,
heat rises from my limbs,
my breath rasps
as if caught on a bone
but intoning
the delight

I feel
at ripping
the black fabric
from the night
and pissing on it.

You are going to control me?

The forest cradles me,
the moon lights my path,
the flesh sates me,
but no one

pulls a wire
to make me dance.
The wild
is in my belly
where you
will join it
one day.

This Abandonment | ***Christopher Hivner***

I saw your demon one night
when he came looking for you.

I spoke to the author of your hell
while he carved your name in his flesh.

He had no interest in the pieces of you on the floor
that I had been scraping up to save,

allowing me to continue,
even holding the dustpan.

He expected me to bargain for you,
offering myself, perhaps, for the blue of your eyes,

but I was busy reconstructing you
from skin flakes, dreams and river silt.

I was in the wrong place at the right time
or told the right joke to the wrong audience,

maybe praised the right god for the wrong reasons,
could be I vomited the wrong sick into the right bag.

I saw your demon one Friday night
and he didn't care for me

or my cavalier attitude
about his position in your life.

Play the eighty-eights,
the song I wrote for you

in the key of c.
I'll always be able to hear it.

About the Author:
Christopher Hivner writes from a small town in Pennsylvania listening to ambient electronic music. His book of horror/dark fantasy poetry, *Dark Oceans of Divinity*, is available at Cyberwit.net and Amazon.com.

Twitter: @Your_screams
Instagram: @ragnarjet

Day: Terminal | ***Anthony Bernstein***

It was the dawn of that final year above.

It was a strange, angry winter.
A savage gleaming greeted all
during that frenzied, tuneless season.
Mass unrest spread like a contagion.
Denial lorded over the quickening days,
Intolerance and hate smelted hearts to iron,
as the arrow of time ran the calendar through
straight to a terminal futurity.

Trolling the blighted grid work of the cities,
gangs of thrill-crazed youths with little to do
mainlined violence and trauma like a drug.
On all sides great iron girders rose high to fashion
metallic towers that loomed, tottered and leered.
Down their stark, halogenated hallways
swagged our future's malign tenants,
fists raised in menace at the stars.
They aimed to steal the sun from the sky
as they traded the world for digits.

Our finest minds bled the planet dry
like a barrage of slick, bloated leeches.
Shambles of their defunct technologies
mobbed the sky to the smog-ladened horizon.
Beyond the rim of creation founded our lost Ideal.
The earth heaved in rebuke of the new order.

Forests burned, the sky fell,
mountains walked and toppled.
Jungles turned to soot and sand,
the air, a soup of carcinogens.
Rising tides swelled and raged
to steal the shorelines,
to glut on entire populations.

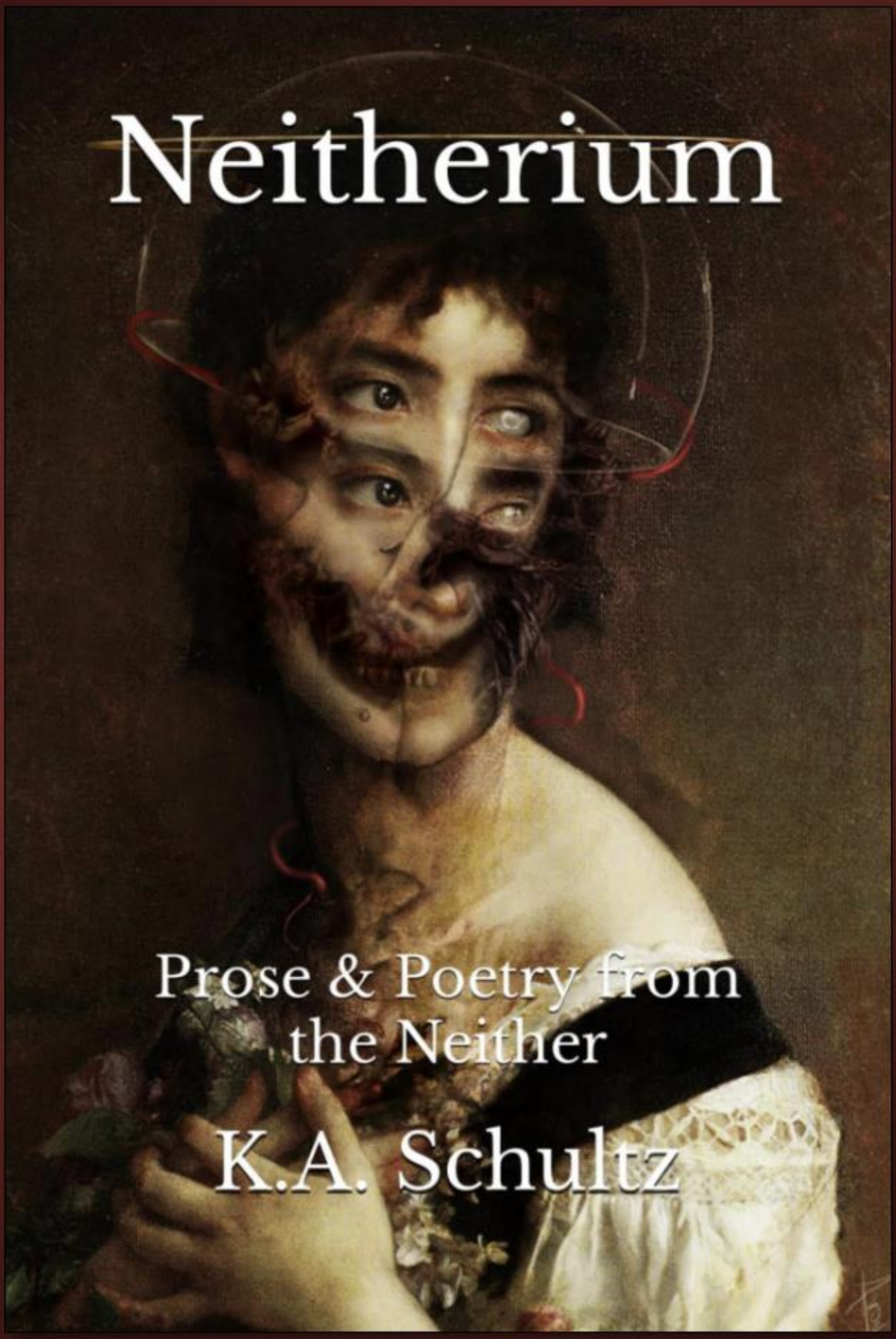
Humanity buried itself to survive.

Wallowing underground like worms
they carried on with the mass illusion.
Drilling the stygian bowels
of a geothermal underworld
the agents of mad industry
soldiers on like machines.
The men who steer society
again practiced full control -
shiny lies of liquid magma
spewed from their every throat.
The temporal mechanics held fast
to the golden years with leaden hands—
their journals and archives smoldered
with sexy obfuscations and gaslight histories.
Everyone all but numb to the toothy moments
as they gnawed away the hours to the end
of the age of the anthropocene.

About the Author:
Anthony Bernstein is a writer of strange poems and tales, as well as an accomplished musician. He is originally from NYC. In the mid-nineties he moved to Providence RI, land of H P Lovecraft. Bernstein lives with two cats, rescues. His writing appears in several dozen publications, including Space and Time, Rhysling Anthology, PanGaia and the now defunct Cthulhu sex magazine.

Facebook: Anthony Bernstein

Prose & Poetry from the Neither



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Sweet Lips | ***Alyson Faye***

She took off her lips,
neon pink,
offered them
slick and moist
pouting, pushing
them at him
against stubbled cheek -

she unpeeled herself
layer layer, shedding
the ten blood-red talons,
snake scales, shimmering -

yanked off bleached
beehived, nylon hair.
Unravelling, slithered
into rats' tails nests -

spidery eyelashes
crawled across the tiles,
before gasping
their last breaths -

but it was
those shocking pink lips
which held his gaze,
perched proud
in her cupped palm

still moving,
whispering sweet come-ons . . .

The Starvelings | ***Alyson Faye***

The starvelings scuttle,
skinny as spiders' legs,
faces moon-glazed,
clothed in cobwebs,
seeking scraps,
morsels of meat.

They feast on flies
and children's eyes,
on slumber-struck babes
and night-drugged newborns.

The starvelings
scramble up the ivy,
shimmy up drainpipes
slip through crevices
and cracks in
windows and walls.

They congregate
bones creaking
teeth clacking
hunting in a chorus
tasting children's dreams

til - as one
they swarm,
busy in a fury,
before descending,
carrying
chrysalid cocoons
to their caverns...

About the Author:
Alyson Faye lives in the UK, with her family and rescue dog, Roxy with whom she is often out on the windswept moors, making up dark little stories. In other guises she wild water swims, sings in a choir and reads ghost stories for fun.

Amazon Author Page: Alyson Faye

The Roe in Your Belly | ***Helen Patrice***

Little mermaid,
with teeth sharp as a broken shell edge,
nails of crab claw,
eyes of anglerfish.
Little mermaid,
willing to sacrifice your sea-shush voice
to walk on land.
Little mermaid,
who tasted a prince's blood when he caught on driftwood,
and now you swim restless
to have that again.
A glamour to hide your fearful fish self,
that's what you want.
Then you can creep into his bed,
hook him to you.
What a feast, better than any merman.
What won't you do to satisfy the cravings
forced on you by the hundreds of roe
waiting in your belly?

About the Author:
Helen Patrice is an Australian writer living in Naarm/Melbourne. She is fascinated by fairy tales, the extraordinary frontiers of science, dinosaurs, and neurodiversity. She is a disability advocate, sometime belly dancer, and student of matters esoteric. Helen lives with her husband and a tiny menagerie of elderly animals.

Author Blog: Blog of a Witch
TikTok: @helenreadsherpoems

Gaping Maw | ***Lena Donnarumma***

It's there, in front of me.
Black hole with acid breath
Void of nothingness.
No time to escape,
No way to turn back.
Accept my fate —
There's no escape
Heart beating fast
As razor teeth
Tear through me
Swallowed whole.

Decayed Smörgåsbord | ***Lena Donnarumma***

Giant behemoth from above,
Falls into icy depths.
Into darkness,
As squid-shaped creatures
Feast on the putrid flesh;
Worming into bone,
Digging deep inside,
Gorging on the smorgasbord;
Turning the corpse
Into a new home.

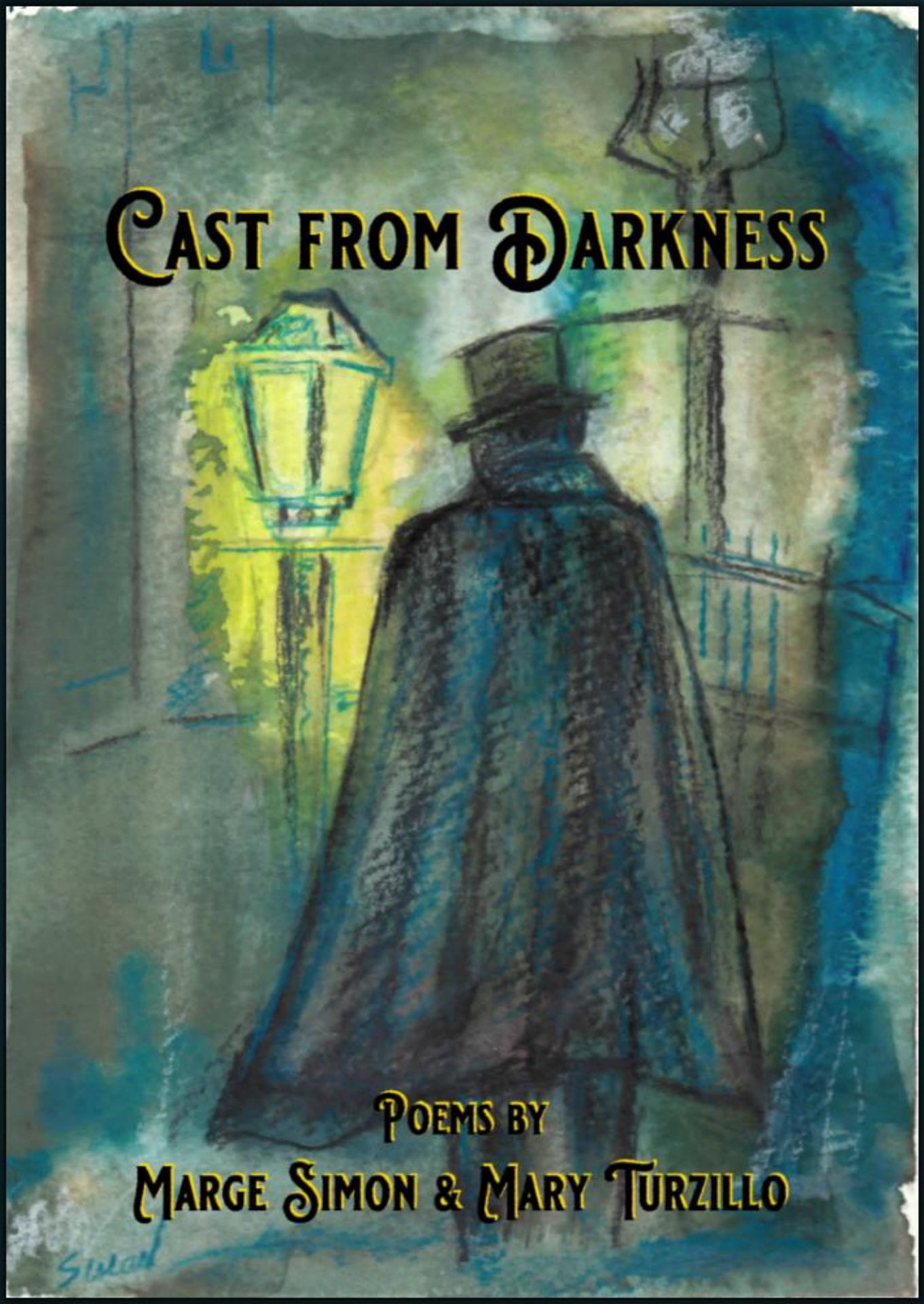
About the Author:
Lena Donnarumma is a marine biologist from Hudson Valley, NY. She developed a passion for writing during her studies, travels, and research of ocean life, particularly the strange creatures which dwell there. She has been involved with writing in the fiction community and enjoys writing poetry inspired by her interests. Lena was a Dwarf Stars 2022 award nominee.

Author Blog: Abyssal Dreams

Chest Cavity | ***Robert Beveridge***

I won't leave till you open
the door he says then lapses
silent gives you time
to reflect that he'd have to be
some sort of moron indeed
to leave after you opened
the door because it seems
like he wants you to open
the door so he can come
in and filch your valuables
not so much the good silver
as the ones you keep between
your ears and legs but hey
the forks might be perceived
as a bonus and that gives you
an idea but do you really have
time to build a fork studded
shield in this situation you're
certain that answer is no so
instead you grab two
from the drawer and try
to remember where eye level
is on this douche you dated
once like six weeks ago and it's
not like the food was even
memorable but you guess
something must have been
because on the other side
of your front door there he is
in a cloud of Ronrico and Hai
Karate and you'd be surprised
if he too isn't brainstorming
ways to dispose of *your* corpse
except he's got plans for what
happens before that and all
you've got is two salad forks
and a possible memory
of the locations of eye sockets
and it's time to turn the knob

About the Author:
Robert Beveridge (he/him) makes noise and writes poetry on unceded Mingo land (Akron, OH). He published his first poem in a non-vanity/non-school publication in November 1988, and it's been all downhill since. Recent/upcoming appearances in Daikaijuzine, The Bond Street Review, and Big Windows Review, among others.



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Spotlight Poets | *Marge Simon & Mary Turzillo*

Award winning poets Marge Simon & Mary Turzillo announce their newest poetry & prose poem collection, *Cast from Darkness*, Mind's Eye Publications, 2023: The lost, the enchanted, the bewitched--all those who wander from the light. You will meet here betrayed lovers, victims, sweet hopefuls. Jack the Ripper mysteries. Frida Kahlo destroying California with her art. A lamia cat. Fatal duels. A Dr. Jekyll-like bigamist. Blasé vampires living the elegant life A goddess igniting the lust of soldiers with her cello. Victims, tragic cases, tables turned. All from darkness.

"Cast as a noun has a few meanings: an object shaped by mold, or an act of throwing something forcefully, while cast as a verb is to cause either light or shadow to appear on a surface. And now Marge Simon Mary Turzillo have created a *Cast from Darkness*, with powerful words of shadow and light covering every page, a poetry collection which defies, (or perhaps newly defines) the mold."

—Michael Bailey, multi-award-winning author and editor.

"This collection from master poets Marge Simon and Mary Turzillo offers a diverse palette of poems that engage every taste of dread, shock, and revelation. Once consumed, the poems of *Cast from Darkness* eviscerates your peace, and hides it like flesh rolled up beneath your pillow, leaving your demented jubilation exposed to the sun."

—Jamal Hodge award winning filmmaker, writer of *The Dark Between the Twilight*.

"With verses lifted from between the brush strokes of masters, plucked from a child's grubby fingers, or washed up in the detritus of dark London streets, Simon and Turzillo's latest collaboration resounds with hardship, heartache, and hope. Brimming with insightful little cruelties, *Cast from Darkness* is murderously good."

—Lee Murray, five-time Bram Stoker Award®-winner, co-author of *Tortured Willows*.

"Inspired by art, myth, dreams and legends, *Cast from Darkness* is a treat for readers of dark poetry."

—Lucy A. Snyder, author of *Sister, Maiden, Monster*.

"Fish and chips. Peanut butter and jelly. Cake and ice cream. Some things are meant to go together. Add to that list Marge Simon and Mary Turzillo, whose collaborative collections consistently shine. How lucky we are they found each other!"

—Scott Edelman, *Things that Never Happened*, Cemetery Dance, 2020

About the Poets:

Marge Simon lives in Ocala, Florida, with her husband, poet/writer Bruce Boston and the ghosts of two cats. She has won Multiple Bram Stoker Awards, Rhysling Awards, the Elgin, Dwarf Stars and Strange Horizons Readers' Award. She received HWA's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2021. Marge's poems and stories have appeared in *Asimov's, Magazine of F&SF*, *New Myths*, *Daily Science Fiction*. Her stories also appear in anthologies such as *Under Her Skin*, *Shadow Atlas*, *What Remains*, and *Sifting the Ashes*, to name a few. She attends the ICFA annually as a guest poet/writer and is a founding member of the Speculative Literary Foundation.

After a career as a professor of English at Kent State University, Dr. Mary A. Turzillo is now a full-time writer. In 2000, her story *Mars Is No Place for Children* won SFWA's Nebula award for best novelette. Her novel *An Old-Fashioned Martian Girl* was serialized in Analog in July-Nov 2004. These two works have been selected as recreational reading on the International Space Station. Mary's Pushcart-nominated collection of poetry, *Your Cat & Other Space Aliens*, appeared from VanZeno Press in 2007. Her collaborative book of poetry/art, *Dragon Soup*, written with Marge Simon, appears from VanZeno in 2008. Mary's collection, *Lovers & Killers*, in addition to winning the Elgin Award, was also on the Stoker ballot and contains *The Hidden* (second place winner in the Dwarf Stars award for 2012), plus two Rhysling nominees *Tohuko Tsunami* and *Galatea*.

Cranium Stew | ***Brian Rosenberger***

The brain, bled of thoughts and ideas,
No longer a brain, now the makings of a main course.
Rather bland according to his discriminating palate
Thus, the need for spices from his garden
And hand-picked herbs.
Experience and Imagination, the Chef's guides,
No measuring tools needed.

Tonight's meal, served with a fusion of exotic vegetables
And sides unhealthy as they are provocative.
The Chef's dinners are exclusive, invitation only,
And always stimulate such interesting food for thought –

Where does he get his inspiration?
What ingredients could produce that flavor?
Will there be seconds?
How does he create such culinary miracles?
What about dessert?
Whose delicious brain?

The Chef feeds on the praise and the compliments,
That and the pituitary gland,
His personal guilty pleasure.

A Knight's Lament | ***Brian Rosenberger***

As a lad, a mere squire, defending the Kingdom, all I desired.
And I did, as a knight, fighting against foreign warriors,
Defending the Crown against all invaders. Then… It was simple.
Blade against blade. Axe against axe. Man against man.
Then… the dragon wing eclipsed the land, burning rich and poor,
Warrior and peasant, castle and hut. Flames had no favorites.
Then… dark sorcery crept into the Kingdom. The Dead walked.
Bad enough to kill unfamiliar marauders than to heft a weapon
Against family, a fellow knight, or even a member of the Crown.
Despair enough to make any Paladin, sob in his mead.
I still miss you, Princess.
Then… seeing the dragon, once killed, yet soaring the skies
And scorching the land. Again.
Enough for a knight to sheath his sword, hang his helm,
Long for a new calling, even a new Kingdom.
One without the need of defending,
As the dark-scaled cloud still soared,
As the Kingdom still burned,
As the dead still marched.

Black Feathers | ***Brian Rosenberger***

"Don't expect happily ever after,"
The spirit guide grimaced, a tombstone grin, as we entered the swamp.
Teeth stained yellow from time and tobacco.
Black feathers given to us at the start of the swamp tour
And magic mushrooms as snacks. The 'shrooms being
The actual spiritual guide. "Hang on to the feathers… or else."
The swamp tour passed from sunshine to twilight,
Bog and briar, our boat slowly moved between Worlds.
I'd suffered worse trips and survived.
My fellow passengers were content with the experience.
Plenty of selfies. Made dinner plans for later.
Our guide gone, swallowed by shadows. Neither mentioned nor missed.
I kept the vulture's feather. It was my feather, after all.
I'd had my meal – the missing guide and the mushrooms (delicious),
And if still hungry, I had the contact addresses for the other tourists.
All Carrion. Dying, if not dead. Some day. Some time.

Faith | ***Brian Rosenberger***

They come, the devout, the true believers.
Every Sunday, it's tradition. It's Scripture.
They believe.

We are all Fallen. All damaged. All sinners in consort.
The Preacher's message: Life is short, so be kind, be good.
Love thy neighbor. Love All.
Forgive.
Sacrifice.

He wears the triregnum, the triple crown,
Usually reserved for the Pope.
None of his congregation object.
As if they could even spell triregnum.
He is a white ghost. Faceless.
His judgment, final.
Nocturnal revivals only because darkness hides sin
And sin breeds in darkness.
He is the Candle. He is the Light.

"Bring forth the Spawn of Satan."

The Preacher grabs rattlesnakes from their cages.
The serpents coil and hiss around albino wrists.
Snakes never to be trusted, reptilian or otherwise.
His congregation writhes in anticipation.
Fangs pierce flesh.
"I would die for you. Will you die for me?"
The noise is Apocalyptic.
The Believers believe. Fuck yes they will.

The Preacher welcomes all to his sermons, Sinners and the Foolish,
The Baptized, those about to be drowned, and those longing for Salvation.
The Preacher does not discriminate because Hell does not discriminate.
He knows they're all Damned since birth.
The Preacher is Old School, Old Testament.

Faceless beneath the Horned Crown,
Still the observant might detect the barest hint of a smile,
The Preacher's unnaturally long canines, not unlike his snakes,
Perfect for draining hemoglobin and Sins.

Blood is the life.
Hallelujah.

About the Author:
Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, GA and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of *As the Worm Turns* and three poetry collections, *Poems That Go Splat, And For My Next Trick...*, and *Scream for Me.*

Facebook: Brian Rosenberger
Instagram: @brianwhosuffers

to feed | ***JB Corso***

the leathery egg breaks open
eighteen arms unfurl into the murky waters,
the hunger in its triple-stomach rages
to feed

circles of sparkling eyes shine
around its vertical bulbous head,
a ravenous appetite propels it upward
to feed

fish die by the dozens within its grasp
sharks and whales flee for safer distances away,
a driving need to grow motivates it
to feed

its crown pops up through the water's surface
Fisherman's Edge Village comes into view,
the scent of humans draws it in
to feed

its single mission grows ferociously inside
decimate the land dwellers and deposit egg clutches everywhere,
and get them ready
to feed

About the Author:
JB Corso is a healthcare professional working to better the lives of vulnerable people. They enjoy spending time with their supportive wife, writing daily, and finding joy in the world. Their author's motto is "Developing stories into masterpieces." They have been published in both fiction and professional outlets.

Facebook: JB Corso

Portal | ***Charles Sartorius***

Empty. Abandoned. Human-less.
Not spiritless. Every window could
be opened. No problem. Really.
Except the only one that was.
Warned locally, but caution ignored.
Non-believers were they. Smirked
at the townspeople. Joked about
obscure beliefs. Ignorant outsiders.
Not the first time. Certainly not
the last. These city folk with large
egos. Their forebearers were different.
They knew. They felt. Adhered.
When the soul is devoured, plucked
from the sprawl. Can't be retrieved
without the rituals. But why try?
Expose the local town folk to horrors taken
centuries to abate? Not likely. Not really.

The portal must be respected. Sealed for now.
Thinly veiled. Awaiting the next urban guests.
Anticipation.

Azure Realms | ***Charles Sartorius***

Nocturnal visions languidly surreal in contextual acuity
effectuate deeply in a pool of subconscious lucidness.
Brief sojourns into rapid eye movement escapades
bestow respite from the waking nightmare of existence.

During cognizant episodes, a single front perpetuates the
façade. But now, the separateness of self is freed to explore
in treble – relaxation, exertion, and curious observation,
concurrent states of essence, arcane but hauntingly pervasive.

Undistracted by reality, cognitive wheels spin wildly free
encumbered only by distant resounds of the far away dawn.

As mystic cycles of slumber evolve, so too the comprehension
of microcosmic realms of existence internalized and allotted to
the id, ego, and superego in vacillating synaptic proportion; each
night a spatial perspective into self and the cosmos unfiltered.

And as always, the horror begins as abominations infiltrate serenity,
first devouring the dreamscape . . . then the dreamer. Screams
of agony echo inside the mind as appendages are ripped from the
trunk and ingested one by one; washed down with fresh spirting
blood.

But this time is different. This time there will be no awakening. This
time the final chapter plays over and over in an endless loop. Hell.

About the Author:
A busy MBA, Charles Sartorius finds time to write both short stories and music lyrics. Several tales have been published in various anthologies and eZines. Another creation, *The Ancient Forest of Terror*, appears in an upcoming Sirens Call anthology. His songs rock on conventional venues such as Amazon and Apple Music like *Feeling Left Out*, judged a finalist in the prestigious 2023 USA Songwriting competition.

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Abominable | ***Tinamarie Cox***

It started as a whisper on the breeze,
the gentle gust gathering syllables like
fallen autumn leaves.
Words that were meant to rot,
devoid of summer vivacity, but
not able to be forgotten.
Not as temporary as the seasons.
All the collected thoughts
lay buried underneath the wanted wondrous white,
twisted and compressed with the darkness.
Trapped detritus under cold winter snow
became something else entirely.
What the passing of time created wasn't human,
though the face resembled one.
What formed from the dark, decayed debris was
something bitter and terribly hungry.
Your very own monster.

About the Author:
Tinamarie Cox is a fairly average weirdo who likes reading and writing depressing things. She enjoys time with her one-eyed cat and other humans only occasionally. You'll find more of her disturbing writings in past issues of *The Sirens Call Zine, Worm Moon Archive, Monstrous Femme, Dark Entries Journal*, and *Crawling* (Hear Us Scream Press).

Author Website: Tinamarie Thinks Too Much
Instagram: @tinamariethinkstoomuch

Unveiling | ***Chris McAuley***

This the time where all men were bathed in yellow.
Madness and conflict consumed all souls that walked the earth.
Minds tortured with humans' rights and wrongs.
Voices silenced and others raised.
Reasonable dialogue discounted.
As the currency of hatred is freely exchanged.
Above and within all of this sits Hastur.
The bearer of the final word.

The waker of the destroyer of worlds.
Smiling as he goads once innocent teeth to rend into flesh.
His fingers slowly loose the chains of Fenric.
This is the time of the wolf,
The final age of mankind.

Lovecraft's Nightmare | ***Chris McAuley***

Bound by a stinking silken web.
I awaken in a cold, desolate place.
A metallic taste coats my mouth.
Its bitter tang causing me to heave.
My eyes grow accustomed to the monochrome gray.

However, it is the sound which penetrated my ears which gave some texture to this place.
Low moans and agonized howls.
Which swept across me like an unwelcome chill wind.
A few meters ahead lay an object which I took for a willow tree.
Bent and twisted and swaying gently.

Willing my gaze to penetrate the distance,
I saw that it was made of no wood.
It was the amalgamation of twisted and decaying human bodies.
From their stretched and static lips came the howl.

The noise which I took for pain.
Was instead a warning.
As the creature whose twisted artistry had crafted awful living botanic majesty.
Enclosed its blistered claws
Around my screaming throat.

Nyarlathotep | ***Chris McAuley***

Come walk with me,
Just for a while.
Let me show you the undercurrents of your world.
Signs, symbols and portents.
Manufactured from my mind.
All these things both mystical and mathematical
Merely seem like order.
They project a sense of stability.
A handhold for your soul to clutch.

In truth they are as much an agent of chaos as I am.
You see I've walked this plane in many guises.
Some like an iterant preacher, others like a showman.
Or, like this, a businessman.
In each case I bring unwelcome revelation.
A precursor to personal revolution.

In many of the old tales I come to steal your soul.
These are untrue.
I have come to return it to you.
Now as I leave you at your destination.
You wonder about my name.
It may as well be Rumpelstiltskin for all it would mean to you.
A naive but clever young man with a ponderous name.
Once discovered it and summoned me.

Lovecraft captured me in a dream.
As he slept, I directed his hand to scribe.
You too have been chosen.
To become poet, prophet, priest or king.
For within the beat of your drum.
Shall manifest the hellish madness to come.

About the Author:
Chris McAuley writes prose novels, magazine short stories, video and tabletop games, and audio dramas. Best known for creating the StokerVerse he has also worked on The Terminator, Doctor Who and most recently the Star Trek franchises.

Author Website: Dark Universes
Author Website: StokerVerse

Mouth of the Woods | ***Alex S. Johnson***

Campers, laughing, hush as
a crackle in the underbrush
laces the nerves with dread—tree
branches bend and stretch around the
mouth of the woods, an all-consuming yawn,
as a set of monstrous, ripping
thorns sets itself in the void's jaw

Then helpless, one by one, they're
sucked into the maw, blood splashing leaves,
organs draped across trees
eyeballs set in ghastly nooks
watching as the forest's stomach
cooks the meat

Now new sounds erupt: the mirth of
a chorus of animals,
ears perked to the campers' screams
as they're consumed

A burp of hearty satisfaction
brightens the forest's gloom.

About the Author:
Alex S. Johnson has been reading and writing in horror since he can remember and publishing in horror for the past 30 years. His first horror short story to be published, "Pen and Incubus," appeared in Bloodsongs magazine alongside Edward Lee. His work has been praised by Ray Garton, John Shirley and Lucy Taylor. A former college English instructor and music journalist, Johnson currently resides in Sacramento, California.

Facebook: Alex S. Johnson

From the darkness
and the shadows
From the lunacy
and the void

POETRY OF MONSTERS AND MADNESS

Adam | ***Sara J. Bernhardt***

It's a night of dark desire,
A song of blood.
Wolves vent their pain into the blackness,
The immortal one awakens,
A power shakes the earth,
Wisps of death,
Shroud him as he stalks,
Waiting.
An eternal desire arises,
His cobalt eyes staring from beneath his raven hair,
His translucent ivory skin illuminates his beauty,
His peril.
His full scarlet lips part slightly to taste the life,
Streaming from the weakened flesh beneath him.
A night of truth,
A night of desire,
A night of newfound love,
I rise.

Nighttime Dread | ***Sara J. Bernhardt***

All around, the shadows gather,
My dread grows as the darkness falls against my skin,
It crushes me,
My blood drips and feeds the thirsty Earth.
In my confusion,
I beg for surrender,
As oblivion hangs ahead,
Waiting for me.
Now alone,
My bloody image falls upon uncaring eyes,
This is my salvation,
My peace,
My end.

Visions | ***Sara J. Bernhardt***

Sensations of warmth,
As if wrapped in velvet,
Yet chilled on the inside,
In the empty spaces between.

Thoughts of beauty,
As if found within reach,
Yet visions of hideousness,
Of wretchedness,
In the tunnels below.

Nothing left to seek,
For there is nothing left to find.
Lack of beauty and warmth in the midst of darkness,
The blackness beckons,
It cannot be battled,
It cannot be challenged,
It is to be embraced,
For only then can the wonders yearned for become tangible,
Only then,
Can the wretched freeze cease.

About the Author:
Sara J. Bernhardt is an award-winning author and poet who has been writing since a very young age. It is clear that Bernhardt writes in a realistic tone while still creating the enthralling feeling of fantasy. Her writing puts readers in a world that they will truly love to be a part of.

My Second Coming | ***Sean Edwards***

I can't remember my original birth,
It was another lifetime ago.
Yet, with my second coming,
A hunger in me would grow.
I once was shy and carefree,
Just a face within the crowd.
I went about my quiet life,
Never ever was I loud.
Yet now I am a monster,
With a constant need to feed.
I need the warmth of human blood,
I have to see them bleed.
Without that flesh between my teeth,
My kind they won't survive.
My nighttime wanderings,
Keep me dead, but yet alive.
My memories of my former life,
Slowly they begin to wane.
My victims are consumed by hunger,
I ignore their obvious pain.
I am a bloodsucking vampire,
This is my story I tell.
This is my lifetimes curse,
Forever my living hell.

About the Author:
Sean Edwards is a 53-year-old Steelworker from South Wales. He has been writing poetry since an accident 20 years ago. He has recently been published in an anthology called Changing Histories. He has also just released a children's picture book called Mostyn & The Dragon.

Facebook: Sean Edwards

Out of the Depths | ***Sarah Das Gupta***

Out of a strange green egg,
a weird creature emerged
first legs, hairy and strong
with talons to rip and to tear.

The body, formed of skin white
stretched very thin and tight
veins and arteries clear to see
a beast to freeze a man's blood.

At last, the head appears
sickening to look and behold
skin already decomposing
cuts with pus slowly oozing.

The hair dark, stiff bristles like
great thorns piercing the scalp
one all-seeing blood-shot eye
floating in glutinous gunge.

This abominable Creature stops
the delicate Spring in her tracks
buds wither and drop and perish
nothing in the forest does flourish.

It crawls to the dark cemetery
scratching with vicious claws
digging in a newly-dug grave
with not a moment to pause.

It drags the fresh corpse to its lair
in a dark cave beneath the pines
soon nothing is left to see
but a heap of hair and bones.

Still hungry it crawls to a cottage
hidden in the fold of the hill
a family sleeps silently there
no care for those it will kill.

Dance of Death | ***Sarah Das Gupta***

Drums beat, wildly, madly,
echoing grimly among the green hills.
In the distance forest trees
lashed by a titanic storm,
bend in obeisance to the gods
of a savage Spring.
Buds and new leaves scatter
in the pangs of this violent birth.

In a circle, young girls dance,
at first their steps slow, graceful.
Bare, slender feet leave
soft, momentary footprints.
The drum beat quickens, darkens.
The dancers, captured, controlled
by the demands of the music,
quicken their footsteps
in the whirling hysteria of the violins.
One by one, dancers collapse
to lie like scattered petals,
victims of the frenzied rhythm.

One lone girl remains.
Faster, faster the music rushes
A crazy orgy, an insane tempo,
her feet no longer touch the turf.
Long, dark hair, blown and tortured
by the rising wind.
The dancer becomes a circle,
a whirling flash of colour and light.
a pattern, an emblem,
a dying sacrifice to Spring.

About the Author:
Sarah Das Gupta is a writer from Cambridge UK who has also lived and worked in India and Tanzania. Her work has been published in over 15 countries in many magazines and anthologies including: 'The Sirens Call', 'Danse Macabre', 'Tales from the Moonlit Path', 'The Chamber', 'Tiny Breathes' among many others.

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Along Came a Spider | ***Renee Cronley***

A crescent moon slivers its way
through infinite black velvet
with a bright tingle of stars
adorning the midnight ballroom.

She spins through charcoal sticks
of spruces shivering in delight
as she weaves through the night.

The gossamer threads of her skirt
flare in moonlight's silver tones,
revealing nature's tapestry.

Her hungry heart beats
beneath a quartz-encrusted
bodice of spinnerets.

She blows a kiss
that carries in the wind
making cobwebs of passing clouds
to ensnare her next lover.

Tangled in her charms,
he thrashes in her primal dance
until she brings her mouth to his
and pierces him with enough
passion to paralyze him.

The dance ends on her lips
where her instincts are recited
and consumes him with enough love
to satiate her for another night.

About the Author:
Renee Cronley is a writer from Manitoba. She studied Psychology and English at Brandon University, and Nursing at Assiniboine Community College. Her work appears in Chestnut Review, *PRISM international, Off Topic, Love Letters to Poe*, *New Myths*, *Weird Little Worlds, ParABnormal Magazine, Black Spot Books,* and several other anthologies and literary magazines.

Facebook: Renee's Writing Page
Instagram: @reneecronley

To the Maggots | ***Joshua E. Borgmann***

My childhood fantasies were always of being slowly devoured.
I've constantly contemplated my body hanging,
imagining how many flies I could attract within an hour.
I fear I could attract more if I ended myself with a bang,
but I'm just not wanting to make too big of a mess for others.
I want to make it easy for the flies to deposit their eggs,
and make me a nursery for thousands of sisters and brothers,
that I imagine crawling out my nose and burrowing deep in my legs.
Not feeling them consuming me strikes me as a damn shame,
but to decay, I must transition into the numbness of the corpse,
so I will never feel the multitudes of children who will inflame
my womb causing my cooling flesh to ripple, crack, and warp.
I wonder: Can flies survive, for a time, in a casket?
I would so love to hear their racket.
How loud it would it be in the absolute darkness of my grave?
Rhythmic buzzing and larval undulation making my body their rave.

I dream of my sloughing flesh being caressed away by thousands of ravenous lovers
whom I have helped nourish to maturity, selflessly offering myself as a beloved mother.

Springtime Feasting | ***Joshua E. Borgmann***

I have grown fond of sweet and sour juices putrefaction,
have sucked glazed eyes from sunken cavities,
beautiful jelly candies dissolving in the soup of putrefaction.
I am driven to feast on the pungent grave-flesh.

I have known the secret tastes of putrefaction,
and massaged cold colons, feces of the dead filling my plate,
a rare delicacy, so few stuffed colons making it to putrefaction,
and I am the gourmet, seeking umami, driven to feast upon grave-flesh.

I have heard the song, the call of putrefaction.
Moist, ripened flesh sings with a choir of tenderizing grubs,
rising and descending like piano keys playing a symphony of putrefaction,
that drives me to feast on the most delicately marinaded grave-flesh.

I have grown fond of the sublime colors of decomposition,
Tasting such delight in the rainbow of putrefaction.
I take in March to have a bountiful April buffet, letting her butchery wait,
for I am driven to feast on her perfectly aged grave-flesh.

About the Author:
Joshua E. Borgmann is a wicked Scorpio child who crafts his trauma responses into dark stars of compressed weirdness. Born among wretched cornfields, his dreams of death metal stardom never got off the ground, but he still takes the stage with his spoken word poetry. He teaches for money and writes to stay alive. He's still surrounded by corn and held captive by feline overlords.

Instagram: @borgmannpoet

My Muse | ***Chris P. Clay***

There's a monster in the typewriter
It's seething for a song
Calling from my gray matter
legends wretched for the throng

Wanting dismal and disturbing
concocted nightmares born awake
Set free those cosmic awful things
Urge them shiver, make them quake

If I cannot claim the impulse
find scant notions in the pot
It shows me things that will repulse
freeze me stricken to the spot

So I'll pound the keys until they bruise
Craft tales of death and doom
The monster writhes, fights to break loose
this confined writing room

About the Author:
Chris P. Clay writes dark, speculative fiction and poetry with an upper midwestern milieu. He is fascinated with the supernatural and all things spooky. His story, *Pocket Change*, appeared in Limitless Publishing's bestselling, *Carnival of Fear*. *Dream Reaver* was featured in Limitless' follow-up, *Carnival of Nightmares*. His poetry appears in the 2023 release *Whispers from Beyond: A Showcase of Dark Poetry* from Crystal Lake Publishing.

Facebook: Chris P. Clay
Instagram: @spoopyrtr

A wonderful compilation of dark enchantments!

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

The Blue Dusk | ***Meg Smith***

I'm falling into
my dark sky rapture.
My blood surges
no hunger for
anything as base as
sleep or breath.
This twilight of mine
sates with bare trees
that could embrace me,
and out of waking,
would they and I be filled.

A Raven on Dublin's Streets | ***Meg Smith***

Mocking the sun, the train
with lazy regard for
the fallen crumbs outside
the national museum,
he grasps the street with easy claws.
He cries
always cheerfully,
and lends night
to the rushing afternoon
and the bridge over the Liffey.
This hungry hour
will suffice.
Together, we will clasp
our silence, and fly.

Doorways | ***Meg Smith***

Blue, green, black,
tell me –
in paint flaking like
dragon scales shedding,
and shifting like
a river still restless
as I place my hand against the wood.
I whisper, and a tremor
ripples, sighs.
Something beyond a keyhole
warms the touch
like a fire of stars.

The Webbed Wings | ***Meg Smith***

Even grasping at
the window's arch,
a membrane so threaded with veins
can still catch light.
Any light, any light at all –
the straying sun,
a dog's cry,
a votive candle, flame wavering
in the sulfurous match.
A pebble falls
from the outside wall.
For this, I reach to close and
be closed in those dark
and aching folds.

The Sleeping Hour | ***Meg Smith***

The sun shifts
in a swift whiteness of light
beyond the green hill
and the slate gravestones
sad in their dulled pock marks.
Above, crows rush to
the snarl of black branches
to gossip, quarrel or simply
call out to bring the air
a modest heat.
Their laughter scatters
the straying dust.
For me, the grass must serve,
but night will sweep in
all of us with no regard of
earth or sky.

About the Author:
Meg Smith is a writer, journalist, dancer and events producer living in Lowell, Mass., where she produces the Edgar Allan Poe festival, honoring Poe's presence in Lowell. In addition to previously appearing in *Sirens Call*, her poetry and fiction have appeared in *The Cafe Review, The Lowell Review, Raven Cage, Dark Dossier* and more. She has published six poetry collections and a short fiction collection, *The Plague Confessor*.

Facebook: Meg Smith
Instagram: @megsmithwriter

The City at Night | ***Joseph VanBuren***

At night, the city, she cries.
Skies sob in lullabies.
Souls stuck in limbo
don the darkest disguise.

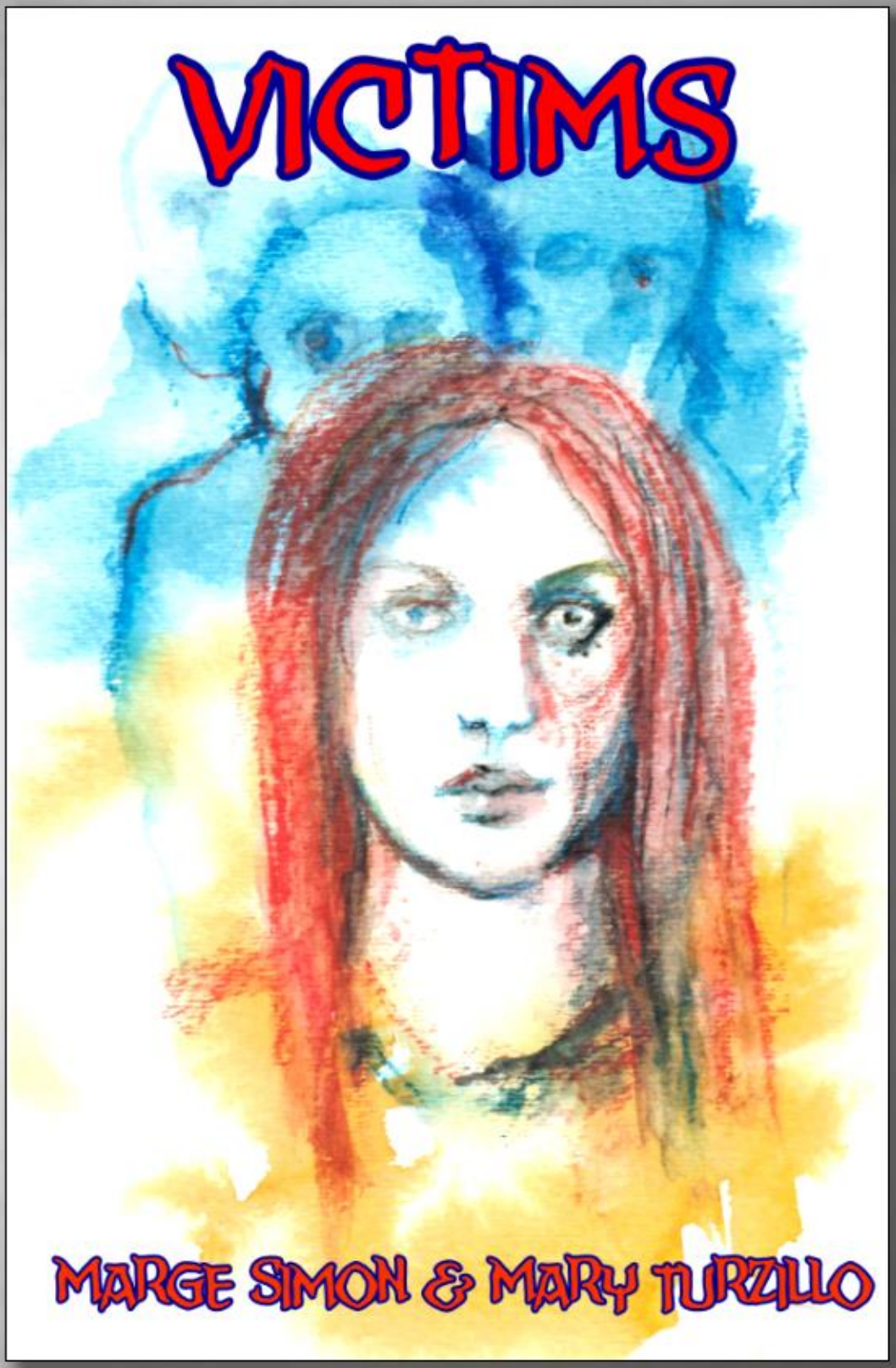
In pain, the alleys, they wail.
Shadows shout to no avail.
Minds cold as winter
howl through gossamer veil.

At dawn, the spirits, they sleep.
Demons fade as sun rays creep.
Heaps under bridges
dream in illusions reaped.

About the Author:
Out of the darkness, risen from the ashes … Joseph VanBuren creates weird speculative tales showcasing the reality of resurrection and brings a light against legion through poetry, music, meditations, hip hop, and more. Recent projects include *This Is Not a Poetry Book* and *This Is Not a Music Album*. 'This poem was titled after a music track Joseph composed, 'At Night the City She Cries'.

Author Website: Joseph VanBuren
Facebook: Joseph VanBuren

Victims, a collection of dark poems by Marge Simon & Mary A. Turzillo is a 2022 Bram Stoker Finalist!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Beneath the Earth | ***DJ Tyrer***

In deepest cavern bowels
Far beneath the earth
Geodes lay in silence
Within them strange life
Slowly maturing towards birth
Rock shells crack, release
Entities hidden within, freed
They surge upwards, upwards
Seeking the surface world
Driven by terrible hunger
Burst into the light
Begin to feed, devour
Unprepared occupants of surface
Men, women, children, animals
All living things devoured
Until no life remains
Whole world left empty
Time, now, to return
Retreat back into depths
Mate and spawn, lay
New geode eggs, waiting
In darkness for life
To repopulate the surface

Cracked | ***DJ Tyrer***

Sudden pain
Nearly doubled over
Stumble out of store
Vomit, sob.
Head feels as if it's about to split.
It does.
Skull shatters, skin splits
Scream cut short.
Tangle of legs twist free
Dripping bits of brain
Creature scuttles away
Looking for a new host
Another head in which to lay eggs.

Lamia | ***DJ Tyrer***

As her tail coils about my body
So desire coils about my heart
It may be foolishness to love her
Yet I know we can never part
Perhaps I delude myself
That something such as she can feel
The sensation of selfless love
Yet I am certain our love is real
So, I slip willingly into her arms
Accept her proffered embrace
Whether a moment or a lifetime
It is her that I shall face

Reborn | ***DJ Tyrer***

A single bite
A *human* bite
Hardly serious, surely?
Then, chills begin
Some horrible infection
Die in ambulance
Before reaching hospital
Abandoned in morgue
Where they revive
Reborn into unlife
Horrific dead visage
An awful hunger
Flesh cannot fill
So they bite
Again and again
Desperate to devour
Never ever satisfied
Joined by others
Spreading their contagion
An endless hunger
Each victim reborn
Joining the feast

About the Author:
DJ Tyrer is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing*, editor of *View From Atlantis*, and has been published in *The Rhysling Anthology 2016*, *Dwarf Stars 2022*, *Speculations II and III*, *Gargoylicon* and *Vampiricon*, and issues of *Enchanted Conversation*, *The Horrorzine*, *Journ-E*, *Lovecraftiana*, *Scifaikuest*, *Sirens Call*, *Spectral Realms*, *Star*Line*, and *Tigershark*. *SuperTrump* and *A Wuhan Whodunnit* are available to download from the Atlantean Publishing website.

Author Website: DJ Tyrer
Facebook: DJ Tyrer

The Heebie-Jeebies | *Lori R. Lopez*

Mutely I viewed them flicker, in and out of sight:
specters or hectors winking, by moon or candlelight;
entities quite apparent that simply were not there ...
offering up a chill ... an underlying scare!

Uncertain as I swayed, in a tizzy dizzied state,
mind and heart divided, swinging like a gate,
the two sides flapping oppositely forth and back,
I knew for true I wandered far off the beaten track —

Where nothing could prepare for anything I'd seen,
as shining peepers watched what happened in-between,
and corpses were less dead, while spirits roamed aloof.
My Skepticism Meter stayed keen to spot a goof.

Senses all on High Alert, my own eyes peeled to spy
proof that everything I glimpsed was really not awry.
A hint of dreamwork; strands or threads of fabrication.
Though I was wide awake, around lurked conjuration.

My presence seemed unwelcome. Respiration stalling,
I felt an apprehension of invisible things crawling ...
my skin a clammy sheen of anxiousness and worry.
Both feet were only eager to join along and scurry!

Warmth was fleeing rapidly, panic about to spread.
Stomach clutched by queasiness from voices in my head,
I listened to them chatter as if harboring some clue,
and searched my pockets for a tube of Mortal Fiber Glue.

Events and figures spiralled, locked in loops of madness.
Aspects froze in throes of desperate grief and sadness.
Moans or groans cascaded from an ocean of unbreaths;
stuttering and sputtering a thousand Lightbulb Deaths ...

For I stood alone on Leery Lane, paler than a ghost!
Alive among these wraiths, stranded hintermost,
my flimsy pulse still lingered, a blip inside a vein,
one shred of conceit to argue I hadn't gone insane.

But every ounce of courage was abandoning my ship;
nervous agitation giving away the loss of grip ...
I am certain that my Meemies ran out of their screams!
Never I felt as unsafe, in the darkest of my dreams.

Monstrous lost its meaning; it broke the Dictionary.
I needed a new Webster's to define charier than wary ...
the fullest range of adversary I could ever come across ...
what may lurk beneath a Cemetery miles below the moss.

I grew incapable to shiver, or even let myself go limp.
Hysteria and Morbs led the straightest tress to crimp.
No hopes of turning back or my knee-bones to knock;
lower limbs to wobble, lakes of dread to fill each sock.

Too petrified for stiffening; too rigid for passing out.
I wanted to go home, there was not a trace of doubt.
Yet instead of giving in to fears, becoming too disturbed,
I danced The Heebie-Jeebies, and disbelief was curbed.

Taking Names | *Lori R. Lopez*

Not everyone tells you their name. It bothers me when they won't, so I follow them. Not to collect in a jar. That would be strange. I'm not strange, you see, just abnormal. But all of us are, in our own peculiar ways. I'm explaining this so you will understand if I ever take yours.

I might. You never know because I never know until I do. It kind of happens at whim. I cannot predict or guarantee that it won't. Because ... it actually could. And this doesn't mean more than what it should, which isn't a perfect ideal explanation. Yet is all that I've got.

My life is complicated. My existence a bloody mess of self-restrictions and social dysfunctions that lead back to the part about people not being open and honest or wishing to share their names, even if I ask them nicely. I usually do. It's only the mean ones I may demand gruffly.

And those I'll admit, I do keep in a jar. Names that is, not people. I've thought about it. A lot. It keeps me awake. However, I haven't crammed any whole person inside a bottle. Pieces of them perhaps. Depends whether eyebrows or freckles, elbow grease, a glare or scream count.

I was born a Name Catcher ... the uncommon genetic predisposition and innate condition that requires me to gather identities as if they were up for grabs. I realize now they are not. This doesn't make it any easier to resist, and strive to avoid; it's still a work in progress.

So here I am, confessing that someone's name might compel my baser suppressed instincts to bubble up and surface like air in a pond where you've pushed your worst friend and bitterest rival because she wouldn't admit who she was. That her middle moniker was Mud.

I am stating an example, but it isn't necessarily a fact. It could be, it simply doesn't need to be. Just so we're clear. This is not really a signed confession, it's merely a supposition of a truth that may or could be accurate. If you believe that sort of thing. I don't know ...

Maybe you should. I feel I've said enough.
I never casually reveal private details with
anyone unfamiliar. When I take names —
there is no warning. I'm not one to signal,
hint, announce my intentions! Before now.
It's done, there's no going back —

You've heard too much. It isn't personal.
I'm afraid I will be needing that name ...

the fear of wide-open spaces | *Lori R. Lopez*

Leaves rattle in the breeze — a pleasant sound
like pattering of rain, until it causes fear, a chill
of apprehension from a thought or intuition —
a sudden premonition. Nervous, I stroll forth
nonetheless, splodging along a path, following
doctor's orders, as if the countryside and fresh
air could be bottled up, sold by prescription.

The pathway damp and puddled from a recent
tap-dance of drops, my cheeks rosy due to brisk
wind, I pick a course to avoid the deepest pools
and squint at sparse scraggly trees, unaware how
a ghostly figure appeared in front of me. Distant
enough not to distinguish identifying traits. Any
such visibly discernible details. Simply an Other.

The person ahead, standing very still, moves so
swiftly I fail to notice; maintaining a margin —
a gap between us to match my steps. At a loss,
I'm bewildered by an impossible feat: remaining
the exact interval, almost preternatural, an eerie
situation. My unsettling chill returns. Shoulders
quiver, a silly spasm of tense involuntary dread.

I falter. Must be an illusion, a trick of the mind.
Smiling to myself, resuming uncertain strides ...
in need of more exercise, and soothing comfort.
The restorative vibes that lie in outdoor settings.
I cannot let a peculiar encounter — this random
craziness disturb a placid walk! "Ridiculous."
Sighing, shaking my head. The effect persists.

"It doesn't matter. Fine!" I wave and turn away.
I'll go the opposite direction. Before taking one
stride, I squint in disbelief. Eyeing a static shape.
The vague familiar outline looms before me, but
two of them! Twins! A pair! Anxious, I whirl,
sighting again the indistinct form. A mirage ...
Is it some kind of game? "Hey!" I call out.

"Can I help you?" No response. Just staring
toward me it seems, a gray overcast pall above.
Heavy clouds weighing down over the remote
vista. Inviting phobia for wide-open spaces;
a slight note of shrillness. "Is there something
you need?" Mocking echoes toss my words
back. "Are you lost?" There is no reaction.

Feeling blocked in either direction, I dart off
the trail, then laugh in a frantic tone, halting.
Glimpsing a third isolated silhouette, lonely
yet part of a crowd. Reeling in panic. Afraid,
I discover myself surrounded by duplicates,
unable to escape this desolate somber terrain.
Countless replicas of the same body charge!

Mute, I wait for the ghastly specters to arrive.

From The Grave Reborn | *Lori R. Lopez*

Out of mulctified and dank regards I clawed —
up from a loamy sense of tenebrous worth, paying
off penalties and fines. Cheated. Granted a rebirth.
The meagerest pulse or beat. Perhaps refunding
in part the price of crimes for which I was accused,
incarcerated, broken and abused. My neck would
never be the same, scorched by a Hangman's Noose.
Ribs and face contused. Teeth scattered like stones.

Under the noses of Takers I lay, enshrouded, limbs
emaciated, weighted by the dirt, my tomb unmarked.
Anonymously planted for renewal, as cretinous
thieves stalked above to pry and dig up, then drag
from the earth even sorrier remains — stealings
from departed souls who had little left to give —
spoils pinched and purloined from victims cast out
of Prison or Hospital. Reaping uneaten rewards ...

Hunted by Scavengers sifting effects too dense
for the bite of a worm. Harvested from soil,
extracted from the ground, like Potato Farmers
in a famine. I eluded robbers, hearing the chops
of blades, random hacks and slices of shovels.
A modest spade tucked in my cloth. Lucky they
didn't bother with boxes here, or markers!
Burrowing a path to the surface, I emerged ...

And filled the hole, curious about the favor,
my secret benefactor. Staggering in darkness to
pay respects. Was it the Physician who declared
me dead? After I was strung up and dangled —
swinging on a rope like the prize at a Fair, only
there was nothing fair about it. I burst into his
room. "Why ..." An ashen gasp of breath this
side of deceased. "... am I a walking corpse?"

"So the Gravepickers missed you. I'm glad."
Relief in his tone. I hurtled to press his warm
throat, soft in my grasp, yielding to blame for
all I suffered. He wouldn't resist. "They needed
a body to punish transgressions, avert detection.
You were convenient, always in the corners —
unglimpsed, with none to miss you — a servant,
a woman, but I noticed. Now you must go!"

Releasing him, hands curled to fists. Flames
of seething wrath dispelled. Eyes brimmed ...
my arms embraced a bundle, silently numb.
"Take these provisions. Food and funds for
travel, a fresh start. Your life here is ended.
You must never return!" No chance to express
gratitude. Abruptly pushed out the door. Alone.
Wood banged, a final blow. His sob endured.

Sustaining, healing. Assuring I was not bereft,
condemned, a cadaver. From the grave reborn.

Underneath The Rug | ***Lori R. Lopez***

I'm going to say this, but more of a whisper
because I don't want it to hear — to be alerted
I am aware of an unidentified lying object
tucked snugly under the rug.

Not sure how it occurred, whether I swept it
or the thing crept, perhaps in a furtive slide.
I don't really care if it rolled, crawled or sprang,
much less bunny-hopped!

Whatever it is, whatever it's doing — hiding
and biding, rotting or plotting, waiting, mutating,
bating it's tiny breath — the very worst part
is the fact it's been growing!

And I don't mean growing a garden or beard.
This bug in the rug (well I'm merely assuming
since I haven't laid eyes to determine precisely)
was a heck of a lot smaller!

Now it's the size of a mouse, but it couldn't be
you see. It was closer to a beetle a minute ago,
then suddenly rodent-sized as if unfolding.
It isn't natural, it's uncanny.

I further suspect it's strong. A visible lump.
Sturdy not soft. It could be a ball of appetite!
Clasping a pen, I'm recording on my walls
a list of blatant uncertainties.

Ordinarily I would strive for confidence —
clarity — being meticulous in most regards.
Under the circumstances, I believe it's fine
if I'm a little bit vague.

Above anything, I am anxious not to scream,
as that would definitely unnecessarily tip off
the unsightly bulge, the slightly gargantuan
bump below my rug.

(Unless it doesn't have ears.) Not that I am
the type to be squeamish, or squash spiders
and other long-legged beasties. I give their
kind plenty of room!

But this creeper has started to circulate.
I suppose I should follow and see where
the carpet moves. It might offer a hint at
what lies underneath.

A braver soul would snatch the rug, yell
"Ah-ha!" or a phrase equally courageous.
That isn't me, so I'm trailing on tiptoe
while pausing to scribble.

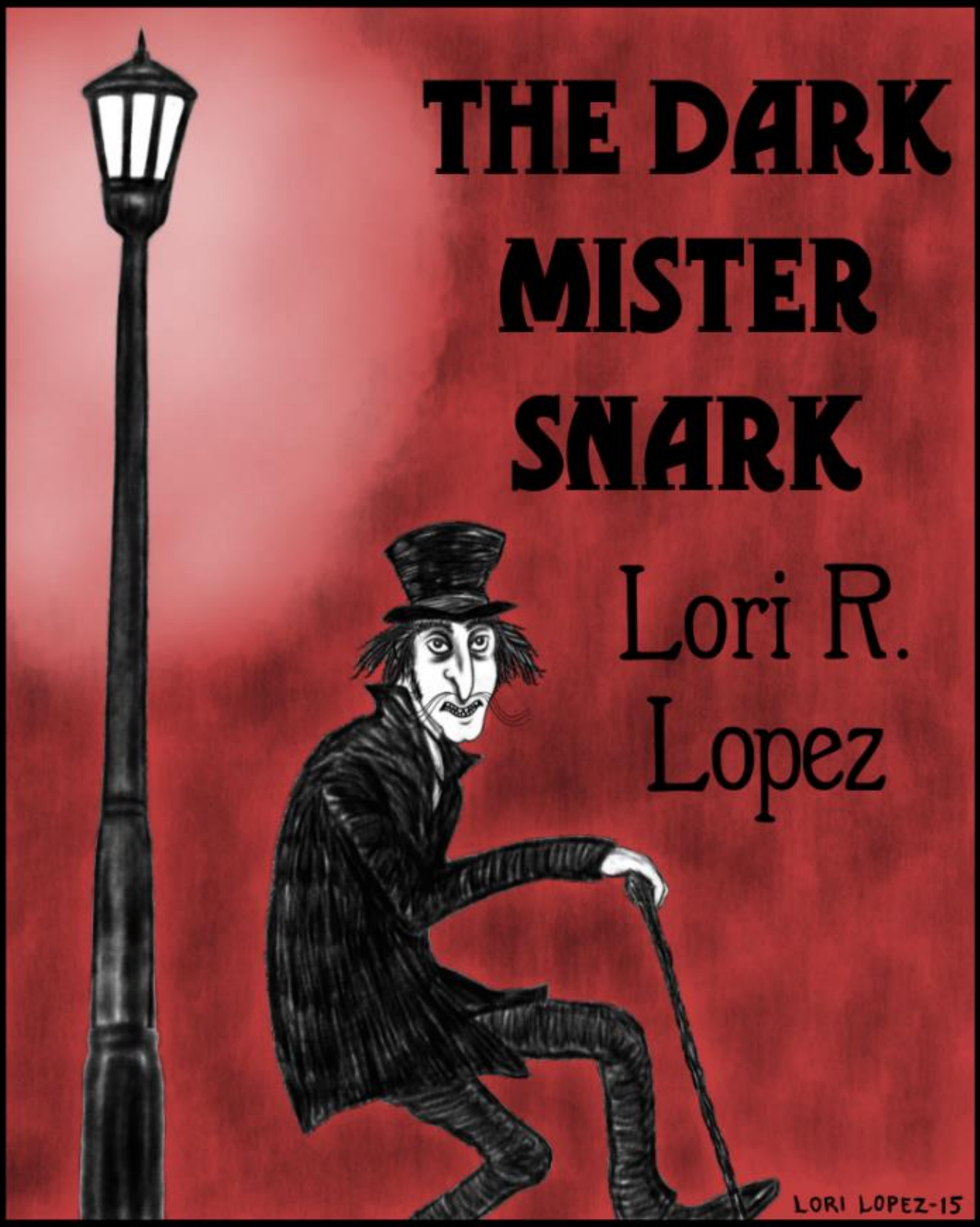
Come on, who am I kidding?! I need to
tear off this bandage, shout unintelligibly!
Too late, it's rising, rug and all, turning —
taller than I am, oh no —

DISPATCH: "The only clues to a killer,
eight two-inch bloody splotches like feet."

About the Author:
Lori R. Lopez is an offbeat author-illustrator, poet, hat-wearer plus animal-and-monster-lover. Verse appears in *The Sirens Call, Spectral Realms*, *The Horror Zine*, *H.W.A. Poetry Showcases, Space & Time* and more. Books include *The Dark Mister Snark*, *Odds & Ends*, and *Darkverse: The Shadow Hours*. Lori won Third Place for Long Form in the 2023 SFPA Poetry Contest and received nominations for Elgin and Rhysling Awards.

Facebook: Lori R. Lopez
Twitter: @LoriRLopez

Beware! Mister Snark is lurking...



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

The Heirloom | ***Philip Madden***

All of Annie's life had been devoted to making herself disappear, from the time when her mother had vanished and her father had begun to stink of whisky and rage. As he stomped around the house flinging cutlery and chairs, yelling and cursing she had learnt to be still, like the dead tree in the garden. Even when he beat her senseless for disappointing him she had learnt not to cry out or fight back, because it only made it worse.

At school she learnt to disappear amongst the blank, dirty faces in the crowded classroom, to avoid the biting sarcasm of the stern-faced teachers whose put downs and nasty remarks only encouraged the bigger and more brutal kids, who hunted in packs like wolves around the playground, to pick out the belittled and dish out more violent slap downs. She learnt to disappear in a crowd, to become one with the anonymous herd, with no voice or character and just drifted on the sea of life like a dead jellyfish.

Now while she sat before a window in the dark stillness of her room listening to the thing from the forest slowly slouch its way towards her door, she knew that everything that had gone before was preparation for what was about to happen.

She had heard the thing which lived in the dark, mouldy holes of the forest floor calling to her before.

She had first heard it a few days after her mother had disappeared. She had wandered the forgotten and overgrown paths of the forest in those initial days of grief, lost in her own agony of loss, her despair eating her from the inside as though it were some horrible worm that had buried itself deep in her innards and was now growing fat and greedy on her pain. Devouring her.

It had called out to her from its hiding place in the dark shadows of the undergrowth from a place which had never been kissed by the sunlight, a stranger to warmth.

"Come here little girl," it had coaxed, it's voice like autumn smoke.

"I can ease your trouble," it had said.

"I can end all of your troubles."

She had looked around confused and scared.

"Are you real?" she had tremulously gasped, in a voice full of fear of what the answer might really mean.

The insidious darkness which lived in the spaces where light had never danced only stared back at her.

After a while she carried on walking down the neglected path and something followed her because she could hear it in the rustle of fallen leaves, or the snapping of a dead branch. And she could hear it in her head, whispering to her and mocking her.

"Pathetic and unloved, ugly and unwanted. Join me and forget it all," it had chanted.

Eventually she became overwhelmed and started to run, blinded by her tears she had simply run to escape the thing that was tormenting her, in a panic she had dashed through the bushes which had scratched her, and the low branches which had reached out to slash at her with their sharp pointed tips. The day was burning itself up, like a scarlet rash splashed across the horizon when she finally broke through the treeline. She bent over and pulled in heaving pants of chilly air into her burning lungs. Her mouth was full of the taste of copper and her nose was blocked with snot. Tears blurred her vision and the seeping blood from various cuts was attracting the attention of tiny feasting bugs.

This time the voice was much closer.

"You can run but I will always find you. You are mine now."

And like the smoke of an autumn fire it was there, spiralling and snaking in the air for a moment before dissipating into the ether.

"I can see you." It would hiss in a voice full of mud and mulch as she passed to and from school.

"One day I will visit you," and then it would scamper away like a rat shuffling inside a wall leaving her scared and confused. She saw and heard many things and most of them she knew were not real. The true things were often more dark and horrific that her imaginings.

But as she walked home alone from school through the forest to avoid the leering looks and grabbing hands of the loud, lewd drunken labourers who gathered outside of the local pub which lay between her home and school, the thing in the hole would sometimes follow her and get so close she could smell its earthy breath and a rich whiff of wet undergrowth.

"Be still, be quiet and it will go away," she would whisper to herself only to hear a cackle of subdued laughter behind her in the gloom where only the prettiest, most dangerous mushrooms grow.

One day at school, as she lay obscured and hidden in the tall grass, staring at the blue empty sky and thinking about the thing in the woods she overheard a group of girls talking about. One of the girls, a loud moon-faced redhead

who according to schoolyard gossip had been caught in the middle of an intimate activity with the young and handsome history teacher, was repeating a story her father had told from his days as a soldier in faraway India, about a Holy Man who had captured a demon in a bowl of water. Even though her flat Northern accent grated on Annie's nerves she was still intrigued by what the girl said.

"There were this fella that said he were possessed by a demon, a genie or something they call it. Anyway, this holy man were called for and he just asked for a bow of water. After doing some chanting and what not, the man looked into the water and saw his refection. The Holy Man told him to move away and what were left were the face of a demon staring out from the water. The demon were dead frightened and begged to be let go but the Holy Man made him swear to leave the feller he had possessed alone. Me dad said it were strangest thing he ever saw in India."

After a while the girls went back to chatting about boys and other things before the bell rang to signal the start of afternoon lessons. Annie lay still staring at the sky and thinking about what she had just heard.

Annie heard the door of her room slowly creak open and caught that almost familiar reek of wet soil, dead leaves and fungal decay. Slowly and soundlessly she turned on her chair to face the window again, silvery moonlight cast a gentle glow, like early morning frost on the dressing table. Behind her the thing began to creep and scuttle on its paws towards her, softly cackling as it came ever closer.

She reached out for the ivory hand mirror which had belonged to her mother, one of the many possessions she had left behind and held it up to her face as she began to comb her long auburn hair with a hand brush.

The thing gasped but still came closer, laying a hand that felt like it was made of sticks and twigs on her shoulder.

"You are mine," it whispered.

"Your father is dead, choked on his own puke in the chair before the fire, he won't save you."

Quietly and gently she carried on softly brushing her hair in long, slow sweeps.

The thing shifted position and now looked over her shoulder into the mirror and froze.

The thing was looking at itself for the first time in its life and what it saw drove it mad.

Frozen and still it cowered and whimpered, it knew no other reality than the ugliness of what was framed inside of the mirror.

"Release me!" it begged.

"I will give you anything, if you release me from the mirror!"

She sat still and did not turn but said, "Give me your place and I will release you."

At first the wretched thing did not understand.

"A trade?" it asked.

"Your place," she simply repeated.

"So I can disappear."

"What of me? What will become of me?"

She shrugged.

"Those are my terms."

The thing struggled and snarled biting and chomping but she was unmoved. She could wait.

After a while it gave in and said in a small voice, "Very well, I accept your terms."

Once again it could imagine a world beyond the confines of the mirror but it was a hollow, empty feeling, for now it was condemned to an existence of wandering and exile.

"Be gone," she said quietly and so the thing retreated defeated and broken.

Annie waited until the first rosy fingers of dawn appeared on the horizon before she went into the forest and down into the cool, deep holes of the underworld where she became one with the freezing mud and the slimy mulch.

About the Author:

Philip Madden is a freelance writer originally from the UK but now based in Poland. His poems, fiction and non- fiction have been published in print and digital magazines, 'Strange Horizons','AbNormal Magazine','Dark Winter Lit Zine' and 'Nowa Fantastyka'.

Sepulcrum | ***Jamie Zaccaria***

Crispy brown leaves crumbled under her boots. She loved the sound of them—it was the sound not just of death, but of rebirth, since she knew the leaves would grow again next spring. The wind whipped through the air, passing through her layers of flannel and denim as if they were nothing. She didn't mind the cold, mainly because it wasn't as bad when the wind stopped, and the air was silent.

Threading through the graves, she made her way up a hill, deeper into the cemetery. It was oddly quiet for a graveyard on Halloween. She supposed there might be more visitors later in the day when school let out. Still, the excitement of the holiday crackled in the air even this far into the cemetery. Errant strands of orange and black crepe that had broken off nearby decorations flew by, mixing with red and yellow leaves on the ground. This was the perfect day for her to practice her trade.

Cristina was an artist of gravestone rubbing. She used a particular type of thin but strong paper that was placed over the stone's face. Then, using a graphite stick, she carefully rubbed the instrument across the entire surface of the gravestone. As she did, the words transferred onto the paper. There was a science to this practice, too—the condition, art, and inscription on a gravestone could tell historians about the life of the person buried beneath. Cristina wasn't herself an expert in these tactics, though; she mostly did it for the people buried underneath.

There was a sense of power in this activity. Gravestones deteriorated with age, making them more challenging to read as the years eroded their stories. She felt she kept these messages alive by pressing paper to stone and embedding the type onto paper. She had only rubbed a few dozen graves here, but this cemetery was massive. It was also old—the further she walked, the further back in time she was transported.

Approaching a half-hidden stone in the corner, Cristina wiped the dirt and a thin layer of moss off the grave's surface. Underneath a carving of a cross, there were letters, but they were difficult to see. She thought she could make out ‘Thomas Lancaster’ or something similar. The birth and death dates both fell in the early 19th century. Hopefully, when she pressed her paper, she could decipher more exact details.

Falling into routine, she pressed and rubbed until an image began appearing on the thin sheet. This one was difficult, and she tried to be as careful and detailed as possible. Still, the words weren't coming out that well. Squinting with frustration, Cristina moved to look closer, then held the paper further out. It should have said Thomas Lancaster, but the letters didn't make sense. All she could make out was ‘rstn Tunr’.

Cristina reached into her bag to pull out another sheet of paper, trying again to transfer the gravestone's exact words. She brushed her hair out of her eyes, leaving traces of black charcoal from her fingertips in her blonde locks. The words came out more precisely this time, but her spine turned ice cold when she read them. It said, ‘Cristina Turner’.

Frozen for a few seconds, Cristina tried to process what she saw. She logically thought that her brain must be reading her own name in an attempt to make sense of a bunch of scribbles. She'd read about this phenomenon somewhere, hadn't she? Maybe this gravestone just wasn't cooperating. She gathered up her supplies and walked swiftly deeper into the cemetery.

Here the trees were thicker and the road far out of her eye-line. She found another stone that looked somewhat legible and sat down in front of it. It had a carving of an angel with the name ‘Margaret Linkker’ nestled above. This time, after frantically scrubbing away, the paper came back with an even more exact message: ‘Cristina Turner 19XX - 20XX’.

What the hell is going on? She thought to herself, her heart racing as her mind tried to reason away the second gravestone rubbing with her own name on it. She looked around to see if someone was playing a prank on her, but there was no one else in the cemetery. All she could see was a gray sky and a horizon speckled by motionless gravestones.

Quickly, she crawled over to the next grave and began rubbing that one too. She hadn't even looked at what the words should have said, but it turned out that she didn't need to. When she pulled the paper away, it read, ‘Cristina Turner 1999 – 2023’.

The shock at seeing her death listed as this very same year sent her tumbling backward. It was already October 31. Did she actually only have a few months left to live? Was this a Halloween prank? Was she hallucinating? An unnaturally strong breeze hit her from behind, startling her already racing pulse.

Cristina grabbed her bag without bothering to close it and took off running through the graveyard. Her vision blurred by blonde hair and brown trees, she narrowly missed running into more than one headstone. Her converse slapped the ground, and she continued speeding through this yard of death.

Suddenly, Cristina's foot caught something. As she fell, she wondered if it was a tree root or maybe a broken headstone. That was her last thought as her head hit the edge of a grave, and everything went black.

The wind continued to send cold air through the bare trees of the graveyard. Everything else was still except for the flow of scarlet blood slowly making its way down the hill to the cemetery's entrance.

About the Author:
Jamie Zaccaria is a science communicator by trade and fiction writer by pleasure. She currently works for an ocean exploration organization and writes fiction in her spare time. She has been published in over a dozen anthologies, online magazines, and her debut short story collection Lavender Speculation was released in October 2023 by Wildling Press. She lives in NJ with her furbabies and wife.

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Pistol Creek | ***C. D. Kester***

Spring has sprung. The flowers have bloomed, the bugs have come back out, the days have grown longer, the air has grown warmer, and the Pistol Creek Gardener will be adding to his garden. Some say it's a legend, but I've seen it with my own two eyes.

That fateful day happened late in March several years ago. I was out picking wildflowers for my mother when I found a patch of the most wondrous yellows, whimsical whites, and beautiful pinks. They led me down onto a trail in a section of woods which I was not quite familiar with.

My bouquet was filling out quite nicely, but I couldn't help but feel like it was missing something. There were more flowers spread sparsely down the trail, so I decided to follow them and see if there were any that could make my gathering feel complete.

I followed it all the way to the end into a small clearing that had a running creek directly beside it. The field had bluebonnets throughout that mesmerized. I was always told that picking bluebonnets was illegal in Texas, but they would look so wonderful with the rest of the flowers in my bouquet. Surely a few of them wouldn't hurt.

I picked them while I looked shiftily over my shoulder and felt the anxiety of paranoia creeping into my bones. Just as I was nearly finished with my flower picking adventure, I noticed something strange.

There was a patch of tilled land in the back of the meadow that was close to the creek. The patch had very specifically planted flowers in it. It was a garden. A garden in the middle of the woods and nowhere near anyone’s property or house as far as I could see.

There was a small patch of petunias, next to a small patch of daisies, then I saw a flower that nearly took my breath away. The petals were a burst of pink and white that exploded in my vision like fireworks in the darkened July sky. It was a dahlia and I had to have it.

I had no idea who this strange garden belonged to, but I knew that this flower was coming with me. As I reached down to pluck it, I considered something. I could take the flower, or I could take it by the roots and have it to cherish for years. There was no choice. Besides, who plants flowers in the middle of the woods anyway?

I reached down with both hands and pulled firmly. It was harder than I imagined it would be, but eventually it came free. Once it did, I was horrified. I dropped it and ran screaming. I didn't even think to pick up my mother's bouquet. What I saw in the roots of those flowers, few have believed. It’s the reason that I know the Pistol Creek Gardener is real.

The roots of those flowers came springing out from the top of a human skull.

About the Author:
C. D. Kester is an author of fiction who does most of his work in the horror genre. He lives in Kingwood, Texas with his wife and two children and is working on his BA in Creative Writing. Kester has published a novella, *The Bunker*, and a novel, *Chasing Demons*. He has also had many stories published in anthologies, ezines, and read in podcasts and YouTube videos.

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Eating Mom and Dad | *Maria Bertolone*

The contractions worsened as Misty tossed around, much to the annoyance of her boyfriend Joel.

"*God damit Misty, can't you keep still? I'm trying to sleep!"* He bellowed.

"You've no idea what it's like. These contractions *Ouch!* I never wanted to be a mom. she complained.

"Fine, I'll take you to the nearest hospital," he replied grumpily getting out of bed.

Desperately searching her closet, she grabbed the things she needed. Joel screeched to a halt inside the car park of Sunnyvale hospital.

"*HURRY!"* Misty cried in great pain.

"Breathe deeply," he replied, trying to sound reassuring.

"I can't, *it's getting worse!*"

***

She watched him disappear through the automatic doors. Globules of perspiration trickled down, stinging her eyes as each contraction savagely ripped through her like a series of giant tsunamis. Joel came back with two female nurses, one was carrying a pushchair. Both he and one of the nurses helped gently ease Misty into it, whilst the other hurriedly wheeled her up the ramp situated near the main entrance.

"It'll be over shortly," the older nurse smiled reassuring Misty.

He watched them disappear through the automatic doors. Anxiety gripped him as he nervously reached into the pocket of his old faded jeans and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, he was about to light it when a voice from behind startled him.

"Don't worry, your wife's in good hands."

He swung round almost dropping the cigarette, to see the younger nurse behind him.

"You almost made me drop my cigarette, and she *isn't* my wife she's my girlfriend," Joel answered indignantly.

"Sorry I startled you," she answered apologetically. "You looked so tense."

"That's alright, sorry for snapping, my nerves are rather frayed."

"I can *imagine,* I'd better go back inside," she smiled before disappearing, leaving him alone in the carpark.

***

He finally collapsed exhausted on the unmade bed after cracking open a few beers from the fridge. Suddenly he was back at the hospital with the same nurses accompanying him to the neo-natal unit. They ushered him through a pair of swing doors into a large sterile room where everything was white, so white in fact, it was impossible to keep his eyes open in the glare radiating off the cold clinical tiles. In the centre his girlfriend lay strapped to a gurney completely motionless, covered from head to toe in a white sheet soaked in blood. Two doctors stood on the right side of the gurney the two nurses on the left. They stared at him without uttering a word, he could just about make out their eyes boring into him through dark glasses. Joel felt uncomfortable with their continual hard stare. Then one of the doctors suddenly spoke whilst handing him a pair, "Here put these on, it'll be easier on your eyes. Let me introduce myself, I'm Dr Dreyfus and this is my colleague Dr Segal and senior nurse practitioner Mrs Brown, and junior nurse Miss Rodgers. Joel recognized her as the nurse who had spoken to him in the carpark.

***

"*Why* is her face covered? *What's all that blood*? She's *dead*! *What the hell has happened to her*?" Joel exclaimed.

Dr Dreyfus stood calmly observing him before answering in a low mocking tone, "There's *no need* to panic Mr Adams, your wife, er *sorry* girlfriend rather, *is* merely resting eternally."

"*Resting eternally! What do you mean? You're all crazy!"*

Without further explanation Dr Dreyfus uncovered her. The sight that met Joel filled him with horror, paralyzed his eyes alighted on the massive gaping hole in Misty's abdomen starting just below the neck and stretching all the way to the pubic area. Two large flaps of jagged flesh hung over either side exposing the shattered ribcage and thigh bones. The stench of putrid festering viscera oozing out and spilling over the gurney was so strong he retched. Arterial blood and guts spewed from the mashed-up contents of her belly, nurse Brown approached carrying a cloth soaked in blood, she unceremoniously thrust it towards him, causing the cloth to fall to the floor. The blood-soaked hideously deformed remains of a barely recognizable human fetus lay before him suddenly coming to life squirming in its own slime with the umbilical cord still attached.

***

They continued staring at him whilst cackling hysterically as Joel screamed in terror. His unborn hideously misshapen child writhed in his blood-soaked hands. Mercifully his own screams woke him. *Wow, pull yourself together man it was only a nightmare it wasn't real.* His thoughts were momentarily interrupted by the shrill ringing of the phone.

"Hello."

"Hello, Mr Adams this is Dr Segal speaking. Congratulations, it's a healthy baby girl weighing seven pound four ounces," he explained.

A growing sense of unease set Joel's teeth on edge upon hearing the name. *That's the name of the doctor in my dream.*

"*HELLO!* Mr Adams are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm still here sorry about that, I've just woken up. I'll come down right away, thanks."

***

As he entered the hospital he couldn't shake the sense of foreboding. One of the nurses he'd encountered in his dream came over, he immediately recognized the older nurse. It was 'Mrs Brown.'

"Good morning, Mr Adams, congratulations," she beamed.

"How is she?" he anxiously enquired.

"She's fine, I'll take you to her." After walking down endless corridors, they finally came to a set of swing doors which had **NEO NATAL WARD** emblazoned above them.

"She's at the end to your right," she explained before leaving him. The swing doors shut as he entered, walking past the row of beds on either side filled with mothers cooing over their new arrivals, he felt awkward being the only man there.

"JOAL!" He caught sight of Misty cradling the baby.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Misty announced.

"She's gorgeous," he reluctantly agreed. *I don't relish the idea of a screaming kid keeping me awake all hours.*

"When are you allowed home?"

"Tomorrow afternoon nurse Brown said," she replied.

"Did you say, nurse *Brown*?"

"Yes *why*? You look as through you've seen a *ghost!"* Misty joked.

It was then that he told her about the nightmare.

"It was only a *dream*," she retorted.

***

He drove to the hospital the next day to collect Misty and the baby. Once inside he came face to face with nurse Brown.

"Hi Mr Adams. I'm Mrs Brown by the way, the senior nurse."

"Hi Mrs Brown, I know Misty mentioned you,"

"Well, I'll take you there now. They're both fine and ready to go. Have you thought of a name?"

"Yes we've both agreed on the name Theresa after Misty's mom," Joel replied.

"How nice. Well here we are, I wish you luck, *you'll certainly* need it," she laughed as he walked though the swinging doors.

***

The Buick slowly came to a halt outside the run-down trailer they now lived in after getting thrown out of their apartment for non payment of rent and rowdiness. Joel jumped out and unlocked the front door. It was dirty and squalid inside and certainly no place for any child to live in.

"Well, *what* you waiting for? Come *on*," Joel shouted impatiently.

"*Okay!* I'm *coming* I've got to get her out yet."

Misty unfolded the pushchair and put Theresa, who was now awake and crying in. She entered with the crying baby taking her to a small bedroom next to the master bedroom were they both slept. She set Theresa down in a crude wooden cote and went to join Joel who had boiled some milk pouring it into a baby bottle.

"Here, give her this, it'll keep *her* quiet for a while."

She took the bottle and disappeared into the small bedroom. Meanwhile Joel removed the clutter off the settee and settled down in front of the television with a couple of large cans of beer fresh from the fridge. It wasn't long before he fell into a drunken stupor, a series of piercing screams awoke him. Jumping up suddenly he exclaimed, *"MISTY! WHAT'S WRONG?"* An eerie silence prevailed. *"MISTY!"* He cried, but to no avail. *Was this another nightmare?* There was only one way to find out, arming himself with a baseball bat he kept as a memento of his younger days, he

cautiously entered the small bedroom the overpowering stench that he'd encountered in his nightmare met him straight away as he froze at the sight of what was on the bed, in the middle lay the shredded blood soaked dismembered remains of his girlfriend—she had been decapitated. Somewhere within the darkened room a horrible loud belching and screeching rang out, but he couldn't make out where from. A hideously disfigured and large malformed creature vaguely resembling an underdeveloped human fetus rose up and crawled out of the blooded abdomen of Misty's corpse with its umbilical cord still attached to her abdomen it sprang. He tried to defend himself with the bat, but it was futile as the thing ripped him apart and devoured him too.

About the Author:
Maria Bertolone, a Landscape Artist by profession was inspired to write by her late friend, a writer who encouraged her to take part in the Blackpool 100 programme in 2011, resulting in the Anthology; The Walls Have Voices. Her other achievements: Fylde Arts Association 2015 Anthology two poems, Sally Parrington Award Anthology, and several stories published in The Sirens Call. When not writing her passion is collecting dolls.

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Prey | ***Taylor Grant***

The night was full of shapes. Dark on dark.

But shifting. Crawling.

He ran.

The moon hung like a neon scythe, casting the barest of light over the ruins of the city, the towering spires that once reached for the heavens now crumbled with decay.

Dr. Marcus Johnson heard a familiar skittering nearby; the terror of it propelled him toward a partially collapsed building. His heart pounded as he squeezed through a narrow gap in a deteriorated wall, scraping his arm badly.

He didn't dare to cry out.

Inside, the air was heavy with dust and the faint smell of rot. Moonlight filtered through broken windows, casting eerie shadows across the desolate interior. He moved deeper into the dilapidated structure, the building's former purpose indiscernible.

Blood seeped down his forearm onto his hand.

Hide! He thought. *Before they smell it.*

Ahead, through the gloom, he could make out what appeared to be a storage room, its once gleaming door now hanging loosely.

A moment later, he heard a cacophony of skittering and chittering on the roof.

Marcus rushed through the darkened doorway. The storage room was cramped, filled with discarded equipment and the remnants of a once highly advanced civilization.

In the corner, he found a gap between a collapsed row of machinery. It was a tight squeeze, but it would conceal him well enough. He hoped.

He heard them moving along the roof and the walls, chirping in their hideous alien language.

Stupid. How could I have been so Goddamned stupid?

He'd lost track of time in his desperate search for hyperconductive wiring, failed to make it back to base camp before nocturnal predators crawled out from the cracks and crevices of the world.

Then again, without the wiring he was as good as dead anyway. The Chronosphere that time-shifted him thousands of years into the future had been damaged during his latest exploratory mission, the result of lightning from an unexpected storm. Marcus needed hyperconductive wiring to repair it. Otherwise, he'd be trapped forever in this post-apocalyptic nightmare.

Since his arrival a week ago, he'd scoured the remnants of several abandoned technological facilities and one research laboratory. To his dismay, the technology he uncovered was far too advanced to be compatible with his time machine.

His only hope was to locate a historical museum or tech archive that might have something he could salvage.

The one hint of good luck he'd had was his success harvesting rainwater. He'd created several catchment areas with containers he found and created a simple filtration and purification system using a layer of fine mesh.

The rain had been plentiful, but unreliable. If things dried up, he would be in serious trouble. Yet the precious water he'd stored was back at his makeshift base camp several miles away. He wouldn't be able to reach it until daylight, when the city's chittering predators scuttled back to their darkened haunts.

Just then his stomach growled so loudly he feared they might hear it. He hadn't eaten since his arrival and was burdened with a relentless headache, weakened body, and a mind becoming less sharp by the day.

It would be impossible to repair the Chronosphere if he couldn't think straight. There had to be some sort of canned or packaged consumables within the abandoned city. Surely the former denizens of this once sophisticated metropolis had figured out ways to preserve food.

There were abundant indigenous plants, but he had no way to discern between toxic or edible. If he became desperate enough, he might have to try some and hope for the best.

Or he could eat bugs.

He shivered at the thought.

He promised himself to make sustenance his top priority the following day.

If he survived the night.

***

He woke to the sound of chittering.

The monstrous thing stared at him in the faint light, its reddish-brown exoskeleton gleamed. Marcus threw his hand over his mouth to contain the scream.

It was one of them. A cockroach the size of a bobcat.

The sight of its enormity froze Marcus in place, primal fear taking hold.

Quivering antennae, delicate yet powerful, waved with an eerie rhythm in the air, twitching and probing the environment, sensing the tiniest disturbances.

But it was the mandibles that seized Marcus' attention, their jagged edges moving with a disturbingly fluid grace, accompanied by menacing snaps and clacks.

Marcus was all too familiar with roaches. They had been instrumental in early tests of time travel. Their durability and adaptability made them perfect test subjects, and they were six to fifteen times more resistant to radiation than humans.

He hypothesized that the mutated cockroaches he'd seen infesting the city were descendants from his lab's countless time travel experiments. The implications were too horrible to imagine.

And while he respected roaches' adaptability, he loathed them with equal measure. They were big, greasy, and thrived in the dark. Not to mention their cannibalistic tendencies, and how they thrived in filth, and spread disease. They were supernaturally fast and nearly indestructible, having survived for millions of years. Plus, they could regrow lost limbs and live without their heads for weeks.

Live without their heads. For weeks. They were like tiny monsters dreamt up by a demented God.

But the one facing him now wasn't so tiny. The repulsive thing jerked toward him; its eyes, a pair of dark, glistening orbs, radiated an eerie intelligence that defied the natural order. Marcus reached for the salvaged metal shard he kept shoved under his belt. It was a primitive weapon, but it was all he had.

He knew the roach's exoskeleton would be resistant to piercing strikes, so he focused his gaze on its vulnerable underbelly. The insect's wings, normally hidden and folded against its segmented body, unfurled with an unsettling swiftness. Marcus watched in horror as it spread them, each delicate membrane expanding to reveal a vast expanse.

The insect launched itself at him, wings beating a frantic rhythm.

With a surge of adrenaline, Marcus delivered a swift but well-aimed blow. The shard of metal became an extension of his wild determination to live. As he struck at it, over and over again, the cockroach recoiled and convulsed. Its intricate network of muscles contorted uncontrollably, causing its spiny legs to fold in against its armored frame.

A final tremor coursed through the dying creature's body; its appendages locked in a final, macabre pose. Silence settled upon the room, broken only by Marcus' labored breaths.

He stared at the insect's chitinous shell: once a fortress against the world, now a dead husk.

He would remove it with his metal shard.

And God help him, he would eat.

***

The horizon blazed with hues of pale gold and soft lavender, casting a gentle glow upon the desolate streets. Marcus had searched three buildings and come up empty-handed. Eating the giant roach had managed to be even more horrible than he'd imagined. But he'd survived the experience and felt stronger having had a meal.

As he turned a corner to the next thoroughfare, he gasped.

Six people were moving toward him. They were dressed in what appeared to be containment suits, resembling bulky armor.

Marcus sprinted toward them, waving his hands, overjoyed to see other survivors.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Hey there!"

All six halted abruptly.

The tallest member of the group stood his ground, while the others took a step back.

"Oh, thank God," Marcus breathed, tears of relief welling in his eyes.

The tallest of the group raised his hand, as if in greeting.

But Marcus' joy turned to horror when he saw the man draw a weapon. A flash, and everything went black.

***

Marcus awoke to the sound of buzzing. It took him several moments to orient himself to the sterile room. He'd been stripped naked and bound to what he deduced was an operating table.

The buzzing emanated from an automated medical device that had lowered from the ceiling just above him. Its metal appendages resembled long arms with hands, gripping what appeared to be surgical instruments.

Images of the countless live roaches he'd dissected in his lab flashed through his mind. Had they felt like this?

He noticed movement in his peripheral vision and looked to his right. Beyond the large observation window was theater seating. A crowd dressed in armored containment suits gathered to witness the procedure.

Marcus heard a voice over a loudspeaker, but it was muffled through the window and he couldn't make out the words.

The audience began removing their metallic hoods.

They appeared to be mutated humans of some kind. Their skin was waxy and unnaturally smooth, lacking subtle variations of individuality and humanity. Pallid to the point of translucency, they were uniformly fragile looking, perhaps why they needed the armored suits.

Their eyes were all too human, though, and they watched Marcus with utter revulsion. Their hybrid antennae probed the air, and their glistening mandibles twitched and flexed.

Marcus was already screaming when the operation began.

About the Author:

Two-time Bram Stoker Award Finalist Taylor Grant has written professionally in nearly every entertainment medium. He is an award-winning filmmaker, successful comic creator, and producer of film, TV and animation for Wattpad WEBTOON Studios. Taylor's critically acclaimed horror fiction has been published by Random House, Cemetery Dance, Weirdbook Magazine, Weird Tales Magazine, and more.

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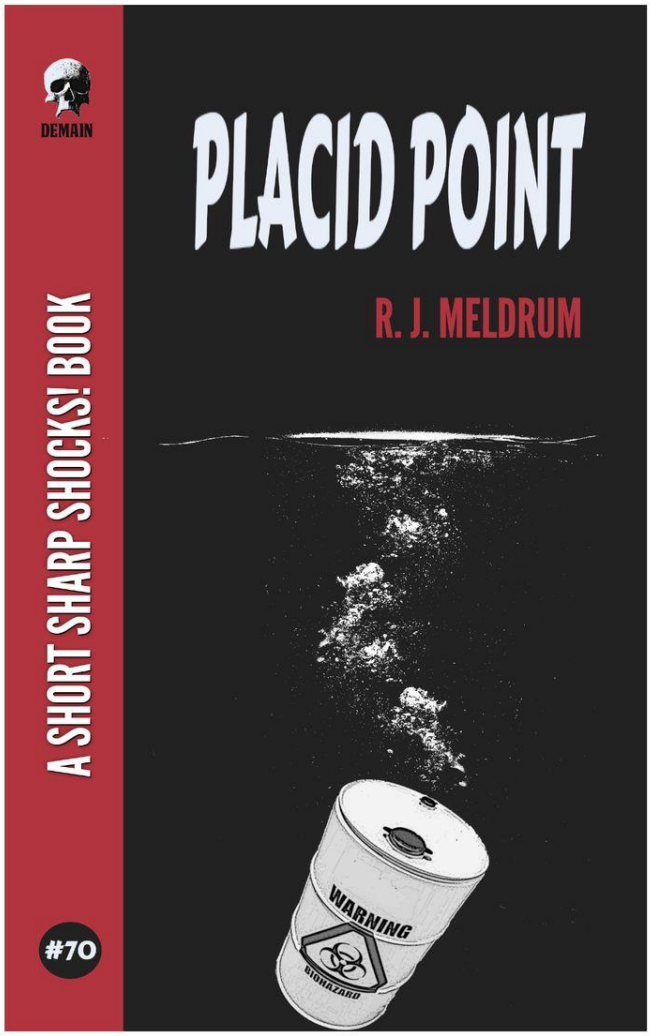

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A Tiny Black Kitten | ***Gabriella Balcom***

A tiny black kitten padded across the grass, mewing plaintively.

"Aww, what's wrong?" Millie crooned, rushing over to pick it up and pet its furry head. "Where'd you come from? I didn't see you a minute ago."

It looked up at her with big, brown eyes, and snarled, the sound surprisingly loud coming from such a little body. Opening its small mouth, the kitten bit her hard.

"*Hey*!" Millie protested, accidentally dropping the animal. But she blanched when it started growing larger and larger, not stopping until it was a full-grown panther. Trembling, she slowly backed away.

The over-sized cat flexed one front paw, tipped with long, deadly-looking claws, then the other. It lashed out, severing the girl's head from her shoulders. Eyes sparkling, it batted her head to the right, pounced on it, then batted it to the left.

The animal devoured Millie's head, then ripped chunks of flesh from her body. When the panther was full, she swiped the blood from her mouth with her tongue, and licked her paws.

About the Author:
Gabriella Balcom lives in Texas with her family, works full-time in the mental health field, and writes fantasy, horror, romance, sci-fi, literary fiction, children's stories, and more. She has had 475 works accepted for publication, and has five books out: On the Wings of Ideas, Worth Waiting For, The Return, Free's Tale: No Home at Christmas-time, and Down with the Sickness and Other Chilling Tales.

Facebook: Gabriella Balcom

Vector | ***Paul Lonardo***

Leslie shut herself inside her apartment when the pestilence began. The apocalypse was spawned by a plague that infected the human zygote. Every newborn came through the birth canal with razor-sharp teeth, their bite harboring a deadly contagion. The fact that humanity would end via its only hope, its children, assured complete destruction. Once the uninfected died off, there'd be nobody to proliferate the human race.

Most of the world's population was wiped out. Leslie hadn't heard or seen anyone in weeks. There was only the stench of decomposing corpses outside and the kick of alien life in her belly.

The Drop Bear | ***Paul Lonardo***

Camouflaged and armed, the poacher traversed the hostile Outback alone, on the make for a prized trophy; the koala.

High atop a nearby eucalyptus, a razor-toothed marsupial of legend waited for him. The hunter wasn't expecting to encounter anything above him other than the cuddly mammals he was seeking for a taxidermist's client in New York.

The drop bear readied itself to strike, making its presence known to the hunter, who raised his head and pointed his rife. But he was too slow. The poacher soiled himself as the vicious animal eviscerated him, showering the ground with warm, wet innards.

Blood Moon | ***Paul Lonardo***

I'd seen my new neighbor lying out on her back deck at 3 a.m. the night before. She wore only a red bikini, her pale skin shimmering under the light of the Hunter's Moon. When she appeared the next night, I went over to say hello. She asked me to put lotion on her back. Now I sit next to her, unable to move. She presses the skin near the holes in my

neck, dabs the blood that leaks out onto the tips of her fingers, applies it to her body. It soaks into her flesh, giving her eternal life.

About the Author:
Paul Lonardo is a freelance writer and author with numerous titles, both fiction and nonfiction. Paul has placed short fiction and nonfiction articles in various genre magazines and ezines. He is a contributing writer for *Tales from the Moonlit Path* and an active HWA member.

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I Shall Grow | ***Joshua E. Borgmann***

I fell to Earth as seed. Grew into a flower. Breathed in as pollen, I took root in lungs, sending tendrils surfing through bloodstreams. My fibers mimicked every organ, perfectly.

I passed without notice for many seasons. New hosts breathing out spores, repeating the process.

I did not hurry. Try to be born too quickly. That is the path to detection. First, I consumed your doctors and leaders. With them speaking as me, no one spoke of me.

I remain free to feast. No one notices changes in the consumed. Perhaps, I have already taken your children.

Fear their breath.

Lament of the Rejected | ***Joshua E. Borgmann***

My core was cleaved open and filthy hands strung my guts across the dirty countertop. Parts of me found the trash bin while my doomed progeny found their way to the ovens to become a tasty snack for gnashing teeth. An incompetent surgeon hacked at my flesh leaving a design so deformed it couldn't be called a face. Disgusted with his failure, I got no candle. I was taken to an upstairs bedroom and heaved from an open window. I exploded in a gory shower that splattered the dirty pavement.

After March thaws, my last vestiges rot in the gutter.

End of Hibernation | ***Joshua E. Borgmann***

Silently, the dead stood against the freezing winds. Hibernating, Belinda joked, like the last bears anywhere.

I said we should finish them, but we had no bullets. I thought of hammers, machetes, axes. She said there was no hurry, no worries. The freeze would hold them until spring.

Belinda got sick mid-February. I seldom left her side. It was February. A frigid northern February. I didn't expect a heat wave.

But I woke to them biting my legs. One chewing on Belinda's screaming lips. They fell upon us, hungry from hibernation.

We joined their herd in greeting early spring.

About the Author:
Joshua E. Borgmann is a wicked Scorpio child who crafts his trauma responses into dark stars of compressed weirdness. Born among wretched cornfields, his dreams of death metal stardom never got off the ground, but he still takes the stage with his spoken word poetry. He teaches for money and writes to stay alive. He's still surrounded by corn and held captive by feline overlords.

Instagram: @borgmannpoet

Born of Blood | ***Archit Joshi***

Don't look into her eyes. If you do, there's no escape. Her eyes are made of dark oceans and moonlight. Once you're caught, you'll be trapped into the secrets of her soul. Look at something else. Her astonishing height. Or her hair, perhaps. Short and messy, all over the place. Or ogle at her athletic curves if you find that sort of thing pleasing about a woman.

But do it surreptitiously because this woman is deranged. Don't let her catch you staring.

I want to rip my eyes away from hers and focus instead on her protruding belly. She's clutching it and hysterically pleading me for help.

"Calm down, calm down..." Of course I utter the most useless words in a situation like this.

We're on a lavish terrace. I'm seated on a giant oak swing. And the beseeching woman has all but fallen to my feet.

"It's normal to freak out," I venture, limited as my experience is with such things. "Everything will be okay. Say, where's the baby's father?"

Her face contorts. A profound pain previously hidden in her soft features reveals itself. Her hands shaking, she reaches for mine. I slide back, as if pregnancy is catching. Too late. Our fingers touch and then –

The forest is lonely. I'm freezing. The clearing is illuminated by powerful moonlight. But it is being swathed in tinges of red. I glance up at the sky, visible through a thin mesh of tall branches. The full moon peaks through. It looks as if it has been shot, slowly bleeding all over itself.

A chant is ringing out in the woods, uttered by a familiar voice. I let my eyes adjust to the dim crimson light and spot the woman ahead of me, on all fours. Skimpily covered in tree-bark and stitched-together leaves. Much slimmer and even more beautiful. She's slapping her palms on the ground in keeping with her incantations. Engrossed in her ritual, oblivious to the biting cold.

Oblivious to the rustling behind her.

I scramble backwards, try to find cover behind a clump of trees, shaking from the cold. And the dread.

First the eyes appear. Glimmering slits suspended mid-air. Then the body. Monstrous and… unnatural. The creature reeks of flesh and blood.

At first glance, it seems like a bear. A colossal grizzly. Bloodied saliva dripping from its mouth. But the more I stare at it, the more I'm convinced this is some devilish creature I won't find on any nature show or in any other forest. Eyes fevered, fur curling stiffly outward.

The woman's intonations halt. She gets to her feet and whirls around to face the creature, her bare back turned at me. I fear for her but I am stupefied.

The bear stalks towards her, pausing for one chilling second to glance in my direction. I cry out but only a feeble whimper escapes, barely audible. The woman stands defiant, her arms now wide at her sides, in invitation. With her feet, she continues her rhythmic tapping, hinging at her hips, bowing to the vile creature.

The forest is now cloaked in red light. The moon above a blood-crimson shimmering giant. Staring down on us all with murderous intent. I want to run, as far away as I can, but I can't seem to make my feet move. Some part of me wants to keep looking on at the scene unfolding ahead. With a streak of voyeurism that's only now revealing itself to me.

The bear sniffs at the woman's body, low growls gurgling from its throat. The woman keeps drumming the earth. With a sudden blood-curdling roar at the skies, the bear stands uprights and shoves the woman on the ground. Her eyes are glinting with expectation as she props herself up on her elbows and opens up her hips. Her lips tremble as her chants resume, even more frenzied, even more urgent. The bear drops down on all fours and crawls over the woman's body. With its teeth, it begins picking at the woman's patchy attire.

The woman's chants are now frantic. Abruptly they turn into pained moans which continue for several moments until –

– she releases my hand. My breathing is heavy as I gulp in painful amounts of air. The terrace we're on gradually returns from red to golden as my eyes readjust to the sunlight.

I stare at the woman, although I can't quite meet her eyes.

"Our tribe… we do… what we do… to align our spirits with the Gods of our Forests," she tries to explain in a tremulous voice. "So that they may continue offering us sustenance and safety. Some of us are chosen… for special rituals… that ascend us to higher spiritual planes by offering up our bodies for the powers of creation."

I'm about to laugh but there's an honesty to her, a kind of innocence that I'm forced to respect. I gobble up word after word that comes out of her mouth, each one more ridiculous than the last.

"We have been around for several centuries, powerful women and men of all races, creeds, and sects. We live and mingle with your kind, forced to keep our true selves hidden. History… has treated us cruelly. Some called us mystics and ridiculed us to no end, while others made witches out of our women… and burned us at the stake.

Now we move about in secrecy, carrying among us deep knowledge of nature and sorcery. We can make the wind howl on command and the clouds thunder at will. We can read your minds and twist your reality, even infiltrate your dreams. On fated nights, we seek to become one with creatures of our jungles… to nurture progeny that then strengthen our race. But such nights are rare and occur once every few hundred years… written away into the history books as a myth or unsolved scientific phenomena for the common people to puzzle over."

My blank face must be asking the obvious question. *What's all this got to do with me?*

"It has been known to happen that our children… turn out to be abnormal. They cannot quite harness the power that runs in their veins. They must be groomed in privacy until they can master their gifts. If their secrets get divulged before they're ready… they'll not be allowed to live. That is why I need your help. When my child comes, we will require safety and protection."

When I look at the woman, I find I can see beyond her idiosyncrasies and her… peculiar condition. Past her vulnerabilities. I can look at her as just another human being, seeking comfort.

"You will help me?" she asks reticently.

I don't know yet, but I realize this woman desperately needs someone to be there with her. Someone to help her process the realization that she's pregnant with –

The sun feels welcome upon us, as we rest on a bale of hay. She's narrating stories from her life, a gentle hand stroking her belly. Growls gurgle from her womb. Seems like the life breathing inside her appreciates her attention. Cattle grazing nearby glance suspiciously in our direction. She finds this amusing.

Eyes twinkling, she reveals her ambitions, her drive. She wants to become somebody. Willing to take a plunge into any unknown her destiny demands. Being with child isn't an obstruction in the pursuit of her identity, she says, only a turn along the road.

As a child, people joked that they never saw her eyes. Because they were always pointed at her feet. Painfully shy, diffident, with a vastness inside her that she couldn't express. Growing up, she often faced situations where her timidity had caused her deep regrets and sorrow. First day of her first job, she remembers, she'd received an earful from her superior, and had sobbed into her arms on the cab ride home.

So she continued to survive, barely. Afraid of confrontations, of judgement. Crippled by indecisiveness.

Until one night, she glanced up at the sky and found the moon bleeding. Until one night, she stumbled upon a bizarre spiritual path that helped her find her anchor within herself. Helped her become a capable, thick-skinned woman who could move about with confidence and grace.

I watch her admiringly. I understand how brave, how tenacious she really is. How marvellously she's transformed.

Flies are buzzing around our heads but neither of us have any attention to spare them. We're lost in each other's company. She has a distinctive, unsurely laugh. Short staccato bursts which are pure melody to my ears. My heart expands seeing her unblemished happiness. It matters to me that she's happy. That perhaps I can contribute to it. One day I hope –

Back on the terrace. A curious, thick mist hangs in the air. Rays of golden light have pierced the dense hazy envelope. Falling like a heavenly blessing upon the cradle.

He's gorgeous. Born with a thick set of hair and soft glowing skin. Eyes wide with wonder, lips perpetually parted with awe as he takes in this strange new world.

I pass a gentle finger down his cheek.

"Ow!"

"Careful," the woman warns. "He bites."

I raise an eyebrow.

"He… he has fully grown teeth already," she responds, massaging her neck. When he was born, we were relieved there was nothing apparently inhuman about him. The Gods had been kind, it seemed. But he still has a few mysteries about him.

I chuckle. She laughs her usual timorous laugh. The pain of my little wound is already forgotten.

***

I enter the cabin where we're holed up, amidst a jungle far away from civilization.

A fire's roaring in the fireplace. Against its amber light, she looks exquisite. Her eyes are brimming with kindness as she offers up her arms. I hug her. Tightly.

After I have all but melted into her skin, she breaks away and pulls me to the cradle.

"Look at him sleeping," she whispers. "So restful, so carefree."

I gaze lovingly at the boy. In this moment of shared silence I know I'm prepared to raise him with her, even if society shuns us forever. I want her to know this. I want her to know I'd go to the ends of the Earth to protect them both.

But her hold on me abruptly tightens. She drags me to the cabin's door and shoves me outside, where a full moon's light reveals her hardened features.

"You will never see us again."

My heart shatters just hearing those words. "What's the matter?"

"Go! Run away. Before I have to harm you." The harshness in her voice cuts deep, although I manage to catch the moistness in her eyes. "I won't think twice. I'll… I'll use a rifle on you if I need to. To protect my baby."

"But tell me why!"

She thrusts my hands into my face.

"Take a look yourself."

She runs back inside and I hear the padlock click shut. I'm left staring at my palms.

At the fur that's begun growing on them.

I watch helplessly as it starts shooting out all over my arms. Soon, it has engulfed my body. Then the pain starts. In my bones. Along my spine. I feel my teeth elongating, sharpening, and lodging further up my gums. Agony snipes at my fingertips, as my nails recede back into my skin. In their place, bloodied, jagged claws slide out, slicing out straight from my flesh.

I bawl madly, and drop down on my haunches. As my body endures more convulsions, a deep hunger fires up the pits of my stomach. My thoughts are not my own. They're overcome with a need for violence. And blood.

I catch the woman peeping through the window. Her face ghastly behind the windowpane as it reflects the reddening night light. *How dare she? After all I've sacrificed?* I want to rip her apart. It's sickening. I force myself to bolt into the dark timberland, to keep myself from –

The forest is lonely. But I've grown used to it. It provides me means of survival. I must continue living here. Sometimes I just sit and wait for my end to come. But it never does. I wait year after year, decade after decade. Pass my days in solitude, with faint recollections of a past life. I cannot return to it. Because some nights – nights like tonight – I'm not myself.

I double-check the knots on my makeshift cage of broken branches and vines. The rabbits I've trapped inside scurry around wildly.

Please understand. I can't help it.

I glance up at the moon and brace myself as the unease creeps up my back. My body tenses and shrivels up, as the insufferable transformations begin until…

I snarl into the crisp, thin air. Drop down on all fours and begin sniffing around. There's flesh nearby. My thirst needs quenching. My gaze falls onto some rabbits, cowering, defenceless. I leap at them, my claws ready.

I discard the very last bone after stripping it clean. That's when I hear a strange sound. A half-forgotten scent is wafting on the air, making me restless. I follow the sound into a clearing.

The creature I see on the ground is crooning a peculiar rhythm. Stomping the ground with its paws. Its musk is causing desires to erupt in me. I vaguely feel watchful eyes observing me from the darkness; I must be cautious. But my longing has overpowered my senses.

The creature becomes aware of my presence and turns to face me. Eyes wide, but not with fear. With its hind legs, it resumes tapping the ground. My heart beats in keeping with the rhythm, making my exaltation more intense. The creature is now surrendering, exposing its flank, eyes trained on the ground in submission. My nose picks up strong whiffs of its scent, which makes my blood course faster. I bellow at the cerise moon and ram the creature onto the ground. Its breathing grows heavy as it spreads out its hind legs. Exposed, furless flesh pale and glowing against the moon's blood-red light. The strange noises resurge from its throat. I leap onto the creature, my fur jutting outwards in anticipation.

The creature whines and moans under my weight, its sounds muted against my steady growls. Then its cries become louder and shriller, until they hurt my ears and rattle my brain –

***

For several deathly moments, I am unable to move. Awake, but frozen, curled up. My bed sheets damp against my skin. My throat has caught on fire, begging for water.

In painful motions, my body straightens out.

The woman's voice is right in my ear: "Come to the forest with me… it's time." I strain my eyes in the dark, my heart pounding, filled with immature joy at the prospect of meeting her. But she's not here.

You were dreaming.

She's out there somewhere.

You are still dreaming!

She's calling me to the forests.

No she isn't.

I need her to know I could never harm her, or our child.

Wake up goddammit!

The voice of reason. When have I ever benefitted from my mind? It has only ever caused me anguish.

You're falling for a woman you cannot reach. You're just lonely.

If I leave everything behind in search for the woman, nobody will miss me much. The lady doctor might, perhaps. The one I visit every week. It's probably her damned chlorpromazine tablets that are fucking up my sleep anyway.

The woman. I can still feel her skin against mine. Hear her hiccuppy laughter. And see her eyes when I close mine. Those destructive, turbulent, horribly emotive eyes. How can someone so vivid and beautiful be so far out of my grasp?

Wake up. And make some friends, you lonesome bastard.

"We can even infiltrate your dreams," she'd said. This was how she'd reached out to me.

"You will help me?" she had asked.

Yes I will. I get dressed and walk out. In the middle of the night. It's that easy for me. Nobody's waiting on me, here at home. But out there somewhere, somebody is.

None of this is happening. Don't run away in your mind! You'll get lost forever.

Outside, the moon is menacing. Bigger than I have ever seen. The air is chilly, which seems to clear up the fog behind my eyes a bit but does no good to the headache that has started to build up. I walk, hands deep in my pockets. You might call this night silent, but nothing is ever silent for me. It's always noisy in my head.

As I put one foot ahead of the other mindlessly, I become aware of a prickle on my left hand.

Wake up! Don't be foolish.

I whip my hand out to inspect it under the moonlight.

Your medicines are playing games with you.

On my hand are fresh bite marks, glistening red. But they soon fade against the moonlight as it turns crimson. I let out a gasp, but a growl escapes. I feel my clothes tear off my body as my torso burgeons. Every cell of my body screams out in pain as claws jut out of my fingers. I throw my head back to yowl, but my voice gets caught when I see the moon.

I freeze, staring in terror at the bloodied goliath in the sky. And then –

Author Bio:

Archit finds his creative satisfaction in writing interesting characters. Till date, he has over 50 short fiction pieces accepted in reputed magazines, anthologies, and publishing platforms all over the globe. He also develops web and media content at the tech firm where he works. Music is close to Archit's heart, and he tries to pursue his musical inclinations by trying his hand at the violin.

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Bus Route UB1 | ***Thomas Brown***

Long weeks working. Rain still falling. Heavy droplets, water crawling down bus shelter, dark skies bawling. Another day is done.

Through the grey a bus approaches, teeming inside, full of roaches, human insects, tired voices, "Ticket please," one grunts. Gift knows the feeling; hating, hurting. Sick of service, new-world weary. Inside bright. The windows dirty.

Loose change. Find a seat.

Near the front, two ladies talking, behind them, a young boy squawking, rows of faces, soulless, gawking. What's the world become? Tongues are wagging, swear words snagging, at the back three young men bragging. Stealing-shouting-almost shagging: Bus Route UB1.

All around her, buildings sliding, melting in the rain, subsiding, streaks of grey, rainfall hiding the city's sobbing face. Lived for ten years. Worked for thirty. Bones are tired, her body hurting. Heart hammering behind her ribs; an ancient, tribal drum.

At the back, the young men shouting louder, voices sounding harder, jostling they assess their larder: rows of easy prey. She knows the sort; no school, no teaching, fathers gone, their mothers breaching as they spawn clutches of offspring, hatching in the dark. The bus route is their hunting ground, their web where helpless victims found, like flies stuck to the city, to the monsters this world breeds.

Outside the road runs black with water; under doorways, people loiter, waiting out the never-ending rain that will not stop. Clouds were black at six this morning. Raining since the day was dawning. Since she stepped, long-faced and yawning, into another day.

Before her eyes, the young men changing. Altogether, outlines blurring. Faceless shapes, new limbs emerging. Monsters in men's skin. Arms are growing, bodies breaking.

Snap like pencils. Sounds like choking. Sucking. Slurping. No one worried, not awoken, dead to this, their world.

From the back it slowly reaches, twelve long legs, thick, dark like leeches bloated on a diet of human peaches; tender fruit. She watches as the creature prowls, she listens to its high-pitch howls. Once-hoodies, now great fleshy cowls, what is there to be done?

What can be done against this beast, which on soft fatty flesh now feasts, and when encounters men proceeds to beat them black and blue? This hatred has not always been, not always was, not always seen, but in this time, grown dark and mean, has found a place to feed and breed, a human brood lusting for food and heat and life and dark corners to do dark things, now brave and bold, the human beast of Bus Route UB1.

The Flowers | ***Thomas Brown***

She goes by many names: Wildflower. Indian Stick. Even Lily, once. Her favourite: Pink Orchid, rare, stunning, suggestive of the way she unfurls for the right price, under the right touch.

She works everywhere. Tonight they meet at her place near Bassett Green. This one found her online, 'just had to call', had to meet Pink Orchid in the flesh. They are all the same.

He arrives on the dot. Sometimes she sees them, waiting outside, smoking in their cars, drumming fingers anxiously across the dash. She knows the feeling. Come in, get it over with, *please*.

They do not fuck for long. He comes quickly, and she's ravenous. He's still thrusting when she starts to change; she watches him through myriad eyes, writhing like he's the one pinned. He screams, this sorry man, this human meat. Pink Orchid always starts headfirst.

About the Author:
In 2010, Thomas won the University of Southampton's Flash Fiction Competition with his story, 'Crowman'. In 2014 he won the Almond Press Short Story Competition, 'Broken Worlds'. That same year, his debut novel LYNNWOOD was a finalist for The People's Book Prize. In 2022, he was invited to feature in The Horror Zine's 'Best Of' anthology. Thomas writes dark, surreal fiction.

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Featured Project | ***Phantom History House: A Bed & Breakfast Experience***

The themed B&B offers guests a creepy, yet comfortable stay in Tampa

There's a house in Florida where history meets the paranormal and where its eerie elegance makes for a comfortable, yet creepy stay. That place is Phantom History House: A Bed & Breakfast Experience in Tampa.

There's just something about the paranormal that fascinates the world.

Ghost stories have long been a part of the human experience. It's a form of entertainment that has always provided context to death and given us hope that even after we depart this world, a part of us is still hanging on somehow. Are ghosts real? Can a place or an object be haunted? Does a part of us or our loved ones linger in a residual or intelligent way, trying to let the living know that there is, in fact, something after death?

Usually, the answer to those questions depends on whom you ask. For Steve Blanchard and Tim Hinton, who wanted to create a space where ghost stories and history are celebrated, the answer is a resounding yes!

The term 'paranormal' encompasses a lot. At this uniquely themed B&B it relates mostly to ghosts, apparitions, disembodied voices, or anything else that falls into the 'haunted' category. The house, while not quite historic, is the embodiment of what it means to celebrate the paranormal and the unexplained.

Four themed bedrooms cater to different parts of the gothic, Victorian and paranormal experience and the entire house has been transformed to represent what you would expect to see in a home that would likely appear in the center of a horror film. Upscale. Beautiful. Comfortable.

And a little bit odd.

A bit more on the house itself in a moment. But what would make someone want to transform their home into a classic B&B with a heavy focus on spirits, the metaphysical and the afterlife? Interestingly, it comes from a combined love of history, horror, travel, and comfort. All of which collide to create what owners and spouses Blanchard and Hinton like to call a "creepy, yet comfortable experience."

Keeping it Creepy, Yet Comfortable

Phantom History House opened its doors during the holidays of 2022 and welcomed its first overnight guest on New Year's Eve. Nearly a year-and-a-half later, the house in Hillsborough County, Florida has attracted visitors from across the country and around the globe.

All the travelers are looking for a comfortable and unique place to stay. But whether they are from the Czech Republic, Austria or California, guests here all seem to have one other thing in common – a ghost story.

That's not to say that everyone who has slept here has encountered an apparition or a spirit in their lifetime. But most of the guests to this unique bed and breakfast, once settled in, see the location as a safe space to discuss their paranormal experience or to ask questions related to stories that they've heard about spirits.

When someone starts a story with, "I've never told anyone this experience before…," it's a huge compliment to Blanchard and Hinton and lets them know that the environment is comfortable, welcoming, and non-judgmental.

Does Phantom History House have all the answers? Absolutely not – not even close. But it does allow guests a chance to separate themselves from the hustle and bustle of the modern world, just for a moment, to focus on a part of our psyche that many of us tend to shut out.

But why? How did Phantom History House come to be?

It all started with a podcast and a curious former reporter.

Curiosity, ghost tours and a podcast

Blanchard worked as a newspaper reporter for 16 years before shifting his career to public relations. While incorporating ghost tours into his travels in various cities, he decided to become a ghost tour guide in his home city of Tampa. Initially, he led locals and tourists through historic Ybor City, a once thriving cigar making community founded by Vincente Martinez Ybor in the 1890s.

When he decided he wanted more complete stories to share with his guests, he began reaching out to local historians and property owners to get a fuller picture of the history behind the ghost stories provided to him. That led him to create Phantom History, a podcast featuring those interviews in an eerie newscasting format.

As he developed the podcast, Blanchard told Hinton about his long-time dream of opening a bed & breakfast with a paranormal theme. Intrigued, Hinton researched what a business like that would entail and agreed to pursue it, with the caveat that it be an upscale and comfortable destination.

But simply turning a home into a themed B&B isn't an easy task. There were steps to take and a lot of ideas to kick around as to its theming.

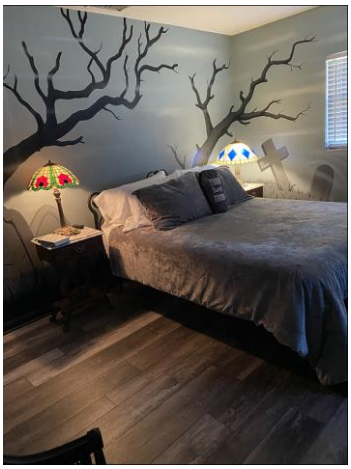
Making a plan

Planning the house took time. Each room had to have its own unique feel and theme that embodied the paranormal in a respectful way while also encompassing an eerie elegance. When the right house was found for the bed and breakfast just outside of Oldsmar, Florida, Hinton and Blanchard had to work to theme four bedrooms and common areas for guests who likely have varied interest in the paranormal.

The Ouija Room was one of the earliest concepts to come to fruition. Creating a bedroom dedicated to the best-known spirit board leant itself to being in the largest room in the house. The room has a king size bed, a reading nook, access to a balcony overlooking a peaceful nature preserve and, of course, a complimentary Ouija Board.

Guests are invited to try the board for themselves or simply tuck it safely away in the closet. Blanchard and Hinton just ask that whoever uses it follows its one simple rule to *always* say goodbye.

Phantom History House rests in a residential area of Tampa and while it may resemble a stately manor from years past, it does not have some of the features that many gothic-themed homes in horror films may have, like an on-property cemetery.



However, overnight guests can stay in the B&B's Cemetery Room, which offers a queen size bed centered amid a mural of a cemetery scene, complete with eerie trees and tombstones painted by Orlando artist Steve Roberts. This room, which also has balcony access, even includes a casket-shaped cabinet in the bathroom, casket-shaped mirrors and an antique urn atop a vintage armoire. While many may think a themed room of this kind is macabre, it's actually warm, comfortable and inviting.

But cemeteries are not for everyone, which is why Phantom History House also has a Portrait Room for its evening guests. Everyone has memories of staying at a relative's home who displayed old photographs of long-dead family members who eerily watched us sleep from within their frames.

Here, Blanchard and Hinton have recreated that in an elegant, upscale way. Dozens of old photographs in vintage frames peer out from the two walls running parallel to the queen size bed. Most of the pieces were found in antique stores or at estate sales and offer a literal glimpse into the past. Behind a mirrored barn door, guests can access the private bathroom, which also features vintage photography, including the well-known Fox Sisters, the United States' first well-known psychic mediums, and an antique dressing table repurposed as a vanity.

Too many eyes peering at you keeping you from sleeping? Maybe the fourth and final bedchamber down the hall, past the wall of horror writers under the flickering candlelight will be more to your liking.

The Castle Room has become what many guests refer to as the most romantic room at the bed and breakfast. Dozens of LED candles line the wall of this room, overlooking a four-poster bed complete with a faux-wolf comforter to elevate the experience. This room is notably less 'paranormal' and more 'gothic' but does pay homage to the theme with a portrait of 'The Brown Lady' in the private bathroom.

The picture, captured by Country Life Magazine in the 1930s, shows what many believe to be the very first apparition ever caught on film. Does the photo really show the spirit of Lady Dorothy Townshend who passed away in the 1720s, or is it a trick of the light that too perfectly resembles the figure of a woman in a dress descending the stairs?

That's the question paranormal enthusiasts and historians have debated for nearly 100 years and a discussion that's included in several events at Phantom History House, like the Ghost Stories Around the Fire evenings. Those events invite overnight guests and visitors alike to join the B&B's host around a fire pit, enjoy refreshments and hear some local and distant ghost stories. Most of the stories are rooted in history, while a few others may contain tales shared from previous guests.

Psychics, weddings and investigations

Not only is Phantom History House a destination for overnight guests looking for a comfortable place to lay their head at night, but it has also become a unique event space. The first floor of the home features common areas like the Potion Room, which displays a large built-in cabinet of colorful glass bottles, and a library, with a selection of books ranging from *The Art of Disney* to *The Exorcist*.

Once a month, the Bed & Breakfast hosts a psychic medium, who offers tarot card readings in the library and an 'open séance' to anyone interested in the candle-lit dining room. The ticketed events give guests and visitors a chance to dip their toes into the paranormal world and experience a reading by psychics vetted by Blanchard and Hinton.

Different psychics schedule appointments throughout the year but at the core are four who make regular appearances, each offering a unique take on their metaphysical gifts. The B&B also provides these experiences to groups hoping to host a special event at Phantom History House, like a birthday party, anniversary or even a wedding.

Offbeat brides and grooms, as they're called, have expressed interest in saying "I Do" in the unique space and celebrating with close family and friends. It's just one of many opportunities to mark an occasion in a totally unique and new way.

As Phantom History House continues into its second year, Blanchard and Hinton have bigger and bigger plans for the house, the property and the events offered at the Bed & Breakfast. To stay up to date on what's happening, consider visiting PhantomHistoryHouse.com and signing up for the B&B's newsletter and following Phantom History on Instagram, TikTok, Facebook and YouTube.

Website: Phantom History House
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I pull the phone from my pocket and poke the speed dial with a shaky finger. She picks up on the first ring.

"Auntie, come quickly! Something terrible has happened." I grip the phone in both hands.

"Where are you?"

"The cliffside. We were parking and, and…"

"I'll be right there. Lock the doors and wait."

I throw the phone down and press against the car door. Stan's legs take up most of the floorboard, so I clutch my knees to my chest. I ask myself how this happened. He stares at me with a horrified expression, his outstretched hand forever frozen.

***

Tonight had been our first real date. I'd been careful all through dinner and at the movie. I had lots of practice—I'd always listened to Auntie. Never look them in the eye, she'd said. She showed me tricks where I would appear to look at a boy, but actually focus on his forehead, ear or chin. Girls…girls were safe. But boys were a dangerous mystery. And since I'd gotten my period, they fascinated me endlessly.

Stan had been such a gentleman all evening, only resting his arm across my shoulders in the theater. When we got to the cliffside, he found a secluded place to park, and we moved to the backseat. I told him I wanted to take it slowly and he listened, for a while. We kissed and he ran his fingers through my coiled locs, telling me how beautiful I was. But when he stroked my breast with his free hand, everything went wrong. I heard a hiss, and he cried out, pulling his hand from my hair.

"What the fuck, Maddy?' He sucked the blood from a wound on his finger.

"Oh, must have been a hairpin," I said, settling my writhing locs with one hand. "Sorry."

He shook the injured hand, then smiled and reached for me. "I'll stick to the soft parts, then."

I fell back into his arms. The heat between us rose and he again reached for my breast with one hand, this time cupping my butt with the other. Heaven! I slid my hands down the back of his jeans and pulled him closer. But something rock hard pressed against me and I panicked. I hadn't looked him in the eyes, had I? I pulled away with a gasp and covered my face.

"No! I'm sorry, Stan. I didn't mean it."

He pulled my hands from my face, and I saw that he was fine! I hadn't hurt him.

"Didn't mean what, Maddy? Talk to me."

He tilted my chin. Relief made me lose my focus and I looked into his eyes. His expression changed and he fell back on the seat, arm still extended.

***

I stare at his unmoving form, free now to gaze into his beautiful blue eyes, surrounded by a sea of granite gray. What have I done?

A knock comes on the door behind me, and I twist around, muffling a scream. Auntie's face appears in the window. I unlock the door and fall into her arms.

"Ssshh," she says, stroking my locs. They caress her fingers in a show of recognition. "You made a mistake. Now you'll learn how to clean up after yourself."

Together, we maneuver Stan out of the back seat and toward the edge of the cliff. She fetches a sledgehammer from her car, and we get to work. Pieces of stone bounce down the craggy drop. More bits chip off with each impact until the rubble at the bottom of the cliff is unrecognizable as a human shape.

Tears stream down my cheeks as we work. I keep pausing to wipe my runny nose on my sleeve. When the job is done, Auntie wraps her arm around my shoulders and leads me back to her car.

"There, there, Madeline. This time, you didn't mean it. You must forgive yourself. Next time, you'll do it with intent."

"There won't be a next time."

I grow cold as a horrible thought slithers into my mind. I stop at the car door and scrutinize my beloved Auntie's face, so much like my own. The night wind lifts her locs into a halo.

"Auntie, what happened to Uncle Paul?"

About the Author:

Valerie B. Williams spins twisty tales from her home in central Virginia. Her short fiction has been published by Flame Tree Press and Dark Recesses Press, among others. Her debut novel, a supernatural thriller titled "The Vanishing Twin," will be released by Crossroad Press in 2024. When not writing, she can be found drinking either tea or wine, depending on the time of day.

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"Order up."

"Do you have those ladyfingers for me?"

"In the window, with the tongue sandwich."

"How about that shank steak?"

"Two minutes."

Carol picked up the plates the chef pointed to and took them into the dining room. "Here you go. One order of ladyfingers for you. And one tongue sandwich for you. Enjoy."

A hand raised across the room. "Oh, waitress."

"Be right there."

She sighed. Busy night tonight. The tables were full. Ever since that makeover show gave her dad, the owner, some business advice, things were hopping. And he refused to hire more help. After all, she and Dan were 'family'.

Of course, the new menu was problematic, but so far, the revamped 'home cooking' was flying out of the kitchen. They had committed to using only fresh ingredients, and the patrons were giving rave reviews on social media. Of course, Dan *was* a Michelin star chef, which didn't hurt—he could turn the toughest ingredients into mouth-watering meals.

"What can I do for you, sweetie?" Carol asked the customer who had called her across the room.

"I changed my mind on the shank steak. Sorry, but those ribs over there just look so awesome. Can I get those instead?"

"Well, the steak is almost done…"

"Oh." The young man's disappointment was obvious.

She placed a hand on his shoulder. "I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks." A grin bloomed across his face.

Carol couldn't help but smile back.

She stepped back to the kitchen. "Dan, eighty-six the shank steak. He's changed his order to ribs."

"But the steak is done!"

"Don't worry, I'll eat it on my break. We have ribs?"

"Check the back. I know we were running low."

Carol opened the door to the storage room. She checked the meat locker. Damn. They were out of ribs.

Taking a key out of her pocket, she walked over to the pen. She unlocked the door, reached in, and pulled out the next animal.

"P-please…I'll pay you anything…just let me go!"

Carol shook her head. "Sorry, dude. Nothing personal. But we're out of ribs." She shoved the boy into the meat locker. "And we promise our customers fresh ingredients."

About the Author:

Rie Sheridan Rose's prose appears in numerous anthologies, including Killing It Softly Vol. 1 & 2, Hides the Dark Tower, Dark Divinations, and Startling Stories. In addition, she has authored twelve novels, six poetry chapbooks, and dozens of song lyrics. Member of the HWA, SFWA, and SFPA.

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Suddenly, Brandon swung his Prius off the road onto the gravel shoulder while slamming on the brakes, causing Linda to scream in alarm. Linda heard the sound of rocks hitting the underside of the car.

“What the fuck, Brandon?”

The car had come to a halt and was illuminated by a deep red light emitting from a neon sign sticking up through the bushes. Bet Yer Soul Mini Putt-Putt, the sign boldly stated. A mist rose from the bushes, giving an eerie feel to the establishment.

Linda saw the mini-golf sign and slapped Brandon across the face.

"You almost killed us for mini golf?" Linda asked. "You dick!"

“I've never seen this place before.”

“Doesn't mean you gotta kill us.”

“Let's go and play a round.”

"It's like 11 at night. The place ain't open. Someone forgot to turn off the sign."

“Let's at least find out.”

"It's late, and I just want to go home, not play this creepy-ass golf course."

Brandon pulled the car up the hill that served as the entrance to the establishment. Linda gave Brandon a nasty look and punched his shoulder. Linda sat quiet and the noise of gravel crunching under the tires was all she could hear until the car reached the top of the incline, where the road turned to the left and opened into an unpaved parking lot. At the end, an old wooden carnival-style ticket booth sat, emitting a deep red light from inside. The parking lot itself had no lighting except for the Prius' headlights. Brandon pulled the car next to the ticket booth and turned off the ignition.

“We're really doing this?” Linda asked.

“Yep!”

Brandon got out of the car and waited as Linda reluctantly got out. Together, they walked over to the ticket booth.

"This place is creepy, Brandon," Linda said. "I don't like it."

“What are you talking about? This place is awesome!”

She glared at Brandon, knowing that further argument was pointless. An old man sat in the booth; his skin looked leathery, and his hair, probably white, appeared bright red in the lighting. When he spoke, his voice sounded like he smoked ten packs of unfiltered cigarettes a day.

"Welcome to Bet Yer Soul Mini Putt-Putt. Are you willing to bet your soul that you can complete our 18-hole course under par?"

“We'd like two tickets, please.”

“Brandon!”

“Linda, it'll be fun!”

“That'll be 20 dollars.”

Brandon pulled two crisp bills from his wallet and fed them through the slot. The man slid back a small scorecard and a golf pencil.

"You can select your balls and putters once inside. But select carefully, as your soul depends on it."

The man cackled with an evil-sounding laugh, and the wrought iron gate next to the ticket booth creaked as it slowly opened.

“Enjoy!” the old man said.

***

Brandon and Linda walked through the gate and Brandon heard it close behind them. Their shoes crunched on the ground. As they walked the path, a fog overtook everything, making it impossible to see. Brandon felt Linda grasp his hand. He noticed the crunch of the gravel had disappeared, and it sounded like they were walking on wood. The fog slowly dissipated, revealing a small wooden shack. One side had a selection of putters of various sizes, and the opposing side had a choice of multiple colored golf balls.

After making their selections – red for Brandon and blue for Linda – Brandon pushed on the wooden door of the shack. The spring hinge squeaked as the door swung out, and they exited the shed.

“Hot damn!” Brandon said.

It looked like they'd stepped into another world. The inside looked like a caldera with jagged gray rock walls. It was illuminated by bright stars above, which looked nothing like the night sky in the parking lot they had just left.

Massive rock stalagmites created a path to the first hole. Brandon heard the sound of running water. Small, twisted, fossilized-looking dead trees randomly occupied the space.

“This is fucking amazing!” Brandon said.

"How'd they do that?" Linda asked. "The sky and all."

"It has to be a dome-like planetarium with a projection on it. It probably comes out of one of the massive stalagmites."

“This is impressive.”

“Ya, I'm guessing it's a play on Dante's *Inferno*, in mini-golf form."

There was a small wooden stand at the first hole where they could put the scorecard and pencil while playing the hole. Brandon wrote his name and Linda's name on the card.

“The card has room for our whole first names.”

“Isn't it usually just an initial?”

"Yes, but it is made to look like a contract with the devil. This place has gone all out."

“What does the contract state?”

"The same stuff the guy running the booth said. Finish par or under, keep your soul, finish over par, and the devil gets it."

"I guess we should stay under par then," Linda giggled.

"Not a problem for me," Brandon said in a bragging tone. "I got this!"

"Okay, Tiger Woods, what's par for the first hole?"

“Two.”

“Damn, we don't get many strokes.”

“Worried about your soul?” Brandon said jokingly.

Brandon set his ball down on the artificial turf. He took a look at the hole and swung. Unfortunately, he was off, and his ball hit a small stalagmite obstacle and bounced to a poor lay. Linda took her turn and managed to stop just short of the hole. Linda sunk her ball with the second swing while Brandon took three to get his in.

“How's your soul feeling now, hotshot?” Linda asked.

"Fuck you. I'll be under par by the end of the front nine."

“Sure, Jack Nicklaus, keep talking.”

They turned a corner to the next hole. A waterfall with red-colored water was facing them.

“That's awesome,” Linda said.

***

Brandon was scuffing his shoe into the artificial turf and mumbling as Linda added the scores for the front nine.

“Things are looking good for me,” Linda said. “I'm under par by two so far.”

“No need to gloat.”

"Oh, I'm not boasting; I'm just worried about your soul. You're over par by five strokes."

"Ya, ya, ya. I'll catch up in the back nine."

"We'll see. I believe hole ten is waiting for you."

Brandon set down his ball, tried to figure out the best way to maneuver the squiggle-shaped course, and then gave his ball a decent thwack. The ball careened down the green, bouncing off obstacles, but somehow managed to stop just short of the hole.

“See, that's how it's done,” Brandon said.

Linda set down her ball and gave it a light tap. Her ball somehow glided down the green, avoiding the hazards and into the hole.

"I got a hole-in-one!" Linda screamed out in a sing-song voice while doing a little dance.

Brandon glared at her and went to collect their balls.

***

Linda skipped over to the 18th hole, happy with her performance so far.

“Brandon, you've got to check this out.”

“I'm coming.”

The 18th hole was the only one that bore a name, Seal Yer Fate. The red water that flowed around the course went horizontally across the center of the fairway, and a small wooden bridge went over the water to the hole on the other side. A small sign designated the running water as the River Styx.

“This is cute, honey,” Linda said.

“I thought this was supposed to be Dante's *Inferno*? Now they are dipping into Greek mythology."

“What do you mean?”

"The Styx was a swamp in Dante; it was a river in the Greek stories."

“You analyze stuff too much.”

Brandon set his ball down, studied the path to the bridge, then gave the ball a soft thwack. The ball veered to the right of the bridge and fell off the edge.

“Fuuuuuck!” Brandon exclaimed.

“Look, honey.”

Brandon's ball was in a small boat and going down the water.

“What the hell?”

Brandon walked over to the water and saw little boats lined up along the side, hidden by the drop-off.

“I guess you only get one shot at this hole,” Brandon said.

Linda set her ball down and gave it a whack. Despite spending a fraction of Brandon's time trying to line up his shot, Linda's ball went over the bridge and into the hole.

"I got another hole-in-one!" Linda exclaimed.

She walked over to retrieve the ball, stepping over the water.

“The ball isn't in the hole,” Linda said. “The hole just goes down.”

“That must be how they ensure you pay if you want to play another round.”

After the 18th hole, the path ended at what looked like a solid rock wall. A sign on the wall said, 'Insert Your Scorecard into the Slot’.

"I guess we get to find out if we keep our souls," Brandon said, making a creepy laugh.

"What should I be scared of, you dork," Linda said. "I made par."

Brandon slid the scorecard into the metal slot below the sign, and part of the rock face slid to the side, exposing a tunnel behind it. Wisps of fog curled out from inside the tunnel.

***

Linda stepped into the tunnel, holding Brandon's hand. She felt the dense fog that had leaked out the door when they opened it engulf her. She couldn't see anything in front of her. She'd always hated these tunnels in the haunted houses that Brandon loved to visit around Halloween. She held her free hand out to feel for walls, to prevent her from colliding with one. She could hear the echos of the cave floor with every step, but nothing else. Then, she realized she no longer felt Brandon's hand in hers. She stopped, her heart beating hard.

“Brandon!” Linda called out.

No response came back. Linda couldn't hear a single sound except for her heartbeat.

"Brandon, this isn't funny. I don't like this!"

Linda felt her chest tighten when again she heard no response. Her palms started sweating, and her heart somehow raced even faster. She had to get out. She started rushing forward, hearing the crunch of stone, trying to find the end of the tunnel. Her head began to feel like it was closing in on her. She tried to fight passing out, but her body won, and she felt herself falling to the ground. The last thing Linda was aware of was gravel biting into her face.

***

Linda felt the sun's warmth beating down on her as she opened her eyes. The brightness blinded her at first. As she became accustomed to it, she saw their car not more than three feet away. Large weeds were growing in the parking lot. She didn't remember seeing them the night before, but the darkness could have concealed them. She sat up, feeling crusty, dried blood where the gravel had punctured her skin. She brushed the dirt from the side of her face and arm.

Linda remembered she and Brandon had gotten separated in the mist-filled exit tunnel. She looked back toward the mini-golf course to see if he had also made it out of the tunnel and had to blink to ensure her eyes weren't deceiving her. There wasn't any tunnel behind her. Instead, there was a small shack missing most of its paint, a faded sign above that said Bob's Mini Golf with some of the letters hanging at odd angles. Behind the shack were the remains of a cheap mini-golf course. The hazards, like a windmill, were covered in plants that must have been reclaiming the course for at least a decade. The artificial turf was ripped in places, and vines were spread along the greens. A rusty chain-link fence ran around the closed mini-golf course.

There wasn't any sign of Bet Yer Soul Mini Putt-Putt that she and Brandon had played last night, nor was there any sign of Brandon. Linda winced in pain as she stood up.

“Brandon!” Linda called out.

The only response she got were bugs singing in the grass. She took one more look around, then pulled her cell

phone out of her pocket and dialed 9-1-1. There was a moment of silence before the phone connected.

"9-1-1," the operator said. "What's your emergency?"

"I woke up at a golf course, and my boyfriend is missing."

"Okay, we'll get a unit over to you. What is your location?"

"Bet Yer Soul Mini Putt-Putt."

"Where? I don't know of any establishment by that name in this county."

"Oh, um, the old site of Bob's Mini Golf."

"Okay, ma'am. The unit is on their way. Please stay on the line with me until they arrive."

Linda saw a card several feet away on the ground, fluttering in the breeze. She walked over and picked it up. It was their scorecard from the night before. She saw that someone had written claimed in scraggly letters in red ink over Brandon's name, and over her name released. In the distance, she heard the sound of sirens getting louder.

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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Birth of the Monster | ***Alex S. Johnson***

Fathered by storms, clouds, rain and wind, and mothered by the earth, silence, murmurs, the color silver, gemstones, sigils, alchemical rites and magic squares, Miranda shook her braided coal-black locks and turned her emerald eyes on the feast she had dragged back to the cave with her. With mounting excitement she traced her dinner from the prominent brow to the collarbones to the curious appendage, then down further still to the hirsute fleshy legs and large feet. She sniffed it, licked it. Her mother called up through the system of tunnels in which Miranda lived, a distinct, echoing sound. She said that the feast was good and nutritious for her to eat and would help stave off the hunger pangs. Miranda took a flint blade and made an exploratory cut in the neck, watching as the blood gushed luxuriously out. She knelt and drank from the font, grinning at the iron-heavy taste, then again some more. The prey had been stunned but wasn't quite dead yet, and that excited her more as she saw it stirring, the arms and legs spasming, then dropping. What a wondrous discovery this was for her, was man and the death of man. Reminding herself to save some of the meal for her sisters, she raised the flint again for a deeper cut, and again, and again.

Wolf-Ishanna | ***Alex S. Johnson***

Ishanna received the silver fire from the moon, coursing through her bloodstream and every nerve. The fur began to flow down her body, her jaws elongated, her canines jutted up, razor-sharp. There was joy in the tang, the iron taste of blood. There was unity in the collective, joining her energy to that of the pack. And there was a certain she-wolf whose favors could only be enjoyed whilst thus embodied. Raising her head, she howled at the moon—her soul—snuffled with her snout, and plunged forward through the scarlet-dappled snow.

About the Author:
Alex S. Johnson has been reading and writing in horror since he can remember and publishing in horror for the past 30 years. His first horror short story to be published, "Pen and Incubus," appeared in Bloodsongs magazine alongside Edward Lee. His work has been praised by Ray Garton, John Shirley and Lucy Taylor. A former college English instructor and music journalist, Johnson currently resides in Sacramento, California.

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Undying Island | ***Caleb James K.***

Dreamy waves lapped lazily against the small rowboat's bow. Starlight twinkled in the water's ripples, and a couple sat silently as a sea serpent slithered by. Along the boat's bottom boards, pooling at their feet, their daughter's blood cooled and coagulated, but her body went unseen. Only the young girl's parents remained on the rowboat, sitting shoulder to shoulder on the slender slip thwart. They dared not look at each other while the darkness swallowed the island shrinking behind them.

"It is cool tonight," the man said, staring off into the black water ahead.

The woman did not say anything for a long time. Occasionally, something would bump into or scrape against the rowboat's outer hull, threatening to spill the two into the dark murky sea, but neither reacted.

"It was the right thing to do, Cairbre," the woman said. Her voice ached with acrimony. "Was it not?"

The man, Cairbre, was less inclined than his wife to ruminate on what had transpired, so he answered quickly. "My sweet, Aoife, there was no other way. If we did not offer little—" he choked back an unexpected sob. "If we did not offer little Róisín to the Undying Ones, death would continue to plague the children of Aslen."

"How can you be so sure!" Aoife snapped, sending a shot of sadness across the silent sea.

As if her indignation had invited the ire of a God, a whirling wind blew in from the south and caused the calm waters to crash against their boat's creaking sides. A wild wave washed the two in salty brine, and for the first time on their trip across the channel, they allowed fear into their hearts.

"Here, my love," Cairbre said, pulling his wife close. "A storm is coming."

Aoife pushed away from his embrace. "So be it," she said defiantly. "We deserve whatever the Gods throw at us."

Another wave rocked the boat. Coal clouds covered the stars and the moon. The wicked wind's wrath intensified. All was dark. Too dark to see.

"Perhaps you are right," Cairbre said.

"What did you say?"

Cairbre had to shout to be heard over the wind. "I think you are right." He held firm to the side of the boat, but they were leaning significantly to one side.

From far away where the storm first hit, a rogue wave had formed and rushed across the open sea like an unstoppable leviathan. Unbeknownst to the couple in the tiny rowboat, a mad mountain of death towered over them, pulling them closer and closer. As they fought to keep from tipping over, they had no idea that it was not the clouds that covered the starlight—as they had assumed—it was the mountainous wave. The one they were now riding up the base of.

Aoife grabbed her husband's arm and spoke into his ear. "If we perish on this night, know that I do not blame you."

With that, the power of the sea proved too great and the boat flipped over, splintering into hundreds of timber shards. Submerged in the cold black water, Cairbre frantically flailed about in hopes of finding his wife, but the wave had separated them and all hope was lost.

Whooshing water pushed Cairbre deep down, down, into the fathomless sea. Engulfed by the eerie darkness, he stopped struggling to reach the surface. There was something peaceful about having the world's weight pressing on him while he floated in suspended animation. His last thoughts were of his beautiful wife and daughter.

Raging across the roaring sea, the great wave carried Aoife back toward the dark island. Spinning, twirling, and whirling, the violent water knocked her unconscious. Fortunately, the whipping winds shifted suddenly and fought back against the wave, diminishing its destructive power. As it neared the island, the tremendous tidal wave had waned enough to avoid total devastation. Aoife knew nothing of this though.

Limp-bodied, she glided through the salty sea while her mind glided through a familiar dream. Death no longer existed as she found herself in the past.

***

As a child of Aslen, Aoife grew up hearing stories about the Undying Ones. Throughout the centuries, rumor flirted with history until an amalgamation of fact and fiction formed a definitive version of events. Yet it was not until she had reached adulthood that Aoife learned this history from a reliable source.

"Good sir," Aoife said to a local priest after a sermon. "Can you tell me of the ones who inhabit An tOileánach Neamhdha?"

The priest looked around to see if anyone else had heard her question, but they were alone in the old church that had been left behind by the Romans. “Young lady, why should you ask about such things?” he whispered.

Aoife breathed anxiously. “The villagers. They talk of—”

“Hush now.” The priest raised his hand for silence. “Let us speak in private.”

He led her to a small room that lacked the threat of eager ears.

“Please, continue with what you were saying,” he said.

“The villagers,” Aoife did not hesitate, “have been talking. They say the inhabitants of the dark island, the Undying Ones, have been crossing the channel in the dead of night to steal our children.” Even if she had not said the name of the island, the priest would have known the one she spoke of. “Who are they? Why would they do such a thing?” she said loudly.

“Hush, hush.” The priest raised his hand once more. “I am sure you have heard tales.”

Aoife nodded.

“Well, allow me to clear some things up to the best of my ability. I do not know all. Perhaps not even much. But I will tell you what I can.

“Before Aslen came into existence, a group of vagabonds were said to have roamed the mainland. Little is known of their origins, but relics of their time have surfaced over the many years since they departed from the country. It is assumed that they had grown wary of the constant travel, and so they took root in the lush green forest that has since become the wetlands. In that forest, they erected a tremendous temple. While the centuries have not been kind to the structure, it still stands, half submerged in the marshy bog.

“A group of Roman explorers led by the infamous Vulcan Volesus first braved the temple's dank and decrepit depths. In doing so, they uncovered a part of the mysterious people's history in the form of a single sacred scroll.

“Indecipherable to the Romans, they had no choice but to take the scroll to Aslen—which was a relatively young village in those days—and bring it to the one elder priest who could still read the scroll's ancient script. This single scroll propagated all that is known of the Undying Ones’ history throughout the land.”

As the priest spoke, a sordid tale of blood and death came to light.

Worshippers of a forgotten God called Ogma the Eternal practiced a dark magic unlike any known outside of their temple. Many religious sects and cults from the ancient world were known to dabble in the dark arts, but the Undying Ones only focused on a single discipline: the art of immortality.

Within the scroll's scandalous script, sacrificial scenes of sacrilege unfolded to reveal an unsanctimonious ceremony. Though the elder priest from Aslen did his best to interpret the scroll, much was lost in his translation from the ancient language to the Romans’ Latin tongue. The purpose of the ceremony was to grant eternal life to those in attendance, but little was made clear regarding how the ceremony was performed.

“Pulling what little they could from the ancient text,” the priest continued, “the Romans had concluded that the innocent blood of children was needed to appease Ogma. Once the God was placated, his worshippers would feast upon the dead. Somehow this was believed to grant immortality. Though it must be noted that the Romans took the scroll with them when they had left Aslen, and so there is no evidence of the Undying Ones’ existence beyond their temple's ruins in the bog.”

“What of the island?” Aoife inquired.

The priest furrowed his brow. “That is where the history becomes too caliginous to navigate. I too have heard the rumors of which you speak, but I know no more than what the Royal Council has decreed.”

“That no children at any time are to be left unattended?”

“Yes.” The priest rubbed his beard as he carefully chose his next words. “I believe that the sightings of these midnight marauders are accurate.”

“So, you believe the tale told by Abbán the drunk?”

“I do.” The priest allowed a smile to grace his bearded face. “A drunk he might be, but he is also what I call a friend. He would not fill my ears with porky pies and faerie stories.”

Aoife frowned. “If what you say is true, then the Undying Ones steal our children from our homes during the night.”

“Now I said no such thing.” The priest grew stern. “At least not in regards to the Undying Ones. I believe they were no more than a cult and have left this world countless moons ago.”

“But you said you believe Abbán's tale?”

“Yes. I believe he did see black-robed figures exiting a boat that arrived from the dark island. And I believe he did witness them crossing our beach on their way to Aslen. I will even consider that they could be responsible for the

missing children. But what I will not do is entertain these radical theories of a deathless people who defy our Gods and the order of nature."

"What about—"

The priest raised his hand a final time. "That is all, young lady. I told you what I know, and even that is probably too much for your innocent ears to hear. May the Gods be with you."

***

Aoife woke from her dream to a seabird pecking at the loose flesh hanging free from a gash grinning down her shin.

"Shoo!" she yelled hoarsely, kicking sand at the bird with her other leg.

The bird flapped its large gray wings and fluttered a few feet away. It landed and took perch on a jagged rock jutting out of the stony beach. Agitated but not frightened, it watched as the woman struggled to sit up and examine her injury.

Saltwater had dried out the wound and slowed the blood flow, but the raw muscle exposed to the elements burned tremendously. If not for dehydration, Aoife's face, twisted in agony, would be streaked with tears.

Attempting to stand on her own proved futile, and the pain from the effort caused her to shriek. Like the shattering of stones, the sound of her scream sent the seabird scurrying farther down the beach. Wood debris that she recognized as the rowboat's remains were strewn about, and after rummaging through the wreckage, she found a sizable plank that would work as a makeshift crutch.

It took some configuring, but she managed to angle the plank under her armpit. The ragged wood wore rough against her sensitive skin, but it was nothing compared to the pain of her injured leg. Even so, she only managed to move from the sandy shore onto solid land before collapsing. Without help, she knew she would not last long. If only Cairbre was around.

"Is this our due punishment?" she whispered to herself.

Close by, a ceremonial horn blared. It spoke a trumpeting truth that tormented her soul more than any words could tell. When she had first awakened beneath the blazing sun, she thought the sea had returned her to the sacrificial site she and Cairbre had left the night before. To her terror, she had thought wrong. She was now stranded on the wrong side of An tOileánach Neamhdha, The Undying Island.

Panic pricked her body with gooseflesh. The urge to flee was overpowering, but even if she was uninjured, there was no escape; she had no seafaring craft nor the ability to fashion one. With her wounded leg and the horns nearing, Aoife's fate was set in stone. Still, the instinct to survive forced her into action.

Aoife stifled a scream as she stood once again. Using the oversized plank as a crutch, she stole toward the dense foliage to hide, but the plank caught a hole in the ground and split vertically down the middle. A pointed piece pierced her armpit and severed a tendon. In the same instant, all the weight the crutch had been supporting fell upon her injured leg and the immediate stress cracked her tibia in half, sending her sprawling face-first to the dirt. This time she could not hold back her scream, which did not last long as the overbearing pain snatched her consciousness from the waking world.

Right before everything faded to black, she heard a rhythmic chanting coming from behind the nearby trees. It was growing louder.

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Light from the sunset flittered through the trees and bathed an open clearing in pink. At the clearing's center, Aoife stood, rope-tied to a blood-stained obelisk carved from an obsidian block. Forming a circle around her, a dozen black-robed figures with veiled faces chanted a haunted hymn in an ancient tongue.

"Who?" was all Aoife could say. Her blood loss had been significant and she was so weak she could barely look up at the little girl, dressed in a black robe, standing directly in front of her.

"Mommy," the little girl said in a voice that hissed with a hideous rasp.

Whatever adrenaline Aoife had remaining surged through her body. "Róisín?" A phantom tear rolled down her cheek as she looked upon her daughter.

"You left me here," Róisín said. The hiss did not come from her mouth but a bit lower.

"My sweet, sweet baby girl." If the rope was not holding her upright, Aoife would have collapsed from grief. "The people of Aslen chose you. We had no choice or—" She stopped to keep from weeping. Forcing a show of stoicism, she continued. "If we did not sacrifice you, the village would have brought you and your two brothers here. Your father and I made the only choice we could."

“Oh, Mommy,” Róisín said, “you are so silly. Everything is fine. I have a new forever family.” The little girl stepped forward and the dwindling sunlight caught her face. Her skin was as pale as a corpse and from a grotesque gouge that had been carved into her neck, her words hissed, “Now you get to stay here too.” She took her mother's hand in hers. The little girl's flesh was cold as snow and her eyes were cloudy white. “Forever.”

Aoife screamed and screamed until she had no voice. The chanting continued long after the moon took the sun's place in the cloudless sky, but day and night held little meaning anymore. Not to the inhabitants of An tOileánach Neamhdha, The Undying Island.

About the Author:
Caleb James K. hails from Washington, Pennsylvania. When he's not lifting heavy things or drinking mid-shelf whiskey, he's talking to other creatives as the host of the Drunken Pen Writing Podcast and co-host of Arcade Bookshop. You can find some of his forthcoming and recent works in PA Bards, Strange Days Zine, miniMAG, Diabolic Press Issue One, Literally Stories, Coalitionworks, HorrorScope Volumes 3 & 4, and SPANK the CARP literary journal.

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Of His Kind | ***Christopher Hivner***

Riley Busby's hands flew off the steering wheel as his deep voiced guffaw filled the inside of the car. He stuffed another handful of potato chips into his mouth, barely chewing before swallowing the jagged ball of salt and starch. Riley had gotten out of spending his scheduled weekend with his daughter by lying to the ex-wife, and he couldn't help congratulating himself. Reaching into the nearest bag of groceries on the back seat, his sweaty, meat-slab hand grabbed a carton of orange juice, opening it before he even had it in his lap.

"Free weekend, no brat," he squealed, pouring the sweet juice down his throat. From the corner of one eye, he spotted a long, rangy dog darting in front of his car, and his eyes followed until it disappeared behind a house.

"Hey, Madelyn! What are you doing out here at night?" Riley exploded with staccato chuckles at this jab toward his ex.

"Sorry I can't take Brandy this weekend, but I have to work," he repeated in his sing-song voice of sincerity. "I'm really busy with a new accounting program for the big boss." Snorting through his gin-blossomed nose, Riley took another swig of orange juice.

The damp cardboard lip of the carton slipping between his puffy lips was the last thing Riley remembered before jerking awake. Juice already coating his chin and shirt, he threw the box onto the floor and yanked the car back onto the road. The front end of his Altima shimmied harder when he floored the gas pedal, rounding the steering wheel hard to the left. The wheels spit gravel as they jumped back onto the macadam, but the car sped too far in the opposite direction careening into the other lane. Riley huffed heavily as he finally righted the car and slammed on the brakes.

"What happened?" Riley yelled. A drop of orange juice fell from his lower lip, sweat coated his forehead. He was having a good time talking shit about Madelyn, and then out of nowhere he drove off the road. Riley threw a glance at the orange juice container which lay on the floor still vomiting out liquid. A shudder had rippled through his body when he took a drink. Now something was different.

Riley knew he was close to home, so he tossed the chip bag away. He would figure everything out later. He glanced at a sign showing the upcoming curve of the road. It was a yellow diamond shape with a black arrow bent at a ninety-degree angle and pointing to the left. But as his eyes pulled away from the sign, the arrow seemed to flop, pointing to the right. Riley drove past the sign, then stopped, putting the car into reverse and backing up. He stared at the arrow angled to the left. When he pulled forward again the arrow jumped to the right. Slamming on his brakes, Riley glared at the sign. He glanced into the cornfield on the right.

A blast from a horn shook him out of his daze. Another car had pulled up behind him. Riley drove forward, confused as he veered to the right. Looking ahead he saw that the road disappeared into the cornfield. The car behind him was gone.

“The hell . . .”

Riley stared at the stalks of corn standing at attention like soldiers.

“I’ve driven this road a thousand times. It curves to the left, not the right.”

Riley started to back up but looking into the rear-view mirror he gasped. He fumbled with the door, shoving it open clumsily and falling out of the car.

Too scared to believe what he had seen; he slowly raised his head. Riley stared at a monolithic wall behind his car. Standing on shaky legs, he stepped to the structure. He pressed his hand on the very real, solid rock. Craning his neck up, he could not see the top of the wall and looking to the left and right, the ends either.

Riley leaned against the rough-hewn stone. He rubbed his face over the gritty surface and thought he could smell rain. Turning so his back was against the wall, he looked at his car and saw a clearance of only about a foot to the bumper. His head jerked mechanically to the cornfield, the column of soldiers still commanding attention, corn cobs cocked like sidearms, husks blowing in the breeze like regimental standards. Unsure of what to do next, Riley stood flat against the wall like a man about to be shot.

The thin night wind raised bumps on Riley’s skin, bringing with them clarity. He took stock of what he saw around him. The only road to travel was leading him into a cornfield. He saw no explanation for this and no avoidance of it as the wall he currently leaned against hadn’t disappeared. Riley got back in his car and sat for a few minutes.

Something, a tug at the base of his brain, urged him to drive forward, off the road and into the field. Riley eased the car slowly, bending thick, robust stalks under the wheels until they finally snapped. The crisp smell of the corn planted itself in his nose, growing stronger the deeper he drove into the field. His eyes darted in every direction as he waited for a being or force to show itself, to explain what was happening.

Riley unintentionally glanced into the rearview mirror. He spun around violently. He was frozen, staring at the stone wall which appeared to be moving with him through the field, still resting only inches from the rear of his white Altima. His first instinct was to get out and make sure what he was seeing was real. But with his hand on the door handle, a timid voice from deep inside told him not to bother.

The unexplainable had become the norm, and there was nothing to do but drive. Riley Busby beat his emotions back until he turned to face forward again. Then he mewed like a child.

Another wall had arisen, a tower of solid rock only inches from the front of the car. Riley's lips quivered, allowing the spittle forming there to run down his chin. His hands gripped the steering wheel as if it was a life preserver and soon his entire body was shaking. A wave of claustrophobia washed over him and without moving his head, he snuck a furtive glance left and right. He was not surprised to find that he was now enclosed by solid rock walls.

Riley leaned back, his body rigid. He wiped a shirt sleeve across his mouth, cleaning up the drool. He wanted to look somewhat presentable when he died, for surely that was what this was leading to. If not physically then at least mentally. He felt a calmness blanket him. Riley turned the car off to sit in silence. He was trapped in a delusion from which there was apparently no escape. Whether they found his car in the morning with his body lifeless, or whether they simply found it a breathing vessel, empty of lucid thought, it didn't really matter.

Riley sat in his car with his arms lying flatly at his sides, his head relaxed against the headrest of the seat. He noticed sweat rolling down the back of his neck pasting his hair to his skin. It trickled down his collar bone, wetting the inside of his shirt. A row of beads, fostered just under his receding hairline, slid down his forehead.

He wiped his bare hand back through his hair, finally noticing how hot the inside of the car had become. He tugged at the neck of his shirt and rubbed his fingers over his oily skin. His tongue lay in a whale-like lump in his mouth.

Yanking on the door handle, Riley pushed the car door open and jumped outside, almost knocking his head into the wall. Cold air slapped him in the face. He stood there, allowing himself to be refreshed. Gulping down clean air, he turned around. The car was gone.

A bemused smile played on Riley Busby's face.

“Why not? Why shouldn't the car be gone?”

Why shouldn't Riley be standing on crushed corn cobs surrounded by four stone walls. Why shouldn't he just lie down in the field and let the creature that was preying on him swallow him whole?

Riley felt a push from behind and leaned forward. Then he felt it again, this time with a grinding sound. Looking down at his feet, he saw a partially mangled corn cob moving forward between his legs. Then felt the wall press against his back. Spinning around, Riley watched the wall move towards him. Whirling back and forth frantically, he saw all four walls closing in. Riley nodded.

“Good,” he whispered. “Let’s get this over with.”

Relaxing his body, Riley Busby waited to be crushed. The walls crept toward him, piling detritus of the cornfield around his feet.

The walls stopped inches from his body. He opened his eyes and stared at the pores in the rock. His knees buckled. Riley thought he was going to pass out, but there was no room to hit the ground. The walls were so tight against him that he could do nothing but stand. His hagridden mind melted inside his head. He succumbed, letting it seep from his eyes and ears. As it crept down his skin, it tickled like the delicate touch of a lover. He could do nothing except laugh. Starting mildly from a chuckle, it soon grew to shouting and finally sobbing that filled the space formed by the four walls, echoing off the stone in a wailing, ancient voice. His arms were stretched high over his head, hands balled into fists. In futile desperation he pounded the underside of his fists into the wall's surface.

Each time his hand struck the stone, he felt something. As he hit harder, the feeling intensified, but even when he felt the blood trickle down his arm, he couldn't explain what the feeling was. The air had grown icier, and it swirled inside his concrete cell. The breeze rippled over his flesh, giving rise to another sensation different from the one he felt in his throbbing hands, but still one he could not explain. A new, inchoate fear burned in his gut.

Riley searched deep in the recesses of his intellect, grasping to pull out an explanation. All he found were numbers, mathematical equations, and computer language. It all danced in a chaotic mass, defying him to find order. He lowered his hands directly in front of his eyes, staring at the pulpy mess of his skin. Then he pounded his fist into the rock face again. The sensation was still there, but what was it? And an instant later, he couldn't be sure if he had felt anything at all. Again, he slammed his fist into the stone, and this time the reaction was even quicker. He watched red liquid seep from his skin into the stone following a twisting canal down the rock face. Straining as if he were carrying heavy weights, Riley tried to think of what the red liquid was and why it was coming out of his hand.

Riley didn't have any answers. His mind, once an apiary rife with activity, was now empty. Each passing second took more from him. Not just where he was, but rudimentary things like emotion, sensations, and understanding. He squeezed his body around, so his back was against the wall he had been facing. Something inside of him beat bullishly against his skin. Warm liquid ran down his leg. He could comprehend none of it. Floating away like a lost balloon was a scrap about language. He opened his mouth, jaw quivering, and tried to speak, but he had forgotten how. His vocal cords contracted only to emit a grunt or a low growl.

Innate fear and mistrust took over. Claustrophobic feelings tightened in his chest. Looking skyward for a way out, his eyes darted like a small animal. Pawing at the rock, he grunted. Leaping in the air searching for a hold in the rock to climb out, he twisted and turned in the narrow confines, desperate for a way home.

With his hands still clawing for an escape, his head cocked to one side. The spider's web in his mind had vibrated. A memory, a sense, an emotion, an idea, was creeping along the fibrous tendrils. His lip curled up, baring his teeth and he tried to crouch in an attacking position.

Riley's hands curled into crescent shapes, and he pawed at his clothes. His mind was reforming, and it didn't understand what was covering his skin. Digging into the material of his shirt, it finally tore as he pulled at the collar. His short arms flailed, and the tattered strips of cloth fell to the ground. Then he pushed his jeans down without unbuttoning them. His face flushed deep red as he struggled to get them over his hips. His breath was desperate, husky puffing. Riley fell to his back, arching and squirming until the pants finally slid down the whole way. He scrambled out of them, whirling around quickly to sniff and paw at them one more time.

The walls were gone. Riley Busby crouched on the ground, nose twitching. He raised up on his knees to sniff the night air. He held his arms tight to his body, his mind alert to any possible danger but found none in the area. Next, he thought of food. Riley lowered himself to a crouch on the ground. He pushed at a corn cob with his nose, drawing its sweet smell in deeply. Pulling it close to him with his hands, fingers curled under and pressed together, he began to nibble on the young kernels.

When morning came, the nascent creature, appetite satiated, crawled among the tall stalks of the corn field to hide from dangerous animals and to search for others of his kind.

About the Author:
Christopher Hivner writes from a small town in Pennsylvania listening to ambient electronic music. His book of horror/dark fantasy poetry, *Dark Oceans of Divinity*, is available at Cyberwit.net and Amazon.com.

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DARK AND EVIL II

FEATURING MIKE LERA

COMPILED BY

BRIAN WOODS

Nature's Food | ***Tabitha Thompson***

Spring was vastly approaching, and the weight needed to come off. Sharon wasn't going to spend another season in oversized shirts and plain cotton shorts. The days of plain Jane were over, Sharon was determined to have that spring break/summer body no matter what. At almost 345 pounds, it was not only becoming difficult to find clothes, but to live in general. The constant feeling of judgment and stares that comes from heavy breathing after bending to simply pick up a fallen can of corn or even worse, eating. The lone safety of her home is where Sharon felt the most comfortable, but yet confined. How many more wrappers of fast food restaurants was she going to collect before diabetes or heart failure came into play? After a close call of having high blood sugar which would lead to diabetes, Sharon knew things had to change. She wanted to prove to herself and her family that she wasn't going to remain as the 'fat chick' much longer and become overwhelmed with health problems.

Progress was made with healthier eating, walking, and even bouts of fasting, but the weight wasn't coming off fast enough. Something clicked one night while Sharon was watching TV, casually eating a bowl of hidden veggie pasta with marinara sauce. It was called Nature's Food. A simple pill with a proper diet and exercise that can melt the fat off within 8 weeks. Slim, smiling women graced the screen, raving about how well the pill worked for them and the results were of little to no difficulty. Before the commercial ended, Sharon made a beeline to order the product online.

Three days later, Sharon was now on the fast track to a healthy weight. The instructions were simple, take one capsule twice a day with food. The capsule will suppress the appetite, causing the body to eat lighter portions and in turn, lose weight. "Seems simple enough. Into the mouth, past the gums, skinny chick body, here I come." Surprisingly, Sharon felt the suppression of her appetite work almost immediately. Even though she was partially full from the chicken salad she ate a few hours ago, the pill shrunk her appetite to where she had no desire to eat much for the next few hours.

For the next month, Sharon had dropped over 50 pounds, shocking family members, friends, and coworkers alike of her transformation. She was perkier, happier, and healthier; at least at first glance. Although the pill was suppressing her appetite after she ate food, she found the pill to also make her hungrier prior to taking it. She didn't mind the extra appetite at first, especially given the pill would make sure she didn't gain weight, but it was a bit concerning to her loved ones that she would eat as much as a world class bodybuilder and never gain weight. Questions were asked and Sharon would always respond with it being just a side effect, and showing the disclaimer of the side effects of the pill, so murmurs and worries were cast aside.

One day after having a cheat meal of a cheeseburger and fries with her friends, Sharon went home and noticed something strange in her bathroom. After relieving herself, Sharon noticed an odd substance in her stool. Now she knew it was normal to have some particles of digested food in her stool, but this was different. It seemed that the particles were *moving* in her stool, if she didn't know better, the particles resembled maggots. Casting that worry aside, Sharon chalked it up to being a side effect and continued with the weight loss.

By the time April rolled around, Sharon went from 375 to 200 and felt fantastic. She was amazed at the progress and relieved that she was able to finally fit into normal fitting clothes after so long of wearing clothes that resembled bed sheets. She was on the fast track to getting that spring ready body. However, the side effects were rearing its ugly head. The 'food particles' were becoming more apparent in Sharon's stool, even to a point where her rectum was itchy and irritated after. Shame and embarrassment prevented her from seeing a Doctor, but the customer service line reassured her that those particles are normal and once she had reached a healthy weight they would disappear.

May. Spring had finally arrived and it was finally Sharon's time to shine. No longer did she feel she had to hide behind fast food wrappers and oversized clothes, but could finally show off the shape that was hiding behind all of that unnecessary fat. She slipped into her black bikini that she had bought over 3 months ago, admiring her new curves and flat stomach. Aside from being left with some excess skin, Sharon was elated that there was barely any excess fat on her body. After heading into the bathroom to relieve herself, Sharon found it harder to do so this time, as if she was in a horrible state of constipation. Sipping prune juice and taking diuretics weren't doing the trick, the heavy feeling of needing to defecate was constant throughout the day.

When it finally came time for Sharon's body to release waste, she was relieved that it was over. A wave of nausea suddenly washed over her, and she proceeded to vomit. She took one glance into the toilet in horror. The particles were not just in her stool, but vomit as well and they were growing into larvae. Her worst fears were realized; the pill created a parasite that was feeding off not just the food Sharon was eating, but her body as well. She could feel the maggots *munching* on her rectum, eating whatever remnants of her waste remained.

Feeling lightheaded, Sharon decided to lie down and relax, feeling the maggots still crawl and feast on her rectum, eventually feeling them crawl upward to her chest, taking her last breath. The last image Sharon saw was the commercial for Nature's Best, seeing the slim women smiling and expressing how great and natural the pill is and the effects. "Try Nature's Food, you'll naturally feel your best."

About the Author:
Residing from Florida, Tabitha Thompson loves all things horror and can talk for hours about the subject. Her published works such as Alternative ™, Decency Defiled, and Highway 54 have been featured in outlets such as Sirens Call Publications, JEA Press, and Mocha Memoirs Press. She's currently working on her debut novel Cutthroat Cuisine and loves every minute of writing it, just ignore the hisses when making eye contact and hand her coffee.

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Cave Buffet | ***JB Corso***

Keith sits upright upon jagged ground he's accepted his fate on. The cave's sunlit exit teases him from across the underground lake. A hint of the opening reflects like a smeared dot on the water's surface. A fallen safety helmet light casts his shadow up the rock walls, which echo his labored breaths. Millions of tiny legs clack around him, creating a background ambiance of movement. The musty smell of subterranean life and the decay of his nearby search and rescue team wraps him in its embrace. Pain from hundreds of chewing bites sear into his flesh. Tears filling his eyes refract his limited vision of the cave. Newborn invertebrates crawl over him, searching for a free section to feast on. A grouping focuses atop his exposed hip bone, slowly consuming morsels of bloody skin. Dark caverns reverberate with Keith's cries for his mother.

The fauna feeding on him from the ground fight against recently hatched siblings dropping from the ceiling. Hunters from above drip across his chest and shoulders. Their triangle jaws shred his shirt, opening burrow holes through the cotton fabric for his warmth. Hungry feeders infest his curly locks. Their thousands of legs scramble for something solid to catch onto. Many climb down through his hair to feed on his scalp. A lone predator slips along his neck, biting at the base of his spine. Its mandibles chew through the first several layers of his epidermis, threatening the nerves under his bones.

His arms tire from swiping the threats away. He hits a cluster off, sending them scurrying into the darkness. Opportunistic cave chewers accept the invitation and attach themselves to his hand, impaling their tiny talons into his skin. He jerks them off, leaving bloody waterfalls behind. Searching antennae pick up on the fresh blood drops splattered about. They feast on the appetizer droplets as others pass by for the main course.

An insect burrows into his upper thigh muscle. The depths of the cave's bowels accept his screaming echoes. The fibrous opening encourages the brood to follow the chemical trail. Exposed nerve endings cause his leg to spasm. Keith slams his bloodied fist against the open wound, hoping to dislodge the creatures feeding on him from within. He realizes his efforts are in vain. The pain courses towards his knee.

Stalactite water dripping into the flaccid lake surface produces rippling echoes. The smeared sun dot fades away into darkness. The headlamp dims as the battery pack dies out. A corpse, once known as Keith, decomposes against an unremarkable cave wall under a blanket of clacking legs.

About the Author:
JB Corso is a healthcare professional working to better the lives of vulnerable people. They enjoy spending time with their supportive wife, writing daily, and finding joy in the world. Their author's motto is "Developing stories into masterpieces." They have been published in both fiction and professional outlets.

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Shadowed | ***Charles Sartorius***

"Shadow creatures should never be confused with shadow figures; they're variants," mused Professor Lakin. "Most paranormal investigators fail to distinguish between the two due to ignorance. That and shadow creatures' comparative rarity . . . until now." Just as in classroom, he catalyzed undivided attention.

The elderly professor, long retired, had spent the latter part of his academic career chairing the local college's Parapsychology Department, a field of study generally considered a fringe discipline by both the institution's academic faculty and administrative officials alike. It was only when Dr. Thaddeus Lakin volunteered to fund the department out of his own pocket did the pertinent bureaucratic honchos agree to add its peculiar curriculum.

Introduction to Parapsychology quickly became one of the most popular classes on campus with a long enrollment waiting list each and every semester. I had been one of the lucky few first year students (fresh out of high school) to gain admission to the class via an early fall pre-semester lottery. First time I'd won anything.

Enraptured by Professor's lectures, I subsequently majored in the field, accepted into the small, but highly competitive undergraduate program (an arduous task) following my third semester. Remained after graduation to earn a PhD in the subfield of paranormal research under Dr. Lakin's tutelage.

Now more than a decade later I was lecturing in my chosen specialty at a local community college by day and conducting paranormal investigations by night. My podcast, *Excursions in Parapsychology with Dr. Knute Quinn*, had morphed last year into a cable network broadcast with an expanding audience base. Unlike similar programs, mine added academic legitimacy to the paranormal field via incorporation of advanced scientific research methodology, something sorely lacking in a majority of those competing shows typically hosted by rank and noncredentialled amateurs . . . in my totally unbiased opinion.

I decided shadow figures would be the focus of my first televised paranormal research project of the new season, and like many times in the past, I paid a visit to the nearby home of my old professor for consultation and guidance. After pondering Dr. Lakin's initial input on the topic, I asked the obvious question, "What's the difference between the two?"

Professor Lakin peered at me for a moment through thick bifocals, his flowing white hair sheltered by a tattered baseball cap. Well into his seventies, he remained as sharp and erudite as ever. "In general, shadow figures roughly resemble humans; might be a bit larger or smaller, but their darkly opaque forms are recognizably hominoid; shadow creatures not so much. Shapes and sizes vary over a considerable range of abominations. And they're much more aggressive . . . and dangerous."

"Dangerous? How so?" My mind swirled with possibilities for the next telecast.

"Unlike the usually reticent shadow figures, these things attack if felt threatened or a territorial breech perceived. Due to relative rarity of past encounters, few researchers are cognizant of the danger. But this might be shifting at least temporarily; come with me."

I trailed the spry professor into a cluttered office located in the rear of his seven-gabled Victorian abode (hauntingly ethereal in the late fall) and pulled up an adjacent chair as he booted up an older Mac atop an antique mahogany desk.

"Let me pull up this file," Dr. Larkin murmured as he clicked away.

"Looks like it's time you consider a new machine," I jested as we waited for the Excel file to appear onscreen. The professor's razored glance told me he was not amused by my quip.

Eventually, the spreadsheet materialized. "Here it is, Knute. Take a gander at the data," Dr. Lakin said as he pushed the mouse in my direction.

I intently scrolled down the *Shadow Creature* file's dates, locations, and events dating back over five hundred years. Not numerous, but steady with a few exceptions. Most encounters were recorded in Europe, Africa, and Asia; later years featured sporadic data from the Americas.

"Wow, it must have taken you quite a bit of time, research, and travel to compile all this information," I observed. "An impressive feat."

"I've been retired for a while now, Knute. Lots of time on my hands. And since I ceased funding the college's now defunct Parapsychology Department upon departure, I've the means to finance my global research jaunts, although that substantial inheritance I received years ago has dwindled considerably – it wasn't cheap supporting an entire academic department, even a small one."

"I'm grateful you lingered until I completed my doctorate; I couldn't have done it without you."

“Well, happy to have obliged – you were my star pupil, but I must say I’m not totally onboard with that TV show of yours. Although it’s far superior to the excrement being produced by those other paranormal programs.”

We both chuckled then returned our gaze to the Mac’s screen. Professor queried, “What do you notice about the data from a longitudinal research perspective?”

I perused the spreadsheet once more before responding. “It appears every hundred years there’s a significant spike in creature figure encounters . . . and in the ramifications of said confrontations.”

“Exactly; and for the longest time I couldn’t understand why. But now I’ve developed a hypothesis. Just a theory, mind you, but I believe it’s on the right track. Maybe that show of yours could explore and substantiate it . . . but that might be asking too much; way too much.” The professor cringed as soon the request escaped his lips.

“Enlighten me; I’d love to use your supposition as the episode’s focus,” I eagerly replied, my heart palpitating as if I’d finished a marathon.

“Forget I mentioned it,” responded the old professor, his expression serious and sprinkled with fear. Dead serious.

Only when I (fingers crossed) promised Professor Lakin I wouldn’t explore the topic on my telecast did he divulge the particulars of his theory.

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Three weeks into the new year; time to begin onsite preliminaries for my season premier scheduled for the first week in August, always the extensive lead time between video production and final on-air product. Academic protocol dictated an extensive baseline study of the chosen location prior to episode filming. Depending on locale and topic, said analysis could last several weeks, typically longer than it took to video the actual cable show.

I’d titled the season’s premier, *Shadow Creatures – Fact and Theory*. If it hadn’t been the beginning of the hundred-year cycle, I’d have heeded Professor’s caution. But I just couldn’t ignore the centenary and projected spike in shadow creature activity. Couldn’t. I’d never have the opportunity again. *Sorry, Dr. Lakin*.

According to the spreadsheet, the nearest verified creature figure activity (only once a few years ago - benign) was inside the gut of Creech’s Cave, located about forty miles west of town. The subject of local paranormal folklore for the past two hundred years, the cave’s folkloric yarns were poo-pooed by many contemporary town residents; others swore (mostly intoxicated teens at this summer party spot) they’d encountered ghostly mists and shadows, heard strange howls, and dodged stones thrown from nowhere.

A younger me had explored the cave’s hollow a few times, prior to my academic interest in the paranormal, as had many locals in their teen years, part of summer’s hot weather fiesta outings. I never encountered even a paranormal whimper. Thus, the cave wasn’t considered a viable destination for my telecast . . . until that spreadsheet. That damn spreadsheet.

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“Thank God for global warming,” Sonja Herrera quipped sarcastically as we unloaded research equipment from the van at the mouth of Creech Cave in preparation for the baseline study. The winter had been unusually temperate, and if local meteorologists could be trusted, it would remain so well into February.

“Luck’s on our side; this time last year we’d be standing in ten inches of snow,” I replied to my associate and budding researcher.

When it appeared a cable network gig was imminent, I advertised on various academic job sites for assistance. After receiving well over five hundred resumes ,mostly unqualified, I narrowed it down to five candidates. Two rounds of intensely in-depth interviews ensued before I selected Sonja, a recent college grad with an independent major in the parapsychological field from a prestigious university who planned on pursuing her doctorate. Exceptionally bright, articulate, and energetic – the young woman was a perfect fit for the telecast. Now in her second year of cable (and probably last . . . grad school beckoned), Sonja had blossomed into an outstanding researcher, a significant factor in the program’s soaring ratings.

We’d both worked up a swelter unloading, then prepping our equipment in the belly of the Creech. Time to take five, we opened the cooler and grabbed a couple of OJs, reclining on the cave’s rocky wall amongst a sea of research paraphernalia lounging eerily in the shadows of our portable lights. Sat there in silence a few minutes, each lost in thought and anticipation.

“We’ve loafed long enough; time to get a move on,” I said, positioning my right hand on the cold wall to stand.

“Okay, okay. Just let me take one last swig of . . .” Sonja’s reply was interrupted mid-sentence by concurrent beeps of both electromagnetic field detection and movement sensory equipment.

“Holy shit; what the hell is causing that, Sonja?”

Sonja's response, a primal scream as she pointed a shaking finger toward the cave's posterior (at least as far as the lighting permitted a visual).

I jerked my head in the direction of her extended digit and caught sight of it, my body quivered with fear. "We need to get the fuck out of here now, Sonja. Now!" I turned and sprinted toward the light at the mouth of the cave, heard the patter of Sonja's feet about ten yards behind . . . at least I think it was hers.

We'd found what we'd come for, I thought scurrying out the cave and toward the surrounding tree line; that horrific image burned into my brain like it was engraved by a hot Texas branding iron. The shadow creature was immense, at least fifteen feet tall and half as wide. Misshapen its outline was, almost blob-like except for what must have been the head at the apex of the monstrosity – best described as an abstract rendition of a T-Rex cranium. Its jagged mouth ripped open in a silent roar. Disturbing, yes, but not the worst of it. A portion of the thing's lower realm began to split away like a cell dividing under a microscope. As I raced toward the forest perimeter, Professor's voiced theory replayed in my mind.

I believe every hundred years these things procreate. That's the cycle; progeny break off from the parent, I think only one, but that's pure conjecture. Once separated the little one seeks sustenance; it requires energy to stay alive and grow – a catalyst for the hunt. Many don't survive more than a few weeks . . . as nourishment for survival can be derived only from one source – humans. Not the flesh, but the soul. The shadowy abominations lucky enough to come in contact with a human devour the soul voraciously – one is all that's needed.

The unfortunate human victim doesn't die . . . physically. Far worse. Once the soul's ingested, the body becomes little more than a living shell, similar to those diagnosed with catatonic schizophrenia. It's extremely difficult to discern between the two unless you know what to look for. The answer lies in the shadow. Careful examination provides the clue. The shadow of one whose soul's been consumed will be lighter, slightly translucent, almost imperceptibly so at a cursory glance. It can also be felt; yes, felt in your core. Of course, even if a psychiatrist were to discern the variance, no treatments exist for those who've lost their souls to a shadow creature. Once gone, can never be retrieved . . . I don't think. But that would be an even more dangerous, if not impossible, study. Now you know why I made you promise not to pursue this further. I could kick myself for even bringing it up in the first place.

Entering the forest's periphery, lungs and legs burning, I turned back momentarily to ensure Sonja was right behind. In doing so I stumbled over a horizonal log; fell headfirst into an adjacent boulder. Fade to black.

***

I visit Sonja once a week; spend an hour or so speaking to her about all sorts of things academic. A one-way conversation. Domiciled in the psychiatric ward of the state's largest private facility, the once brilliant Sonja idly sits in a wheelchair facing one of unit's large picture windows. Stares, but doesn't see. Like her catatonic brethren.

But I know better. When I escaped unconsciousness on that fateful January day, a check of my phone indicated over an hour had passed. Groggily staggering to my feet, I called, "Sonja! Sonja!" then carefully crept back toward the cave, ready to retreat at a moment's notice.

And there she was, sitting in a semi-lotus position a few yards from the entrance. I sped toward her repeating her name as I ran.

"Shit no, shit no, shit no!" I howled after discovering her in that catatonic state. *Dr. Lakin's theory has to be wrong . . . has to be!* I called 911, my voice frantic, and waited for the paramedics to arrive, an eternity. I resisted at first, but as the afternoon sun angled its way down toward the horizon, and shadows became elongated, I crept next to Sonja until we were mere inches apart. Took a deep breath and stared intently at the tandem shadows. *Oh God, no. No!*

Sonja's shadow was just as the old professor hypothesized. A slight variance, but undeniable; felt it too. When the EMTs arrived, they found us both staring blankly into the distance. The only difference – my eyes flowed with tears.

I've taken a year's hiatus from the show; could be longer. A lot longer. A couple of days after the worst day of my life another worst day sideswiped me. Dr. Lakin, my beloved professor and mentor, passed away in his sleep. Heart failure. The last of the family line, he bequeathed his entire estate to me; wrote in his will he hoped I'd continue on with his research. He died not knowing of a promise broken. *A silver lining*.

The days pass slowly as does my melancholy, exacerbated after visits with Sonja. I force myself to peruse the news on the internet; all the shit going on in the world makes my circumstances a tiny bit more tolerable. Everything's relative. An article the other day stated there's been a global spike in cases of catatonic schizophrenia this year. *The hundred-year cycle.* Makes one wonder how many of these poor souls are actually catatonic and how many are . . . you know.

More than you'd think. Much more.

A Cadger's Gizmo | ***Charles Sartorius***

Barnabas Abhartach's cadaverous casing hid beneath layers of winter apparel providing camouflage unavailable in the months of temperate weather; cold his trusted ally. Patiently he awaited the next unsuspecting snowshoed specimen's plummet into the cleverly concealed pit along the hiking trail. Sales to the human organ market would be brisk this year. Blood money. What remained feasted upon; his empty stomach rumbled in anticipation.

Condign Sunrise | ***Charles Sartorius***

The world didn't end in a whimper, but a thunderous nuclear bang. When the first missile struck paydirt, retaliation came swiftly. Back and forth it went until total annihilation. The aftermath's opening sunrise was spectacular, a kaleidoscopic collision of rays with atomic particles. Alas, no living creature remained to experience its awe. Only the newly unencumbered undead enjoyed the light show. Earth would be much better without those human pests. Much better, indeed.

Clue | ***Charles Sartorius***

The Puzzler struck again during a torrential rainstorm, later reported to police by a horrified park jogger. The recurrent modus operandi echoed the killer's infamy – partially consumed body parts strewn about like pieces of a dumped puzzle. As crime scene personnel hosed mud from the first bloodied appendage, a shoe dangled visibly on one end.

Blended Family | ***Charles Sartorius***

The Kenins moved into their new haunted home on October 31. Sonia and Hal longed to be empty nesters, but their two grown children, Horace and Gert, were happy with the status quo. As night fell, the resident demon addressed the issue, completed its dirty work, then rearranged and connected the four bloodied, grotesquely disfigured bodies into one horrific monstrosity. A work of nefarious art worthy of display in the world's most notable museums.

Heavy Mettle | ***Charles Sartorius***

The paranormal investigative family's intended midnight exploration of the dilapidated Miller house wilted during the fifth minute. It was one thing to observe the shadow creature, another to become its prey. When the miscreation sprung forward, Mom, Dad, and Brother all spun and attempted to scamper away. Sister, the youngest, remained. Facing the fear, only she survived to walk out of the shadows.

About the Author:
A busy MBA, Charles Sartorius finds time to write both short stories and music lyrics. Several tales have been published in various anthologies and eZines. Another creation, *The Ancient Forest of Terror*, appears in an upcoming Sirens Call anthology. His songs rock on conventional venues such as Amazon and Apple Music like *Feeling Left Out*, judged a finalist in the prestigious 2023 USA Songwriting competition.

The most sinister objects of fear are never truly discarded...
just **repurposed**.

from DEAD SKY PUBLISHING October 10, 2023

"Give it to me," Felipe said under the light of the moon, shoving Carlos against the building.

Felipe and Adam had ambushed us outside the bar, which was a hole-in-the-wall place on the edge of town. A lone parking lot light flickered overhead.

Adam had a gun pointed at me, so I wasn't about to risk my life for Carlos, especially since Carlos was more of an acquaintance than a friend.

If not for their completely opposite physiques, Felipe and Adam could have passed as twins. Both had dark hair and matching goatees, but Felipe was a lanky guy, while Adam was portly with a round face.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Carlos said with a sly grin.

Felipe leaned in. "Cut the crap. I know you're a runner for Eduardo. Give me the drugs, and I'll keep your beating to a minimum."

A chuckle escaped Carlos' lips.

"You think this is funny?" Felipe hissed.

"A little."

Felipe huffed and delivered a punch to Carlos' midsection, Carlos immediately dropping to his knees and gasping for air. Felipe put a boot to Carlos' back, forcing him on his stomach.

"Stay still and don't try anything," Felipe said. He dropped to one knee and patted down Carlos. Then he got to his feet and eyed Adam, letting out a frustrated breath. "He doesn't have it on him."

"I told you," Carlos muttered.

"Shut the hell up," Felipe barked. He took a moment to ponder, eventually glancing at me.

I was already sweating through my t-shirt, and now I felt a drop of perspiration glide down my cheek as I swallowed.

"Alejandro has it," Felipe said, gradually approaching me. "I have nothing against you. Other than the fact that you need to keep better company. Give me what I want, and I promise not to lay a hand on you. You don't need to end up like Carlos here."

I glimpsed Carlos, and he shook his head at me.

"Fine," I said, pulling a bag from the pocket of my jeans.

Felipe grabbed the bag but continued to glare at me. "All of it."

I sighed and retrieved the rest of the contents from my pockets, handing everything to Felipe.

Adam slowly backed away with the gun still aimed at me. I watched as Felipe pocketed the goods and mounted his motorcycle. Then Adam holstered the gun in the waistband of his jeans before mounting his own motorcycle.

The two bikes roared to life, the throaty growl of their engines fading as they made for the main road.

I walked over to Carlos and offered to help him up, but he waved a dismissive hand at me.

"Why the hell did you do that?" he said, getting to his feet.

"What did you expect me to do?" I replied. "He took my tobacco leaves, too. I needed those to get home."

"Enough with the urban legends."

"It's not a legend," I insisted. "And I'm not helping you do your dirty work anymore. I told you I didn't want to get involved with this crap."

Carlos opened his mouth to speak, but a pair of screams forced him to pause.

"Was that Felipe and Adam?" he asked.

I offered a nervous shrug as goosebumps formed along my arms.

The two of us stood there in silence for a minute, peering into the darkness.

A clopping sound stole my attention, and a black horse appeared in the moonlight. Atop the horse was a stern-faced man. He was dressed in black from head to toe, donning a cowboy hat, jeans, and a button-down shirt. A lit tobacco pipe dangled from his mouth, and a puff of smoke lingered in the air.

"No way," Carlos said, his mouth agape. "I'm out of here."

Since the man was blocking our way to the car, Carlos took off running, heading in the direction of the nearby woods. I was tempted to follow but hesitated, frozen with fear.

"I wouldn't run," the man said, removing the pipe from his mouth. "Not in that direction, at least."

He didn't bother dismounting his horse. He just sat there and stared at me.

"You're him," I stuttered. "The Black Rider."

He pursed his lips for a moment. "Call me what you want, but I'm here to deliver justice."

According to legend, the man's ghost showed up on the first day of spring each year, and his job was to rid the streets of troublemakers. But you could avoid his wrath by offering him tobacco leaves.

A scream pierced the air, this one coming from the forest.

"That's probably your friend," the man said. "My two dogs patrol the woodlands, and I'm guessing he's become their latest victim."

"He's not my friend," I said.

"Lucky for you then."

I pondered, curious about Felipe and Adam. "What happened to the other two men?"

"They've been dealt with." He patted the horse's neck. "Isn't that right, girl?"

The mare snorted in response.

I choked down my anxiety. "I'd offer you some tobacco leaves, but they were stolen from me."

The man chuckled. "People think I'll spare them if they offer me tobacco leaves, but it's just wishful thinking on their part. Don't get me wrong. I appreciate the gesture, but it won't right a wrong." His eyes narrowed. "Come here."

I stood my ground, debating what to do.

"It's not a request," the man said.

My heart pounded up into my throat, but I eventually obliged. I sidestepped the horse and stopped a few feet short of the man.

"Closer," he said.

Once again, I did as told.

"Hold out your hand," he demanded.

"What?"

"Hold out your hand."

I huffed and extended a hand. Before I even had a chance to blink, the man snatched my wrist, the pressure of his grip causing me to wince.

"You're weak," he said, relinquishing his hold on me.

I rubbed my sore wrist. "Pain doesn't make me weak."

"I'm not talking about your wrist. I'm talking about the fact that you don't stand up for yourself."

My brow furrowed.

"People take advantage of you," he elaborated. "It's why you do what you do."

I hated to admit it, but the man's words were true enough.

"If you don't change your ways," he continued, "you're going to go down the same path as the others who met their demise tonight."

I vehemently shook my head. "I won't be like them."

"Maybe. But are you willing to make that promise? Because there's one type of person I hate most in this world."

"A liar?" I said.

"No. Someone who doesn't follow through with a commitment." He paused for a few seconds. "You've been marked, so consider this a warning. And your only warning."

"Marked?"

"Your wrist," he replied.

When I glimpsed my wrist, my eyes went wide. There was a black mark in the shape of an X.

"If you live an honest life from this point forward, the mark will disappear in a year's time," he said. "If not, I'll be back. And you don't want to experience my brand of punishment."

I couldn't even muster a response.

The man returned the pipe to his mouth. Then he pulled on the horse's reins, turning the mare around.

I watched as The Black Rider disappeared into the night, and I prayed it was the last I'd ever see of him.

About the Author:

Kevin's work has appeared in a variety of anthologies, magazines, and e-zines, and he enjoys writing in multiple genres.

Amazon Author Page: Kevin Hopson
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Offspring | ***Suzie Lockhart***

Sunlight glistened off the water as I reclined on the dock, feeling thankful to be alive as I watched my grandchildren letting out whoops of joy. My son-in-law was in his speedboat, pulling them from behind in their inner tubes.

It was the happiest I'd felt since my partner, Donald had died suddenly from a massive stroke, two years prior.

My cell phone vibrated in my pocket.

I slipped it out, recognizing the number instantly. I contemplated not answering.

"Abe speaking."

"Hello, Abraham." Cassandra Moxie's cool voice came across the line. "I'm afraid this isn't a personal call."

"I gathered. But I'm retired, remember," I stated flatly, waving at my grandkids. "*Surely* you have another agent that can handle whatever is going on."

"Not this time, Abraham. Not many agents remember what it was like to work for Homeland, when everything began 35 years ago."

I could feel the ulcer I'd finally gotten under control ignite an unfriendly fire in my gut.

Unfortunately, Moxie had achieved her goal. She had my attention.

She had *to be wrong.*

"Okay. What's happened?" I asked tentatively.

"I need to send you pictures from the crime scene." I could've sworn I heard her voice break a little, sending that same familiar, morbid chill through me—the one I'd felt so often back then.

Did I truly want to know...to ruin this near-perfect day...? I hesitated for a moment, but old habits from years of training sent the word flying out of my mouth before I could gather enough conscious thought to stop it. "Sure."

"Call me back. After." When the always unphased Agent Moxie sounded like she couldn't continue, I felt as if a 500-pound bag of sand hit my chest, and I had to gasp for air. I closed my eyes to my scenic surroundings for a moment, trying to envision what could rise to a level so horrific, that it had shaken the always cool, level-headed woman who had been my supervisor for two decades.

I waited for Moxie to send the photos, trying to take slow breaths. When my phone vibrated, I opened my eyes, prepared to be objective... but that proved impossible.

The carnage did, indeed, look much like attacks from the infected I'd seen as a rookie agent. Instead of the grotesque monstrosities that had attacked the living—before a treatment was discovered, to reverse the progression of the fungus that had found its way into the human population, from a combination of a warming planet, and a public's obsession with mushroom highs—so much so that drug dealers found a new way to put lives in danger.

In the pictures, a group of young adults sat amidst a macabre setting of candles and skulls.

Bile rose in my throat as I noticed a familiar girl sitting near the center. Long brown, matted hair hid half her face; spidery veins covering the porcelain skin on the other half. A tangle of intestines dangled from her teeth, blood and gore trickling down the corners of her pouty lips. Her once dark eyes were all white and stared blankly at the massacre surrounding her.

I felt sick; I recognized Donald's daughter…

I dialed Agent Moxie back immediately. "Do you know where she is?"

"We lost sight of her. I'm so sorry…"

I cut her off. "Activate my credentials asap, Cass," I said. "I'll be in first thing in the morning."

I watched my family splashing each other, unaware of what awaited us all.

Hungry beings that were once human like you and I. But they wanted flesh and blood to nourish their dead bodies. Intuition assured me this new generation would be even more repugnant.

We hadn't anticipated a scenario where the inoculations' effects were not passed down through the parents.

These new sightings...

These creatures were...

Offspring.

About the Author:

Suzie Lockhart is a mother of 3 grown sons and a teenage daughter. She is the author of numerous horror stories and poems. She had dabbled in a few other genres as well. She enjoys multimedia art and creating jewelry. Her favorite TV shows are Black Mirror and the Twilight Zone, and confesses to loving the Barbie movie. She enjoys some humor...mostly her own sarcasm. See you in the shadows!

Amazon Author Page: Suzie Lockhart

Facebook: Suzie Lockhart

An alcoholic teacher and father's world spirals out of control when a former student is killed and he is left with her dog and the dark presence that follows it.

"Nick Roberts really gets his claws into your head with this one. Enter at your own risk."
Stephen Graham Jones

CRYSTAL LAKE PUBLISHING

The Crawler | ***Jim Mountfield***

Harry stood in his aunt's cottage, remembering the last time he'd seen her alive.

Alive… If you could call it that. Her shriveled skin contained little apart from the rickety frame of her bones. Her face looked particularly skull-like thanks to the grin made by her oversized dentures and the hollows containing her eyes. Yet from this apparition came a lilting voice, almost youthful, almost coquettish: "Look at ye! Deidre's wee boy. Grown into a big, strapping man!"

She only mentioned her sister when reminding herself that Harry was her nephew. Otherwise, she didn't reminisce about Deidre or express sadness about her death, which had happened when Harry was 12.

"Auntie Lil," he said. "How are ye?"

She fished a lighter and packet of cigarettes out of her pinafore pocket. Once a cigarette had been planted and lit between her wrinkled lips, she inhaled deeply and the tip of it glowed. "Ach, grand. Still enjoying life's little pleasures." The reek of cigarette smoke that suffused the cottage, its air, its upholstery, everything, was one reason why Harry hated coming here.

Admiringly, she repeated, "A big, strapping man!" She turned towards a wall where a sideboard, table, and set of shelves stood end-to-end. "What do yous think, ladies? Here's a handsome fellah yous can flutter yer eyelashes at."

That was another reason why Harry hated this cottage. The dolls.

They shouldn't have disturbed him since they were just innocuous plastic dolls, plump-faced and blonde-haired. The oldest ones dated to the 1950s. They were lined along the tops of the sideboard, table, and shelves, their eyes all staring at him.

She plucked one off the sideboard, turned a key in it, and set it on the floor. It scuttled towards him. "This one's so taken by ye she can't hold herself back."

The doll represented a baby and the clockwork inside it allowed it to crawl on its hands and knees. But its hair was too thick and long for a baby, and its face too mature – with pouting lips, eager eyes, a somehow lewd expression. Harry felt like stomping on it as if it was a giant cockroach.

But he stepped aside and it crawled past, through a doorway and into his aunt's kitchen. He followed it. The clockwork stilled and the doll stopped. As he picked it up, he noticed three buckets positioned under the sink, full of water.

"What's with these?"

"The pipes have been funny lately."

He turned the tap. It gurgled dramatically but exuded only a single brown drop. Grainy brown sediment covered the sink's bottom. "So, where are ye getting yer water?"

"The spring at the end of Daddy's field. I fetch a few pails from it each day. It's fresher than what the tap gave me."

Silently, Harry bristled. It wasn't Daddy's field anymore. It belonged to one of the farmers she'd sold Daddy's fields to, years ago, after she'd inherited the farm and realized she hadn't a clue how to run it. Harry's mother had received nothing. Daddy, and Mummy, had disowned their second daughter when, unmarried, she'd become pregnant with him.

He returned the crawling doll to the sideboard. "I'll find a plumber," he lied. "Someone who'll sort out them pipes without charging the Earth."

Despite the cottage's squalor, cigarette-stench, and dolls, he made himself stay a little longer. "I have something for ye. Saw it on sale in the Spar." From a plastic shopping bag, he took out a 750-millilitre bottle of sherry.

Her eyes gleamed in their hollows. "Ach, Harold. Ye're spoiling me. Ye'll join me in having a taste?"

"Just a wee one. I'm driving and in my line-of-work I need to be careful."

While she searched the kitchen for glasses, Harry sneaked open the door of the cottage's only other room and peered through. He felt the gazes of the dolls behind him, not peering into the room, but peering at him.

He saw a bed, tangled sheets and blankets – he shuddered to think when they'd last been washed – and a bedside table with a saucer overflowing with cigarette-butts. Then his aunt declared, "Here we go!" Hurriedly, he closed the door.

She handed him a glass with a smidgeon of sherry. The badly-chipped mug she held was full. As they clinked the rims of the receptacles her eyes scrutinized him, like the dolls' eyes had done.

"I'm so happy I made yer acquaintance. My nephew… The nephew I'd practically forgotten about." She took a swig of sherry. "Though it's curious how ye've appeared in my life only now. It's almost like ye've been biding yer time."

He wondered*: Does she know?*

Now, in the blackened cottage, he heard rain pattering on the tarp that lay across the hole in its roof. The hole was above the bedroom, where the fire had been fiercest. It wasn't the end he'd have chosen for her. He'd have preferred her to die less hideously – falling into the spring and drowning, say, or having a heart attack lugging the buckets across the field. Still, it didn't matter. She was gone.

He told himself he wasn't responsible. She'd done it to herself. But, deep down, he knew that argument was nonsense. He was responsible by not intervening. Northern Irish people made a big deal about being independent and self-

sufficient, and not needing other folk's help or charity. Consequently, the province was full of elderly people who were unable to support themselves but struggled on anyway, deluding themselves, until they came to grief. During the course of his police work, he'd encountered old-timers in such circumstances and had always passed their names onto the social work department.

He should have done that with Auntie Lil, especially on learning her home no longer had running water. But he hadn't.

His torch-beam roamed across the remains of the wall that'd separated the main room from the bedroom. Its burnt timbers were crisscrossed by yellow tape. Beyond them, the bedroom floor was a mire of cinders, rubble, and charred pieces of furniture. Numbered squares were planted amid the wreckage, indicating sites of possible evidence. Several clustered in the corner where Auntie Lil's bedside table had stood with its saucer of cigarette-butts.

He knew from experience – especially during the years of the Troubles – how thorough the fire investigators and forensics teams were. They wouldn't have accidently left fragments of *her* lying behind.

The outer walls, made of stone, had withstood the conflagration. The one facing the road contained two windows, now glassless, and through these he heard a car. He switched off the torch and stepped back from the windows. As the car approached, it climbed a crest in the road, and its headlights suddenly probed into the cottage. Panels of light appeared on the bedroom's back wall, striped by the shadows of the burnt timber pillars. Then, when the car reached and passed the cottage, the light leapt sideways and illuminated the dolls.

The water from the firehoses had swept some onto the floor where, later, they'd been broken under the firemen's boots. But a good number still huddled on top of the scorched furniture. Their plastic skins were blackened, bubbled, and scabbed. Crispy scrags remained of their hair. Sometimes their features had sunk inwards, making craters in their heads. Other times, their plastic faces had softened and oozed downwards, like rotting, liquefying flesh parting from a skull.

The car departed. Harry stood in darkness, listening again to the rain's gentle percussion on the tarp. But then he heard something more, not from above but low down – rustling sounds, as if something was scurrying on the floor. He switched on the torch, crouched, and shone it around. The sounds ceased without him seeing anything.

A rat, probably.

Harry set about his business. He knelt before the sideboard and prized open one of its doors. Like the shelves and table beside it, the sideboard was made of oakwood, which hadn't caught fire by the time the fire-engines arrived. He shone the light into a compartment. The heat had browned the papers inside but they hadn't combusted either.

Every Friday, the local fishmonger drove his refrigerated van around this area, selling his wares on the farmers' doorsteps. Aunt Lil would cadge a lift with him to the nearest village, where she'd cash her pension-giro and buy groceries and cigarettes. Afterwards, she'd hang around the shops until she found someone who'd give her a lift back. Harry had taken advantage of her Friday expeditions to break into the cottage. Thanks to official and unofficial police activities where he'd searched suspects' homes for evidence, and occasionally planted evidence, Harry was a skilled housebreaker. Though breaking in here wasn't difficult. Auntie Lil didn't even lock her door.

When he found correspondence in the sideboard bearing the name 'Charles McCluskey & Co', he whooped with joy. He had dirt on Charlie McCluskey. During the Troubles, Charlie had provided secret legal advice to people facing murder charges, something that wouldn't endear him to relatives of the murder-victims. Furthermore, when the police had leaned on Charlie, he'd quietly given them information about the people he was supposed to be helping. Even now, after the Peace Agreement, there were aggrieved folk on both sides of the divide who'd happily drop Charlie into Lough Erne, with weights attached, if they ever learnt the truth about him.

Charlie, weaselly as ever, confirmed what Harry suspected. Auntie Lil had a bank account containing the money she'd made selling the farmland. Most people believed she'd squandered the money while living in the farmhouse, the only part of the farm she hadn't sold. And when the farmhouse decayed and became uninhabitable, and she moved into this old farmhand's cottage, they assumed it was gone. Actually, most of the money remained. Why would she spend it? She had her dolls – all she needed for her happiness.

Charlie also mentioned a will. Her money would go to several causes and institutions, including a preservation-fund for the churchyard where her parents were buried and a doll museum in Dublin.

"Dublin has a doll museum?"

"Aye, Sergeant. I hear it's very popular."

"Christ." Then he growled, "Make sure that will vanishes, Charlie. Or ye might vanish yerself."

Harry rummaged through the papers. No correspondence relating to a will had appeared since the last time he'd checked. Good. He didn't want awkward documents turning up that might come between him and Auntie's Lil's money.

He froze. Were there more sounds behind him? Yes, something was scrabbling over the floor. Harry shifted round on his knees.

His torch showed the rubble, ruined wall and gutted bedroom. A little face gazed at him from the light's edge. He only got a glimpse of it, for immediately it flitted sideways, out of the light, into the dark. He swung the beam after it but couldn't locate it again.

He felt vulnerable – kneeling, level with whatever it was – and started to stand up. Debris shifted under his left boot, unbalancing him. He fell back, struck the sideboard, and rebounded onto the floor. The torch flew from his hand and landed elsewhere. Its beam scoured along the ground and revealed a moving outline. Strangely, part of the outline had straight edges and corners, while other parts looked organic… Then he understood. The torso of Auntie Lil's crawling doll had been burnt away, exposing the casing that held its mechanism. But its head survived, as did the limbs propelling it.

The doll turned and faced him again.

Turned? How was that possible? Wait, how was it even *moving*?

Harry grasped upwards, found the edge of the table next to the sideboard, and tried to lift himself. The table teetered, then keeled over. He crashed back onto the floor and the table-edge slammed down on him. It struck his nose, cartilage snapped, blood welled onto his face, his senses swam…

Harry had a flashback to his childhood, to a rare occasion when Auntie Lil invited him and his mother to the farmhouse, where she lived at the time. She retained her blonde hair and vestiges of her youthfulness and beauty. He remembered seeing his aunt cradling one of her countless dolls and cooing over it. Then she looked at him and exclaimed, "Deidrie has you, and I have all my girls here. Why, yous are practically cousins!"

After the visit, he'd asked his mother about Auntie Lil's weird doll obsession. Deidrie sighed. "Lil thinks she's one herself. That's what Mum and Dad called her. *Our wee doll*."

Now, under the table, he heard a series of scraping sounds – a key being turned, a clockwork motor being wound again. Trying to ignore the pain from his broken nose, Harry started wriggling out from under the table. Then he discovered the other dolls were attacking him. They were on his belly and chest… One pressed against his face, making him smell its burnt plastic and feel the molten stubs of its fingers on his skin.

He screamed, "Get off me!"

By the time he'd realized the dolls had merely fallen on top of him when the table toppled over, he was gripping his Ruger Speed-Six revolver. During his panic, he'd snatched it from its side-holster.

He heard further scurrying sounds. More of the fallen dolls were partly blocking the torch-beam, but in the tatters of its light he saw the thing crawling over the rubble towards him, the key turning while it jutted from the metal where its torso had been. Its blonde hair had been scorched away, yet the face still pouted at him. He recalled his mother's words: "She thinks she's one herself."

Thought? No, she *was* a doll. Specifically, Auntie Lil was *this* doll.

Harry sat up. "Fuck off," he shouted. Then he cocked, pointed, and fired the revolver.

The noise was thunderous. Momentarily, the flash showed the entirety of the cottage's wrecked interior. A minute's silence ensued. Then he heard the key again, making those ratcheting sounds. And then it came scrabbling back through the torch-beam. The bullet had blasted away an upper quarter of its face, including one of the eyes, and the head resembled a broken egg. Yet what remained of the face smirked lewdly.

Harry used the gun again. This time he shot wildly and the bullet caught the end of his right boot. The leather burst apart, spraying blood and pieces of toe. He screamed in agony, fell back, and passed out.

When he revived, a small body with stiffly-moving limbs was scrambling up onto his face. Its whirring clockwork sounded like someone whispering to him coquettishly. Shrieking, he stuck the pistol against the doll and fired again. The bullet tore off the remnants of the doll's head, then planted itself in Harry's own head. For a few seconds, his body twitched.

The headless doll clattered off him, ended up on its back, and paddled its arms and legs in the air until its mechanism wound down and stopped. By then, Harry's flesh-and-blood mechanism had ceased too.

About the Author:

Jim Mountfield grew up in Northern Ireland and Scotland. He has since lived elsewhere in Europe and in Africa and Asia, and is currently based in Singapore. His fiction has appeared in Aphelion, Blood Moon Rising, Death Head Grin, Flashes in the Dark, Hellfire Crossroads, Horla, Horrified Magazine, The Horror Zine, Hungur, Schlock! Webzine, Shotgun Honey, The Sirens Call, The Stygian Lepus and Witch House, and in several anthologies.

Author Blog: Blood and Porridge

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"*Please,*" eight-year-old Norabelle begged.

"Stop arguing." Her mother, Lurleen, frowned. "Get in the car."

"But…"

"You wanted to visit the flea market and got to. Now it's time to go home."

"We can't leave her in the trash. She's alone. Sad."

"That's just an old doll someone threw away. It doesn't have feelings."

Norabelle began sobbing.

Lurleen sighed, saw discarded boxes by a dumpster, and grabbed one, putting the doll inside.

After getting home, she gasped to see Norabelle clutching the doll. "Don't *touch* that!" She knocked it from the child's hands. "It's filthy. You might catch something." Using thumb and forefinger, she lifted it by a strand of matted hair, letting it dangle in the air.

Later, she held out the freshly scrubbed doll. "This cleaned up better than I expected. It's well-made. The soft material feels like skin…"

"Oooh!" Eyes glowing, Norabelle grabbed the doll. "Her hair's all golden. And her eyes are the color of yummy chocolates."

Her mother chuckled.

"Rowena's *beautiful*."

"You picked a name fast."

"It's her name. She told me."

***

"Several *hundred* dollars?" Lurleen exclaimed. "For a doll? You're mistaken."

"I got estimates online," her boyfriend, Frank, said. "It's antique and may be worth even more."

"Selling it would break Norabelle's heart. I'd never..."

"Think of all we could buy."

"She loves that thing."

"So? She'd get over it."

"*No.*"

Once Lurleen slumbered, Frank crept into Norabelle's room, shining his flashlight around. Seeing the doll tucked in beside the sleeping girl, he removed it, then hurried to the back porch. "I'll get us a bigger TV," he muttered. "No. One for my place… the casino..."

He glanced at the pilfered item, frowning. "Weird. You seem different... Stupid lighting."

A faint sound came from somewhere. He saw nothing, though. Setting the doll on the porch, he walked to the back fence, looked left, right, but no one was there. Snorting, he turned around. "What the…?"

Rowena no longer lay on the porch. Instead, she stood upright.

Frank laughed. "Okay, you got me. Come out."

Nobody responded.

The doll's head swiveled until her eyes met his. She grinned, mouth widening until it took up half her face. Rising into the air, she floated toward him, laughing. But the sound grew louder, changing into a maniacal cackling. A hole gaped where her mouth had been, now encompassing her entire face except for her eyes, which darkened to black, red flames flickering inside.

"Let's play." The whisper came from all around him.

Blanching, he backed away.

A hazy mist emanated from Rowena's mouth, solidifying and coalescing into a girl no more than five or six. She flew toward him and clamped her fingers around his throat.

Frank fought to get free, his face reddening. He couldn't escape, but managed a strangled yell.

Flames shot from her mouth, engulfing him. Soon nothing remained of him but charred remains, which she devoured.

After changing back into the doll, Rowena vanished, reappeared beside Norabelle, and snuggled up to her.

Mama | ***Gabriella Balcom***

"You children did a wonderful job," Mama said. She beamed first at one of them, and then the other. "I can't remember ever having a better hunt. You really listened to me and obeyed, and I was quite pleased how perfectly we worked together. We make a great team, and I have a surprise for you, to reward you for doing so well."

"Do we get extras this time?" eight-year-old Manny demanded. "Last time we didn't."

"You sure do," she replied, chuckling. "Smart boy."

"*Yippee!*" Five-year-old Mimi cheered and jumped up and down. "When do we eat? I'm hungry."

"Me, too," Manny said.

"The meat will take a while to cook, because I just started it," Mama said. She grinned at them, revealing her double rows of long, razor-sharp teeth. "But it'll be perfect when it's done. All nice and golden brown."

"Raw is better," Manny commented. "It's juicier, and the bones are nice and crunchy."

Mimi gazed at her big brother, whom she adored. "I like raw, too."

They turned, studying the cages full of the humans they'd caught. Some cried. Others clung to the bars, rattled them, or looked around wildly, clearly searching for a way out. Many huddled together in groups, trembling. A few glared at their smiling captors.

***

"Mama, I'm *starving,*" Mimi complained. "It's been forever and I want meat."

"I just looked in the oven," her mother replied. "The two I put in are still rather pale. Not fully cooked. I want them done a bit more before I pull them out."

"But I want some *now!"*

"I know, but you need to be patient, dear. The time will pass more quickly if you find something to do. Why don't you play a game with your brother? Or, you could have some herbs while you wait."

Manny screwed up his face at Mimi and crossed his eyes, making her giggle. He ambled toward the cages, nibbling at the chamomile and sage growing beside them. He glanced over his shoulder, and saw their mother preparing another body for baking, not paying him any attention. Quick as a flash, he lunged toward a cage, gripped a human around the head, and ripped off its ears. He ignored the creature's loud wails, tossed an ear to Mimi, and chewed the other.

"Naughty boy," Mama snapped. She frowned at him before tromping over to swat his behind. "You know the rules. No snacking before meals."

Once her attention returned to the food she was preparing, Manny winked at his little sister, who winked back. He darted toward another cage, and this time when he grabbed a human through the bars, he tore off both of its arms.

Mimi giggled, smacked her lips, and caught the appendage he threw her.

"Oh, all right," Mama groused. "The main course is still too rare, so you can go ahead and share one while we wait. But *just* one. I want you to have a good appetite for dinner."

About the Author:

Gabriella Balcom lives in Texas with her family, works full-time in the mental health field, and writes fantasy, horror, romance, sci-fi, literary fiction, children's stories, and more. She has had 475 works accepted for publication, and has five books out: On the Wings of Ideas, Worth Waiting For, The Return, Free's Tale: No Home at Christmas-time, and Down with the Sickness and Other Chilling Tales.

Facebook: Gabriella Balcom

Burn Every Book | ***JB Corso***

The Boston Public Library hosts blank shelves after we burned their precious books. Every single one. Reference books. Encyclopedia sets. Even magazines and newspapers. Everything. We've had no choice but to become dumb.

The young wisdom vampires can sense our intelligence. They're so hungry. They've fed on so many of us before we could barricade the library. Being around the damn scientists and survivalists lured so many of us to their deaths. There's too many of those damn things to take any chances. We must save whoever survives from gaining any new knowledge. It's humanity's only hope.

Park Villa Cattle | ***JB Corso***

Madame Claudia sends our vampire youth out into the chilly night. They've grown from newborns into energetic children within hours. Her servants dress them in clothes of the nearby population while they feed from wicker baskets of rats. A small snack before they descend onto Park Villa.

The villa's isolated shoreline location is the perfect starting point for the downfall of mortals. Our fanged youngsters will turn locals into loyal, half-breed blood suckers and corral the rest to our castle. There is no going back. The eternal reign of vampires has begun.

Skin Squares | ***JB Corso***

I lay immobile over the couch's padded arm. I've lost track of time. Another section of skin dropped off my back last night. I've developed an exposed wall of muscle. The skin square slithered towards a tubular egg. They've all attached to it. I can't watch the way the mass pulsates.

I awoke to the sound of movement. Clacking on the hardwood floor. My flesh pieces have all dried into leathery husks. The egg shell stands open. A slimy trail leads around the couch's back. I can't see where it goes.

Young and Hungry | ***JB Corso***

Juvenile wings obscure the full moon hanging overhead. High-pitched chirping brings a sleeping dog out of its backyard slumber. The canine scans the lawn's dark corners. Nervous whining rattles along its throat. It yelps once.

Screams erupt around the neighborhood. All fall silent in moments. Fuzzy shadows pull across the grass towards the bright living room lights of a young family playing board games.

The first talons catch onto the window screen, followed by several dozen more. Newborn death bats shred apart the thin metal interlace. Raging hunger and bloody fangs lead their swarm inside.

About the Author:
JB Corso is a healthcare professional working to better the lives of vulnerable people. They enjoy spending time with their supportive wife, writing daily, and finding joy in the world. Their author's motto is "Developing stories into masterpieces." They have been published in both fiction and professional outlets.

Facebook: JB Corso

The Wolves | ***Matthew McAyeal***

A long time ago, in the twilight before a night of the full moon, a young Puritan colonist named Constant Turner was barricading himself into his home. This was not an unusual activity at the moment, as all the townspeople were doing the same. The difference was that they were hoping to keep danger out while Constant was hoping to keep danger in.

It was thus a most inopportune time for someone to knock on his door. A knock came nonetheless.

"Go away!" he barked.

"Please, Constant!" said a very sweet voice. "I need your help!"

The voice belonged to Obedience Child, the local seamstress and the prettiest of seven nubile sisters. Her sisters were named Patience, Mercy, Thankful, Hope, Unity, and Rachel. Constant had gotten to know Obedience quite well recently, since he needed so much clothing repaired these days.

"Find someone else!" he said. "I cannot help you right now!"

"Constant, please!" she begged. "It has to be you and it has to be right now!"

He couldn't say no to Obedience for long. Against his better judgment, he let her in. He knew he'd have to get her to leave before the darkness came, but how long could this take?

The familiar sight of Obedience's beauty was revealed as she stepped inside — her fresh face, fair skin, dark hazel eyes, and the little curl of dark hair peeking out from under her white coif. Like all the townswomen, she wore simple Puritan garments, but Constant did not think that the robes of a queen could have enhanced her beauty. Surely even Louis XIV, in his decadent court across the sea, could not hope for a woman so beautiful!

Constant knew her well enough to know that her beauty on the outside was matched by beauty on the inside. She was not only a God-fearing hard worker, as any good Puritan colonist would be, but friendly, helpful, and cheerful. She always smiled a most loving smile at her fellow creations. Even now she was smiling, only it was a bit more nervously than normal. Constant hoped she would always smile at him like that, but her smile would disappear really quickly if she stayed there much longer.

"Constant, I need your help," she said. "My father wants me to marry John Black."

"Do you want to marry him?" asked Constant, trying to keep his voice even. He hated John Black and was sickened by the thought of Obedience marrying him, but Constant wasn't exactly in a position to pass moral judgment on anyone else.

"No," said Obedience. "I cannot marry him. He is a wicked, ungodly man! You remember what he did to that Indian village during the war. That was the same night the wolf attacks started. It is God's judgment against us, I am sure of it! But you knew it was wrong at the time. That's why you stayed behind with the men building the palisade."

"Yeah, I suppose I did," said Constant awkwardly. "Maybe you should go now."

"It's dreadfully ironic that you were the first victim of the wolf attacks and on that very night no less," she continued. "As I recall, you found yourself naked in the forest when you woke up the next morning. I still don't understand how that happened. And just a month later, your entire family were the wolves' next victims. Oh, Constant! I feel so bad for you and so afraid as well! How do the wolves get past the palisade?"

"Well, no one knows that," Constant lied. "You should go now."

"Constant, I want you to marry me!" Obedience declared. "Believe me, I know my father wouldn't be happy with the match, but I don't care! You're the only godly choice! I'm ready to give up everything for the Lord and I can only do that with you!"

"No, you can't," said a gruff voice suddenly.

At that moment, John Black himself burst in the door. He was a tall, handsome man with shining black hair and he was pointing a musket at Constant.

"If you think this is the way to court me, you are wrong!" Obedience yelled indignantly.

"I'm not doing this to win your favor, woman," John said with a condescending sneer. "I'm saving the town for a second time."

"You didn't save it the first time!"

“I did what I had to do,” he drawled. “Why should I have spared their women and children? The children would only grow up and the women would only breed more of them. My only regret about the war is that I didn’t kill King Philip myself!”

“And how are you saving the town now?” asked Obedience, crossing her arms.

“By putting an end to *his* attacks!”

“Wolves are behind the attacks!”

“No,” said John, shaking his head. “One wolf is. Him. He’s a werewolf, Obedience! The attacks always come during the full moon, the same nights he’s always too ill for his militia duties. But it’s over now. The silver bullet I’ve loaded into my musket will see to that!”

“Werewolves!” scoffed Obedience. “Surely that’s an old pagan myth! We Puritans know better than to believe such foolish superstitions!”

But even as she spoke those words, thick hair had started bursting out all over Constant’s body. “Go! Go!” he yelled at Obedience. “Get out of here!”

“I will not leave with John Black!” she declared proudly.

“He’s right about me!” yelled Constant, speaking quickly while he still could speak. “The wolf which attacked me was a werewolf and I became one when I was bitten! The next time I changed, I killed my own family! I’ll kill you next if you don’t leave! I’ve tried to stop the attacks, but the beast always finds a way! I couldn’t tell anyone! I didn’t want anyone to know! I really, really didn’t want you to know because I — because I love y—” At this point, the growth of huge wolf fangs suddenly made him incapable of human speech.

Constant hated the way Obedience was looking at him now — with big, fearful eyes and not even the slightest smile. She was scared — scared of *him*! And she ought to be too, since the beast was rising up within him and he could already feel its monstrous impulse to rip apart her vulnerable, delicate body. Oh, how he wished he could save her from the danger! That would bring back her beautiful smile for sure! But he couldn’t. He *was* the danger.

He flailed and snarled as he came down on all fours and burst out of his clothes. He was not a person anymore. He was a beast now. He did not recognize Obedience as a special person or even a person at all. She was just something to kill in the hopes that it would help satiate his violent fury. His only concern was that she wouldn’t be enough — not even close to enough! He would have to kill a lot more people than just her, so he’d better get started!

The werewolf lunged forward.

Obedience screamed in terror.

John fired his weapon.

The silver bullet found its mark.

Tension dissipated as the werewolf collapsed. Being dead, Constant was spared the sight of Obedience collapsing romantically into the arms of her rescuer, John Black.

About the Author:

Matthew McAyeal is a writer from Portland, Oregon. His short stories have been published by "Bards and Sages Quarterly," "Fantasia Divinity Magazine," "cc&d," "The Fear of Monkeys," "Danse Macabre," "Scarlet Leaf Magazine," "Bewildering Stories," "Tall Tale TV," "Fiction on the Web," "Quail Bell Magazine," "MetaStellar," and "Kaidankai." In 2008, two screenplays he wrote were semi-finalists in the Screenplay Festival.

Amazon Author Page: Matthew McAyeal
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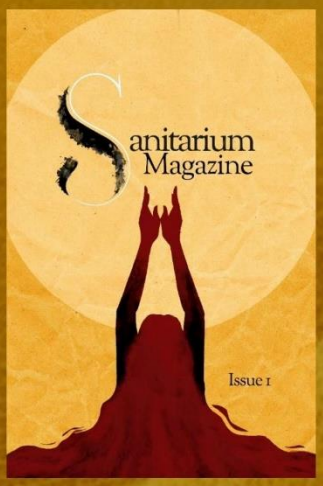

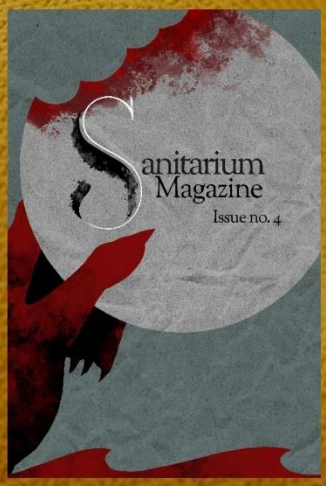

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The Rock Ladies | *Rivka Jacobs*

The cherry-red Chevy Nomad flew south along US Route 666. Rattling and bumping behind—attached by a rope-reinforced hitch—rolled a silver, gleaming, twenty-two-foot Airstream Flying Cloud. Lorraine Moody was the driver. Her sister, Shirley Moody, sat beside h er. They were singing a Buddy Holly hit, bouncing in their seats. “Well that’ll be the day when you say goodbye, yeah that’ll be the day when you make me cry, you say you’re gonna leave you know it’s a lie…” They held their breath and stared at one another, then shouted loudly, “…’Cause that’ll be the day-yay that I die!”

They broke into squeals of laughter. Shirley glanced behind her, at the back seat where their babies were settled in their shoeboxes. "How'd you like that, guys?" she asked them.

Ricky and Lucy gazed back at her as if unimpressed, their sharp, quartz-crystal teeth and lustrous amethyst lips pulled into a lopsided smirk. Mary as always appeared round and open, infinitely supportive, her concentric circles of powder-blue and lavender agate and chalcedony exposing a nearly perfect hole filled with sparkling, smoky bubbles. Tom and Bob weren't paying any attention; they'd turned slightly toward one another and conversed in silent whispers. Ahway and Atsah appeared confused. And Darla, poor deformed Darla, her small head almost entirely obscured by a bulbous mouth prickling with a mass of tiny, jewel-like needles, Darla—as usual—seemed distracted and far away.

"Aww," Shirley said in a comforting tone, "we'll be at the Black Hills soon. Atsah sweetie, you'll get used to us." She turned back to her older sister. "Lorraine, Ahway and Atsah seem a little depressed. Maybe we should have left them with Nathan."

Lorraine shrugged, checked the rearview mirror to make sure her red lipstick wasn't smeared. She also took a peek back at the bright front hump of their travel trailer. She reached to turn up the volume of the car radio as a Perry Como song came on.

Shirley made a face, her coral mouth puckering. She splayed her fingers, holding them in place long enough so the world could see that her coral nail polish perfectly matched her lips.

Lorraine smiled and stuck her left elbow out the open window, resting her arm on the door frame as she hummed in time with Mr. Como.

They were headed for one of their favorite hunting grounds within the Black Hills of east Arizona. The Nomad wagon and trailer rolled between stretches of hard-scrabble, occasional Alligator Juniper trees, and prairie grass as they descended into Sonoran Desert country and approached the billion-year-old volcanic fields. The sudden appearance of Barrel and Saguaro Cactus, small ash green juniper bushes twisted into torturous shapes signaled an abrupt change in landscape. Ahead, all around them, loomed the dark slopes and crumbling cores of ancient volcanoes, slouching hulks, toothy cliffs and mesas of basalt and rhyolite warily observing them as they drew near.

They'd been in Ganado the past few days, visiting their friend Nathan Yazzie. Nathan was a master rock hound and prospector; one of their suppliers. They considered him a brother. He treated them with respect, and they had declared him ‘safe’. Not that the babies could get anything over on Nathan. He knew what they were. Nathan spoke several languages and frequently traveled to South America and Mexico hunting the best specimens. The sisters were afraid to go to places like Brazil, Uruguay, Veracruz, and Chihuahua, so they relied on him to do the digging for them. He, for his part, didn't care for the flea-market or county and state fair circuit. So Nathan depended on the Moody Girls, as he called them, to market his turquoise, gem-quality crystals, geodes, and raw semi-precious stones.

It was Nathan who found Ahway and Atsan last fall in the Chihuahua region of Mexico; classic 'Las Choyas' coconut rounds, their bodies made of chalcedony with interior clusters of sparkling calcite points. They were not as snobby as Ricky, Lucy, and Mary, with their agate rings and fine amethyst throats, or elitists like Tom and Bob who were Thundereggs from Idaho. The two in fact seemed a little shy and disoriented, propped in their rectangular cardboard box, swathed by cotton ticking.

Shirley reached for her purse on the floor between her feet. She hauled it up and rummaged inside, removed her matching compact and lipstick tube. She studied herself in the little round mirror as she touched powder to her cheeks. Her blond bangs marched straight across her forehead in tight formation. She could only find a few wrinkles—and a little jowly sagging under her chin. "Not bad for an old girl of forty-six," she said to her sister, snapping the compact closed and popping the lipstick case back together. She threw them into her bag. "What's that sweetie?" she asked, half turning around. "Oooh, you are so sweet, Bobby!" Shirley giggled and jounced a little in her seat as she faced forward once more.

Lorraine nodded without expression. The radio had been playing Elvis Presley's *Jailhouse Rock*, but now static started to distort and garble the sound. Lorraine tried to adjust the dial, but got only a spitting, hissing noise instead. "Hmmm ... we must be getting close."

"Oh look, Lorraine, it's one of our landmarks," Shirley nearly shouted, pointing and waving her hand. "The sign for the turnoff to the campground!"

A few hours later, as the sinking sun painted a few stratus clouds and the tops of surrounding hills a luminescent salmon-pink, the sisters were at their camp site off the Back Country Byway, the shiny trailer parked, the green-and-white striped awning raised along its side. Two folding chairs and camp-tables were drawn up to a round, dancing campfire. Shirley was in the galley, at the princess gas stove, cooking and singing to herself. Every once in a while Lorraine, who was outside gathering more firewood, could hear her sister guffaw and exclaim. They were alone for now, and Lorraine preferred it that way. She wore a black peacoat over blue-jean coveralls and a flannel shirt. Her heavy shoes were fit for hiking or farm work. She walked back to the open door of the trailer and stuck her head inside. "Hey Shirley," she called, "it's getting cold outside. Wrap yourself up when you get out here." She pushed the heavy door so that it almost shut.

Shirley Moody emerged, kicking open the door again, carrying a tray loaded with steaming food. She bent and carefully unloaded the dishes on the small tables. "Don't forget to wash your hands," she said to her sister. She straightened, the tray folded under one arm. She was wearing her tight black capris and completely inappropriate strap slippers. A large fluffy sweater obscured her knit blouse. "Don't start eating," she reminded Lorraine, "until I bring the babies out."

When all the geodes were set up on a special red-painted bench, in a row facing Shirley's right, the sisters lowered themselves into the canvas and wood chairs and took their plates on their laps. They scooped food while uncountable facets, silicate blisters and metamorphic lumps glinted in the firelight. Bob's large, sharp crystals engorged, glittered; they seemed to crawl around the edges of his mouth.

Lorraine glanced at the geode. "Hmmm," she said, and took a sip of her coffee. "I hope we meet up with some lost hiker tomorrow."

"I'm going to finish my book tonight," Shirley announced. She tossed her plate onto the table with a clang, took her coffee mug into both hands and rested it on her somewhat bulging belly. Her legs were apart, her Capezios planted on the gravely ground. She breathed in the cool and pungent dusky desert air.

"Which book is that, dear?" Lorraine asked.

"My Ayn Rand. It's called *Atlas Shrugged*. It's new. I have such a big stack of books to read, and poetry. And there are so many new movies to see. I don't know why you have to drag us to John Wayne movies over and over again. Nathan hates John Wayne. Says those movies are cruel and mean and tell lies about his relatives."

"Those are the best goddamn movies ever made!" Lorraine remembered the time they detoured into a small West Texas town where the drive-in theater was showing *The Searchers* and she'd forced Shirley to watch. Lorraine also remembered; that night had not ended well. Too many young people hanging about, out late, drinking and dragging. Lorraine tossed the rest of her coffee onto the rocks, began singing the theme from *The Searchers* to tease her sister.

Shirley slammed her mug down on her table and covered her ears dramatically. "Stop, just stop!"

"'... Ride away .... ride away ... ride away....'" Lorraine persisted decrescendo, then laughed at her sister's stormy, frustrated expression. She heaved herself to her feet, tugged her coat.

Shirley fondled her pearl earrings, making sure she hadn't dislodged them. "I wish we could stay in one place." She sighed. "I wish we had television. You know what night it is, it's Sunday night! Ed Sullivan and Dinah Shore and Loretta Young!"

Lorraine raised her arms and twined them high over her head. The stars were emerging in the bowl of sky above; a mass of flickering, multi-colored points and a Milky Way band that looked not unlike the infinitely large face and endless interior of a cosmic geode. "You know why we have to keep moving," she said without emotion.

"But why can't we stay at motels anymore?" Shirley already knew the answer.

Lorraine ignored the question. She arched her back, stretching, her hands on her hips. "I'll make the fire tomorrow, so I'll be up before dawn. I'm going to get ready for bed."

"Remember the Rose Motel in Utah, Lorraine? The one with that wonderful diner, in Provo? They had the best bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwiches. Oh, and their soda fountain—mmmm—banana splits, triple fudge sundaes, and milk shakes for twenty-five-cents. And the juke box." She closed her eyes with the pleasant memories.

"Yeah, well.... You know how it is. We can't stay more than a day in any one place. We gotta keep moving. We'll find a lunch counter somewhere in Tuscon, soon, I promise. You can have one of your chocolate-strawberry milkshakes."

Shirley was momentarily overwhelmed by a surge of emotion, a wave of loss and loneliness. She immediately sensed tension, and glanced around at the geodes. They did not appear happy. "Oh, I'm so sorry guys!" She tried to make her tone as humble and apologetic as possible. She shot up, hurried over, fell to her knees in front of their bench. Mary was all circles and OOOO, but Darla's mouth was swelling and blistering and radiating sparks. The crinkled and ragged openings

of Lucy's maw widened and a liquid-like glare flared from within. Ricky's jasper and agate lines shifted. Atsah and Ahway seemed shadowed, as if they were trying to hide. Shirley reached out to touch Bob. "Ouch!" she screamed. She withdrew her right hand; a perfect little arc of bloody punctures marked the flesh of her wrist. Tears stung her eyes.

Lorraine walked over, leaned down to see. She helped Shirley to her feet and took a Kleenex tissue out of her pocket, patted it on the wound. "Bob," she scolded, "that wasn't nice at all. You should be ashamed of yourself."

Bob flashed, his blazing crystals surrounded by slithering layers of deep red and carnelian orange. Tom appeared to be closer to Bob now; they were almost touching. The others were grouped together, at the far end of the bench, becoming more dull as the campfire burned out.

Lorraine wrapped one arm around her younger sister's shoulders and gave her a hug. "Oh, come on, forget it. You know how he gets sometimes. Think of all the boxes of beautiful rocks and minerals in our trailer and car. Think how we tumble rough stones into semi-precious gems. We're the Moody Girls, the Rock Ladies. We are the most popular rock hounds on the circuit."

Shirley sniffed, blotted her nose with a knuckle.

"We'll go to the hunting grounds and up the trails tomorrow. We'll find gobs of fire-agate and smoky, topaz and tourmaline. And there's bound to be some tourist or careless hiker out there too, some old prospector for the babies. They'll feed and they'll be fine, don't you worry."

Shirley slumped, chewed on one of her enameled nails.

"I'll give you the bed this time. I'll take the table."

They took turns sleeping in the camper's forward bunk. Shirley hated the alternative; the dinette table topped by bench cushions that creaked every time she moved. She felt lighter. She straightened, stood taller, smiled slightly.

"There you go!" Lorraine hugged her again. "Shirley," she whispered, in an old, familiar way. "Adamite all sugary and lime with rust-red flecks of bright. Wulfenite candy-orange. Crysocolla blue green, like the color of a shallow sea. Sodalite glistening lazuli with veins creeping white."

Shirley sighed with contentment. "Lovely, lovely rocks," she murmured.

"And who are the most beautiful of all?" Lorraine stepped back and grasped Shirley by the shoulders.

"Geodes," she answered, her voice dreamy with the mystery of it all. "Geodes are as beautiful as heaven."

Lorraine embraced her, then patted the middle of her back. "You go on in now, and get some sleep. I'll make sure everything is ship-shape out here. I'll bring in the babies. Okay?"

Shirley bowed her head a bit and peered up at Lorraine from under her lashes. She displayed an embarrassed grin. "I'm sorry...."

"Nothing to be sorry about, sis. Go on now, get some sleep. You're fine!" Lorraine waited, and watched Shirley shamble to the camper, wobble up the drop-down steps. After a few moments, she began to gather the dishes, carried them into the kitchenette of the Flying Cloud. She came back outside and moved to the dying fire, kicked some dirt to smother the remaining embers.

Finally she turned and approached the array of geodes, now illuminated only by star-fields and a sickle-moon. They were contrite, their contours sagging downward, their crystals dull, their gullets mere cracks. She stood with her feet wide, her arms folded. "Well," she said, "you all should be truly ashamed of yourselves. What harm did Shirley ever do to you? I am sorely disappointed." Her words clouded in front of her face.

A silver, undulating mist coiled around them as she picked up each of the babies, collecting them, cradling them in her arms; they made clicking and gurgling sounds as she walked. Lorraine climbed into the trailer. She carried her charges to their boxes where she gently lowered each and tucked them in, swaddling them in their undyed and pure cotton cloth.

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

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Just a Mite Peckish | *Rie Sheridan Rose*

I suppose my…shall we say epicurean…taste began in the womb. One day, my mother expected to have twins. The next, only me. Apparently, I absorbed my sibling, as one does, to seal my place as an only child. After that fiasco, no way in hell my mother would ever try again. But I didn't mind playing by myself.

The one time she allowed me to play with my peers as a toddler didn't end well. One of the other children waved their hand in front of my face, and I took it as an invitation. The fat little fingers looked like Gummi Worms—so I bit one off. It didn't taste like a Gummi Worm, but I still enjoyed it. I would have chomped off another one, but the little girl's screams attracted the attention of the adults in charge, and I didn't get a chance. They wouldn't let me come back either.

Of course, eventually, I *had* to interact with other children. Mother didn't have the chops for home-schooling, and Father left the picture as soon as he realized 'no' was *always* going to mean 'no.' I think I was about four when he walked out and never returned.

So, when I hit six, off to public school I went.

Public school was an eye-opener. Children were everywhere—not that they gave me any opportunity to repeat the finger experiment. I don't think it would have worked, anyway. I had observed from my own hands the fingers thickened as one grew, and the bones made up most of the expansion. It wasn't worth the trouble for so little reward.

On the other hand, the knowledge one could absorb was amazing! I lived in the library when I wasn't required to be in class. I read far above my grade level. By the time I reached third grade, I had consumed every book in the school library. Fiction *and* nonfiction.

The librarian took it upon herself to introduce me to the city library—to get me out of her hair, I think—and I began my *real* education. First, I read about Jack the Ripper, Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer…when I finished with every serial killer I could find, I started into methodology.

Dissection, butchery, gourmet cooking…my educational consumption knew no bounds. Unlike my practical application.

I knew by instinct I shouldn't practice my new knowledge close to home. Like cats don't shit where they eat, a cannibal has to be careful.

There. I said it. I know you were thinking about it already.

Yes, by the time I was twelve, I knew my future occupation would be cannibal. Nothing brought me as much satisfaction as the long pork. Some may say I hadn't had enough experience with the process to make such a claim, but I knew. I knew.

That tiny set of phalanges slithering down my throat had been the best thing I'd ever tasted. It sent a thrill through me, I knew I could never duplicate—but I could come close. The question was *how*?

And the answer came soon after my sixteenth birthday. I had gotten my driver's license the week before. I had been on my mother's bank account since I was fourteen—in case of emergencies. So, now I had mobility and funds at my disposal. I told my mother a friend had invited me to spend the night. She was drinking so much by then; I doubt she even heard me.

"That's nice, dear," she caroled from the kitchen, and I heard the gurgle of wine into her glass. "Be safe out there."

I left the house, feeling the exhilaration of freedom singing through my veins. I could go where I wanted, and do as I pleased. Hot damn!

From my serial killer research, I knew one of the biggest pitfalls was getting sloppy. If I was going to do this, I had to do it right. I loaded three ice chests in the back of the station wagon. Ice packed each half full. I planned to drive to the next town over and look for one of the panhandlers that seemed to be everywhere these days. The type of man or woman unlikely to be missed for several days, if at all.

I had found an abandoned cabin in the thick woods which grew between the two towns, and set it up as a kill room. God bless *Dexter*.

I doubted my first time would be perfect, but I had removed as many obstacles as I could think of. Along with the plastic sheeting I had hung throughout the cabin, I had pre-labeled several large freezer storage bags and laminated a detailed diagram of the human body, so I would know where to cut.

As I cruised up and down the streets of my destination, looking for a likely meal, a boy accosted me at a stoplight. He looked about my age but whittled down by deprivation to almost nothing.

"Spare some change?" he whined through the open window.

I grinned. “I’ll do you one better. Hop in, and we’ll go get a burger.”

His eyes bulged, as if he could not believe his luck. Then he ran around the car and hopped in before I could change my mind. “Thanks!” he said, sincerity glowing from his face. He might be thin, but I could tell he would taste sweet.

I pulled away from the stoplight and headed toward the cabin.It took him a few minutes to realize we headed out of town.

“Hey—I thought we were going to get a burger…”

“Don’t worry. I’ll keep my promise.” Mentally, I crossed my fingers.

We pulled into the clearing outside the cabin, and he looked scared. “Um…you can take me back now. I’m not hungry anymore.”

“Nonsense. Besides, *I’m* hungry.” I beamed my best smile his way. “C’mon inside. I’ve got all the fixings for a fantastic hamburger.”

He still looked doubtful, but what was he going to do? Run ten miles to safety?

I got out of the car and crossed to the front door. “C’mon. It’s cooling off out here. It’s much better inside.”

He got out of the car and inched closer to the porch.

Impatient at the time he wasted, I unlocked the cabin, then came back to his side. I slipped an arm around him and guided him up the steps.

He moved like a loose-stringed marionette, but he *did* move. Until I opened the door, and all the plastic came into view. He tried to run then, but I’m stronger than I look, and he was a seventy-five pound weakling.

I pushed him through the door and jabbed the hypodermic I was concealing in my other hand into his neck. He fell like a downed bull. I hadn’t been sure it would work, but I had read as much as possible about the easiest way to take someone down fast, and an air embolism worked in the movies…

I dragged him further inside the cabin. I doubted anyone would drive by here and get suspicious, but better safe than sorry. When I had him zip tied to the eye bolts I had screwed into the floor in the middle of the kill room, I went out and retrieved the ice chests.

Setting my laminated cheat sheet where it would be easy to see, I started removing his clothing. It proved a shock to find the hand-tooled money belt he wore beneath his clothes. That was not the accessory of your normal runaway. He also carried a thin wallet with an ID card instead of a driver’s license, in the name of a prominent local family.

Shit.

Things just got real bad. He might be as young as fourteen and big for his age. That could explain no driver’s license *and* his weight if he’d had a recent growth spurt.

I opened the money belt and found three thousand dollars in cash. No wonder he wore it close to the skin. Must have decided it would be fun to play vagrant for a few days, but brought along enough of daddy’s money to go to a hotel if the fun wore off. It could make things sticky…but if I never used the cabin again, and cleaned up with care, I hoped the authorities would chalk him up to a childish tantrum leading to a new life—at least until the heat died down. Surely, he hadn’t just kissed mom goodbye with ‘A Beggin’ I Will Go’ on his lips and disappeared. There had to be a reason he’d left, and it wouldn’t surprise me if no one cared overmuch. A lot of these kids ran away over the slightest altercation.

My stomach growled at the time I wasted, so I got started with my business. I slit his throat first, just to be sure he was really dead. The blood didn’t fountain out like on TV, but oozed sluggishly from the wound. Good. It wasn’t under pressure. He’d already been dead.

I must admit it gave me a bit of a relief.

I learned a lot from my first kill. It wasn’t a neat butchery job, but it showed me where everything was, and what it really looked like—you don’t get the same sense of it in pictures—and *smelled* like. That was the most disgusting part. The smells.

Still, by the time I had everything placed in the proper neatly printed bags and stored away in the ice chests, I was ready for a treat.

I cooked up my first feast that night. It tasted like anything but chicken. Heavenly.

And that’s how I got started on the road to here. And you. I’m much better at my profession now. Hell, I even have a butcher shop on the side—selling the sort of products people expect. No long pork there. It’s helped me hone my skills.

Your death won’t hurt a bit, I promise.

In fact, the drugs I gave you when we had that drink earlier should kick in any moment to waft you off to dreamland. I hope so, at least.

About the Author:
Rie Sheridan Rose's prose appears in numerous anthologies, including Killing It Softly Vol. 1 & 2, Hides the Dark Tower, Dark Divinations, and Startling Stories. In addition, she has authored twelve novels, six poetry chapbooks, and dozens of song lyrics. Member of the HWA, SFWA, and SFPA.

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Solstice Savior | ***Doug Hawley***

The reverend began his sermon on the Winter Solstice. "It is time to pick the chosen one from our congregation. Picking the most deserving is the most important decision we will ever make. I've been thinking and praying for the right decision, and weighing the alternatives for months. Mrs. Jones has loyally supported us for fifteen years with Sunday school, picnics, and potlucks. Mr. Hadley has provided workers and design for our remodel, and got it done under budget and on time. Mr. Jackson has led the choir for ten years and has written many of our hymns. It has been a very tough decision, but Mr. Hadley is our savior." Jones and Jackson tried unsuccessfully to hide their hurt, while Hadley beamed.

"Come on up to the front Hadley. Do you accept the charge?"

"I do, with the greatest humility."

"Do our predecessors accept this man to guide our members forever into eternity?"

A mix of ghostly male and female voices which seemed to emanate from the walls responded "We do."

The reverend took off his gloves and placed his right hand on Hadley's forehead "Thank you for having the courage and faith to accept your role, the most important role for anyone in our faith for a century until our next savior is chosen."

Hadley fell down and didn't stir. Reverend said "Saint Hadley is one with our esteemed predecessors. As we have done in the past, we will report his death to authorities who will say that he died of a heart attack."

The voice of Hadley seemed to come from everywhere. "The joy of joining my ancestors is beyond anything I could say."

The reverend told the flock "The ritual you have seen today ensures that none of us will be held by the bounds of death, but will achieve everlasting life in the beyond with our ancestors."

The parishioners filed out with beatific smiles from the promise of eternal life.

About the Author:
Doug Hawley is a little old man who lives with editor Sharon and cat Kitzhaber in Oregon USA. After working as an actuary, he turned to writing in 2014 and now has published in four continents and all of the major genres.

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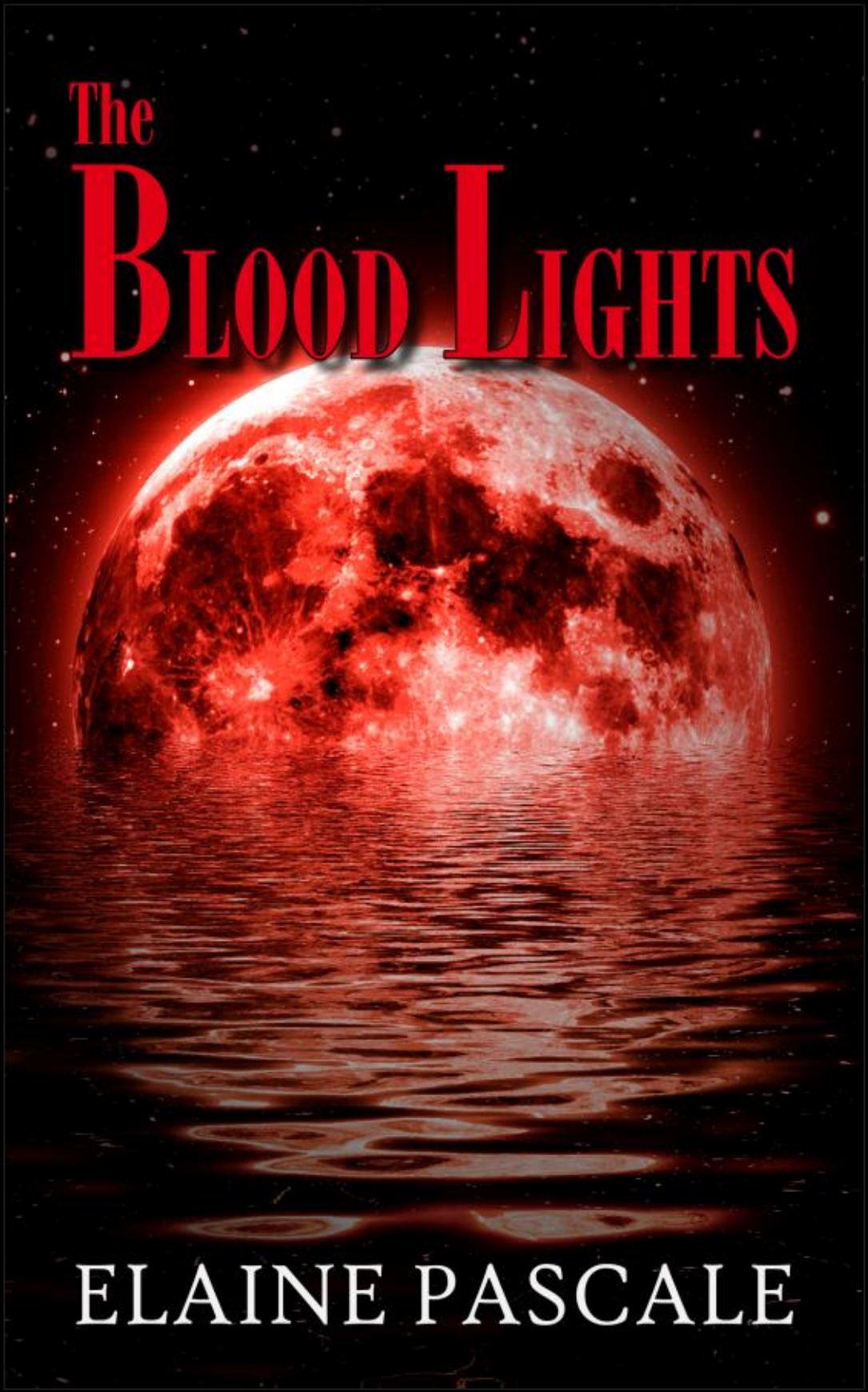
The Blood Lights are the last thing you'll see...



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

"So, it's settled? You'll take the house rent-free and take care of the old lady?"

"Sure, we can do that," Sarah answered with confidence.

"Good. Here are the keys." Mr. Johnson handed over the keys with a too cheerful smile.

"Wow! That's quite a lot of keys!" Lucas said.

"There are quite a lot of doors."

Lucas watched Mr. Johnson speed off in that old pickup that appeared to be falling apart, until it turned the corner.

"Lucas? Anybody looking at you now would think we were handed the keys to the Snake Pit and told we're responsible for the next five years."

"I wish you had talked to me before accepting that offer."

"It's rent-free! What's to talk about?"

"It's in my home town."

"Exactly. Your family will be all around us."

"Exactly."

"You still think I am stupid because I am a city girl."

"You have never learned to temper your education with common sense, you go ahead. We'll join you at the weekend. The girls have exams until Friday and I need to tie up some loose ends at the office."

Sarah met Miss Lucy on her first day at the house. She was a cheerful ninety-two year old full of life despite being in a wheelchair. Sarah cooked Miss Lucy's favourite meal and took it up to her along with a plate for herself. They enjoyed their meal and each other's company. They exchanged stories about their lives and found it adventurous just sitting in her living room and chatting away and travelling through time. Miss Lucy was quite descriptive unlike Sarah who was a lot less so. She also loved her makeup and needed it changed three times per day. She did like the colours mostly. She also liked her hair brushed, but that one she did herself.

"Did you do the cabaret when you were young, Miss Lucy?"

"Yes. How did you know that?"

"Your choice of colours for your face. They enhance your beauty."

"I don't understand but thank you. I enjoyed my youth when I was young. I left nothing for another day."

"I feel unusually tired, Miss Lucy. I think I'll go to bed. Have a good night."

"You also have a good night, dear."

Sarah answered the door bright and early the next morning to find a dishevelled Mr. Johnson standing there.

She looked him up and down and without a greeting asked "What happened to you? And where are your shoes?"

"I lost them somewhere. I've been walking all night and I don't know why. This morning I turned the corner and here I am. I don't know why I am at your door."

"Come in. I am just about to make breakfast for myself and Miss Lucy. I hope you're hungry." The fidgeting stopped and Sarah turned to see him shaking like a leaf and his complexion pale. But his hair that is naturally curly and was terribly matted when she let him in was now as straight as a ruler and he apparently wet his pants.

"Oh my! Come. I'll take you to the bathroom." She duly took him there and got him some clothes which she slipped in. Loud sobbing could be heard through the closed door but she didn't worry about it. Too many unexplained happenings since she accepted those keys.

Someone was shouting her husband's name from way off in the distance, and stunned she peeped through some cracks in the walls and saw a youngish woman with a baby in her arms hustling up the pathway. She appeared to be safe enough so she went and opened the front door.

"Hello, I am Stacy, friend of your husband. We all grew up together here. He left you here all alone?" Stacy rushed in without an invitation.

"He had to close up the office and the children have end of term exams so he stayed back to do what I couldn't do, and I came to start what he couldn't."

"That sounds a fair enough trade from your point of view. But definitely stupid from his side. I suppose you're a very modern woman that when you say yes, it is yes."

"That sums it up quite nicely."

"But not in this neck of the woods."

"What do you mean?"

She watched Stacy put the baby on the sofa and blocked her in with some throw cushions to prevent her from falling if she should roll.

"I think I saw a crib in one of the rooms. Wouldn't she be safer there than on this sofa?"

“Don’t worry. She’ll be fine here. Come and sit. Let’s have a chat.”

“What would you like to drink? Tea, coffee, or something cold?”

“Nothing thanks. Let’s chat. But first put these nutmegs under your arms. No questions and no objections. Now!”

Sarah accepted without a word and did as she was told. She liked the scent of it. It smelled like the toolum that her mother-in-law used to make whenever she visited them in the city.

“There’s a little sink in your armpits, just stick them there and twist and turn until they are comfortable.” It wasn’t too difficult to find the right spot.

“They’re cool. Is that how they should feel?”

“To begin with yes. Let me know if they should feel warm.”

Mr.. Johnson came out right then and screamed when he saw Stacy.

“What are you doing here? You’ve come to ruin my plans.”

“Yes. You should know better than to mess with my family. You got away last time, but not now.”

“I need a break, Stacy. I can’t take it anymore. My wife left me. She didn’t even take the children.”

“Can you blame her? Who would want those monstrosities?”

Sarah could tell there was something serious happening here and it involved Miss Lucy but she couldn’t tell what it was. She watched the emotions change in Stacy’s expression and felt a bit of what she felt. She was close to being her sister-in-law.

“Help me out, Stacy. Please. It’s been close to fifty years. How much more can a man take?”

“Not our fault. You should have obeyed Granny Sylvia. But no, you chose to insult her. You should have known we don’t take too kindly to insults.”

“We didn’t know what Miss Lucy was. We didn’t know what she was capable of.”

“Granny Sylvia tried to explain but what did you all do? You raised your voices above hers when she was talking to you. Why? Because she was old and frail?”

“No no.” Mr. Johnson raised his hands palms out and shook them along with his head trying to excuse himself. “We were just little more than children.”

“You were married. I’d say that was far from little more than children. But whatever… You are not dropping my sister-in-law into your pile of dung.”

“She is not your sister-in-law,” he stated vehemently, stamping his foot. Stacy realized he was getting angry so she pulled Sarah to her and put the baby in her arms.

“Hold her tightly and go into the kitchen. She will start screaming, don’t worry about it and don’t let her fall to the floor.”

Stacy returned her attention to Mr. Johnson but he was no longer alone. Miss Lucy was standing next to him, her face twisted in anger, but her body was straight.

“You people are always interfering in my business.” Her voice was gravely as if not quite formed. Stacy knew not what to do or say. She wasn’t prepared for this. Nobody ever said that she would one day get up from the wheelchair. Stacy knew she had a good strong and powerful voice so she decided to use it. She fixed her arms at her side and bending her elbows took a long and deep breath till her breasts swelled enough to burst her bodice and screamed. The ornaments on the shelves around the room toppled and fell, the trees surrounding the mansion bowed their heads in obeisance at the sound of a familiar. The house plants grew their roots like a tangled web and tied both Miss Lucy and Mr. Johnson to the spot. The screams stopped and then Stacy noticed her baby was sobbing quietly. She rushed to the kitchen, ensured both baby and Sarah were alright then went back to where she left the two people. She didn’t know what next. Fortunately the entire neighbourhood came running in answer to her screams and the elders understood what happened and explained.

“Miss Lucy was John and Elizabeth Montgomery’s’ first child. She contracted a deadly disease at five and both parents were prepared for the end. But then they were told by their doctor they couldn’t or shouldn’t, I can’t remember which, have any more children. They were devastated and as in such cases they chose to go the other way to lengthen their daughter’s life. They succeeded but for a terrible price to be paid for by Miss Lucy herself.”

“What is that?’

“Every few years she must have a young woman living in the house free of charge and having to talk and laugh with her on a daily basis. Within that time she rejuvenates and then the young woman disappears never to be seen again.”

“In this small village missing girls will be noticeable. How did they hide it?”

“They couldn’t hide it for long. In a place like this everybody talks. Including those you think are enemies. One day the bad boys got together to put a sound licking on her to get her to change her ways. They went too far and that’s how she ended up in a wheelchair. The one we all know as Granny Sylvia just turned up in our midst one day and was welcomed with open arms. She told us how to protect ourselves. We all obeyed except for the Johnsons.”

“That family has always been rude and impertinent.”

"You're quite right. When Granny Sylvia was explaining to him what he should do because she'd already have his wife in her clutches, he just raised his voice louder than hers, and that was a terrible insult to her. So she cursed him and his descendants. Miss Lucy got her youth from Emma his wife, but she didn't disappear, just got terribly deformed. She eventually left here and that was quite a few years ago. The children were staying in the house with Miss Lucy sometimes, but they didn't have much juice left, so he brought you here. He thought he could have left you here and run away, but he should have paid attention to Granny Sylvia's words."

"I did pay attention, she was talking gibberish. Nothing made any sense." Mr. Johnson suddenly found his voice.

"That's because you're an undisciplined such and such. She did talk to you in words that even you would understand."

The elder was getting tired and looking around for a seat by the window. Miss Lucy chose that time to free herself from the vines that tied her to one spot. Flailing her arms she grew into a giant of a woman and blew her breath on all gathered in the room. The elder managed a few words before she was turned to stone,

"Stacy! Scream! Now!"

And that she did. Miss Lucy's parents materialized and tapped her on the waist. She shrunk and was back in her wheelchair.

"We're so sorry, Lucy. We never expected it to turn out this way. Please know that we've always loved you."

"No. You never did. You just wanted to show off to your friends. You never thought about me."

She eventually shrivelled and blew away.

Lucas drove up just then with the children and shouted from the truck "Anybody want pizza? Enough for the whole neighbourhood."

About the Author:

Soter Lucio is a great-grandmother from the mountainous region of Trinidad, W.I. She works as an ironer by day and writes horror by night. She lives alone with no distractions except for the occasional ghost who gives her writing a boost. She's been published by Sirens Call Publications, Weird Mask, Migla Press and Wicked Shadow Press. Soter also has a collection, *The Ghosts of Charuma Forest, published by Stratton Press.*

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Love Labyrinth | ***Austin Muratori***

I walk along this labyrinth in a daze. The corridors ahead get narrower and narrower with each step. Your voice echoes off the walls, "I love you."

The words turn into whispers as they return back to me, sending a crescendo of pain and familiarity down my spine.

I can't feel my feet, the nerves in my legs fire and misfire causing me to stumble. I keep having to grab the wall and pull myself up again. The pain burns deep into every fiber. A scream tries to quell its way from my lips, but silence prevails.

I see you off in the distance at the end of the path. I tried to reach for you but your image turns into a shadowy silhouette. Alarms sound in the distance, muffled by my warped perception, my head buzzes.

My heartbeat pierces the threshold as I fall to the ground once more.

There is no escape from this maze for which I am trapped in. Each trip mirrors the last morphing into the same path.

Constantly haunted by what I know now is only your ghost.

About the Author:

Austin is a writer, photographer and filmmaker from a small town in Michigan. When he isn't telling stories or creating, he can be found enjoying a Coca-Cola and spending time with his 3 year old son.

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The Horror at Highgate | ***Chris McAuley***

I've pushed myself too far. It's been a long time since I have had to exert myself in this manner. In the Afghan war I caught a Jezail bullet. I had been an enthusiastic soldier and often found myself in the thick of the fiercest fighting. After my injury however, I settled into the life of a general medical practitioner. I left the army hoping for a successful practice in London and in the last year I can confirm that I achieved that goal. The bullet had lodged in my leg and although I've long since been able to walk without the use of a cane, this simple act of climbing a wall taxes me.

There was nothing else to be done however, the case had been brought to me by the scruffy, yet dependable 'Baker Street Irregulars'. These were unwanted children who were cast off by society, unseen and unthought of. The traits which were seen as a blemish to their character had made them incredibly useful to us.

The 'us', in case you were unsure of, was the famous Sherlock Holmes, consulting detective and myself, Doctor John Watson. I had distinguished myself as his trusty chronicler. However, in this matter, Holmes was not with me. So, in the evening hour of 11 o'clock, I scaled the wall and made a fool of myself.

I landed in the shrubbery in a completely ungraceful manner. As I raised my head and got to my feet, I observed that the surprising thickness of the fog which had descended. I pulled my coat closer to my body, it was not the evening air which had caused this sudden chill, rather it was the location. I had tumbled into the northern perimeter of Highgate Cemetery. As I moved deeper into this eerie location, I hoped that the 'irregulars' were as dependable as Holmes had suggested. If so, they should be on their way to seek out Inspector Carmichael of Scotland Yard to rouse the nightshift to my aid.

Holmes had never approved of the supernatural but I had seen enough during the affair of the 'Sussex Vampire' case to suspend such disbelief. At one time, I had been a practicing Roman Catholic and my wife Mary, still kept to certain 'older' religious practices which I am better not detailing in print. So, when rumors reached Baker Street of a creature stalking and abducting children, I felt it best not to bother Holmes and investigate myself.

The fog crept upwards towards my waist and I realized that this had been a rash decision. I could even hear Holmes; monotone in my head chastising me for my stupidity. If he were here, he would first admonish me for believing such rumors and secondly for putting myself in danger. Not from imagined ghosts but from the murderous ire of grave robbers.

I steadied my nerves and further reassured myself by fingering the revolver secreted in my coat pocket. I kept my pace steady and passed high mausoleums dedicated to long forgotten nobility. The pale stone glinted as it was caressed by the soft moonlight. The carved eternal names were almost covered by moss and vines.

The density of the fog made me lose my way. I was alone and confused. Thoughts of imagined beasts climbing from graves and visions of that luminous hound once again stalking me on the moors plagued my mind. I stumbled forward and almost lost my rationality in fearful reverie.

It was then that I heard a dreadful scream. Its high pitch cut through the mists and rang in my head like a siren. I gritted my teeth and finally dispelled the hellish visions which threatened my sanity. I broke into a halting run, unable to maintain a constant momentum having still feeling winded from my climb and fall. My first instinct is always to assist even when this would be against my own best interests.

I reached a tomb which lay partially open. Flickering red and yellow light licked its entrance. Standing for a moment I observed the torch, applying the methodology of my friend, I could discern it has been recently lit. My blood ran cold as I watched the two colors of the flame merge into a golden hue. I moved forward, wondering if I was about to confront my first case of grave robbery. It was known for gentlemen of my profession to employ individuals with a certain reputation and skill set to procure the recently deceased. The bodies were then used to experiment upon and practice basic surgical procedures.

Taking the torch from its wall mooring and drawing my pistol I entered the crypt. It appeared to be of an older design, along its solid stone were etchings of names without dates attached to them. Deeper I crept and realized that there would be no profit here for the would-be Burke and Hare's. The flickering flames lit carvings of hideous faces protruding from the walls. I had a sense of almost impossible space as if this was the entrance for a tunnel and not a tomb.

A low growling sound touched my ears, it caused me to falter and my revolver fell from my right hand. It skittered inside the darkness of the grave and I could see it spinning in the scant torchlight. I halted in my steps and peered forward, as my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, I saw a pitiful shape slowly move.

It crawled backwards, in a manner like a spider, yet I was convinced that the anatomy was that of a human. It then squatted near what I discerned was the rear of the chamber. Taking two small steps forward, I could see that on its

lap lay the limp and broken form of a young girl. She was still a child. It had been she who had cried out in terror and agony only a few moments ago. Her once neat gown had been torn down to expose everything to her pubis. This had allowed the creature to have free access to devour her jaw and cheeks. In place of the eaten flesh was a smooth, shiny, wetness.

The beast turned its sightless eyes towards me. Wide, empty, ocular cavities remained where white sclera should have resided. Its tongue flicked out, slowly, almost idly across the naked chest of the shattered girl. The underside of which resembled small mushroom-like suckers. Similar to that of leeches that I would use to remove diseased blood from an ailing patient.

The child slowly turned her face towards me. I was shocked to find that she was not yet dead, although given the state of her, I wish that she had been. Her eyes spoke of her intense pain and although she attempted to speak, her tongue flopped uselessly against the gaping maw at the side of her mouth.

I had observed some of the most horrendous wounds inflicted upon the human body. I felt a form of proxied pain as I did so. As an army medic, I had witnessed soldiers torn apart on the battlefield. Guts oozing from the deep wounds of intense warfare, last moments consisting of locking their eyes onto mine. The intensity of their gaze begging for a lasting testimony of their final actions. Mumbled words which desperately held onto heroic nonsense and eventually morphed into screams of unbelievable agony.

Even with all this horrific life experience, I had never experienced a moment like this.

My stomach gave way and heaved. Burning acid from its depths climbed my throat and spilled from my mouth. The sharp pain this brought caused my eyes to water and I began to retch. A liquified rendition of my last meal of potatoes, thick gravy and ham poured from my lips and dripped from my nose.

As I gained composure, I backed towards where my pistol lay. I kept my eyes on the creature, I dared not look at the girl again. I needed to remain calm now that I knew what must be done.

From its lips the creature produced something similar to a sneer and snorted noisily. My heel tapped the back of the pistol and as I bent to reach it. The creature snatched the tongue of the girl and pulled. It stretched forward like rubber and tore. The child's face was now a fountain of blood. Her eyes, in an almost merciful manner, were obscured with gore.

With a mixture of anger and sadness, I made a grab for the pistol. I took careful aim and shot the girl in the head. I remember crying out the name of my God in that moment, I wondered where he was or if he had really ever been. The child's head caved into itself from the impact of the bullet and her torment finally ended.

In the moment which she died; the beast roared. Its plaything and supper had been taken from it. It glared down at the, now lifeless body and in a frenzy tore it in half. The creature pulled the body apart like a turkey, bones snapped and organs tore until a rush of blood, excrement and yellow fluid burst from the lifeless flesh.

I readied myself to fire another shot. This time aimed at the beast, who had lurched to its feet. As I squeezed the trigger, I noticed, with disgust that its member was clearly aroused by the events of this night.

I heard a loud bang, then a roar and suddenly the world went dark.

I came to in the arms of my dearest friend and to the noise of several gunshots and emphatic curses. Taking several deep breaths, I could tell that I was outside. I coughed out some of the stale air which had taken hold of my lungs in the crypt as Holmes explained how they had found me.

I interrupted his discourse by grabbing his arm. With wide eyes I bellowed my question.

"Did you get it?"

From behind me a gruff, Yorkshire voice answered me.

"No Doctor, we didn't. Our bullets couldn't penetrate the hide of the beast. We think we hurt it, but we cannot be sure".

With Holmes' help, I managed to stand. Lestrade took off his cap and wiped his brow. Holmes tutted and addressed the Yard's failure, as he had done many times previously. However, in this moment, he did so with some sympathy.

"You see Watson, our friends in the police service have the same failing as I. We see the world in rational terms. Crime must meet punishment. We are not men of imagination or those who believe in the reality of folk lore. That is our equal failing in an event such as this."

Inspector Carmichael, a copper haired, middle-aged man with a hand dog face spoke to Lestrade.

"The woman from the ministry is here, sir. She has jurisdiction over this case now. We are to leave immediately."

Lestrade wasn't about to argue. He was more than pleased to quickly forget about this night and the dark secrets it revealed.

"The lady with the… accent you mean? Yes, I saw her and the various gadgets she placed about the area. Let's get away from here, George. Come on Holmes, take your friend and let's agree to stick to catching bank robbers and the like from now on."

It was many months after the event that I brought myself to record his memo as 'The Highgate Case'. Still, as I close my eyes, I see the child. I see the creature. I wonder if I shall meet it again?

About the Author:
Chris McAuley writes prose novels, magazine short stories, video and tabletop games, and audio dramas. Best known for creating the StokerVerse he has also worked on The Terminator, Doctor Who and most recently the Star Trek franchises.

Author Website: Dark Universes
Author Website: StokerVerse

The Malthusian Trap | ***Briant Laslo***

"Now, have you applied your sunscreen?" Professor Montgomery Graham asked me as we approached the doorway to the primary level of MSG-132.

"I have, Professor Graham, but…" I began, holding up my applicator as proof.

"Call me Monty."

"Oh, okay, sure. I have, Monty, but why do I need it up here?"

I was new and completely untrained; excited to have been given the chance to work on one of the five hundred Massive Space-Based Garden stations that orbit the Earth and thrilled to play a role in potentially saving our planet.

It was the first time I could recall feeling hopeful.

"My apologies," Monty said while pressing the button which opened the door allowing us to exit the small living section. "We don't get a lot of new recruits up here, so I forget that not everyone knows exactly what we are doing."

We stepped from the quaint living quarters, and I stopped in my tracks. I had been told what the MSGs were, but seeing one of them now took my breath away.

As far as I could see in front of me, and to both my left and right, endless rows of every imaginable vegetable, periodically interspersed with poles listing information about that section.

"You see," Monty continued as he ushered me into the garden, allowing the door to close behind us, "we grow vegetables for the Earth here in a variety of ways: hydroponics, aeroponics, micro production, and the old-fashioned way… in enriched soil. But, all of them need light. And that light still gives off levels of radiation that can cause your basic sunburn."

"Oh! Right, sunburn! I have heard about that; we don't see much of that on the Earth anymore."

"No, no we don't," Monty fell into step alongside me. "That's what a population of 45 billion will do. Not only is there not enough soil left to plant in because of all the infrastructure, many folks spend their entire lives moving from one building to the next, never even getting outside."

He was right. Prior to being chosen, I had only been outside once in my 25 years of life.

"It's such a shame," I said, "because the sky is so beautiful. Our investment in climate control and air purification has really paid off over the past decade."

"Well," Monty almost chuckled, "it has certainly paid off for our atmosphere. But, it's only pushed us further into the Malthusian Trap."

I looked at him, having no idea what he was talking about.

"Just some ramblings from one of my ancient ancestors, Thomas Malthus. He theorized that '*the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the Earth to produce subsistence for man*.' Essentially, that the urge for humans to reproduce would inevitably prove greater than the capacity of the Earth to sustain them."

"Wow, seems more prophetic than rambling."

"Well, we have certainly outgrown Earth's ability to provide for us as a species. But he also believed that this would most likely lead to the extinction of all humanity in a mass famine event…"

Monty stopped, cutting himself off.

"Here we are! This is the starting point of where you will be working while you are here."

I looked around, seeing that I was in the middle of a vast section of carrots being grown the old-fashioned way. I was happy I would be working in an area using enriched soil. I was looking forward to digging in the dirt, having never experienced dirt as anything other than something that accumulated and was cleaned up.

"From right here," Monty looked up at the pole we were standing next to, "to that next marker ahead, will be your section."

I took a deep breath. I swear I could smell fresh air. I smiled. This is where I would do my part to try and save humanity.

"Do you think we can do it, Monty?"

"Do what? Save humanity from extinction?"

I nodded.

"Of course I do!" He hit my back in comradery. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't fully believe that."

"I just hope I can do my part."

"Don't worry, we're not just going to throw you in the deep end. I'll be checking in with you every day, and you'll have classes. You will learn exactly what kind of nutrients your crop needs, how much light, how much water and all of that. All you must do to start is treat each one of these vegetables, every single one under your care, as the precious cargo it is."

"That I can do!" I knew it would be a long road, but I was proud that I was going to be in a position where I might be able to make some small difference.

"And then, after you are comfortable with this part of it, we'll get you trained up on selecting the 10% of your crop to inject with the Tri-decanide and how to take care of that."

"Tri-decanide?" I spoke slowly. "Isn't that… a poison?"

"Oh yes! Probably the deadliest we've ever created," Monty smiled. "Odorless. No taste whatsoever. Kills people in almost limitless ways… from aneurysm to ventricular tachycardia and virtually everything in between."

"But, Monty, I… I don't understand. I thought we were saving humankind?" I could feel my heart skipping between pridefulness and dread.

Monty put his hand on my shoulder.

"My child, that is exactly what we are doing! There are 45 billion people on Earth, that's five times what the planet can sustain. My ancestor, Thomas, also believed that the only way to avoid the trap that came to bear his name was that '*premature death, in some shape or other, must visit the human race*.' We are the ones who control that premature death."

My heart sank. My hope was reduced to dismay, my joy to depression, my pride to woe.

I nodded. Then I fell to my knees, felt the dirt with my hands, and cried.

About the Author:

Briant Laslo loves creating worlds. What happens in those worlds can be anything from horrifying to wondrous to exciting to downright confusing. Having been in a wheelchair his entire life with Muscular Dystrophy, Briant has learned that words, a good story, carry as much power as any kind of physical force. He hopes to reach more people and continue inviting them to visit his worlds.

Amazon Author Page: Briant Laslo
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I felt ill. Moist. Sanguineous.

I had been used in the most unimaginable and grisly way, manhandled, thrust deep and twisted inside flesh that deserved to be speared. Not unlike a slab of beef that had done no wrong but winds up on a grill, meant to be consumed anyway.

This was distasteful. Yet not evil. A necessity.

She'd had no choice.

She pulled me from his torso with a squelchy, sucking sound and brought me over to the sink, running hot water over my body, scrubbing and soaking me in bleach as if this could erase what she had done with me.

To me.

I still felt the blood covering me. The tangy copper smell suffused me. Viscous red matter dried on my form after she finshed.

She'd plunged me into her husband's stomach and his blood had soaked me. She'd plunged again and again and I felt my sharp head pierce his flesh, the sickening sound of it making me nauseous. I'd had no idea it would be so messy when she'd desperately snagged me from my hearth and sunk me into her husband's body to my hilt, drowning me in his life's fluid until I thought I would retch.

His organs had been squashy and soft around me, pumping fluid out through the gashes she'd made with my stainless-steel blade. I no longer had a say. And despite knowing she'd used me for a righteous cause, one for which I had coached her, how could I ever return to what I was before?

I sighed as she dried me off, walking me over to the knife block to slide me back into my slot among the other unassuming cutlery.

But I was no longer an ordinary piece of cutlery. I wasn't like the others. I never had been. For her, I was more. From the first moment she'd handled me.

I hadn't had a serious function, a real reason to exist, however, before tonight.

Tonight, we had both been reborn in blood.

I had served a higher purpose.

I had tasted blood and I liked it.

We could not go back.

Our symbiosis was complete.

***

She sat with a cigarette dangling from her thumb and pointer, spent ashes sprinkling to the floor like snowflakes.

She stared at her husband's body, a bloody and slaughtered hump supine in the middle of the living room floor like a slab of beef on a butcher block.

The knife had been right.

She'd heard its whispers. Its promises.

From the first slap the week after they'd returned home from their honeymoon, to the last punch tonight. And in between all the choking and pummeling she'd endured—three years of abuse, loss and pain—she'd always known it would one day be him or her.

The knife had told her so.

She hadn't believed it the first time she'd heard it.

She'd just lost her baby after all; had thought she was emotionally overwrought. Delusional.

She'd dared not tell anyone for fear of being committed. She especially couldn't have told him. He would have used it to keep her with him, as if she wasn't already prisoner enough. He would have used it against her. Even though her condition, her *loss* was his fault.

So she tried to act normal, going about her business as usual, or as usual as one could get after such a traumatic experience. No one could understand and anyone who might have, she wasn't allowed to see or speak to.

He'd watched her like a hawk those first few weeks after. Anyone who didn't know him would have thought he was a caring husband, so sensitive to his wife's needs and grief. The reality was so much sleazier.

And each day the noise from the knife block got louder, more comprehensible until the words were plain as day, not in her head, but outside of her. Talking *to* her.

She hadn't completely ruled out insanity, especially when she'd catch herself in the kitchen not just listening to the knife, but talking back to it.

One night, he'd caught her, standing at the butcher block, polishing the blade and whispering. He'd hit her then for not getting dinner on the table soon enough and she'd apologized like she always did. But the knife wasn't happy, didn't like her groveling and saying sorry when she hadn't done anything to deserve her husband's wrath.

We'll get him, you and me, together. Just trust me. When the time comes, you will know.

Tonight, the time had come.

She'd thought that the whispers would stop once he was dead, but they hadn't.

The knife wasn't happy.

It wasn't done.

The cacophony rose to a shattering crescendo until she dropped her cigarette and slammed her hands over her ears, shaking her head.

After a long moment, she nodded.

She knew what she had to do.

The knife explained.

She could handle it. It told her so.

It said the hacksaw in the toolshed had offered to help.

About the Author:
Native New Yorker, Gracie C. McKeever has authored several novels, novellas and series most of which can be found at Siren Publishing under multiple sub-genres beneath the erotic romance umbrella. Her work has also appeared in the anthologies *Sensuality: Caramel Flava II* and Bold Strokes Books' *In Our Words.* Control Alt Delete appeared in *Allegory Ezine* and *Metastellar* and is Gracie's first published non-romance story.

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The Awakening | *Miracle Austin*

Hundreds of *Harlequin Stingers*—ten-inch mahogany beetles with thorny pinchers and fiery, barbed wings—flew inside my opened bedroom window in a spiral pattern. Leaping from my bed with my blanket shielding my entire body, I tripped over jagged, tree roots emerging from the floorboards. My walls hissed. As they breathed in and out, the house levitated and rotated counterclockwise and slammed down. I landed near my window. Their screaming sirens echoed in my throbbing eardrums. As I stumbled and swung my legs over my window to jump, a handful of stingers swarmed all around and consumed me.

About the Author:
Miracle Austin is a Texan gal who works in the medical social work arena by day and in the writer's world at night, including weekends, as a YA/NA author. She loves horror, collecting T-shirts, *Stranger Things*, *Wednesday*, Marvel & DC, sparkles, unicorns, 80s music, and daydreaming up stories.

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Foreword by Wrath James White

Lizard Beach | ***Andrew Martin***

Nick leaned off the subway platform to look down the tracks and felt the urge to step off into nothing. There was a name for that he thought, and then he had it. *The call of the void.*

Spooky, he thought and leaned back. The tracks were covered in large brown leaves, the third rail gleaming between them with the promise of electric death. Rats and lizards darted through the leaves. There was a palm frond on the tracks. Nick wondered how it got there.

He heard a low roar, the train coming, felt the spray as it approached, saw the lizards and rats scramble out of the way. The train hit Nick's bed and threw it into the corner, spilling Nick to the floor.

Nick woke shouting, soaked, trying to climb his bedroom walls. The water was receding, gurgling as it carried his dirty clothes and bedding out the door. There were screams in Spanish from the neighborhood. Sirens in the distance.

Nick checked his watch.

It flashed, 'Tsunami warning, seek higher ground immediately.'

***

Nick still had cell service. He texted the office, texted Beth in Bed Stuy, Mollie in Philly, then his Mom. He thought about logging into his Myface account, marking himself safe. Instead, he picked his way across the slippery tile floor, noted that his laptop was safe and dry on the kitchen counter and stepped into the gray light of dawn. The wave was withdrawing, carrying lawn furniture, clothes, and palm fronds over the sea wall.

The yard was thrashed, the house was wet, but he thought it would be ok. His neighbors down the street were outside, still yelling in Spanish, but they weren't yelling *yelling*, like something really awful happened, like someone was trapped or something. He ducked back into the house, grabbed one of those little 10-ounce beers they sold here, then went back outside. The sea was gray and boiling, but he didn't think he was in any danger of a repeat. Did anywhere ever get two tsunamis? He didn't think so.

He took a pull from his tiny beer. He turned his phone camera on and started filming.

"This is Nick Jacobs coming to you live from Puerto Lagarto and I just survived a tsunami."

He panned his phone around, showed his trashed back yard, ignored the notifications from his mom, and Beth and Molly and his boss. He filmed the angry grey sea, the waves short and choppy and dancing nearly vertical. He panned across to the island, the wildlife refuge that sat a few miles offshore.

He pocketed his phone. *That's weird*. The island was a pyramidal heap of green rock, but something was different. He stepped out to the edge of his lawn, where it met the seawall. He shielded his eyes against the rising sun.

There was a big white scar, like the world's biggest smear of bird shit, on the side of the island that faced him.

***

The sun was coming on hot already and it wasn't even 10 am.

Nick sat on a picnic bench under a palm tree, sipping his third or fourth tiny beer of the morning. He'd tried the internet company, the cleaning service he used when he rented the place out, and Island power. He couldn't get an answer from any of them. It had been emailing first, then phone calls like it was 1950, but no answers anywhere.

He alternated between staring into space and scrolling. He realized he didn't follow many locals. Or any actually. He was getting live pictures of the Tsunami's path from big US news outlets but that was it. It looked localized to sector Lagarto. The town was in the center of a cone of destruction that spread for 5 miles up and down the coast. He could hear generators and chainsaws in the direction of town but in general things didn't seem too hectic. The yelling he'd heard earlier had stopped.

He took another sip and thought about walking into town. Right on cue a bead of sweat emerged at his temple and slid down his face. *Nah,* he thought. There wasn't much he could do there.

Nick took another pull from his tiny beer.

"Yo Nicky!"

Nick jumped up, his foot snagging the bench and threatening to spill him to the grass.

Mark Chester, a data guy from Austin was standing on the beach. Mark was a prick, never failing to mention that he had *two* places in Boca Lagarto, one to live in and one to rent and maybe the only EV on the island, but what else was Nick doing?

Nick picked his way down the sea wall. The beach was trashed. Palm fronds, coconuts, old fishing gear, bottles, big hunks of rock and coral, it was like the sea bottom had thrown up all over the beach.

"Yo bro," Mark said and put his fist out. Nick gave him a bump. "Fucking tsunami man, am I right?"

"No cap," Nick said.

“How’s your place?” Mark said. He had a big metal cup in his hand. Mark’s breath smelled like mint with an undercurrent of soil. *There was probably some mushroom energy tea in that metal cup*, Nick thought. “On the beer already?” Marked asked.

Nick ignored the last. “No power. Floors are wet but not too bad.”

Mark nodded. His face was chiseled, tight around prominent cheek bones, perfect teeth flashing in the sun. “Can you get someone out? You want to get the salt water off everything before it starts rotting your drywall.”

Nick looked at his phone. No missed calls, no emails. “I got someone on the way. How’d you make out?”

“Well, my place on Calle Norte is fine. Totally dry and we’ve got power. I was staying on Calle Strasse and it stayed dry but we’ve got no power. Good thing I have a generator.”

“Good move.”

“You don’t have one? You really need to get one…” Mark said, launching into a generator pitch.

Beyond him something white was bobbing in the surf, sticking out in the overwhelmingly brown slick of palm fronds and coconuts. Actually, quite a lot of somethings.

“I see something,” Nick said, stepping past Mark.

“So do I,” Mark laughed and lightly punched Nick, motioning up the beach with his metal cup.

Willow was walking up the beach. Willow was a 10 in Boca Lagarto. Willow was probably a 10 back in the world too. Her bikini was doing its usual straining act as she walked like a runway model between the palm fronds and fishing gear. Her bikini was black and made her perfect tan pop, but also made her look somehow…*serious?* Like she was making a journalistic appraisal of the tsunami’s damage.

Her phone was on a selfie-stick and she was filming all of it. Occasionally she panned from the crap in the sand out to the crap at the waves and shook her head slowly or dabbed her eyes. Nick wondered if there was a market for disaster influencers. She tapped her phone and dropped the stick.

“Hi Mark!” she said, her smile devastating even from 50 feet away. “Hi…”

“Nicky!” Mark said, tapping Nick in the arm, like he was teaching a kid a new word. Nick looked away from all that tan skin and soft feminine muscle and back to the surf. The surf was full of those white things.

“Well, here comes something to do even if the internet stays out, amiright?” Mark said and punched Nick again.

“Yeah, sure,” Nick said and walked to the water’s edge. He knelt in the warm water, mangrove seeds and plastic washing against his feet. One of the white things was tumbling in the wash. Nick picked it up.

It was big, half a basketball in size but light. The skin of the thing was leathery but also hard. The outside was white, and the inside slick and gooey, oily. He turned to Mark. “Hey, I think this is an egg?”

Willow screamed, a horrible, high-pitched sob-growl and Nick forgot the egg. Mark screamed and Nick heard Mark’s big metal cup hit the sand, the mushroom-goo inside sloshing.

Willow had collapsed because a leg needs muscles to keep it upright, raw white bone and shredded skin won’t keep it up. A lizard, huge, vaguely iguana-shaped but horned and much too big was scrambling up the beach, gulping down one of Willow’s perfect tanned calves.

The lizard sprinted, its belly up off the ground, ten feet of spiked tail whipping and snapping behind it. The tail snapped across Willow’s throat and her skin parted, a crimson tsunami surging forth and even from fifty away Nick could tell she was dead before her head hit the sand.

Which was good, because the huge lizard that had killed her was just the point man, *point creature*, and a half dozen other lizards had scrambled out of the surf. They pounced on Willow, ripping and tearing and swallowing huge chunks of her. Nick spewed his tiny beers onto the sand.

One of the lizards was retching too. It coughed and hacked, spit up a gore slick silicon globe and then its eyes landed on Nick and Mark. It chirped, loudly, and the rest of its brethren looked up from the Willow-scraps. They chirped and hopped in answer, their meaty bodies thumping as they hit the sand.

“Nicky come on!” Mark yelled and Nick felt his hands on his arm, pulling him. The lizards were *fast,* too fast and Nick knew they’d never make it.

Nick spun and hit Mark in the corner of his perfect jaw and it was enough to get him off balance and Nick followed through, shoved him to the sand. Nick sprinted for the sea wall, dodging palm fronds and rocks and fishing nets. He scrambled up the sea wall, looking once over his shoulder as he made the top.

The lizards were all over Mark. Mark’s screams became gurgles as one of the lizards got Mark’s head in its jaws and started swallowing. Mark thrashed and clawed, the lizard’s jaws trying to close over his face, while another lizard rooted in his boardshorts like a truffle hog.

In the surf behind Mark there were dozens of the lizards, their horned heads trailing little vees as they swam. Behind them loomed the island and that big white scar. Nick ran for the house. The tsunami had broken the beachside door so he hit back room at a sprint, his toes kissing the sopping tile and he registered the icy slickness of the tile a microsecond before his feet went out from under him. He hit the floor and the room flashed yellow like a flashbulb going off and his phone clattered under the couch.

From down the road he heard shouts in Spanish and police sirens. Gunshots. He pushed off the floor, almost went down again but managed to stay up. He crossed the room in two stumbling steps and snagged his keys off the countertop. He bolted for the door, passing the window that looked out onto the street.

There were lizards between him and the car. Most were still doing that weird, bow-legged, high-step scramble inland, but at least one was settling in, stretching out in the sun next to the car. Another bumped into a tire, barked and bit it, the tire hissing as it blew and the lizard scrambled back in fear before attacking again. A third climbed the trunk in a clatter of claws of tail spikes and then splayed out on the roof, blinking its horrible eyes in obvious pleasure at the sunbaked warmth of the car's roof.

Nick went to scream and bit his knuckles. He heard chirps from outside and a shadow fell across the bungalow's beachside doorway. Nick bolted for the bathroom and slammed the door behind him.

***

It was stifling in the bathroom.

Nick was pretty sure he'd fallen asleep, or passed out due to the adrenalin crash and the sticky humidity in the bathroom. He wasn't sure how long he'd been here but judging by the sun through the high frosted windows it had been a few hours. From outside there were intermittent barrages of gunfire, sirens, a loudspeaker message in Spanish.

"¡Permanecer en el interior!"

Nick sat up. Listened. He thought the loudspeaker sounded closer. For maybe the thirtieth or fortieth time he went to the window and stood up on his toes, tried to see out the frosted glass. He'd always listed himself at 5'10" on his dating profiles but now, stretching and straining to peek out glass too frosted to see through, he was reminded he was 5'8".

He could maybe see if he hopped up on the toilet, so he clambered up on the bowl.

From outside he could hear lizards chirping on the lawn.

He heard the crunch of heavy tires rolling down the street. He heard lizards squeaking in alarm, then a barrage of gunfire and Nick dove on the floor and covered his head. His house shook. Somewhere glass broke.

"Hey! Hey! I'm in here!" he screamed.

"Hay lagartijas en el tejado. ¡Permanecer en el interior!" came the voice on the loudspeaker.

"I don't speak Spanish! No able Espanol!" Nick shouted. He heard spent brass tinkling in the gravel, heard the crush of tires, a beeping. *Wait, were they leaving?*

"Hay lagartijas en el tejado. ¡Permanecer en el interior!"

"No!" Nick screamed and bolted, luckily no lizards in the living room, and then he was out in the blinding sun, running, dead lizards crumpled on the grass, their fat scaly bodies still leaking blood. As he rounded the bungalow he saw the HUMVEE K-Turning. *Fuck me, they're leaving,* he thought.

"Wait! Wait! Wait!"

There was a soldier in a gun turret on the HMVEE's roof. His eyes went wide and he spun the gun around toward Nick.

"¡El techo! ¡Lagartos en el tejado! ¡Bajar!" the soldier said, waving at Nick and pointing his machine gun upwards.

"Wait!" Nick ducked as he ran.

He heard an excited trill from above and he was hit with a stinking, scaly weight and driven to the lawn. He tried to roll, to push up, to run and but it was like his foot was stuck in mud, hot, steaming mud. He felt teeth in his ankle and screamed. His foot was in a lizard's mouth and he could have sworn it smiled as it bit down and then shadows were falling on him as more lizard leapt from the roof, pink mouths lined with teeth yawning in anticipation of their next meal.

About the Author:
Andy Martin is an archaeologist, metal musician, and writer living in South Philly with his partner and cat. His short fiction has appeared at the Horror Tree, Cultured Vultures, Midnight Tales, Siren's Call, Gravestone Press' Monstrous Tales Volume 5, and he was DandT Publishing's Emerge Author in December of 2022.

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Crab Cocktail | ***Doug Hawley***

Duke enjoyed feeding his crab pals at noon from his isolated beachfront house along the Pacific Ocean outside Lincoln City, Oregon, USA. His ten or twenty buddies had learned that he would toss out commercial crab feed at noon every day. Duke was a loner and a bit weird from avoiding people for over twenty years and believed he had conversations with his clawed buddies. He thought they were asking for a change in diet. He started mixing the commercial food with various human supplements, including a growth hormone he had been using for many years without result.

Over a few weeks Duke noticed the change in appearance of his pals. Their light brown bodies had changed to a whole a palette of colors – orange, purple, pink. Their shells were two or three feet wide, bigger by a factor of three or four. If he had weighed them he would know that the bigger ones weighed thirty pounds.

On a bright spring day in April he went to his beach at noon. The crabs assembled for their usual feed. Duke appeared embarrassed and told them "Oops, sorry guys, I forgot the food. I must be getting old." He laughed and turned around to get some food for them, but two of the bigger crabs nipped both of his Achilles tendons, disabling him. The crabs got their last feast from a screaming Duke.

About the Author:
Doug Hawley is a little old man who lives with editor Sharon and cat Kitzhaber in Oregon USA. After working as an actuary, he turned to writing in 2014 and now has published in four continents and all of the major genres.

Author Website: Doug Hawley
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The Dream Set | ***Dawn Colclasure***

The dogs barked in the distance. He knew he didn't have much time left. They sounded much closer than when he'd last heard them.

No matter. He would complete the ceremony. He had to. It was the only way he would be able to have his revenge.

The potion was taking too long to boil. He threw more branches into the fire beneath the cauldron. Soon, the power to enter dreams even after death would be his.

Finally, it was ready. And just in time too; he could hear them stomping up the wooden stairs to the room he had locked himself into.

With enough potion in the vial, he raised it to his lips just as the door swung open.

"Stop!" he heard them cry.

He threw the hot liquid down his throat, wincing as it seared through his lungs. He threw the vial onto the ground as he looked at the constable standing in the doorway. "You're too late! Vengeance will be mine!"

"You have gone too far this time, Ulric," a new voice announced.

Ulric watched as his enemy appeared from behind the constable. In this lifetime, he lived as a schoolteacher, and dressed the part, wearing a black short-fronted tailcoat and a matching fitted waistcoat over a long-sleeved white linen shirt. His enemy also went by a different name in this lifetime, but since he was so keen to address him by his ancient name, then so would he.

"You can't stop me, Baldern!" he roared.

Baldern chuckled. "But I already have." He signaled to the constable, who raised his revolver and fired it at Ulric.

The mortal wound left Ulric on the floor, gasping. Baldern knelt at his side, moving his hand to the right side of his neck.

Ulric felt the piercing sensation of the blue thorn in his neck and chuckled. He had already drank from the potion; immortality was no longer needed for him to come back.

"You're a fool," he sputtered. Then he took his last breath, dying with a smile on his face. He now had a way to come back and seek revenge on his enemy.

***

Gemmy was the last of the sisters to turn sixteen. Up until then, her two older sisters had acted as though it wasn't a big deal, but now that the day had finally arrived, only one thing was the topic of discussion – and it wasn't her sixteenth birthday.

"What kind of dreams do you think you will have?" Alexandra inquired, smiling with excitement.

Before Gemmy could answer, her other sister interrupted. "I bet it will be about the future!"

Diana's prediction immediately erased what Gemmy had planned to say and she looked at her 17-year-old sister with doubt. "Nobody has ever dreamed about the future!"

Diana shrugged. "Doesn't mean it can't happen."

"Oh, you mean a future husband, perhaps?" the older sister, Alexandra, teased. At eighteen, she was already dating, but not a man she had seen in her dreams. No, the sisters knew that Alexandra's recurrent dreams were about a seaside cottage, one which she hoped was her future home because the way she described it sounded lovely.

"Yuck! I hope not!" Gemmy said now, making a face. She shook her head. "Who knows what my dreams will be about? We can't even guess. Besides," she added, looking at Diana. "No one expected your dreams to be about a painting."

Diana acknowledged this with a nod. Her recurrent dreams were about a painting of a woman who looked so similar to their mother. The dreams were the same – of Diana observing the painting in a hallway and feeling some kind of connection to it – but no one knew what the painting meant, or who it was of.

"Do you know what I think?" Alexandra began, but before she could continue, the three of them looked up to see a woman enter the room.

"Girls! Dinner is served!" she announced, smiling at them and motioning for them to go into another room.

"Thank you, Mother," Alexandra replied.

The three of them arose from the couch they had been sitting on and followed the woman into the other room.

That would have been the end of the conversation, if Gemmy hadn't been so curious about what Alexandra thought. So after dinner and the birthday celebrations, she found her sister preparing to climb into her bed in her room. "Well, what do you think?" she asked, folding her arms across her chest and bracing herself for whatever sort of wisdom her oldest sister had to share.

But Alexandra's smile was thoughtful as she turned away from her bed to look at Gemmy. "I think we make too much of a fuss over these dreams."

Gemmy was silent for a moment as she thought this over. "You're only saying that because you think your dreams are better than everyone else's."

Alexandra chuckled. "Well, at least it's more interesting than someone's boring dream about a painting." She tilted her head. "Do you think you'll start having them tonight?"

Gemmy sighed. "There's no way to tell. It's not very common for the dreams to begin right after someone turns sixteen. Mother didn't start having hers until she was almost seventeen. Same with Father. Perhaps mine won't happen just yet."

Alexandra nodded. "This is true. Mine didn't start until a week after I turned sixteen, and Di's was a month after." She shrugged. "Whatever dreams you end up having, I hope they are good ones."

A smile slipped across Gemmy's face. "Me, too."

After the excitement of the day had died down late in the evening and everyone had settled into the couches in the living room, Gemmy yawned. "Wow, I guess today wore me out. I shall retire for the evening."

She kissed her parents and siblings goodnight then walked to the bedroom she shared with her younger sister. She lit the small gas lamp that was between the two beds and closed the door. She changed into a nightgown then opened the bedroom door just a crack before lowering the flame of the lamp. Darkness fell across her room as she pulled her quilt down on her bed and climbed under the blankets. Once she settled into bed, she stared up at the dark ceiling.

"I wonder if my dream set really will begin tonight," she muttered.

Soon she was fast asleep.

She found herself inside of what appeared to be a home. From the simple furniture and wooden floor, she could only guess it was a cabin that belonged to a poor family. A pungent odor hit her nostrils and she winced as she covered her nose. She walked through the room and found a wooden door. Upon opening the door, she gasped in alarm at the sight of three dead people inside. A woman lay on the floor, her throat bloody from the slash wound that circled the front of it. Her eyes blankly stared ahead. Near where her hand lay, a baby of about half a year old was likewise prone on the floor, also with a fatal wound at the neck. On a small bed lay the body of a young boy of perhaps two or three years of age, and he too had a bloody wound at his throat.

Gemmy screamed in terror and tears sprang to her eyes. She turned and gasped at the sight of the man that towered over her. He had long brown hair, a mustache and dark eyes that stared right through her. He wore dusty brown pants, a tan long-sleeve shirt with dirt all over the front, and a brown coat. He gripped her arms before she could run away from him.

"He killed them!" he grunted, shaking her. "He killed my whole family! Only because I practiced magic!" He looked skyward. "And now I will kill him!"

"No! No!" Gemmy pleaded, as the man dragged her to another room. The living room outside of the bedroom was gone and in its place was some kind of secret room. An altar was in the middle of the room, complete with a dagger, black candle and a bowl containing assorted bones. Gemmy gasped when she saw the pentagram on the floor. It appeared to be created by a red liquid and she shuddered at the thought that the liquid was blood.

She gasped in alarm as the man swung her to the floor in the middle of the pentagram. He kneeled next to her and placed his left hand on her chest, holding her down. He lifted his right arm and began chanting a spell.

Gemmy shook as she lay there, too frightened to move. She had no idea what the words he said meant. She screamed as his voice raised and he nearly cried out the last word as he swung his free hand down onto her chest.

Gemmy awoke, her eyes wide as she steadied her breathing. She remained where she lay on the bed, her gaze darting around the dimly-lit ceiling.

She moved her hands over her body then, assured of the body's gender, sighed with relief.

"It worked." He was surprised to hear his own voice again. Perhaps it was a side effect of the spell. Still, it would be unusual for a young girl to be speaking with the voice of a twenty-eight-year-old man. It was possible to use puberty as a reason, but even then, it was unusual to happen so fast.

Perhaps he could figure out a way to fix the voice problem while in the girl's body. No matter. He had more pressing things to attend to.

He got out of bed and changed clothes, putting on the trousers the girl so rarely wore, along with a tunic. He put the hair up into a tight bun, making a mental note to get it cut later, then put on stockings and boots.

Just as he headed for the kitchen, a hand fell on his shoulder. He swung around, his hand up and ready to strike.

"We will be leaving soon," a young woman who appeared to be close to this girl's age informed him. Perhaps this girl was a sibling. She looked much too young to be the mother. He noticed how she squirmed at his defensive pose and relaxed.

"Leaving where?" he asked, lowering his hand.

The girl studied her. "To see the Elders." She blinked in confusion. "Gemmy, what happened to your voice?"

He shook his head. "Hormones, I guess. Never mind these Elders you speak of. I wish to find Baldern."

The girl continued to study her. "I don't know anyone by that name." Then she looked at him with curiosity. "Tell me, what is your middle name again?"

He thought for a minute but nothing of the girl's memories came to him. Was it possible she knew her sister was possessed? He couldn't take that chance.

He ran to the front door but the girl was fast behind him, calling out a name.

Another girl arrived, possibly the Alexandria that had been summoned, and she looked at the two of them with confusion. "What is going on?" she asked.

"We have to leave now!" the first girl cried, struggling to retain her grip on him. "Something has possessed her! We might be too late!"

Alexandra joined the other girl in getting control of their sister. They nearly dragged him to the carriage waiting outside and held him down as they told the driver where to take them.

Once before the Elders, he straightened. They were inside some kind of meeting room, where the three Elders sat at a large wooden table. All three had long gray beards and moustaches, and if it weren't for the different

colored robes they wore – green, brown and red, with matching caps – one may have assumed they were triplets. They nearly looked identical. Except he knew better. He could see past the body and knew which soul inhabited it.

He chuckled. What he had thought would be an interference with his plans had actually made his task of finding his enemy easier.

"So, Baldern, we meet again!"

He heard the girls at his side gasp in alarm.

The wizened Elder sitting between the two others stood from his seat, a look of dread on his face. "It can't be!"

He chuckled. "It can and it is! And this time, I will have my vengeance!"

He roared with anger as he flew at the Elder. The other two moved away as his body crashed into the body of his enemy.

Baldern struggled to push him away but he was stronger. Somehow, using the dreams to transport his soul into the body of a dreamer had given him superhuman strength. He gripped Baldern's neck and squeezed.

He felt hands and arms on him, likely of the others trying to pull him off. He lowered his head and cried out a spell that moved them from him, knocking them out cold.

He once again constricted Baldern's neck.

"Even if you kill me now," Baldern managed to say. "I will come back! And I will find you."

He grinned. He didn't have the blue thorn now, the thorn that would stop Baldern's ability to reincarnate, but he would have it later.

"And I look forward to it," he replied, grinning as he watched the life disappear from his enemy's eyes.

Finally. He had his revenge.

He stood from the body and looked around the room. The others remained out cold.

Nodding with satisfaction, he walked out of the room, hopeful at living a better life this time around. At least for now, his thirst for revenge was sated.

About the Author:
Dawn Colclasure is a writer who lives in Oregon with her husband and children. She is the author and co-author of over four dozen books, among them the horror novel, Shadow of Samhain. She is also a freelance writer, book reviewer and columnist. Her stories have appeared in magazines, newspapers, websites and anthologies. She publishes the free newsletter for writers, the SPARREW Newsletter, each month.

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Growing Pains | ***Thomas Brown***

Each day, when morning breaks, the gates unlock. Blue-eyed boys and blond-haired girls hop, skip, jump, crack silly jokes, kick chequered balls into an empty sky. A bell rings and they rush inside; Nick, Lily, little Max drink juice, help themselves to biscuits, laughing, throwing punches, wiping crumbs from around their messy mouths.

After lunch the children play inside, read stories (Tams and Sarah sing), fall fast asleep, and then, in that calm, soporific state, begin to change. Skin shivers, splits revealing shells, long insect legs, click-clacking tongues; by night a horrid, hungry hive trapped inside this, their steel penal-nest.

About the Author:
In 2010, Thomas won the University of Southampton's Flash Fiction Competition with his story, 'Crowman'. In 2014 he won the Almond Press Short Story Competition, 'Broken Worlds'. That same year, his debut novel LYNNWOOD was a finalist for The People's Book Prize. In 2022, he was invited to feature in The Horror Zine's 'Best Of' anthology. Thomas writes dark, surreal fiction.

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The Fallen | ***Michael Gesellchen***

Each trip here is worse than before. The stink never comes out, clinging to our garments made of torn rags and frail fibers. I see the fallen. We stand toe-to-toe like prize fighters going for gold. Despair contorts the skin around their eyes, wrinkled like a wrung-out washcloth. Sorrow billows off the shoulders like plumes of smoke rising from the ashes. Heads hang, unable to look forward and see anything resembling a future.

Red haze permeates the horizon, trickling down from the skies of a polluted city. Buildings rise up from the ground, broken and crumbled like tombstones in a century's old graveyard. A worn footpath fades, turning into broken cobblestone splashed with crimson and dirt. Drippings from the open market run in little red streams between the cobblestone cracks.

Town square bustles with depravity and soulless debauchery. Every dark thought and twisted desire is on display for all to see. Nothing is hidden, all is laid bare. Darkness floats from the heart to the mind, forming images like paint on an artist's canvas. We see it, smell it, touch it… it seeps in. I raise my cloak, but no shield can block it. Yet, I come all the same, for them… for the fallen.

The fallen are brought in, dragged by whatever hair is left on the head to a raised wooden platform and placed on exhibit… sold at auction to the most ruthless bidder. Currency is worthless here. The economic system is controlled by brutality and animalistic instinct, survival of the fittest on full display. Slaves aren't bought and purchased, they're taken by whomever has the strength to control the savagery and hold it at bay, securing absolute dominance and control. Some use witchcraft, others offer blood sacrifices… seeking favor from the Gods below. Anything to tilt the advantage.

***

Streets narrow past the market, fading into darkened alleys. Buildings rise from all sides, creating claustrophobic tunnels, mimicking their earthly counterparts. Shadows fall like raindrops from the top, black rain growing heavy, each droplet becoming larger.

THUD

The fallen land at my feet, broken necks bent ninety degrees, splintered bones protruding outward into sharp points. The eyes are sunken into black holes. Any light that once lived behind them was snuffed out long ago, hidden under a bush and unable to shine.

I kneel down and touch the wounds. Marrow and sinew meld together, growing and fusing as the neck straightens and becomes whole. The eyes open, color shifting from black to gray. The lips move, but nothing audible comes out.

THUD

Another lands behind me.

THUD… THUD… THUD

The fallen pepper the street like confetti on New Year's Day, jumping from tall buildings on earth, breaking their physical bodies and landing in this shithole. They sit up, gripped in confusion. I float amongst the fallen, searching for her. I wish I had a map, a tutorial on how to get this done, but nothing has ever been written. Knowledge is gained through experience, understood by putting on the shoes of the other and walking the horrific mile. Only then will our eyes be opened and illumination befallen.

A dark hoard emerges from the alleyway. Large brutes carrying whips and chains; shackles made from forged iron and smelted metal. One bends down, forcing a choker around the neck of a fallen. It's her… the needle in the haystack, the one I'm searching for. The one I betrayed so long ago. She's drug across the ground, skin ripped from flesh as it scrapes across the jagged cobblestone. Fingernails crack and tear as she struggles in vain to grip the cracks, unable to grasp the blood-filled canals between the stones, fingers slipping in despair.

I float behind. The alleyway opens back up to the middle; all streets point to the town square. A crowd gathers; hissing, snarling, cackling. The fallen is brought to the wooden platform and dragged up a series of broken steps. The end of the chain is wrapped around a pulley, lifting her by the neck, feet dangling a foot off the ground.

I wait—outcast and unwelcomed, a foreigner in a hostile land as a robed figure rises from the crowd and removes its hood, revealing a pale face with demon's eyes. Its jawline slants into a pointed chin. Grinning thin lips reveal yellow-stained teeth. The eyes shift and change color; black to gray, settling into a bloodshot crimson.

The dark figure ascends the rickety stairs and raises its hand. A long thin talon points upward and stretches to the sky, brought back down to touch her face. The razor runs along her cheekbone, scratching the surface and drawing a red line. Blood drips down the neck and spreads to the chest. The figure leans in, possessed eyes flaring with wicked desire. A forked tongue protrudes from its mouth and licks the red pooling at her breasts.

The fallen tilts her head and screams. The cries form a connection, restoring a bond that was broken long ago. Her sorrow churns my heart as I slowly change, becoming fully materialized in this hellish realm.

The crowd senses my presence and parts like the Red Sea. Hatred oozes from their souls and permeates the atmosphere as I step onto the wooden platform and lean into her face; distorted, scratched, and bloody. The dark figure's eyes fade to black, lip curled. Anger rises from its shoulders and swirls in little red wisps as it can only stand by and watch. My thoughts form into ghostly images, visible to those who are ready to see. They float towards the fallen, fluttering like monarch butterflies and landing upon her shoulders.

I'm the reason you're here. I left you too soon. I should have been there when I wasn't, but I couldn't keep them at bay. I wasn't strong enough to fight back, but I've been given a second chance to find you. I've been where you've been. I've done what you've done. I was a jumper, like you, but now I walk in the light and can show you the way. There's no going back to earth, but there is refuge. I once stood upon this very platform... when I chose to end things. An iron collar around my neck, choking me like a dog. The brutes took turns, each with talons sharpened to points; skewers, knives, and hot pokers. One-by-one they stabbed and jabbed, looking me in the eye while they sliced and carved. I begged for mercy, but they laughed and dug deeper. I cried out in despair, like you. My cries were heard and I was given a great gift… a chance to ask for your forgiveness.

The girl's eyes remained closed. I reached up and loosened the pulley. Her body fell into my chest, wrapped tightly in my arms. Blue flames ignite as if our bodies were dipped in gasoline and a match was pressed against its striker. The crowd erupted into mass hysteria. Brutes fought and muscled for rank, pushing through the unruly mass. Screams filled the open market. Blue fire exploded, spraying the crowd like police dispersing a riot.

The dark figure put up a meager defense, its black magic no match for the holy fire burning like hell. It stepped backward and fell from the platform, engulfed in flame and writhing on the ground below.

I descended the broken stairs and carried the girl across the blood-soaked cobblestone, back to the worn footpath I traveled in on. I placed her on the ground at my feet, a tear dropped from my eye and landed on her cheek, healing the scratch from the dark figure's talon. Our bond created the flame that drove the brutes away. I failed the first time. I was a poor father on earth. I should have never left her alone up there, but now I've found her.

Sweetheart… will you forgive me? Will you give me a second chance?

The girl opened her eyes, lashes fluttering softly.

Daddy… is that you?

About the Author:

Michael Gesellchen lives in Minnesota with his wife and two children, creating stories inspired by shadows spreading across the basement wall… stretching like vines from cracks in the cinder block foundation. Growing up in the 80's has manifested a passion for writing science fiction, fantasy, thrillers, and horror. Michael has published seven novels and several short stories.

Amazon Author Page: Michael Gesellchen
Author Blog: Books from the Basement

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Blue Steaks | ***E. W. Farnsworth***

The stockyards were full, and sounds of continual slaughter made the winter of 1880 an inauspicious time for romance. Yet Ruth was not getting any younger, and I was finally able to support a wife and family on my accountant's wages.

I met the comely nineteen-year-old counter clerk outside the entrance of the Armour Company to propose a Dutch-treat dinner the evening of February 14. I said, "Ruth, I shall meet you in the parlor of your boarding house at seven o'clock PM. We'll walk to the Stockyard Restaurant and enjoy our meal. Afterward, I'll walk you home again."

She was fussing with her gloves. "Simon, I would be happy to accept your invitation, but I cannot afford to pay for my dinner. The Stockyard Restaurant is very expensive."

I did a few calculations and changed my tactics. "Why don't I pay for both our meals? I have just enough money to cover two blue steaks, one for each of us. I won't have enough for dessert."

She smiled. "We could split a steak. Then you'd have enough money for dessert. We'll have coffee instead of wine. I am extremely excited. I'll have the opportunity to wear the winter dress I have been sewing. You'll like it, I think. And you'll wear your brown suit?"

"That's right. I'll wear my hand-painted tie with the octopus pin you bought me for Christmas."

"I'll see you at seven on the fourteenth. You know what day that is, don't you?"

"Yes, and it is the most appropriate day for my purposes."

"So, you have ulterior motives?"

"You could say that. Anyway, you've made me a happy man."

"If you say so, Simon. Good evening." She extended her gloved hand and I shook it. Then we went our separate ways in the twilight. She joined two of her fellow roomers. I trudged homewards alone.

Black snow piled in the streets and on the walks. Snow fog rose as the lake lay calm with only a few seagulls apparent. I felt the cold through my shoes. I was warmed by the thought of our forthcoming dinner. The white fog's tentacles enveloped me. I was suddenly surrounded by five or six ruffians, who wanted my money and possibly my life.

Thieves had easy pickings among the salaried employees of the meat packers. They did not figure on my kind of victim. I was a trained boxer and seasoned street fighter. I used the weather as a weapon. The band of brigands soon lay on all sides moaning in pain. I passed by uninjured. I heard the leader of the robbers threaten me, but I did not deign to reply.

The lamp lighters were busy now. Here and there I passed constables on patrol. I heard the sounds of feet slapping on wet pavement and hooves of giant horses pulling carts with heavy loads. A sea of people immersed in fog came at me in groups with their hats and coats, their murmurings and occasional laughter punctuating the silence.

I reached my rooming house in time for the evening meal. Mrs. Salvage told me to take my place at the dining table and serve myself. Having divested myself of my coat and hat, I took my usual chair and used my boarding-house reach to fill my plate.

"Mrs. Savage, I will not be at dinner on the fourteenth as I shall be dining out."

"It's good you told me, Master Floyd. The others won't mind as there will be more for the rest of the lodgers."

The lodgers, seated around the table, nodded their heads up and down and made animal sounds of satisfaction. One laughed outright as he stuffed his face. The landlady handed me a second napkin and gestured for me to use it. I rubbed it against my face and saw the blood.

"Have you been brawling again, Master Floyd?"

"I'm all right. You should see the others." I smiled weakly.

"One day the police will be involved. Mark my words. Hooligans are taking over this city. I work hard to find civil clientele like you. I don't want to lose you."

I finished my meal, excused myself, and walked up the stairs to my room with my hat and coat in hand. There my tiny bed was ready to receive me. As my needs were few, I prepared for the evening by cleaning my teeth and washing my face. A vase with water and a bowl with a towel were sufficient. Last, I recorded my daily activities in my diary. My successful exchange with Ruth was the highlight of my week. I made no written record of the band of ruffians I had dispatched on my way home.

The last thing I did was to open a small box which contained the ring destined for Ruth's finger. I admired how the fire of the stone caught my eyes. I had been keeping the box in the inside pocket of my suit coat. On the fourteenth, the ring would either be accepted—or I would return it to the jeweler's shop for a refund.

That night as the wind howled under the gabled eaves, I slept fitfully. My mind was full of visions and dreams. I saw a tentacled creature come out of the fog to help defeat the robbers. I heard the shrill threats of the leader of the brigands. My mind's eye admired the tie pin in the shape of the octopus as if it were my talisman. As always, my accounts were my refuge. My prodigious memory retained numbers, which I checked and rechecked until I fell asleep at last.

St. Valentine's Day came with wind, rain and fog. I took one of the rooming-house umbrellas to work. I wore my painted tie and the tie pin shaped like an octopus. I padded through the thick crowd of workers. My supervisor marked my presence at the office, which was redolent of wet wool worn by the other workers. My desk held my ink well, my account book and my goose quills. I repaired the accounts from the previous day and worked through the chits I had been allocated for recording today.

The office manager arrived at ten o'clock AM and reviewed each employee's numbers. He approved my ledger by initialing each page since his last inspection. He was about to proceed to the next employee's desk, but he hesitated to whisper in my ear, "Two days ago, it has been alleged, you fought with six boys from our neighborhood. Their leader was the son of the chief of police. I'm aware of the sensitivity of the situation, but there is little I can do to help you. Be careful. The authorities are not to be trifled with."

I went back to my work, but I mulled over my manager's warning. I was not naïve. I did not want to lose my job or to cause my superiors trouble. I decided to take measured steps in case of unspecified difficulties. Above all, I did not want to endanger my girlfriend Ruth or my landlady Mrs. Salvage.

The hours flew by, and I had closed my ledger minutes before I realized it was time to leave the office. Outside was a downpour, with the streets full of water running to the drains and the lake. This accountant had turned in the direction of Ruth's lodging when I heard the voice of the leader of the brigands: "I have come for you alone. I mean to teach you a lesson you'll never forget."

I answered, "I did not pick a fight when we last met—you did. If you come at me, I shall defend myself."

The thug advanced and threw the first punch. I evaded the blow and tripped the would-be pugilist with my umbrella. The attacker fell face downward in the rushing water, which transformed into a writhing mass of tentacles forcing him underwater. The other five robbers came out of hiding to save their leader. They too became tangled in the tentacles. Meanwhile, I continued on my way to Ruth's place where I met her in the parlor as we had planned at seven o'clock PM. She was dressed in the garment she had told me about—the one she had tailored by hand. To me, she looked beautiful in her creation, and I told her so. She blushed bright red as she smiled.

I then told her how I had deflected the hooligan's attack with the help of an octopus. She thought I must be joking and suggested we had better walk to the restaurant. As we did so, the rain continued, and now darkness fell. Ruth held her dress above the running water while I held the umbrella over us both.

The Stockyard Restaurant was packed to the gills with regular customers, but I had reserved a table for two on the lakefront. There we ordered a blue fillet mignon steak for two with coffee and flan with white chocolate pieces for dessert. Our table featured a lighted candle and flowers. The waiter was accommodating. Ruth agreed that she had never tasted better cuisine. I assumed a kneeling position beside her and gave her the ring with my proposal of marriage.

Before she could give me her answer, two constables forced their way to the table. The six ruffians were behind them gesturing at me and egging them on. The crowd were joined by the chief of police, who ordered his men to take me to the police station without delay. I shrugged and asked whether I could settle my bill before we departed. While I counted out the ten dollars for the meal and tip, Ruth winked and thanked me for giving her the best time of her life.

"Somehow, I think your trip to the police station will be interrupted. Anyway, do as these gentlemen say. I can find my way back to my rooming house alone. And, to your question, of course, I shall marry you. We'll decide on the details later." She slipped my ring on her finger and turned to her dessert.

I left the restaurant with one constable on each side and the police chief leading the way. I still held the umbrella high as our menagerie stepped into the running water. Tentacles rose from the stream and grasped the policemen and the brigands. In a boiling tangle of arms with suckers, the aquatic creatures pulled their prey into the lake. They did not touch me, so I returned to the restaurant to escort Ruth to her lodging.

"How did you know my trip to jail would be interrupted?"

Ruth smiled. "Give me some credit. If your account of the tentacles seizing the robbers was true, I was convinced they would protect you a second time—and they did so. If your account had been a lie meant to cover something you did without external aid, I was sure you would escape your predicament by yourself."

"I'm so glad you said yes!"

"I'm so glad you proposed after all these months of anticipation."

We heard the shouting of police and robbers alike, but they were well out on the lake now. We took our time walking back to her lodging. As we stepped through the rushing water, we felt occasional tentacles rubbing against our calves and ankles.

I diverted us to a pier extending into the lake. At the pier's end, we stood as the rain ceased and the full moon shone on the placid lake. There we shared our first kiss. We stood in each other's arms until she said she was getting chilly. I conducted her to her boarding house before striking for home.

I had no idea what the police chief's next move would be. I decided I would play events as they came. I resolved only that I was thankful for the tentacles that had protected me and allowed me to complete a perfect evening with my girlfriend Ruth.

About the Author:
E. W. Farnsworth, a productive member of *The Siren's Call* family, is widely published online and in print. Cosmic horror is one of his specialties as indicated in his two collections of prize-winning stories: *"The Black Marble Griffon" and Other Disturbing Stories* and *"Firstborn" and Other Tales and Poems of Horror.*

Author Blog: E. W. Farnsworth
Twitter: @wickengel

Sanguinary Pursuit | ***John H. Dromey***

The highly potent witch's brew boiling in Claudia's cauldron lacked a critical fresh ingredient which could only be collected from a human donor, willing or otherwise.

The witch and her friend Dave met in a bar to strategize and enjoy a couple of beers.

"I can't donate," Dave said. "I'm too squeamish."

"What about the barmaid?"

"She's a beaut. Her blood's worth bottling."

"I agree," Claudia said. She took a white-handled boline out of her handbag and tapped its sickle-shaped blade on the neck of Dave's bottle. "Let's finish our brewskis. We'll use the empties to collect the barmaid's donation."

Sticky Situation | ***John H. Dromey***

When Louie went to his friend Winston's house for a late-night visit, he arrived just as someone else was leaving.

"Who was that?" Louie asked.

"No one you'd know. Just a vampire I'm doing business with. In these tough economic times, I've had to start selling my blood in order to pay the rent."

"Why didn't you go to a blood bank?"

"I did, but because of my medical condition they won't buy from me."

"What's wrong with you?"

"I have hemochromatosis. There's too much iron in my blood."

"Ah, that explains why your customer was covered with refrigerator magnets."

About the Author:
John H. Dromey was born in northeast Missouri. He likes to read—mysteries in particular—and write in a variety of genres. His fiction has appeared in over a dozen previous issues of *The Sirens Call eZine*, as well as in numerous other publications. His drabble "Sticky Situation" was originally published in *Hysterical Realms* (Strange Musings Press, 2015).

Invitation to Dinner | ***A.D. Jones***

I move silently through an abyss of darkness.

All around me is a total void of color, blackness in the most absolute sense, an ink-soaked existence that I still feel I can't truly call black, as that would insinuate I'm able to see anything at all.

As I move along in whatever direction this is – how does one even differentiate direction in this vacuum of nothingness – I wonder where my body ends and the darkness begins. Are we one and the same.

My movements feel sluggish as I ponder these, and many more questions.

Where am I going?

Where have I come from?

How long have I been here?

I ponder these questions as I continue my eternal journey through the void. I think perhaps I have always been here, and that I come from wherever here began. As for where I'm going, that I do not know but I believe that is because I haven't got there yet.

With nothing to mark the passing of time in this realm of perpetual midnight, I continue to guide myself onwards in search of whatever my purpose might be. Once again, I couldn't possibly discern what direction this might be – am I moving forwards, backwards, up, or down – with no solid substance to serve as my anchor, I am simply moving. Though I am certain that this too will eventually become clear.

***

In what I am hesitant to call time, it could be minutes, days, or millennia, I see a change in the sprawling nothingness that has been my existence.

Ahead of me, within the all-encompassing blackness I see a shape. A circular hole set into the black, tearing through the borders of its very being. Its edges flicker with bright, glowing light, dancing rhythmically across its rim. Many shades of red and orange weave and wind across each other, rising and falling in a hypnotic pattern that draws me ever closer, spellbound by its magical allure.

As I draw closer, I feel – a new experience for me – the warmth of the glowing circle, a heat that washes over my being like a gentle embrace as I close upon it. Within the circle I can make out different shapes and colors, moving patterns set against the black border. As I continue to bridge the gap between myself and the hole, I become aware of something else, a sound travelling through into the hole. Multiple voices are chanting words that I do not understand, sounds that come to me as if by magic.

This must be my purpose.

As I travel closer and closer to the hole, this doorway to elsewhere, I reach out with desire and longing. I watch as four ink black tendrils reach up and out of the hole, reaching through the breach and resting on the other side of this portal, resting over the flames that encircle it. I feel the solid ground, cold and hard beneath my touch and revel in the coarse, gravelly texture that pushes back against me.

A strange sensation rocks through my whole being, a vast pulling as my limbs try to extract me from the hole, bringing me through to this new plane of existence. I make no attempt to fight it as my form is squeezed up through the hole, birthed into this strange land.

***

A cool breeze washes over me as I raise myself up from the hole, which immediately becomes solid earth below me. The sulfurous smell of flame and burning wood coats me with its stench as I take in my own form for the first time.

Not black as I thought, but a deep, noxious green. Two long tendrils dance either side of my hulking body, a gelatinous mound of rippling, pulsing flesh balanced atop a thick prehensile tail. Opening my mouth to test its movement, I find it stretches deep into my torso before separating left and right into a cavernous pit of sharp teeth. A gurgling, clicking hiss emits forth from my mouth as I stretch it to its limits before casting a glance around at my surroundings.

Three women, clad in flowing black dresses stand in a row before a backdrop of giant trees, wide smiles splitting their faces as they take in my appearance. I assume them to be the source of the chanting I heard earlier, and for some reason I feel an immediate bond or kinship with them.

The woman in the center of the group, her long dark hair flecked with swathes of silvered strands throughout, steps forward and points past me as her lips part and unintelligible sounds come forth. I feel compelled to follow her directions and turn on my tail to take in the display behind me.

The sturdy wooden table rests on the soil, a circle of torches burning brightly around it. A naked man lays strapped to the table, bound by the wrists and ankles with thick hempen rope that draw his form into a large cross. Bloody sigils coat the majority of his bare flesh, and a filthy rag is tied across his mouth. I watch him, glossy brown eyes dart wildly about, jumping from the trio of women to myself, the fear is obvious in his expression.

A desire fills me as I take in this strange offering, a fresh gnawing in my mind, a craving that I have never felt before.

Is this hunger?

Moving closer to the table, I am overwhelmed by the potent stink of fear, the aroma heady, intoxicating and incredibly enticing. I can feel myself salivating, thick rivulets of stringy drool running over my lips as my grotesquely large mouth widens in anticipation.

My torso lowers itself, coiling back into my tail before I lunge forward like a viper and fall upon my meal, powerful mouth tearing the flesh away from the front of a thigh and stripping it to the bone as muffled screams cry out above me.

The warm, gushing fluids and meaty tissue are gone in an instant as I ravenously swallow them down and continue up the body, tearing into the man's torso as I gorge myself on blood, meat, and entrails.

In no time at all I have harvested all the delicious flesh from the front of the body, hollowed out its inside and crunched down on the skull to extract the brain tissue from within, but I am still hungry.

Coated in gore I leap from the table and spin to face the waiting women. As I draw near to them the ruby red pendants affixed to their chests seem to glow brightly and I feel myself halted by some invisible force. The first woman speaks again, her words still lost on me, but I can sense the power within them as I focus my attention, waiting patiently like a loyal pet as she continues to speak.

Words within words slowly begin to make sense as her intention starts to become clear to me.

"…go…feed…"

She's pointing again and I turn to see the dirt path that leads down the hill, worn bare by many years of constant footfall, where it turns right onto a long road set within the forest of trees. Remembering that her earlier directions led me to a fresh meal, I decide to once again journey in the direction of her wrinkled pale finger, the snake-like lower half of my body carrying me down the hill at great speed.

Travelling along the path of dirt and stone, the cool shadows of the trees cast across my body as the giant ball of luminescence in the sky spreads a soft, silver light across the land, I soon hear the clipped sounds of footfall approaching up ahead.

A man is heading this way, his head dipped, and a large brown sack slung heavily over his shoulder. He hasn't seen me.

I close the gap like a stalking assassin, and he looks up from his feet as my shadow darkens his steps, but it's too late. Two of my thick tendril-like arms snatch him around the throat and lift him from the ground, his feet thrashing as they dangle inches from the dirt. I tighten my grip as I squeeze the life from him, fascinated by how very purple his face turns as his eyes bulge pink and wide in their sockets. His thrashing limbs slowly submit and go limp as I watch a cloudy yellow liquid run down his dangling legs and begin drip-drip-dripping onto the earth below.

The hunger within pains me as I bring his flaccid body towards my gaping maw and sever the man's head, skull and all, in a single bite. Like a snake I open wide, extending deep into my chest, and begin to feed the rest of his body into the meatgrinder that is my mouth, making quick work of it before I move on.

Following the reverse trail of the now dead man's footsteps I eventually come to the top of a hill overlooking a settlement below. Scattered shacks and buildings sit dotted about on the horizon, each with tiny squares of orange-yellow glow emanating from within. Raucous sounds emit from some of the larger structures and distant figures can be seen moving in and out.

And the smells.

The whole town smells delicious and as I feel the hunger inside me gnawing away, I feel the need to give thanks to the trio of women I left behind. Thanks for the bounty they have provided for me.

Author the Author:

A.D. Jones lives in the North of England; where he spends his time favoring books over people and can be found writing or devouring said books to review online. He loves Coca-Cola, Twin Peaks, all things horror, and cult movies. His debut novel – Umbrate was released in October 2023 to positive feedback.

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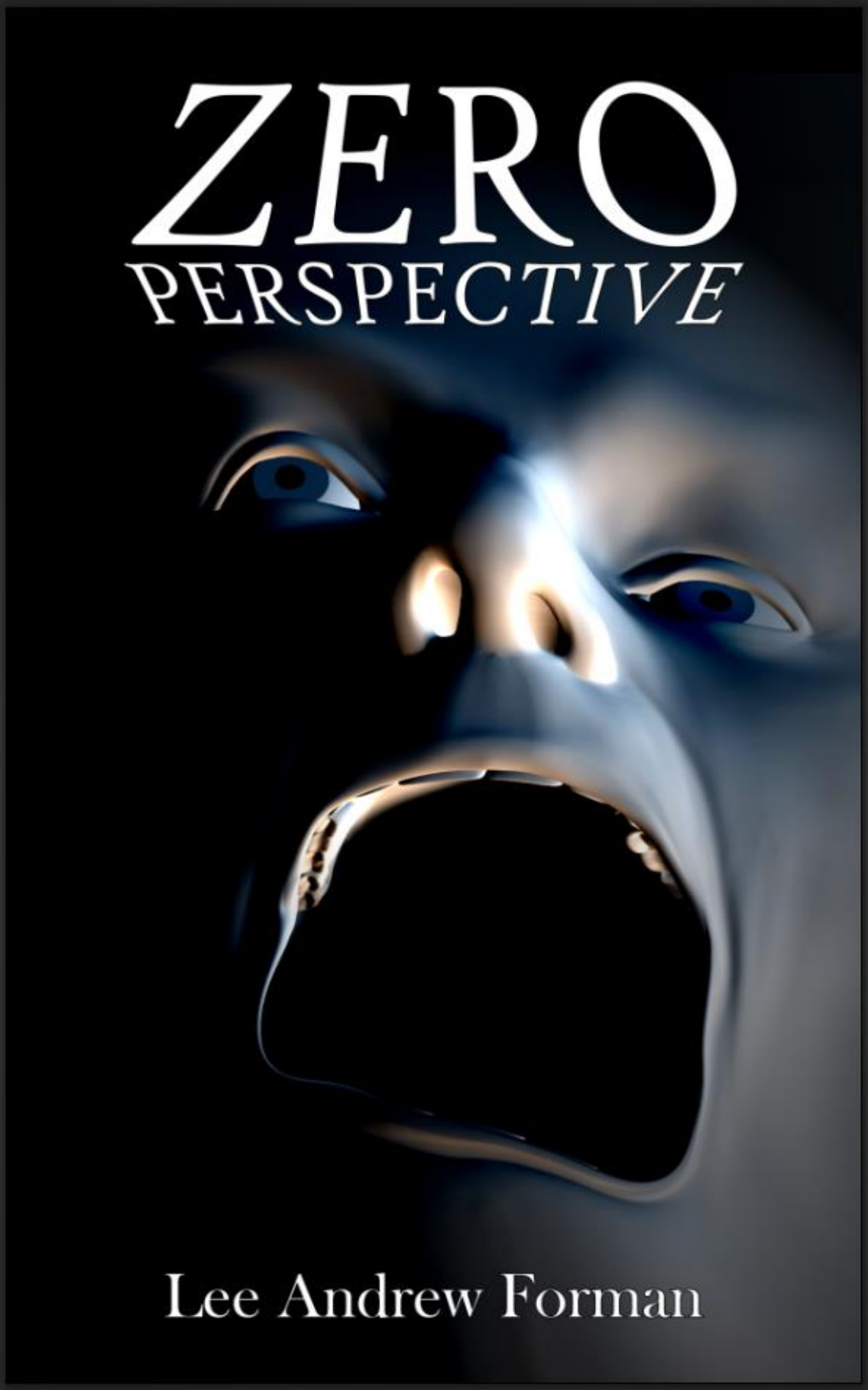

Available on Amazon!

The Garden Way | *Heather Grimm*

'I hate this town. I don't know why my parents had to move us all the way out here to some stupid nothing town in the middle of nowhere to 'work on their marriage'. Especially not if Dad has to stay each week in town and only see us on the weekends. I mean, he's the one that cheated, why am I the one getting punished? I'm in the middle of some weird, creepy town where there are actual white picket fences. There's a bandstand in the square across from the courthouse where there are free concerts on the weekends. All the women here wear dresses and compete for the annual 'Best Garden' competition and the men all wear hats outside. And not caps, but real hats, with brims, like those hipsters do, but unironically! What kind of 1950s Stepford hellhole have I been consigned to all because Dad couldn't keep it in his pants yet again?'

As Marguerite clicked the post button she sighed. Her mother kept saying to put on a brave face and look on the sunny side, but it was so hard. She was trapped here in some retro-hell town away from her friends and the rest of her family. Middle school and junior high had been tough, but everyone said high school was different, that everyone was too obsessed with their lives to bully others and that no one would care if her dad had slept with half of the PTA but it looked like she would never be able to find out for herself. Her mother's headlong flight from reality had been a physical one this time, and she had dragged the hapless Marguerite along in the middle of the school year. Next summer she wouldn't be enrolling in high school with her friends. Oh no, like everything else in this postage stamp town, she would have to rely on the internet for that.

Still, Marguerite did have sympathy for her mother. Finding your husband under the Christmas tree with your sister was one hell of a Christmas present. So, she was trying. It was just so hard. Her mother was drinking the Flavor-Aid here, in a big way, wearing dresses all the time and springing this weird retreat on her. A 'Wonderful Winter Weekend Wonderland!' held in the historic mansion on the far side of town for those girls aged 13-16. Honestly, Marguerite distrusted any event that tried that hard to be excited in its advertising. The only information online were the pictures of the manor and vague comments about beauty advice, planting and garden care hands-on classes, and how to 'bloom your home'. For a town that thrived on the tourist trade, it was strange how little information there was online, but it wasn't like you wanted outsiders signing up for your indoctrination camp, right?

As she lugged her duffel bag through the massive carved wooden doors, Marguerite was stunned out of her dark thoughts. The entry, and most of the house, had rich, dark wood everywhere you looked. Wood paneling on the walls, hardwood floors, wood furniture, and that weird grid pattern of beams on the ceiling she had no idea what it was. Everything was shining and well taken care of, but the doors were the real masterpieces. Each one was carved with leaves and flowers in completely different but quite similar patterns, and they had to have been hand carved.

A woman waved her through a door to a room where three other girls were awkwardly huddled around a seated woman. As she stepped into the room, the seated woman looked up with a bright, enthusiastic smile. "Ah, our latecomer is finally here! And just in time. My name is Lily," she said, standing with a stack of four large manila envelopes hugged to her chest. "I just cannot begin to tell you all how much we look forward to this each year. And what a bumper crop we have!" She finally loosened her hug on the envelopes and started calling names. "Saffron?" At that the littlest girl in the room, a tiny blonde clutching a stuffed teddy bear by the arm, flinched and darted forwards just long enough to grab the envelope and retreat to the paltry protection of the two others.

"Rosemary," had a dark-haired girl stomping forward and ripping the envelope out of Lily's hands with a glare. She stared at lily hostilely for a few more seconds before she turned back to the group, but she turned her head to keep Lily and the other woman in the corner of her eyes as she retreated. For a split second, Marguerite thought that Lily's smile turned... almost predatory, as though she knew Rosemary feared her and relished it. But then Lily looked down at the envelopes and her smile just seemed exuberant.

As Sage stepped forward to get her envelope Marguerite had almost convinced herself that she had imagined it all when Sage whispered, "Please. It's my last time..." She had her hand held out for the envelope, but she just had to straighten her fingers for it to be a gesture to stop.

Lily's smile didn't waver as she shoved the envelope into Sage's hand and folded her fingers about it saying, "Now, now, we have no input into who is chosen. You know that dear!"

Sage was trembling as Marguerite stepped forward and tugged her envelope from Lily. *What crap*, she thought. *This had to be some small town little miss bragging rights competition. Judging women by their appearance and biddability in some archaic competition*. She rolled her eyes. Her friends were not going to believe this.

Lily's smile was more unsettling from up close, though. She stared into Marguerite's eyes for one long moment before coming back to herself and then caroled two words that set Marguerite's teeth on edge. "No electronics!"

Marguerite could hear the other girls making noises of assent, but couldn't help a groan as she pulled out her cell phone and gave it to Lily.

As Lily turned to lock Marguerite's phone in an elaborately carved desk, the other woman hurried up. Her smile was more natural as she waved them from the room. "Welcome dears. I'm Camellia and you will be sleeping just up here," she said,

leading them up a staircase and down a few halls. “Your room keys are in your envelopes. Please don't lose them. The only other copies are kept offsite and will be a long wait. I'll let you settle in and then bring you down to dinner.” As she swept away, Marguerite opened her envelope and dug out the key. Next to her Sage was doing the same while behind her Saffron had already disappeared into her room.

Once she got her door open, Marguerite felt someone staring at her and turned. Standing in the doorway of the room next to Saffron's was Rosemary, staring at her. She paused for a moment and kept staring before she slammed her door shut and locked it.

Once she was safely locked in her own room, Marguerite dropped her bag on the floor and collapsed on the bed with a sigh. It was just after two, so unless they had dinner very early, she had hours to kill. She rolled over to take a look around the room, but it was the same as the rest of the house. All wood paneling, flooring, and furniture. There were even wooden shutters on the windows. She paused and looked at the floor again. No carpets. That was going to be one icy floor in the morning. In fact, the only textiles anywhere were on the bed. The more she looked around, the more this place struck her as weird.

Far sooner than she realized, Camellia had returned to lead them down to dinner. Adding to the cult indoctrination vibes was the vegan dinner and strange prayer about giving of the self to renew the land. But, Marguerite mused as they filed through the garden for a mandatory moonlit walk led by Lily, cults didn't really act like that. They love-bombed and gaslit you until you were too deeply in to ever really know which way was up. So what was going on here? And, she wondered as she stopped walking, where had everyone else gone? They had barely been in front of her, yet when she rounded the corner they were gone.

She stopped and listened, but heard nothing. It was like the hedges swallowed the sound. She tried to backtrack, but couldn't quite remember which turns she had made. Embarrassing as it was, she was going to have to call for help. “Hey, guys?” But she could barely hear her own voice. She called louder, “Hello,” but she got no response. Well, she remembered, if you ever got lost in a maze, just always take the right-hand path. It would take forever, but it would get you out eventually. Or it should have, but Marguerite found herself swearing that the paths shifted. She knew that those flowers hadn't been growing there, and it was getting harder and harder to think.

Eventually, she staggered out into the center of the maze and stopped in awe. There was a beautiful statue in the middle of the open area. She looked like she had been woven of branches. Despite the cold, leaves grew as her dress and golden flowers spilled down the branches that were her hair. As Marguerite got closer, it seemed as though the statue turned its head a little to look at her, but she was so entranced that she could not think of anything besides its beauty.

“Come to me,” the breeze singing through her branches seemed to say, “and I will bless your home. Your garden will grow fairer than others and your family will grow fat on my gifts. Give me your boon that I may recover after this hard winter and I shall bestow mine.”

The statue moved and held her arms out to Marguerite and she was able to see dead leaves in the dress and flowers dead from frost. The statue was so beautiful and she had to protect it. She moved as in a dream and moved into her perfect embrace whispering, “Of course. Whatever I can do to help.”

At that, the branches moved. The statue opened into a circular maw as the branches whipped through the air like snaring tentacles, grabbing and lifting Marguerite, screaming, until she was dropped into the center. There, the branches grew over and through her until she was locked in place. The branches grew along her bones, sending roots out the soles of her feet, and leaves filled her lungs. It was agony, for minutes or hours she couldn't say until it faded as she changed. Still, somehow, cognizant even though her heart had stopped beating and sap had replaced her blood, she could see. There was still a her, nestled into the branches that has devoured her physical form, but it was slowly becoming a they, as the consciousness that had called out to her merged with her. It would take time, the other one said, but by midsummer she would be fully absorbed.

So, it was with a calm heart and peaceful air that she watched as Lily and Camellia brought her mother to see her in the morning. She barely felt her mother's palm cupping her cheek and could barely hear her say, “Thank you, my Marguerite. I knew she would love you best. Now we will both have new lives here.”

About the Author:

Since she was a child, Heather Grimm has enjoyed scary stories. Finding the psychological horror genre was like coming home and she has since spent her time creating and devouring stories. Recently, she has been pursuing her childhood dream of being an author and sharing her stories on Tumblr and other venues.

Tumblr: @ghostmarmot

"Turn your head to the right."

The flash made my eyes water.

"Now left. You signed the forms?"

Another flash.

"Yes. I signed them."

The voice came from the darkness behind the camera.

"Face forward. Don't blink."

I stared straight ahead. The flash left flares of yellow and orange explosions behind my eyelids. The camera was popped open, the film removed and the voice disappeared into a connecting room.

"I'll be back with your licence."

I waited, sat in the light from the streetlamp that shone through the only window that wasn't boarded up. There was a plan of the warehouse on the wall. Post-it notes covered written details for unwarranted eyes. The rooms, rat runs and mazes were sketched in pencil and were as of yet unassembled.

The voice returned and handed me my fake licence. "I want to welcome you to our fleet of drivers. You're an excellent addition to the club. Want to see the car?"

I pocketed the licence, and followed him into the elevator that took us to the cellar garage. The car looked deceivingly like a cab, all polished paintwork and chrome with a night's worth of fuel in the tank. I sat in the seat, feeling the smooth leather of the wheel. "When do I begin?"

"Friday, seven thirty."

"One more question?" I asked, "Where are the door locks?"

On Friday I returned, eager to do well. The club was situated in a nondescript alleyway that had long been forgotten about. It was a stumbled upon cut through that led nowhere, except to a dead end illuminated by one dull streetlight. A dump for wet trash bags and the rats that chewed through them. Victorian warehouses loomed on either side, almost appearing to touch each other, blocking out any sunlight. All the doors had been painted black, like the walls and boards that covered the windows.

I noticed a freshly painted yellow stripe on the curb. My marker. A door opened in the wall adjacent to it. A man smiled, and ushered me inside. This side, the *right side,* had been fitted out to look like a nightclub. There was a well-stocked bar and dancefloor with tables around it.

I was handed my key. "Don't put the '*vacant*' light on in your cab unless you're sure, Ok."

As I began my hunt among the detritus of the city, I nervously coached myself. '*Are you a visitor to the city?'* I laughed, I enjoyed setting the trap. *'Do you want to go somewhere different?'* I shook my head. "That sounds like I'd take them to a brothel!" I decided I would let the passengers lead. *'Where would you recommend for a late drink?'*

I parked up in the advised hideaways, so as not to alert suspicion from other *legal* drivers, and waited. I switched on the radio to listen to the live feed from the warehouse nightclub. The selected guests had arrived and were waiting. I could hear their impatient chatter, feel the tension and anticipation. Then a voice announced the arrival of the first car of the evening. My heart was pounding! The guests became silent, while the MC entertained, *'Which door will they use ladies and gentlemen? Right or Left? Quiet! The car approaches.'*

Those few seconds were delicious. What was the choice? Some music cut in, ruining things! They, the pick ups, had got out of the cab on the right, and straight into the nightclub. I felt deflated. Disappointed expectations. I switched off the radio. The passengers would be tolerated, given an hour's worth of drinking time before being spiked and dumped somewhere innocuous, to wake up with a hangover like death.

I continued the search, then pulled over when my phone buzzed. Another cab had arrived, but it was just more disappointment. The *right side* had won again. Boos and hisses from the guests. The crowd were eager for their entertainment.

The night continued. People whistled or waved their hands at me, willing me to pull over, but none were suitable. I turned onto a quieter street and saw two men, suited, ties loosened, walking slowly, but not drunk. I switched on the '*vacant*' sign. One saw me and waved. I slowly stopped and they got in.

"One more drink?" he said to his pal.

"I'm tired."

"One more!" He pretended to punch him in the arm. '*Now!'* I thought, '*Now!*'

"Why not eh?" They looked at me, the anonymous driver. A pair of eyes in the rear-view mirror. The voice in my head whispering, '*Be friendly, but not pushy.'*

"Listen to the man! One more drink."

"OK. Let's go."

I quietly pressed the switch that locked the doors. No light came on to warn them. The guests at the club would now be alerted to the *drop offs*.

"I know just the place. A nice little den in the old area. OK?"

"Sounds great. Take us there."

I turned into the alleyway. The cab seemed to squeeze into the gap between the buildings. I stopped carefully adjacent to the curb marking. I was sweating, knowing the guests would be listening, anticipating our arrival. *Now*, I thought, *Which side will these fellas get out?' Ha! Their future was decided by a random act, and they didn't even know it*.

"How much?"

"Call it a fiver. I forgot to put the clock on, when you got in."

I released the door locks. The pick up put the cash in my hand. No tip! The other opened the door nearest him. *The left side.*

His friend followed. A door opened immediately in the wall. A voice welcomed them. The door closed after them and was locked tight. I parked up in the shadows next to the other cars, happy I had found my way in at last! I switched on the radio and quickly had to turn the volume down. The screams had already begun.

About the Author:

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

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Occupied | ***Eddie D. Moore***

Nick waited for the effects of cryo to pass. He fought the urge to empty his stomach and opened his eyes. He saw movement through the condensation of his pod's window, and he heard muffled noises. Did someone's pod fail? Were there intruders on the ship?

His hand felt like it weighed a hundred pounds as he wiped the pod's window. A second later, a grotesque face full of anger appeared inches away. The creature growled and licked a long claw.

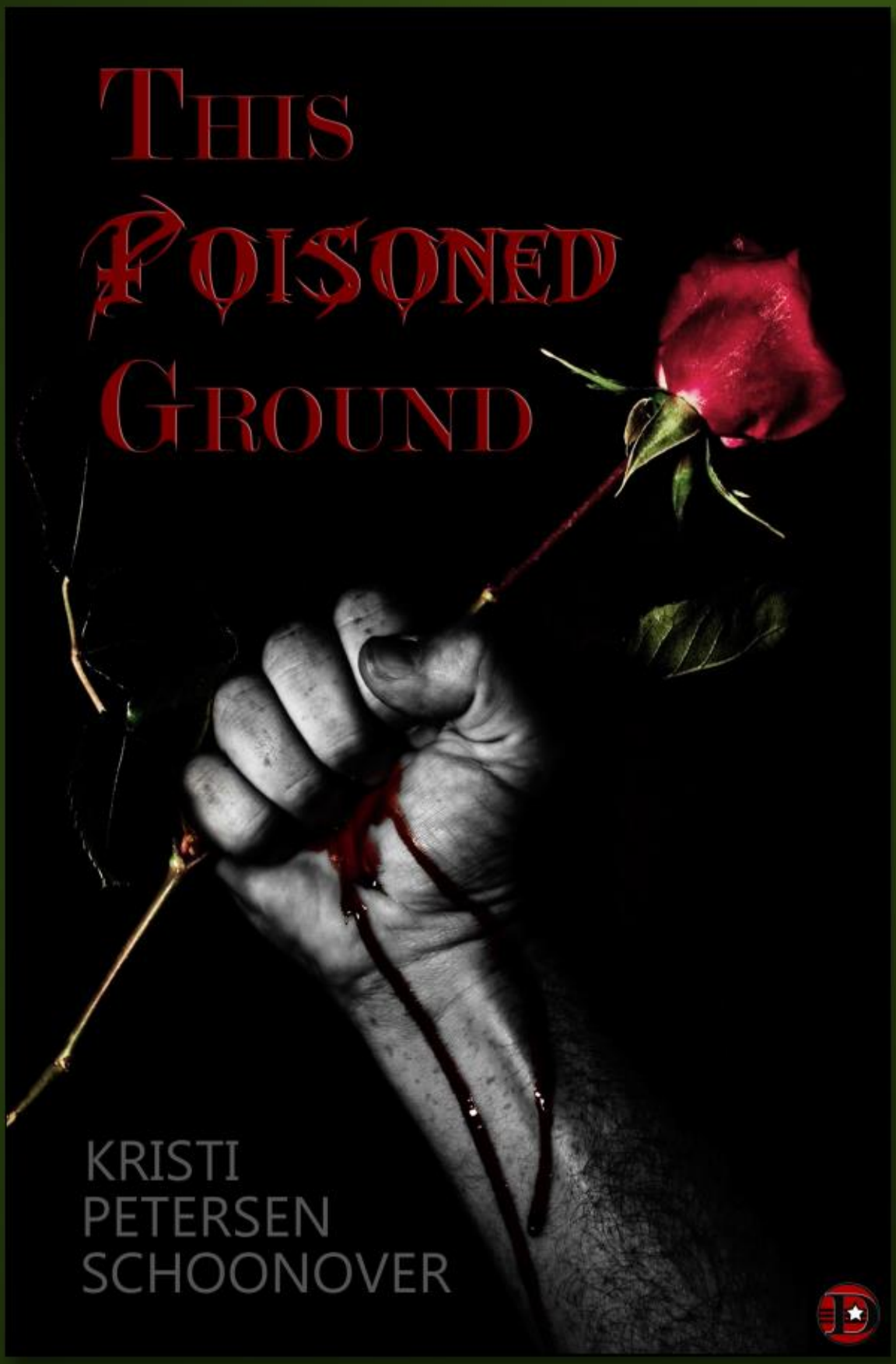
"Well, I guess this system is occupied."

The door unlocked, and half a second later, it was ripped away.

About the Author:

Eddie D. Moore still lives within a few miles of the small Tennessee town where he was born, but he spends his free time exploring faraway worlds that only exist in his mind. If you desire more, he'd suggest picking up a copy of his mini-anthology Misfits & Oddities.

They say you hurt the ones you love most.
No one ever talks about when they hurt you back.



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Not That Way | ***Matt Scott***

"How high are you right now?" my wife asked me as we stopped on the trail about a mile and half from the trailhead. Spring flowers were curled up next to the trail brushing the dew off the saw grass. I was frozen on the trail, a joint still smoking in my right hand.

My wife always asked how high I was when she thought I was full of it. As if weed was the reason for all of life's miscues. I hated it.

It was early, around seven, and the sun had just crested the mountains, casting us deeper in shadows, cold, and damp.

"Tell me you saw that?" I whispered back to her. I had taken point and was in front of her a few feet.

"See what?" She pulled her phone from her back pocket, checked for signal, then put it back in.

"Are you serious? It just walked right across the trail."

She stopped then. Looked around. Positioned her walking stick in front of her like a wizard protecting halflings. "Was it a skunk? Bobcat? Zombie squirrel? You shall not pass!" That was too much.

"Fuck. Really?"

"Oh what, don't be so mad. What was it? Just tell me."

Yeah, ok. I smoke a lot of pot. Like a lot. And most of the time when she called me out on it, it was funny, you know, because it was usually something benign, something totally inconsequential and irrelevant that it would be funny. But not this. Not what I just saw walking across the trail just a few hundred feet in front of us. It wasn't funny at all. Motherfucker was disturbing.

"Let's turn around," I said, trying not to sound scared and failing.

"What is it? Are you going to tell me or not?" I could tell she was getting a little concerned. The smile had left her voice, and she began to look around the trail now. In front of us, the way we were slowly backing away from.

There was a low, drawn-out growl up ahead, almost like speech, just off the side of the trail. Bushes moved. The low hanging limbs bent back, as if something was grabbing on to them, waiting there for us to walk by.

"Time to go," I said and grabbed my wife by the hand.

"Yep. Time to go now," she said falling in step with me.

We were about thirty minutes from the car, maybe a mile, mile and a half. We had taken our time up to this point, being early and dark, enjoying the trail and the sunrise. But now it was time to haul ass back to the trailhead and the safety of the car. If it provided any at all.

We picked up the pace. Almost running, the trail was smooth and unencumbered in front of us as we made our way back.

Another growl. This time from up ahead of us, blocking our way. A low, mournful growl, full of sadness and hurt. It sounded almost human.

"Turn around," I said.

"But there's one behind us."

"We can't go that way," I said, determined to avoid being eaten by a bear, or whatever the hell it was.

"There's a shelter back to the right. Maybe we can climb up it," she said, checking our six.

"Good idea. Go." I nodded to the right, back the way we had come. Ronnie didn't hesitate. She bolted. I followed. So did whatever was growling in the woods, just beyond our view. Both of them.

We could hear them converge on the path we had just left, trampling down trees and twigs heading our way.

The shelter was in a clearing about fifty yards from the trail. A prime picnic spot to be sure, secluded, isolated from the trail itself by way of a small stream and then a short walk across a wooden walk bridge to the shelter house. We were going to get up on top of that motherfucker. See what we could see.

We ran toward the stream, the rumbling in the underbrush behind us getting ever louder as we got closer to the shelter house. I didn't know what safety its meager frame would provide us, but it was sure as hell better than being out in the open. If we stayed out on the trail, we were going to die.

I got there first. I ran up to it, put my foot on the post, grabbed the rafter. Sturdy.

"Get up there," I said to Ronnie.

"You first," she said, "you can pull me up."

I climbed, fast and quiet, my legs screaming, threatening to give way like wet spaghetti. I crawled onto the roof with considerable effort, my body spent, my mind reeling. I had to get Ronnie up there. I reached my hand down to her, lying on my stomach, I could reach.

She put one foot on the post and then pushed off. I pulled her up as far as I could. She snaked her right hand up onto the roof and then swung one leg up and over onto the shingled slope.

Something grabbed her other leg and jerked her violently down onto the ground. I jumped down without thinking.

We were alone. For the moment.

"Fuck. Are you ok?" I asked, scanning the area for the creatures. I knelt beside her. She was winded and holding her left calf. It was sliced through, deep.

I pulled off my belt and cinched it tightly around the wound. She was wincing, crying.

"We gotta go," I said, helping her to her feet. It wasn't a matter of 'if' she could walk. She had to. I put my arm around her shoulders and hitched her up to me as best I could. We looked like we were in a sack race and losing.

We took off again, the way we had come. We had to get to the car. We had to get out of the goddamn woods. Ronnie's leg was bleeding profusely. She looked blue, going into shock most likely. We didn't have long. She didn't have long.

The sun was almost fully up now, hanging over the mountains, threatening the world with its light. And heat. Ronnie hobbled beside me. I carried her upright for minutes at a time, needing to stop and reposition my arms, getting a better grip on her. We had to hurry.

I wanted to grab my phone and call for help but had no idea who to call. 911? Forest service? The marines? They couldn't help us, and I would only get us fucking eaten if I tried now.

I pushed limbs out of our way as we rushed back to the car. My face was scratched up, a gouge beneath my right eye where a branch got me a little ways back. The growling was behind us now, in the distance, the shadows of the mountain.

Ronnie looked back often as we half walked half skipped back the way we had come, still seeing no one, nothing, and hearing only distant growling, mournful and low, regretful of missing their meal.

And then, when our bodies were spent, legs like lead weights, adrenaline gone the way of the ether, we were at the trail head. And the car.

Ours was the only car in the small pull-off next to the wooden fence that marked the start of the park property. We rushed to it like an oasis, and I leaned Ronnie against the passenger side door as I fumbled for the keys. Hitting the button on the fob, the doors unlocked and I deposited her in the seat without much trouble, her leg bleeding, her lips blue.

I went around and quickly got behind the wheel.

Just then a tremendous force heaved itself against the car and we were thrown to the side, Ronnie's head smacking her window, shattering it. I was thrown over on her as the car bounced back and landed on all fours. Growling erupted all around the car and at once we felt surrounded.

I grabbed Ronnie and pulled her to me. She was out, a gash in her forehead where she hit the glass. Not too serious I ascertained on the fly, part out of observation, part out of blind fear. We had to get out of there. I looked in my side mirror and saw dark shapes, low to the ground, scurry behind the car. I checked my rear view.

One, large, black shape emerged from behind us, growing larger as it stood, as if being born as we watched. It loomed suddenly, over our car, its long thick black arms shrouded in ragged cloth reaching hauntingly out for us as we cowered in the front seat.

"Fucking go already," Ronnie croaked, her head in my lap. I looked down, shifted the car into drive, and punched it out of there.

Gravel and dust spun in the midday sun as I tore out of that parking lot heading for the hospital. I stuck my phone on the dash stand, used my Bluetooth to call 911 and told them I was coming in hot. That my wife and I were attacked out on the trail.

The police met us at the ER. Doctors and nurses whisked my wife away as I stood at the entrance with a couple of confused yet concerned looking patrolmen.

"What can you tell us?" One of them asked.

What could I tell them? Fucked if I know. I was numb. I walked outside to the ambulance bay I had unceremoniously come to a stop in and went to the car. I opened the driver side, reached in, grabbed a pack of smokes I kept hidden behind the set. My wife didn't know. Kind of my dirty little secret. Shutting the door, I looked down, lit my cigarette, and pointed dumbly, silently at the door.

There, in the bottom right edge of it, where it met the chassis. Was a long, yellowed, tooth.

A tusk really, but I didn't want to say any of what I was thinking. That there were a couple of fucking monsters in those woods that were hell bent on getting us this morning, and almost did. And now, staring at it, there was proof that it happened. That it was real. That bad things exist, dark things, things with teeth that only hunger, that only hate, that only want to feed.

I didn't know what to say. So I said nothing. I took a drag off my smoke, tossed it down on the asphalt, and walked back toward the ER and my wife who was barely hanging on.

This was their problem now, the police, the forest service, the marines.

About the Author:
Matt Scott writes short horror and is the author of 76 published works. He has three collections of short horror stories as well as a collection of poetry. He lives and writes, in southern Colorado where he and his wife, Heather, get out every chance they get to explore the union's most colorful state.

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The Best Money Buys | ***Diane Arrelle***

We bought a hergot from an intergalactic website. Cute little critter, like a green cat-monkey. We were supposed to declaw it but we loved her too much for that.

Loved her so much, we decided to breed her. Earth-born hergots are worth a fortune. Yeah, it's forbidden, but that's just big business being big brotherish.

All went well, but my wife disappeared. Next day I found six babies curled up in her pulpy, shredded corpse.

Sure I'm upset, but I've sold the babies and believe me when I say my wife's going to have the best funeral money can buy.

Not Worried | ***Diane Arrelle***

I asked, as a joke, right before I said, I do, "Does her kind eat their mates?"

"Nah," Matheson said smiling, "but you gotta be really careful when they're pregnant."

Now my wife's with child, but I'm not worried.

Matheson's wife's pregnant too and in her nesting stage, and Matheson's gone, vanished. She decorated their nursery and I couldn't help but notice Matheson's fairy tattoo, the one he had done of his wife, glued to the wall over the crib.

But I'm not worried. Although my wife's been sharpening the kitchen knives as she gets closer to her due date.

About the Author:
Diane Arrelle has had more than 400 short stories published and two short story collections: Just A Drop In The Cup and Seasons On The Dark Side. A retired municipal senior citizen center director and ex-elementary school teacher, she's co-owner of a small publishing company, Jersey Pines Ink LLC. She resides with her sane husband and her insane cat on the edge of the Pine Barrens (home of the Jersey Devil).

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The Wages of Sin | ***Valerie B. Williams***

July 14, 1975

Yevgeny Petrovitch grunted as he pulled the heavily laden cart over the uneven forest path. Only another half kilometer to go. He'd selected the remote location of his garden plot out of extreme caution. The newly developed fertilizer, stolen from his employer, had been deemed a failure when applied to pine and spruce trees. But Yevgeny had noticed its effectiveness on smaller shrubs and bushes and had smuggled the remaining mixture out, rather than dispose of it as ordered. After four trips over the past week, this was the last load.

It would be perfect for his special crop.

He mixed the fertilizer with compost and shoveled it onto the base of his marijuana plants, disappearing into the towering rows as he worked. When finished, he walked the perimeter of the plot, inspecting the wire fencing he'd put up to keep deer from destroying his yield. Birdsong and the rustling of leaves filled the air. He breathed in the spicy smell of his crop and smiled. Satisfied that all was well, he whistled as he began the three-kilometer walk home.

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The huge Carpathian wild boar traveled alone. Only during mating season did he seek out others of his kind; females to mate with, males to fight. His days were a constant search for food to maintain his bulk.

His keen nose led him to a patch of tall, spiky-leaved plants enclosed by a shiny barrier. He tore off a mouthful of overhanging leaves and munched. When no more tender leaves were within reach, he lowered his head to the barrier, hooked it with his tusks, and tore it aside. A musty, delicious smell came from the earth at the base of the plants. He snuffled and dug his tusks into the dirt, gobbling mouthfuls of the rich dark soil and rolling it over his tongue in search of earthworms. After eating his fill, he felt sleepy and retired to a nearby small cave to rest.

The boar returned to the patch the next day, and the next. Each morning he awoke to find he'd outgrown his nighttime resting place. Familiar paths through the forest became too narrow, so he leaned his great shoulders against the trees to widen the way. His head brushed the canopy of the forest and at times he could even see over the tops of the trees. His increased size required more food. A lot more food.

After wiping out the patch of spiky plants, he began stripping leaves from trees, often pulling them down in his frenzy. He drove his tusks into the earth in search of insects, toppling even more trees. His taste for meat increased. Small mammals were mere snacks. Anything living became potential prey. He discovered that his nemesis, the gray wolf, made a fine meal and since wolves traveled in a pack, he could kill three or four at a time.

July 21, 1975

Yevgeny gaped in horror at the remains of his crop. He hadn't been to the plot since he'd added the last of the fertilizer, not wanting to attract attention by visiting too often. His feet sunk into the soil, as soft as if it had been freshly turned. He approached the flattened fence, searching for signs of who or what could have done this. An enormous print in the mud caught his eye—a cloven hoof, two meters long and a meter wide. He crossed himself and murmured a quick prayer before hurrying home, glancing nervously over his shoulder the whole way. He must speak to Father Kozlov.

The devil himself had come to Onega.

July 24, 1975

Father Kozlov followed Yevgeny to the destroyed garden and viewed the giant hoofprint for himself. He scoured the area and discovered more prints, enough to ascertain that they had been made by a four-legged animal, not a two-legged devil. But what creature could make prints of that size? Poor Yevgeny looked like he would have preferred the devil, and Father Kozlov almost agreed with him.

He reported the giant hoofprints to the mayor, only to be met with disdain. Not surprising; it was difficult to believe even having seen the proof. Kozlov also told his army reserve unit. Most of them were avid hunters who theorized that the prints belonged to a new species of boar. Eager to acquire the ultimate trophy kill, they spent the next few days gathering an arsenal of heavy weaponry in preparation for the hunt.

July 31, 1975

The boar stood on a hill at the edge of the forest, gazing down upon a warren of humans. He'd always avoided people, but he was so, so hungry.

He broke into a trot and charged down the incline, shaking the ground with every step. He shook his massive head, sending ropes of saliva flying from his tusks to land on the ground like giant slugs. Two people ran screaming just ahead of him, one of them carrying a smaller human. He snatched them up and crushed them in his mouth, enjoying the burst of blood and crunch of bone.

The boar slowed to a walk as he surveyed the area for more food. A patch of greenery among the stone structures beckoned. He strode toward it, his giant hooves crushing everything and everyone in his path. He heard popping noises and felt a barrage of stings on his haunches, but his thick, bristled skin and layers of fat protected him.

A chorus of sounds to his rear increased in volume. His massive neck prevented him from swiveling his head, so he turned his body sideways to see his pursuers. Flames exploded from near a huddled group of humans, and a long, pointed thing hurtled toward his flank. The boar roared as the object tore through his unguarded belly. Loops of bloody, glistening innards dangled from his wound as he spun to escape the pain. The boar faced the humans, his enormous chest and shoulders his best defense. He bellowed, lowered his head, and galloped toward them. All scattered but one.

***

Father Kozlov knelt in front of a grenade launcher, trembling as he watched the giant animal advance. The beast must be over nine meters in height! A sudden rush of adrenaline calmed his nerves and brought his sharpshooter training into focus. He steadied the sight of the launcher, aiming at the giant left eye. Waiting until the boar was nearly upon him, he squeezed the trigger and turned to run. The grenade exploded, hurling chunks of bone and blobs of brain matter everywhere. The priest was knocked to the ground by a flying piece of skull. The massive animal collapsed on top of him, delivering Father Kozlov into the arms of God.

***

The townspeople worked frantically to move the great beast off the body of their savior. It took fifty men and two hours to dismember the boar. A solemn procession formed to carry Kozlov's crushed body to the church. The remains of the boar were left until the next day, when they would be burned in a large pit.

During the night, a pack of gray wolves slunk into town, lured by the familiar scent of their favorite prey. The alpha male led the pack toward the mound of boar meat, and they ate their fill before tearing off chunks to carry back to the den for their pups.

August 2, 1975

Yevgeny wept at the funeral of the heroic priest. He'd watched, frozen in fear, as the brave soldiers battled the beast. After the boar was slain, cowardice stilled his tongue and prevented him from confessing that he had, in fact, created the freakish monster by applying the stolen fertilizer to his illegal crop. If the townspeople found out, the best he could hope for was a quick hanging. But those who lost loved ones wouldn't settle for such a merciful end.

***

Knowing how difficult the funeral had been, Marushka served her husband's favorite meal that night, borscht with black bread. Afterward Yevgeny leaned back, hands laced over his full stomach, and let out a satisfied belch. Even their usually fussy young son, Mikhail, had finished the meal, mopping up the borscht with chunks of bread in an imitation of his father.

Marushka beamed at her husband. "You like?"

"Excellent! Did you use different spices?"

"Not exactly. The new harvest of beets. They are so big and tasty, I barely needed to season the borscht at all!"

Yevgeny's lungs seized. He pushed back from the table, knocking his chair to the floor, and rushed from the house. *No, no! It couldn't be! There had only been one small bag left and he'd hidden it beneath a tarp!* He slid to a stop at the garden shed and braced himself against the doorway, panting. The fertilizer bag lay on its side, empty and crumpled.

Yevgeny staggered into the yard and spewed a stream of crimson borscht at the feet of his puzzled wife. He bent over, hands on knees, trying not to black out. An eerie sound pierced his veil of self-pity and misery. He raised his head and listened.

A chorus of wolves keened in the distance. Their howls sounded stronger than usual…more demanding, almost frenzied. And much, much hungrier.

About the Author:
Valerie B. Williams spins twisty tales from her home in central Virginia. Her short fiction has been published by Flame Tree Press and Dark Recesses Press, among others. Her debut novel, a supernatural thriller titled "The Vanishing Twin," will be released by Crossroad Press in 2024. When not writing, she can be found drinking either tea or wine, depending on the time of day.

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Topsoil | ***JB Corso***

Summer's generous sun bathes an isolated campsite in its glow. Campers fill out lunchtime grills with hot dogs and burger patties. Sunscreen aromas waft against a blanket of fresh pine. Children and parents toss footballs and frisbees back and forth.

Ten thousand massive larvae crawl inches under their tents. They squirm in a giant mass of hunger. Each presses their muscular tubular bodies upward towards the loosened soil, led by their innate instinct to feed. Thousands of fang-ringed mouths on the hunt for the nearest meal. Topsoil under a picnic table of seated campers rips open. Their generational feeding begins.

Echoes of Dinner | ***JB Corso***

Echoes of the Washington's family dog's barking rip apart the late Sunday afternoon suburban calm. Memories of cooked burgers hang in the air. Chauncy's red collar draws taut against her tense shoulders as she leers at a piece of lawn breaking open. Her aggressive barking pulls the Washingtons from their meal.

A group of antennae bump grass blades as they taste the air. Hints of the dog's scent excite the lead death roaches. Each releases a chemical dinner bell to the hundred thousand hatchlings behind them. The mass breaks through onto the lawn, tossing soil and grass to the sides.

Don't Feed Wolf-worms | ***JB Corso***

The sun sets over Point Place Plaza. Thinning daylight crawls back towards the horizon, creating elongated shadows over the empty parking lots. Cars face all directions as if scattered like dice. Their occupants hang out of open doors with gaping wounds and swollen eyeballs.

A single howl fills the cooling night, followed by an orchestra behind it. An adolescent wolf-worm stands upright on its dozens of arched back legs. Hair-covered antennae sweep the air for dinner. It gallops down an empty road with a thousand of its newborn siblings in tow. Its rough tongue savors the blood on its chin.

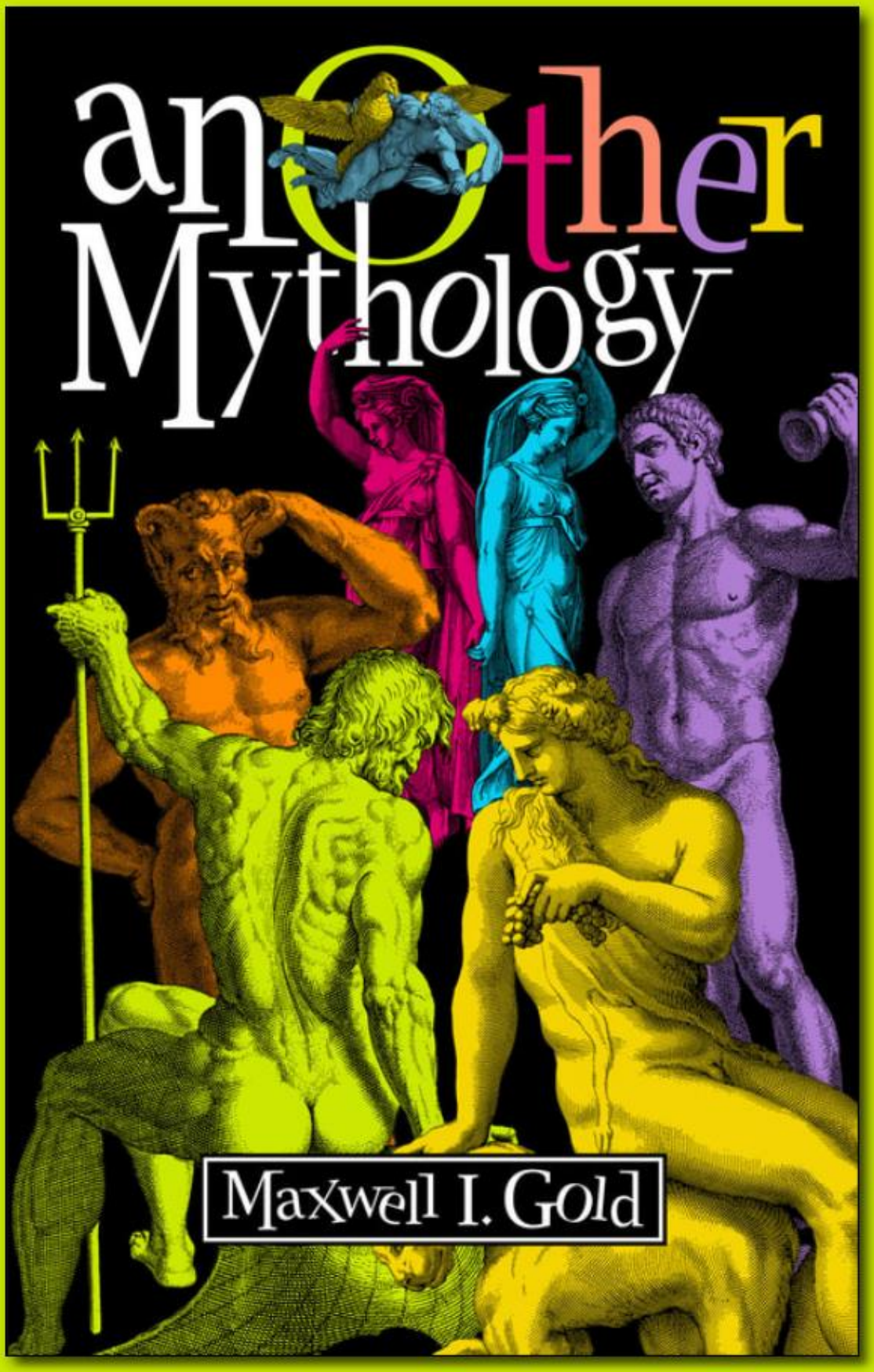
Until They Finish | ***JB Corso***

The young snails chew on me all day long.
My arms. My legs. My face. My back.
I can't move around my house without more latching on.
I'm a human buffet for their invasive teeth.
Blood drops harden down my arms. I pick at the dark spots.
Mother tells me to stop picking.
I can't even recognize her anymore, as covered as she is.
Her chest heaves with effort.
I imagine that it'll rise and fall until they finish feeding on her lips and start on her throat, just like Papa.
All we'll know is pain until the bitter end.

About the Author:
JB Corso is a healthcare professional working to better the lives of vulnerable people. They enjoy spending time with their supportive wife, writing daily, and finding joy in the world. Their author's motto is "Developing stories into masterpieces." They have been published in both fiction and professional outlets.

Facebook: JB Corso

A poetic soap opera of gods and monsters.



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

No More Prying Eyes | ***Maxwell I. Gold***

Lake Parime, Brazil

Beneath viridescent nethers of dreamless jungles where the eyes of murky gods meandered through golden lakes, soon, their secrets, never meant to be spoken, were placated by the fleshy odors and funk of one thousand untouched human hands. Their mouths closed and lips sealed as deep trenches lined with waterfalls and golden secrets, protecting a truth that would never be.

Tenebrific oaths never meant to be broken, sealed by blood and shadow beyond high, cloudy walls, through infinitely expanding jungles littered with terrible beasts, an ancient lake swallowed a thousand souls who walked the streets of a nameless city.

Faster and faster, clearing the brush as the daytime star began to fade, the stars swarming the horizon with darkness, Parime and Takutu embraced, mouths closed, and lips sealed breathing billowing plumes of water and clouds towards the heavens,

hidden.

No

more

prying

eyes.

Persisting on the pages of Someday, ink and memories died under a hot, unforgiving Brazilian sun as crinkled parchments withered into empty legends on forgotten atlases like words never spoken;

Mouths closed

and lips sealed.

Treasure ships from the borders of unknown maps hearing myths of the two great rivers where cities drowned in gold, skeletons swallowed by iron, and barbaric gods, sought their fortunes. Too late, they were met with oceans of silvery-tongued demons, carrion flowers, and hungry things stalking the night. Ruins of stone, rust, and whispers reached verdant canopies, cutting through towards vast, endless skies. The eyes of foreign invaders forever blinded by the dread of something they'd never understand;

Mouths closed

and lips sealed.

Only whispers and footsteps, utterances beyond Cyclopean trenches where Cariban chants wailed, echoing the sacrifices of flesh and fantasy into watery Voids beneath craggy, fungi-covered sholes where Parime and Takutu bathed in stardust and death,

hidden.

No

more

prying

eyes.

*First Appeared in *Shadow Atlas: Dark Landscapes of the Americas*
(ed. Carina Bissett, Hillary Dodge, and Josh Viola, 2021).

§175 | ***Maxwell I. Gold***

Through bizarre temples built with parchment and burnt words, codified by unreasonable nomenclature, whose restrictive bailments kept us locked away, colored and contextured by orientation and love; here the paragraphs were taken down as if an unholy commandment written by gods that were never ours.
The words themselves put down not in ink, but the blood of so many like us, the Queen-Goddesses who fell in the stone streets where the blue-bald thugs laughed at their glitter and gold; the Yellow Stars and Pink Lights who burned underneath the cigarette and concentration of neon flames by the fires of progress. All tenants wrought by words which were never meant to, but still linger like the ghosts of yesterday.

The ruined Temple of Nomenclature, bodies of signifiers spilling out of the Cosmic Bath Houses, scattered across the stars not only for the world to see but confined inside our closets where the fingers of new corporate gods hoped to press us further, deeper; the words of their awful prayers forever codified as if we *never-were* or *never-could-be.*

Though, this was for the Queen Goddesses, Yellow Stars, and Vogue-Mothers who damned the commandments of an old world that never wanted them in the first place, who cried in languages of
love,
rage,
and light;
to leave behind not ruins of a nameless temple, or phrases that beg to categorize, conflate, and ascribe meaningless affirmation to existence, but throw into the pyres of Someday, the bodies of old, white gods who never knew
the love,
rage,
and light;
to deconstruct the universe with their final cry,
Down
with
175!

*First Appeared in *Unspeakable Horror 3: Dark Rainbow Rising (ed. Vince Liaguno, 2023).*

I Demand the City of Flesh | ***Maxwell I. Gold***

My mind tortured by songs unspoken,
Ne'er enough, until cursed Venice, lost to death and sea, The price paid
with flesh, sorrow, a life unbroken
Piece by piece, gods and monsters, take me Deeper into the
sea, away from dark days. Illusions of love, the one who-
used-to-be; *I demand the city; the flesh be paid!*
Drowned in wrath and joy, I am free! A voice too familiar,
songs unspoken,
Pulled me closer by webbed hands towards the foam; Through the
waves, the blood of Venice spilled, Bone and gold, repaid to the god's
own,
With great dread and wrath, but tribute unpaid,
I demand the city, your flesh, they said.

*First Appeared in *Shakespeare Unleashed (ed. James Aquilone, 2023).*

Asphyxia

Shadows danced against particulates of my breath, falling into the soft bleakness of night. Slowly, deliberately, without changes in rhythm or tempo, every exhalation dripped apprehensively from my lips, crumbling into molecular oblivion at my feet. Trembling and cold, I could hear those ancient ululations thrash within my consciousness, an unbridled metaphysical trauma of generations unborn, unable to breathe, unable to speak, strangulated by the historic instruments of pragmatic complacency, mired and muffled by the songs of silence.

Ethereal fingers slammed against tissue and terror as my lungs contracted under the weight of what felt like a billion terrible stars, a billion eyes gazing into the atomic blackness without any real consequence as every last pitiful ion was crushed. The rhythm picked up, fingers tapping over the fleshy surface of the sky, where inhalations felt more like tiresome infinities arpeggiated in some twisted symphonic beat.

Colors began to blend, everything merged into some wild spectral hue of what-ifs and someday-soons, it was beautiful, like I had taken one last breath; until the horizon bled with fissures, preparing to burst under the pizzicato of ghostly fingers plucking away on strings of some unholy tool.

And there was no more color, no more beauty, a world drenched in grotesqueries and greyspaces. Slowly, deliberately, without changes in rhythm or tempo, every exhalation dripped apprehensively from my lips, crumbling into molecular oblivion at my feet. Shadows danced against particulates of my breath, falling into the soft bleakness of night.

*First Appeared in *Chiral Mad 5 (ed. Michael Bailey, 2022).*

About the Author:
Maxwell I. Gold is an acclaimed Jewish-American cosmic horror poet and editor, with an extensive body of work comprising over 300 poems since 2017. His writings have earned a place alongside many literary luminaries in the speculative fiction genre. His work has appeared in numerous literary journals, magazines, and anthologies such as Weird Tales Magazine, Startling Stories, Space and Time Magazine, Other Terrors: An Inclusive Anthology, Chiral Mad 5, and many more. Maxwell's work has been recognized with multiple nominations including the Rhysling Award, the Pushcart Prize, and the Bram Stoker Awards. Find him and his work at www.thewellsoftheweird.com.

Instagram: @cybergodwrites
Website: The Wells of the Weird

My Little Black Velvet Notebook: Writing is Survival

I'd like to journey back, and visit a ten-year-old boy in 1999. Dawning a pair of Harry Potter looking glasses, cargo shorts, and a kid-sized polo shirt he was the perfect target for any bullies self-internalized scorn. During a recess break, he was scribbling away in his black velvet notebook. The object of his imaginative desire. Soon, not long after the bell rang, a group of kids thought it'd be amusing to taunt him, call him a few names *queer, Jew boy*, their juvenile vitriol was not all surprising, but nonetheless they continued, pushing him to the ground and took his black velvet notebook, tearing apart the worlds he had created, page my page.

Don't worry, there's a happy ending for the boy, though, he felt the world was ending – the worlds he attempted to create were literally torn to shreds. So, he knew from that point forward he *must* write. He needed to write to survive, and to help others survive in the face of those who'd do everything to tear down that which we so dearly protect and covet.

Writing is like survival.

It's easy to say that I write because I *want to*, but more truthful to say that I write because I *must*. No, writing is not *like* survival, but writing *is* survival. It's like the scream in the dark wood where without it, no one could hear the cry in the night, or the last fight against a terrible enemy. Writing is everything when no one is listening or the walls seem too high to climb, but there is the rope.

Without water, we become nothing but empty, lifeless bodies, left to the whim of a harsh, thankless environment. Without words, without writing, many of us, including myself, feel the real anxiety set in without the comfort of those words and those gateways we create. The fear and need to survive.

I know that we all have our *notebooks*, in whatever form they take and they are not merely short stories or poems on the face of it all.

I've circled back to this question for quite some time and over the last year and a half, asking myself the same thing over and over again: *why do I write?*

Of course, it's not a question that can be answered throughout the course of this essay, but I hope to try.

I find we all *need* to write for varying reasons and those can range from anything that include market choice to meeting specific deadlines, or even something as simple as career ambition, and there's a fine line between *want* and *must.*

I remembered back to that small boy, aged ten, carrying his black velvet notebook with barely legible scribblings and stories etched in multi-colored gel-pen. They weren't overly complicated, or anything derived in substantive form; a sequel to the Goldeneye movie which came out that year or a ridiculous tale how the asteroid from *Armageddon* was blown up, and somehow the extra pieces collided with Mercury causing a second existential crisis for the humans on earth to deal with. All sorts of wild and utterly ridiculous plots which made no sense, but for him, they were everything. They didn't mean much to everyone else, but to him they were everything. They were the gateways into imaginative worlds and places outside of his reality.

According to a study by Cambridge University on expressive writing, "the immediate impact of expressive writing is usually a short-term increase in distress, negative mood and physical symptoms, and a decrease in positive mood compared with controls." The study also concluded that, "participants also rate their writing as significantly
more personal, meaningful and emotional."

Alternatively, the study listed potential health and behavioral outcomes that resulted from daily exercises of expressive writing.

Health outcomes (Note - these are results from a university study and are not to be construed as medical advice).

Fewer stress-related visits to the doctor
Improved immune system functioning
Reduced blood pressure
Improved lung function
Improved liver function
Fewer days in hospital
Improved mood/affect
Feeling of greater psychological well-being
Reduced depressive symptoms before examinations
Fewer post-traumatic intrusion and avoidance symptoms

Social and behavioral outcomes

Reduced absenteeism from work
Quicker re-employment after job loss
Improved working memory
Improved sporting performance
Higher students' grade point average
Altered social and linguistic behavior

Scientifically, we can point to reasons that we should write, and empirical data which enforces better behavior due to writing, and without question I'd encourage anyone to write every day even if they were ideas, names, or bits and pieces for a story, poem, or other creative project that has yet to be completed.

More importantly, and arguably the illusive question remains: *why?*

What happened to the elementary school boy in 1999 and his black velvet notebook? The notebook remained at his side, though was not entirely filled with gel-pen scribbles and managed a half-full spiral bound amalgamation of silly, wild musings. Though he carried on to write even more wild and soon dark phantasmagoria because like a body without water, he too realized that nothing in the world made sense without writing. Not only

that, he realized that he could help others, too. This was all to say that sometimes, the most simple solution is the answer to a complex question.

There was a happy ending for the boy from 1999 as promised. The notebook remains on his shelf to this day as a reminder that not only were these early notes some of the most precious gems in his mind, but that moment made him understand why he needed to write, to survive.

And yes, that boy was me.

We write to combat bullies and those who'd find any reason to silence our voices, and who'd attempt to burn our velvet notebooks and dreams. Write to dream and write to carry forward not only the raw and unfocused visions of a frightened school-boy, but the others that may follow. I'd implore writers, creators, publishers who read this essay to dig up those unpolished gems, your little black velvet notebooks and consider the possibilities.

Writing is survival.

About the Author:
Maxwell I. Gold is an acclaimed Jewish-American cosmic horror poet and editor, with an extensive body of work comprising over 300 poems since 2017. His writings have earned a place alongside many literary luminaries in the speculative fiction genre. His work has appeared in numerous literary journals, magazines, and anthologies such as Weird Tales Magazine, Startling Stories, Space and Time Magazine, Other Terrors: An Inclusive Anthology, Chiral Mad 5, and many more. Maxwell's work has been recognized with multiple nominations including the Rhysling Award, the Pushcart Prize, and the Bram Stoker Awards. Find him and his work at www.thewellsoftheweird.com.

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MAXWELL I. GOLD

BLEEDING RAINBOWS AND OTHER BROKEN SPECTRUMS

INTRODUCTION BY
ANGELA YURIKO SMITH

Erased

I lost myself in him,
With him, through every touch
and terrible possibility
that came with the darkness;

I lost everything the moment
His eyes corrupted caught me,
Like some sweet drink,
or blood-mixed in metal
as if I was a zombified fucktoy,
Controlled and twisted;

I lost everything
On the other side of the curtain,
Drunk on stars and sin
And eyes so terrible
They meant everything and nothing;

I lost my body, destroyed
Myself in a bed that became my grave
Alone in a palace of night, dagger and
Betrayal was the only thing I knew;

I lost everyone who said I was mad
When I stepped into the arms of a god
That promised me the universe
And delivered my worst fears,
Erased by both unimaginable pleasure and fear;

I lost myself in him,
with him, through every touch
and terrible possibility.

Crimson Lips

Wandering through gray storms of ice, rock, and glass where dead castles and wild Rimbaudian palaces stretched into the cold, libidinous night, I swallowed deep pangs of a never-ending, desiccating thirst. My lips were soaked, bubbling with liquescent crimson pleasure, drops of ecstasy splashing onto my skin, the bloated, fetid corpse at my feet, drained entirely of blood and beauty. They were the last ones, the last vessels in a cold, lifeless tower, as my hunger only grew worse throbbing with an insatiable wanting. The air was soaked with a thick intoxicating scent of rust, sweat, and leather as I stalked the halls, the ancient moon grinning through a marble aperture, appalled by my grotesque, sensual appetites.

More! I cried, my fingers twisted, popped, and cracked in immense undulating pleasure, caressing the pile of decayed flesh and ligaments, seeking to quench that thirst, which was monstrous and unbearable, like a deep chasm with a beast lurking in the unimaginable bottom. Soon, the hideous moon reached its awful zenith in the night where all at once, I was lost in a furious rage of bloody sanguinity, chewing, gnashing, and singing wildly into the frozen Voids. “More! There has to be more!” I cried, the moon winking from its perch, mocking me in the firmaments as I started, pulling, tearing, and licking the moist, fleshy carcass. Calcite daggers dragged across the surface, pleading sensually for one more drop. My lips were soaked, bubbling with pleasure, the soft drops exploding onto my skin, the bloated, fêted corpse at my feet, drained entirely of blood and beauty.

Eight Billion Desires

Drained by monstrous expectations, prudent and artificial structures by which my true dreams were suppressed into rotting, shameful pits, I was forced to make a choice. Deeper, longer, and after every day confined to my abyssal prison, I found myself like the rest of the world, tired of skulking along the peripherals of so many indifferent eyes—Eyes which never knew the carnal desire locked inside me. Those unspoken treasures, and bloated Dionysian fantasies painted the ravaged cathedrals and sanctuaries of my nightmares with lurid, erotic Uranian truths.

No longer contained by the despicable roots of cold eyes or metal systems, I rose from the pit. Naked and filled with blood and star-boned jubilance, I stood over a city in flames where thousands gawked, fled, and even kneeled in my shadow. My lips parted, happily taken as the object of their darkest fears and desires; I beckoned. Take nothing... Higher I went still, the city bestrode by my immensity covered in lust and ruin; I knew it was finished. ...for I am your desire.

Cyanide Surprises

i.

Pop one, kiss two,
It'll only hurt a little, he said.
Crack, snap, another star dead —
Another piece lost —
Another piece of myself,

Lost in the game,
The endless beauty-muck.

Fuck one, kiss three,
The pain goes away.
Crack, push, no more,
No more stars,
No more pieces to lose,
No more pieces left

Only cyanide surprises,
Lost in the game,
Drowned in the beauty-muck;

ii.

Down the rabbit hole,
where the veins opened like some phantasmic tubular dream-
cruise. Fill the Void, more pressure, forget the pain until the
stars and screams subsided, the wild claxon wailing like inane
trumpets the only reasonable music that played in my bruised
brain as I hungered for
Cyanide Surprises

one
more
pop,

one
more
kiss;

iii.

From the Void was all I needed;
It'll only hurt a little, he lied.
Crack, push, snap,
No more pieces to lose,
No more pieces to give.

Sean the Leviathan

Thick and heavy were his thoughts which pulled me down like a monster from the sea. Compelled I was, to drink from the salty oceans provided by his anger and love despite the dread and dumb-belled nightmares which clashed in my mind every night. Every day he grew with vile, manipulative blood-stroked mania as if another ship swallowed through his wide, terrible jaws.

Still, closer I found myself pressed into tight sweats pulled across a grotesque mass where vascular flesh-stars dotted the all too familiar horizon. I was running out of time. He craves the meat, those before me said, familiar with the monster, who tried too late to warn. Too late, they were helplessly devoured. Set one, press two until rolled into that ruthless existence, which was Sean.

I Crave Infinity

Nothing could stop me from insatiable drumbeats of thirst which smacked the dry, empty ruins behind my timid eyes. Still, I had to quench the longing, to find some way to hold that treasure where even gods transformed into corpses in their struggle to combat my craven hunger.

I craved more, while my loins were wracked with heat and pain, while the stars in higher towers were tucked safely behind Saturn's cradle, wrestled my growing terror;

I craved more space, more voids to which my needs could be met though never achieved until washed away in the white-hot fantasies of what-if and someday-soon;

I craved more gods, beasts, and nameless, worthless symbols floating in darksome webs of the night to fill my raw, ancient, needs;

I craved more reason to live for the possibility that the stars might fall into my lips, through my heart, ripped into atom and aroma only for me to dance in jubilation to have swallowed a crumb of infinity;

I craved more, piece by piece until even the coldest fractures of existence weren't enough, and enough was never enough, and the last ruins behind my timid eyes stopped me from insatiable drumbeats of thirst;

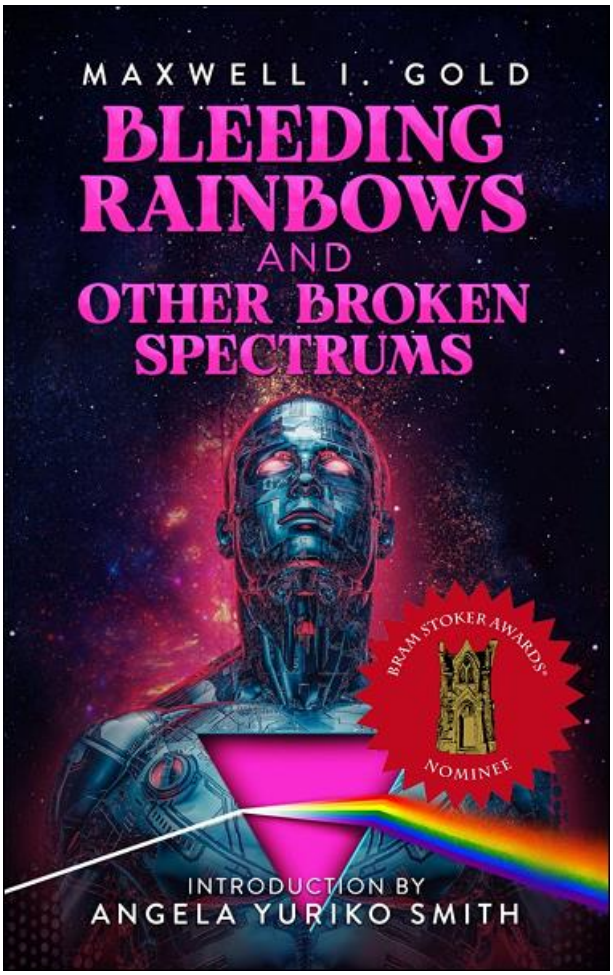
Gods, I craved more, to embrace infinity and hold him until he collapsed in my arms, crushed by the endless weight of my lust-drenched desire, and there wasn't anyone who'd keep me from him...

I craved infinity.

Somewhere Over the Rainbow

Familiar songs sung through crinkled lips like glass-reflected, darksome melodies played across broken, beautiful spectrums of light. The same old song to some, but Neon-Queens who strutted beneath the disco and dread of forgotten histories kicked up those awful troubles and tumults and case them out, like houses dropped from a dust-devil's stomach.

A song played throughout the generations as if anthems trumpeting where we marched across the yellow-brick-bodies of lovers, laymen, and lepers; no more would the broken glass make us bleed or cackling witches keep us from returning home, so long as we sang familiar songs.



***Bleeding Rainbows and Other Broken Spectrums*, by Maxwell I. Gold**
Available on Amazon!

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