

NORTHERN SHADOWS

WHAT CREEPS IN THE SHADOWS



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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Readers,

The crisp autumn air is finally here, and with it comes a change in the leaves. It's officially my favorite season, and there is no better way to kick it off than by having the honor and privilege of welcoming you, dear reader, to the inaugural issue of Northern Shadows Magazine. The last six and a half months have been a whirlwind of excitement, activity, and busyness around here.

I think it is only appropriate to start from the beginning, since this is, in fact, the inaugural issue. In the words of Sam Reich, one of my favorite creative minds, "... the only way to begin is by beginning." So, here we go.

In February 2026, I had a thought that went something like: "Hmm, would it be hard to start a genre magazine of horror, fantasy and sci-fi?" As a recent MFA graduate and the co-chair of the Oregon chapter of the Horror Writers Association, I decided to reach out to everyone I knew in the literary space for help. I am going to be honest here and say that I thought I might get one or two bites. In reality, I got several messages of interest, and within a week I had a volunteer staff of about ten folks who agreed to help me launch this publication.

Our first meeting was held on March 1st, 2026, and we haven't looked back since. We've grown to fourteen souls in total. That's fourteen people who've volunteered their time and effort in various capacities to bring you what you are about to read, our first issue. I am blown away by the talent and effort of each and every one of these individuals, and I consider myself extremely lucky to not only call each of them a colleague but also a friend. Without their contributions, we wouldn't be here today. To you, the staff of Northern Shadows, I say, with the deepest appreciation, THANK YOU!

Now that you know how we got here, I can move on to the issue at hand (I know... very punny). Inside this inaugural edition, you'll

find fourteen stories of dark speculative fiction from both established and emerging voices. They range from a terrifying take on the tooth fairy to monsters waiting to ambush you in the woods of Appalachia, and from strange happenings on the Willamette River to meeting a man of many colors. These stories are fun, terrifying, whimsical, and creative, and I'm stoked that each writer trusted us, a newly minted market, with their work. I've enjoyed reading each of them, and I hope you do as well.

But we can't just stop at stories; we need to go above and beyond. Inside, you will also find multiple pieces of hand-drawn art to accompany the beautifully designed front cover. Our extremely talented in-house artist took the magazine's vision and inaugural theme and created stunning work that I am blown away by. I hope you take a moment from reading the words on the page to enjoy these pieces.

Lastly, it's time to thank you, the reader, for taking time out of your day or night to read this issue. Thank you for signing up to receive it by email or downloading it from our website. Thank you for engaging with it. Each reader helps our little market grow bigger and brighter and reach new goals. I am excited to share more about what we've got cooking on that front, but for now, I will simply say that starting in 2027, you can expect a quarterly issue from us. So, from now until issue two in March of 2027, I wish you good tidings, happy haunts, and a wonderful holiday season.

Keep your eyes on the shadows,

H.A. SPECTOR

Managing Editor, Northern Shadows Magazine

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C.E. Stern

STRAY SOD

By: Kim Curran

“In every district in Ireland, there is a particular spot, at which people are supposed to go astray, this is called a ‘stray sod’. It is supposed that an unbaptized child is buried there, and that is the reason people go astray. When this happens a person, he should take off his coat, turn it inside out and tie down.”

– *From The Ducas School’s Collection*

Remember yer man O’Toole? Lovely fella. He’s dead.

Patrick Kinsella was in my ear, as I stood by the bar, nursing my third pint of Guinness, drinking up the courage to ask Caitlyn O’Connor to dance.

The girls were sat on one side of the hall, the boys on the other. Some of the lads had been brave enough to claim a girl, and couples were awkwardly swaying around the room while the band played a slowed down “Hucklebuck.”

I wasn’t a bad dancer now, not at home, spinning me ma around the kitchen table with the radio on. But my shoes, not my shoes, the ones I’d pinched off my brother because he was away at the Brothers and I had no good shoes of my own, were a size too small and had cut the bejesus out of my heels, blood seeping into my Sunday white socks, and so I was already limping like a lame pony when I finally crossed the no-man’s-land and asked Caitlyn to dance.

Her big eyes darted around like rattling marbles, looking for escape, and I felt the black stuff shifting in my belly like it was waking up and wanting me to throw up on her pretty pink dress. Eventually, she smiled, in that way she does, with her mouth but not her eyes, and nodded.

I placed one hand on her waist, feeling the stiff toughness of the corset beneath her taffeta dress and the soft swell of flesh at the top of her hip that I wanted to dig my thumb into so badly; I forced myself to keep my thumb stuck out like I was hitching a ride. I took her hand in my other one. It was like holding a bird with a broken wing; twitching, wanting to fly away, but trapped.

How’s your ma?

Well, yeah. Well enough. Yeah.

She winced like she’d sucked a lemon every time I stepped on the tip of her pink satin shoes but said nothing. Her eyes kept

jumping around the room, looking over my shoulder for someone else, anyone, to step in and put her out of her misery. She'd tell her friends about this. Look at what that prick Thomas Sullivan did to me shoes; I only said yes because I felt sorry for him, what with his ma and all, but it was like dancing with a bullock. And they'd laugh. They were laughing already before I'd even asked. I could hear it already, so loud in my ears I could barely hear what the band were playing and lost all rhythm. The heat of embarrassment burned all the way from my neck up to my ears, and I wanted to crawl out of my skin and leave it here, an empty rubbery shell dancing with Caitlyn, while I, or at least, whatever I was that wasn't my flesh, ran away.

I felt a sharp tap on my shoulder and looked up, and up again, to see Michael Cleary standing over me like a giant from the old tales. He didn't even say anything. Just jerked his square jaw in the direction of the door and took Caitlyn's hand from mine. I stood back, and he spun her away, both of them laughing.

It was too hot. Too loud. And I'd only come to the dance to try to get with Caitlyn, and she was now being waltzed around the room by Michael Fucking Cleary, who had slid his hand around her waist and down to the top of her arse, and she didn't even stop him.

Are you off then, Patrick Kinsella asked as I staggered for the door.

Aye, I am.

Send my best to your ma.

I will, yeah.

I will fucking not.

It was, typically, a four-mile walk home, which I could do in an hour on a good day, but back home my mother would still be dying, so I took the long way round, up past Old Pat's farm and down the lane. It was a warm night with a full moon, and the drink had gone to my head more than usual, so the walk would do me good. It was only nine and Ma wasn't expecting me home till past midnight anyway, if she was lucid enough to notice I'd been away at all. If she was, she'd look at the clock hands, not yet pressed together as though praying for me, too, and sigh. You need to find yourself a good girl, Thomas, settle down; you can't be looking after me all your life.

No, Ma, not all my life. Not all of mine. But yours, which, judging by the way your eyes lose focus more often than not these days, like you were looking at something the rest of us couldn't see, how a cat looks into shadows, well, it won't be long now. That's what the priest said, as he folded up his purple stole and put his ointment oils away.

It won't be long now. A week maybe. God love her.

That he does.

That he does.

I'd put a mile between me and the dance and Caitlyn and Michael Fucking Cleary. They'd be kissing now, out the back, his hand up her blouse, rough Hurler's hands on her breasts, her telling him they shouldn't but wanting to anyway. They'd be married by spring, her with a baby in her and I'd be invited to the reception, and I'd watch them dance and wish them the best, while wanting them both to die. A mile between me and the burning shame, when I realized I didn't know where I was. I was the sort who always knew where I was. I had never gone further than ten miles from my house and knew every blade of grass. But I stood looking up at a Yew tree I had never seen before, down at a ditch I had never seen, up and down a field I did not know, and for the first time in my life, I knew I was lost.

I spun around, looking for something to orientate by. Old Pat's farmhouse should, by rights, be on my left; I should be able to see the church steeple to my right, and the lane that would lead to my house should be just in front of me, a fence hop away. None of it was where it was supposed to be. None of it was anywhere. Or if it was, it wasn't for me.

There was a farmhouse in the distance, but not Old Pat's and not one I knew, and I knew every house and hovel in this district.

I looked down at my feet, almost expecting them to belong to someone else, that perhaps I was no longer even in my own body and I'd left my flesh back at the dance. But they were still my feet in my brother's shoes, bleeding, standing on a patch of grass that shone bright green in the silver light.

Mist curled over the field and with it women's laughter, so like the sound that had echoed in my head earlier that I tried



to ignore. One of me ma's imaginings slipped loose and come walking. But the women came then, out of the shadows.

Seven glimmering girls, dressed in white dresses that floated like the mist around their ankles. Nothing about them settled; their hair, their clothes, their limbs, floating like I was looking at drowned creatures, not living women at all. Their laughter turned to singing, high and lilting, their voices weaving together like silk, and their drifting to dancing.

I'd heard the stories about being led astray by the fairy folk, we all had, and I knew if I was to turn my jacket inside out and sit down a while that the world would right itself and I would find myself back on the path to home. It had happened to more than a few of our neighbors over the years.

Stepped on a stray sod and found myself led astray, so I did.

Happened to yer one, you know, with the teeth, wasn't the same after, so he wasn't.

Now, I was one of those stories.

The women called to me, too long arms like willow branches blowing, soft lips like fallen peaches. One of them had Caitlyn's marble eyes.

Dance. Dance. Dance.

I could have turned my coat inside out and sat a while and let the world right itself and made my way back home to where my ma was dying inch by inch, gazing into the corners, another woman to leave me.

These women wouldn't leave me. Or I wouldn't leave them—same thing.

I slipped off my biting shoes and crossed the no-man's-land, proper this time, went to them as anyone would, to ask them to dance.

About The Author:

Kim Curran is the Irish-Times Bestselling Author of *Brigid* and *The Morrigan*. She was born in Dublin and now lives in London. She holds a degree in Philosophy and Literature from Sussex University and is a freelance Creative Director and Royal Literary Fund Fellow.

AN ACCIDENT IN APPALACHIA

By: S.T. Talbot

The powder from the deflating airbag made the air in the car taste like a condom; Jarren pushed it away from him.

"Fuck." He looked at his wife in the passenger seat. "You okay, babe?"

Melanie stared at Jarren with unfocused eyes. She rubbed her face. "I'm okay, I think. You okay?"

"I'm alright. The fuck was that?" Jarren traced a path over her body with his eyes, looking for blood.

"We hit a deer," she finally managed in a shaky voice.

Jarren glanced in the rear-view mirror at the hulking figure crumpled on the side of the road. An ethereal crimson haze illuminated the thing—he realized he was still stomping on the brake pedal. He eased his foot and the red glow disappeared. "That weren't no deer. I only saw it for a second, but it weren't no deer. Too big."

Melanie blinked slowly. "Then what was it?"

Jarren studied the large, unmoving shape on the shoulder of the road. "Not sure. That thing's the size of a moose."

"I've never heard of moose in West Virginia."

He didn't care for the dreamy quality of her voice. She might be concussed. *He* might be concussed. It had been a direct hit.

They'd been in the midst of a flirty conversation about whose turn it was to clean and cook the pumpkin seeds that year when the animal stepped out of the forest and onto the road. There was a flash of brown fur, a yelp from Melanie, then the impact. He didn't even have time to tap the brakes until they had barreled through the thing. Jarren didn't even need to check to know the care was totaled.

He checked the cupholder, where he kept his phone while driving, and found it empty. His fingers blindly searched the floor until he found it beneath his seat. The screen was offensively bright. He adjusted the brightness, pulled up the AAA site, and passed the phone to Melanie. "Can you call and get us a tow? We're on Ridgecrest Road. About five miles from the clearing.

Just tell 'em where we are, and they'll send someone." Jarren reached down and pulled the lever to pop the trunk.

Melanie looked at his iPhone like he had just handed her alien technology.

Jarren put his hand on her knee and squeezed. "Mell-knee." The gag pet name, which she usually hated, shook her from her daze. She regarded him with shocked eyes. "Are you sure you're okay?"

She looked from the deflated airbag to the smoke rising from the buckled hood. She let out a shaky breath and deliberately closed her eyes. When she opened them back up, she was once again in the now.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm okay—just shook up." She studied his phone. Her eyes squinted, then widened. "Triple A. I'll call Triple A." She hit send and brought the phone to her ear. "What stretch of road are we on?"

Jarren opened his door and stepped one foot out. "Ridgecrest, near the clearing." He pulled himself the rest of the way out. He glanced at the bloody ruin of the front end, slammed his door, and walked on unsteady feet to the back of the car, where he grabbed a tire iron and Maglite from the trunk. Both were cold and heavy in his hands. He fished a pack of Marlboros from his pants and rested one between his lips. Jarren lit it and slammed the trunk shut.

The beam of light was large and dim—he needed to replace the batteries. Jarren drew deeply from his cigarette as he approached the figure on the side of the road.

It was a discernible heap of brown fur and equine legs.

He took his time approaching it. Jarren had never done well with gore, and judging by the amount of blood plastered across the hood of the car and smeared on the road, it wouldn't be pretty. There was also the possibility that it might still be clinging to life. Born and raised in critter country, Jarren was no stranger to a mercy kill, but it didn't make the idea any less unpleasant. He squeezed the reassuring cold metal of the tire iron as he approached the broken beast.

It was indeed the size of a moose.

He looked for antlers and hooves, but all he could make out was blood and fur. Jarren could smell the musk of the beast. He kicked something small and white that went flying away from his foot, tinkling against the blacktop. It sounded—and looked—like his favorite off-white D20 die, which had been essential to dozens of home-brew D&D campaigns he'd crafted over the years. He squatted to inspect the indiscernible pile.

Teeth—it was a pile of human teeth that he had kicked, bloody molars and incisors alike scattered across the blacktop near the shape. Jarren blinked stupidly at the scattered pile of tiny bones until his mind caught up. Only then did he gasp, a plume of steam billowing from his lips with it.

A snorting whistle burst from the dying thing. Jarren lost his balance, falling back on his ass. A deeper, more painful sounding snort emanated from the crumpled body. Jarren stood and tightened his grip around the tire iron, keeping his light beam trained on the animal as he walked around it.

He aimed his light at what appeared to be an eye on the side of its face. Instead of an eyeball, the light illuminated a circular patch of white fur contrasted against the dark fur that covered the rest of the creature.

A chubby, human hand reached up and shielded its face from the light. Jarren yelped and jumped back, keeping his light on the thing's head. Fingernails, painted dark purple, glinted in the light's beam. The tan skin of the hand went down to the wrist, where fur met flesh, blending together somewhere in the middle of the limb before the fur became thicker farther up. The hand feebly tried to cover the creature's real eyes, which Jarren now saw faced forward like a canine's. They were black and camouflaged against the dark fur of its face. Jarren's eyes darted from the small, human hand to the glinting, dark eyes behind it, then back to the circle of white fur he had originally mistaken for an eyeball. The white spots on the fur functioned like the fake eyes on a butterfly's wings. They even had a dark spot in the middle to replicate a pupil.

Jarren gazed a path from its hand down its long, equine leg. There were too many joints. He counted three knots that might be knees on the leg in his flashlight's beam. They moved independently as the broken limb twitched and tried to find purchase

against the blacktop. Steady clicking sounds filled the dark night as it tried to stand on its shattered limbs.

Two legs ended in bare, human feet. The other two ended in hands. The appendages were of different sizes and colors.

A phlegmy sigh escaped its lungs as Jarren explored more of it with the flashlight. Its body loosely resembled a deer's, except for the extra joints and sheer size of it. Plus, its neck and shoulders were dense, like a pitbull's.

Jarren groaned.

Its face was long and clever, like a wolf's, except for the ears. It had deer ears. Its snout gave its face an elongated, slender look, like that of a whippet. It pulled its lips back, showing the few teeth that remained in the bleeding gums, animal and human alike.

The thing tried to take another breath.

Melanie beeped the horn—Jarren jumped.

"Babe, what is it?" she called. "Is it dead?"

He didn't take his eyes from the shape. "Stay in the car!"

It took shallow, rattling breaths, still poorly covering its eyes with its plump child's hand. Jarren locked eyes with it. Cold chills traveled his digestive tract. He pulled the tire iron back and held it above his head. His skin itched with anticipation. The thing stared up at him with its large, wet eyes. Jarren couldn't bring himself to do it.

The beast drew in a haggard breath, looked Jarren directly in the eye, and winked.

Jarren swung.

About The Author:

S. T. Talbot has been writing since he was a boy, but took up writing fiction to process living in an unfamiliar environment following his move from his hometown in the San Bernardino mountains to Florida. If he's not at work staring blankly at clipboards or in his office conjuring up ghost stories, he's most likely listening to spine-chilling old-time radio shows or gorging on cheap, foggy horror films with his cat, Casper. You can find him on Instagram @s.talbot.writes.



CRANES AT MIDNIGHT

By: Evelyn Teng

Lansa's first, tentative rap on the lecture-hall door echoed in her ears; her second made her glance around the dark hallways, anxious she'd be caught by the Imperial Necromantic Academy's porters.

No lamplight came swinging around the corner, though. No growled demand to know what she was doing out of bed at twenty to midnight. Instead, the door cracked open, revealing another student and, behind her, darkness pale-lit by a handful of candle charms.

"I'm here as requested," Lansa said, her attempt at a smile faltering against the girl's scornful look.

But all the girl asked was, "Did you bring the scroll?"

Lansa fumbled the scroll from her pocket, unfolded it, presented it for inspection with shaking hands. Her eyes raked greedily over the other student's features, trying to read in that scornful look any hint of acknowledgement, any clue as to why Lansa, of all students in the Academy, had received the invitation.

The Imperial Necromantic Academy's Golden Crane Honor Society has selected you to be their newest nestling. Please present yourself at the archival lecture hall no later than midnight.

But the girl only said, "Come in," and swept back into the lecture hall in a swirl of silken robes.

Lansa followed, feeling distinctly out of place as every person in the chamber

turned to look at her. These were the twenty best students in the entire Academy, and their judgment weighed like lead slabs on Lansa's shoulders. She was suddenly and acutely aware of the candle charms in their palms, the shine of that clear bright light on the Cranes' silk robes; and aware, too, of the way her own cotton robes frayed at the cuffs and how her shoes, a size too small, pinched her toes.

But worse than her appearance—worse than the fact that she couldn't cast even a simple candle charm—were the whispers that trailed her to the lecturer's podium.

"Really? Her?"

"Haiyun insisted, so—"

"Look at those robes. Did she buy them during the previous dynasty?"

"Didn't she earn zero marks in the last exam?"

Behind her thin, quavering smile, Lansa writhed with embarrassment. Yes, she was bottom of the class; yes, the pronunciation professor frequently decried the country accent that she couldn't seem to entirely shed; so why had they invited her? By the time she reached the front of the lecture hall, her head was hot and her breath dangerously shaky.

Then the tall, elegant student at the podium said, "Quiet," and the whisperers cut off as if snipped with shears.

Lansa stared in pure shock. Haiyun—the

Academy's top student and head of the Golden Crane Honor Society—had just hushed her fellow Cranes for Lansa's sake! And they'd obeyed!

"I know you must be confused," Haiyun said. She smiled at Lansa, and the expression sank like sunlight into Lansa's heart, it was so welcoming. "Let me reassure you that you're indeed being asked to join the Golden Cranes. Additionally, I apologize for the insults. My comrades' discourtesies reflect my failings as their leader." Her eyes flicked spark-sharp around the lecture hall, as though to set alight any who dared speak.

This had to be a mistake. Desperate though Lansa was to be part of the society—much as she craved the post-graduation connections it would bring—her treacherous honesty got the better of her. "I'm sorry, but my grades aren't...well, they're..." She gave up. "They're terrible."

"There's more than one kind of intelligence."

"The professors don't think I have any."

"The Cranes aren't as rigid. We aren't so...set in stone."

"I don't understand."

Lansa cringed as the words left her mouth. The same words that caused her professors, every day, to sigh, shake their heads, bemoan her rural ignorance either under their breath or to her face.

But Haiyun did neither. She simply nodded—the most natural thing in the world—and Lansa blushed. Affection unfolded and flowered in her heart at the understanding in Haiyun's gaze. "Your parents died when you were eleven, didn't they?"

A painful lump formed in Lansa's throat. "All my relatives, too. The river flooded. Half the village drowned."

Haiyun's eyes were bonfires, irresistible and arresting. Lansa found herself leaning forward as though she could capture their fervor. "I overheard the professors discussing you. The Academy sent necromancers with drought charms to

banish the spirits of the drowned. When they arrived, they found you at the riverbank, scolding the shuigui like disobedient toddlers."

Laughter rippled through the lecture hall, making the candle charms flicker and flutter. Lansa's blush deepened. "I didn't understand what I was doing."

"Yet you saved the surviving villagers from having their bodies stolen."

"It was an accident."

"It was innate affinity. Lansa, you possess a rare talent. You're unique."

How the words burned in Lansa's soul—burned with the good, throbbing pain of water poured over frostbitten limbs. She drank them up in huge draughts, swallowed them without chewing. How long had it been since she'd received anything but censure?

Then she stopped breathing as Haiyun walked around the podium, crossed the distance between them—and cupped Lansa's face with both hands. Her fingers were slightly clammy, and a shiver ran unbidden through Lansa, but Haiyun smiled. The gentle acceptance of those full lips, slightly parted; the soothing moonlight fairness of that skin against the soft raven hair; the butterfly shadows cast by her eyelashes. And those eyes. They seared away the tattered rags of Lansa's inferiority.

"The professors might not believe it," Haiyun said, "and not everyone in the society might agree, but you have value. I see it, if no one else does. Is that enough for you?"

And she leaned forward, breath warm and fragrant, to place the lightest of kisses on Lansa's forehead.

Forget her grades. Forget her lessons, her struggles, the charity that covered the Academy's tuition but not the cost of new robes. In the wake of the tide sweeping through her, Lansa remembered only one thing.

What it felt like to be accepted.

"Yes," she whispered, "yes, it's enough."

“There was something predatory about that expression; it mired the familiar courtyard with crawling shadows and turned the air to mud.”

“If it were just me, we wouldn’t bother with this,” Haiyun confided as she led Lansa and the rest of the society across the Academy’s central courtyard, lit by a candle charm in her left hand. “But...well, you heard them. They’ll never say it aloud, but they believe necromantic power belongs only to certain families. They don’t understand the value of utility.”

Utility. Usefulness. The word had a lovely ring to it, and Lansa smiled. “Why do you think different? You’re a daughter of necromancers, too.”

“I was taught that actions speak louder than breeding.” Haiyun’s voice was gentle, but the candle charm in her hands lit her face from below, made shadowed caverns of her eyes. Despite her adoration, Lansa shuddered. There was something predatory about that expression; it mired the familiar courtyard with crawling shadows and turned the air to mud. The very rustle of the Cranes’ slippers across the grass sounded not like footsteps, but the unquiet wind tumbling across an open grave.

Then Haiyun raised her hand higher, the shadows on her face shifted, and the darkness changed back from quiet terror into a beautiful shared secret. “I want you to show the others your worth. Sweep away any protest for good. Will you help me do that?”

“Yes,” Lansa sighed, “I’ll do anything.” They were across the courtyard now,

and Haiyun eased open a small door, motioning Lansa through. The space beyond was dark, tasting of old dust and spider silk and damp stone, and her hastily-gabbed candle charm gave barely any light, merely smudged the shadows with shades of dark gray.

Twenty pairs of feet shuffled in behind her; twenty voices rose in smooth Imperial accents; twenty candle charms blossomed in the dark. Washed in their golden glow, Lansa gazed upwards—saw a towering, brass-barred door heavy with age and engraved spells—and at last realized where Haiyun had led her.

She blanched. “The White Library’s forbidden to students!”

Haiyun stepped forward. Her own handful of light painted darkness across the planes of her face. “Only if we’re caught.”

“Yes, but—”

“I’ll be nearby the whole time.” Her gaze flicked to the other Society students, and a shiver ran through Lansa. It might have been the shadows, but Haiyun’s expression seemed a touch wolfish. “We’ll all be nearby. Besides, you said you’d do anything.”

“Breaking into the White Library, though—”

“How else are you to demonstrate your abilities?”

Lansa swallowed. “Some of the spirits in there are thousands of years old.”



Haiyun laid a hand on Lansa's shoulder. Somehow, though the touch was gentle, it sent a cold, unpleasant rill through Lansa's innards. "We're not asking you to banish a jiangshi or aoyin. You can open the first burial codex you find. Just subdue it like you subdued the shuigui from your village."

"I..." Lansa's voice faltered.

The Cranes pressed in close. Their eyes glittered in the guttering candlelight.

"I knew it. She's just a brainless yokel."

"A complete flower pot—decorative but useless—well, not even decorative."

"Frog in a well—thinks she knows best—"

One withering glance around from Haiyun, and the other students fell silent. When she looked back at Lansa, though, Lansa's belly twisted. There was a filminess to Haiyun's eyes: not like tears, but rather, the dark shimmer of burned oil. "If you want to back out, I won't hold it against you."

Haiyun didn't beg; she didn't threaten or bully; so Lansa swallowed her shudders and walked into the White Library.

She'd expected a gust like a wind blowing across a corpse-swollen river, or the smear of grease from an abandoned meal half-rotted in the pan. But there was nothing. Just cool, dry darkness, and the smell of old paper and stone.

"There should be candles or a lamp nearby," Haiyun whispered through the half-open door.

Lansa fumbled at her side, felt a table's polished wood, groped across its surface for candles and flints. The single wick she lit seemed feeble and weak against the ancient darkness wallowing beneath the high ceiling and behind chairs and bookcases. Palms damp, she inched forward. No need to search. Just take the first spirit she found. A guipo would be best, kindly old grandmothers that they

were, but a shuigui would do as well; they were powerless outside a river.

The door thumped shut behind her. She tensed, then relaxed when she heard footsteps and the rustle of silken robes. The rest of the Society crowding into the library, that's all. Normally, being watched by the Academy's twenty best students would have frozen Lansa's tongue and turned her spine to porridge, but not this time. Now, she relished the company, if only for the texture they gave to the cool, desolate dark.

Past shelves of yellowing scrolls and crumbling oracle bones Lansa crept; past new books and old reed-scrolls fragile and soft with dust. Her skin crawled. But why? The student library held artifacts, too; she'd picked them up, pored over them, dutifully practiced the spells inscribed on them until her instructors snapped at her to give it up, she was hopeless. Yet the familiarity felt wretchedly distorted. A dream, that's what it resembled: but the sort of dream that was worse than nightmares, where a relentless, nagging voice at the back of your mind insisted this wasn't right—

There—at last—a burial codex resting on a red-wood table, jade covers gleaming amidst the old, moldering dust. Lansa set her candle down and opened the codex with shaking hands. Finish this fast. Summon the spirit, bind it to her will, send it back. Easy. Not like she'd failed this task in class, not like the shadows beyond the candlelight's reach were muttering now, near-inaudible syllables pressing on her ears—

The pages were blank.

Lansa stared. That wasn't right. She'd seen occupied codices in class before: a lifetime's worth of words scrawled across the paper, in neat script or messy scribbles or incomprehensible splashes, and always with some trace of the spirit itself trapped in the ink. A pearly sheen on the words, perhaps, or a faint smell of rot. Bewildered, Lansa leafed through

page after page. All blank, except for a smudge of mold at the bottom of the page.

But—

Burial codices didn't get moldy. The magic-steeped ink were supposed to keep the pages pristine.

Her body reacted faster than her conscious thoughts, flinging her to the ground as the spirit burst free in an explosion of mist. Burning claws raked her scalp; shrieks tore at her ears. Blood trickled down her face, but that wasn't important, because with a roar like the wind feeding a wildfire, the mist began to coalesce. Lansa's blood ran cold as the spirit dove at her once more.

"Stop!" Lansa cried. Terror shredded the last year and a half of painstaking, painful pronunciation lessons. She was a child again, watching the river burst its banks; a child still, begging the shuigui, in coarse rural accents, to leave the villagers alone. "Stop—"

The spirit halted as though its foggy form had in an instant become ice. Lansa almost sobbed with relief.

But only for a second, because the spirit trembled with balked violence. Hastily she scrambled to her feet. Power over spirits, Haiyun had said, though Lansa had never managed to wield it after coming to the Academy.

Grinning, she said, "Return to the codex, please."

The spirit flew at her. Only a quick twist saved her from being torn apart. Lansa stared. But it had worked! Just a second earlier, the spirit had obeyed her—

How did I say it? How must I have said it to the shuigui? How was I forbidden to speak in class? It's not the Imperial way—a necromancer is a representative of the Emperor himself—no village dialects allowed—

As the spirit towered over her, form and features settling into those of the person it had once been, Lansa propped her hands on her hips, glared into the gaping maw, and snapped in tones fishwife-harsh, "Get back in the book! You got until the count of three!"

The spirit's almost-solid claws halted an inch from her nose.

"One!"

A howl tore from its throat. Ripples spread through its pallid flesh.

"Two!"

Writhe and weep though it might, scream and strain though it did, the spirit compressed in on itself, cursing her in a high, gusting voice. The pale form whirled and spun into a tight rope of a being—a foggy column bulging from its furious bid for freedom—

"Three!"

The top of the column exploded as the spirit sprang for her, pure hatred in its distorted features, fighting its own body to sink one claw into Lansa—

The table rocked on its legs as the spirit was yanked into the burial codex. At once Lansa slammed the covers shut and steadied the table.

Then she sat back and breathed.

She did it. After feeling useless for so long, she'd made a spirit bow to her command. Was it her voice? Her village dialect? Something inherited, like blood? Did it even matter? She'd proven herself to Haiyun and the rest of the Society. She'd accomplished something that normally took a fully-trained necromancer hours of preparation and ritual. Almost giggling with relief and triumph, Lansa said, "I did it! Haiyun, did you see that?"

Her voice should have echoed from the high rafters; it should have been met with reluctant applause and, maybe, a few cheers. But her words fell flat in a sudden, yawning silence.

It's not the spirit, Lansa thought, staring at the closed codex. It can't be. No spirit is powerful enough to leak through the restraints of a burial codex.

At least, none that I've learned about.

Voice quavering, she asked, "Are you there, Haiyun? Can we leave?"

The candle guttered, the sound soft as silk against her ears.

Lansa shrank back against the table.

Had the darkness in the White Library always been so deep? She could barely see beyond the candlelight, and even that seemed to be struggling. “Haiyun?”

Something breathed beside her.

Lansa froze, even as she croaked, “Go away,” but the breathing grew deep and ragged, and hot air brushed the back of her neck and as something soft and cold and sinuous crept up her arm.

Don’t move. Don’t react. It’s the other Cranes. They’re trying to frighten me. See if they can scare a shriek out of the village girl. Ha-ha, very funny, we’ll laugh about it in the morning.

She looked down.

A vine caressed her elbow: thick, shiny, so dark a green it was almost black. More vines prodded towards her from the darkness and lapped at the sweat suddenly trickling in icy rivers down her skin. Beneath her feet, the wooden floorboards flowered with a green-gray growth too low and creeping to be grass, not tranquil enough to be merely mold.

Fear was a frozen slab in Lansa’s mouth, weighing down her tongue even as she whispered, “Don’t touch me.”

A vine grazed the back of her head.

She bolted.

Never mind Haiyun and her Cranes, now; never mind how foolish she might appear, mouth agape and eyes wide and staring through the impenetrable dark. It pressed around her, a living, breathing, hunting thing, as she tripped over chairs and ran headlong into bookcases and display stands. The library echoed with the clatter of falling artifacts. Lansa’s breath rasped in her throat, and she tried to silence herself—except she didn’t want to be silent, because then she’d hear just how loud the breathing behind her had become.

Her feet slipped on flooring suddenly moss-soft, mold-slick.

Lansa fell on her rump with a cry, struggled to her feet, and tried to run

again, but too late. In whirl of darkness and dust, the hunter materialized before her: a nebulous entity stretching as high as the ceiling, it seemed, robed in billowing ash, the edges of its cracked-stone body indistinct with dark fire.

“Leave me alone!” Lansa sobbed. “Go away!” Her words struck—she saw the stone-skin heave with earthquake tremors—but then it shuddered, shrugging off her words, and continued advancing. A sudden urge rolled through Lansa. She needed to touch it. She craved the sensation of that rough skin against her palms, her cheeks, every inch of her bare skin. Those smoldering reddish eyes, that undefined shape and the unbearably alluring way its chest pressed against its robe. Male—female—something else altogether—she couldn’t tell and didn’t care. She knew only that she wanted its touch...

No! some part of her screamed, feeble but still defiant, and with a tremendous mental wrench Lansa tore her gaze away and ran. Where to, it didn’t matter. If she ran far enough, her crazed mind said, she’d hit a wall; follow that and she’d find a door, any door. Her feet slid over fungal grass and tripped against snatching vines. She gabbled charms as she ran—for protection, binding, invisibility, health—one of them had to work—

But even as she spoke, the words fled her. Panic drove every lesson from her mind and robbed her tongue of both her village dialect and proper Imperial inflection. Except she knew how it felt to be afraid, and this wasn’t fear.

It was music.

As if it sensed her acknowledgement—as if recognition itself became acceptance—her body slowed, then stilled. She didn’t want to run, barely even wanted to move. Beautiful. Beyond beauty, even, into the music made by the gods. A zither strung with hairs from a qilin’s mane. The harmonics reached right into Lansa’s brain and nudged her around, gentle as a finger under her chin.



Before her, the figure's indescribable features, eyes boring into her.

Around her, its arms enfolding, embracing, like a second skin—except it was a first skin, really, her own outer shell flaking off like ash from a burned-down coal. The stone of its outside moved in to replace her peeling hide. She would have screamed from the pain, but the figure was so beautiful and its whispers were so melodious.

Inside her, the fire of its core, trickling into her mouth and nose and ears and pores, filling her edge to edge, supplanting everything that was her.

I'm vanishing, Lansa realized, with the last parts of her capable of thought.

As nothingness clawed at her vision, she saw Haiyun step out from the darkness. Her upraised left hand glowed with light. Her expression was completely blank as she spoke a half-dozen precise syllables.

Lansa shattered.

"That was unbelievably reckless of you," Dean Tiedun said.

Haiyun bowed deep. Her coiffure left no loose hair behind which to hide, but she didn't need it. Her mask of perfectly contrite. "I apologize."

"It's sheer luck you aren't dead or possessed!"

"I apologize."

"Trust your elders, Haiyun. We were formulating a plan to deal with the yaomo. You have to consider the consequences of your actions. What if you'd lost control and it had gotten loose in the Academy?"

"I apologize."

Her tone was perfect too, and Dean Tiedun subsided with a sigh. "Officially, I'm censuring you and placing you under academic probation for the remainder of the term."

"Yes, Dean Tiedun," Haiyun said, still not daring to look up, but "officially" sounded promising.

"Unofficially...few students could recognize a yaomo, let alone destroy one. You really are the best in your generation." Haiyun waited, breathless, as Dean Tiedun picked up a brush and scrawled something on a fresh sheet of paper. "I understand your family has been

having some, ah, financial difficulties. You recently put in an application to withdraw from the Academy."

"Yes." Her stomach twisted. The mere thought was agony. She, a daughter of the Tian family, heir to the empire's oldest necromantic lineage, forced to leave the Academy because her uncles made unwise investments and her cousins loved expensive courtesans. A fortune degraded from gold to brass.

Dean Tiedun laid down his brush and stamped the bottom of the paper with his official seal. "It would be a shame to lose such talent over mere money. His Imperial Majesty can no doubt be persuaded to authorize a scholarship for the student who took down a yaomo by herself—as long as you stop wandering around at night."

It was everything Haiyun had dared hope for, and she bowed with true gratitude before exiting the office.

Her fellow Cranes awaited her in the courtyard.

"Well?" they clamored, clustering around her.

Haiyun smiled. "Not a trace of suspicion."

"And the scholarship—"

"Mine."

They didn't cheer or pat Haiyun's back, but the air around them loosened, the collective held-in breath escaping. Haiyun's eyes misted over as they showered her with congratulations. Her fellows; her friends. It had broken her heart knowing she would leave them behind. Now, with her future restored, she yearned to throw aside the bonds of propriety and hug them, one and all, who had helped her sweep away the broken stone in the White Library.

But she was a star student—the one who'd eradicated the knot of corrupted primordial energy, neither spirit nor demon, that had plagued the Academy—and she had to maintain her dignity. She thanked her friends for their sentiments, insisted with proper graciousness that she couldn't have done it without their help, then excused herself. There was much to do. Her head whirled as she walked back to her room. Unpack her clothes. Return her books to their shelves. Cancel the carriage that would have transported her

to the family home this evening. Write to her family, too, telling them the good news—

Haiyun opened her door and froze.

The spirit floated above her bed. It was barely cohesive, just a scrap of mist really, yet Haiyun felt its attention fixate on her, as soft and seeping and weeping as a shuigui's water-rotted arms.

She should be dead! There shouldn't be even a scrap left! Haiyun had deliberately waited for the yaomo to wholly consume the girl's physical form and become briefly vulnerable to charms. She should have been swallowed whole.

A breeze drifted from the spirit. Why me? it sighed. Why me?

"It wasn't your fault," Haiyun said, and meant it. It wasn't Lansa's fault she'd been the discovery of a lifetime, whose voice alone sent spirits scrambling. It wasn't her fault the professors insisted on Imperial pronunciation and diction, and in doing so unknowingly stifled her abilities. Nor was it her fault she was an orphan, easy to miss and dismiss once her talents failed to manifest within Academy constraints. Dean Tiedun probably didn't even realize Lansa was gone.

Faced with the ghost of a ghost, though, Haiyun couldn't lie to herself. She'd killed Lansa as plainly as if she'd stabbed the girl through the heart. That look on her face as Haiyun poured out assurances and acceptance, and that light in her eyes when Haiyun kissed her. A frustrated, trusting, despairing soul.

It wasn't her fault.

But Haiyun was a scion of the Tian family, and when all was said and done, Lansa was just another nobody from the countryside. The Academy was full of them.

There was no need for a burial codex. A wave of her hand, a breeze charm perfectly spoken with her tongue briefly kissing her palate, and the spirit shredded to rags, to wisps, to nothing.

"Goodbye," Haiyun said. "You really were valuable to me."

She smiled as she began unpacking. A capricious, instinctive, irreproducible talent, or the knowledge and traditions of a bloodline matched only by the emperor's for prestige. It wasn't hard to see who was worth more.

About The Author:

Evelyn Teng is a legal writer currently living in Houston, Texas. Her publications include short stories with *Flame Tree Press*, *Augment (The Shadowrun Magazine)*, and the anthology *Fascination*. She has also written a short story and creative text for Magic: The Gathering.

DAMN YOUR EYES

By: Kay Northbridge

I acquired the knife a month ago from a vagrant in a filthy Whitechapel slum. So sharp and hard that it required precise sheathing. If the blade were to touch the inside of the scabbard, it would slice directly through the bronze. The price for such a tool from such a desperate man? I only had to promise I would never give it back.

What a wonderful addition to my cabinet of curiosities. The story of my adventure through London to collect it would only add color to the tale with which I would regale my guests. I would tell them, as the wire-haired fleabag had told me, that the dangers of using the knife went far beyond the risk of being stabbed by its glinting blade. They would stare, captivated, into the compartment where it rested. I'd saved a place between my pickled lamb fetus and my pair of skeletal seahorses. I imagined the look on Sybil's lovely face as she watched me click open the walnut-wood doors of the cabinet, revealing my collection of curios. It would impress her, no doubt, the knife most of all. She had often accused me of leading a predictable life, and I was determined to demonstrate that I did anything but that.

After writing down the beggar's exact instructions, before I could forget them, I climbed into a hansom cab at the earliest opportunity and escaped the stench of the poor. Riding out of the city gave me time to reflect and to commit the rules of the knife to memory. The key thing was to make sure that the knife itself was not replicated in the process of summoning its magic. The horses pulled me merrily up the gravel track to my house, and I tipped the driver well. Returning to my grand abode, I waited for the sun to sink and the flicker of candles to light my rooms.

As soon as my shadow was cast full height against the library wall, I checked my notes. Following the instructions to the letter, I gently liberated my new toy from its metal prison and held the blade on the side furthest from the candle. With the sharp edge at a slight downward angle away from my body, and close enough that the spine glided just over the fabric of my suit, I began. Starting at my feet, the handle in my right palm, I drew the knife around my form, swapping hands at the midway point and continuing with it in my left.

As I reached to sever the air above my head, I held my breath and paused. Why was that grimy man so keen to give up such a valuable artifact? At no gain other than to be rid of it? Perhaps he had cut his flesh one too many times with the treacherous blade, perhaps with hands shaking from the drink. I would make no such mistake. I finished the task at my feet, ensuring that the knife cast no shadow itself as the last cut was made. Without so much as a single nick of my tweed throughout the entire process, I carefully returned the knife to its bronze sheath and neatly folded the instructions. Only then did I allow my hands to tremble with the gravity of what I had done.

The trembling spread across my body as I hurriedly concealed my precious things inside my cabinet. A strange sensation washed through my muscles, electrifying my form and causing ripples of wonder to shiver through my very being. I turned at once, and there he stood before me, as he had done before, but he no longer copied my stance.

My shadow, slightly quivering with the flicker of the candle, had spread his arms out from his torso as if to test his freedom.

"How does it feel?" I asked him, my mouth dry and breathing unsteady. "To move of your own volition?"

He shrugged and bent his elbows, empty hands palm up, as if asking me a question in return. That moment underlined the reason why the shadow of the knife had to be hidden from my outline at the point of separation—if it had been visible in its own right, then he would also have had a knife to bear. The filthy gent in Whitechapel had told me severed shadows were wholly made up of the darkest parts of the soul; they were not to be trusted. But I had never done anything truly dishonest in my life and assumed my own shadow would pose no threat.

I pulled off my blazer and wriggled into my full-length velvet smoking jacket, expecting his form to reflect the change when I was finished. But my actions no longer influenced his appearance. He stood before me complete with the angular shoulders of my tweed. I wondered how much autonomy he had.

"May I ask you to humor me? Perhaps we could experiment a little?"

He turned his head to the side so I could tell he was nodding in agreement.

"Are you able to leave the room? That door leads to a corridor which runs past the entrance hall and through to the kitchen. Oh, I suppose you know your way around the house?"

He nodded again, then shuffled slowly across the library, as if trying out his legs. When he reached the door, he dropped to his knees, shrinking in height by a third. His body somehow folded so his head was by the floor and he slithered, head-first, through the tiny gap between the door and the battens of the parquet.

My eyes moistened with overwhelming glee as I swung the door open and followed him. I had a companion who could go anywhere he wanted. Anywhere I wanted, perhaps. He could, as I had hoped, sneak into Lord and Lady Burlington's manor and report back to me

about the man who was courting Sybil, their eldest and most beautiful daughter.

I glanced towards the kitchen, but the corridor was unlit and, in the shade, my shadow had become invisible. This was both a disappointing realization and a wonderful epiphany. At night, and in darkened rooms, he would be impossible to see and even more effective as a spy.

"Where are you? Show yourself."

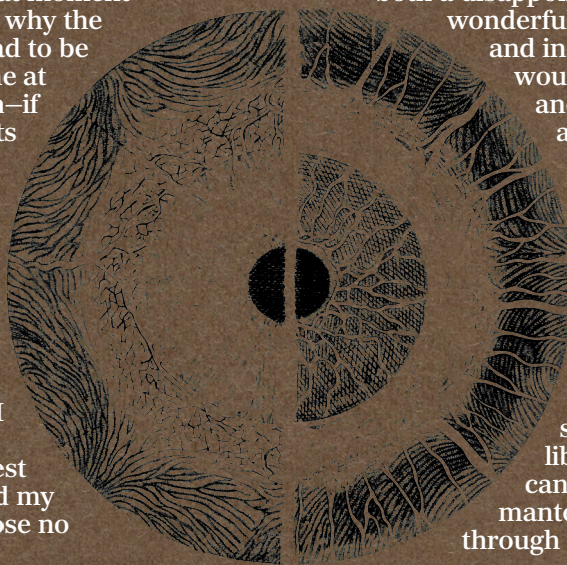
There was no response, but perhaps he could not respond in a way I could perceive, with the surroundings being so dark. I stepped back into the library and grabbed a candle from the mantelpiece, bringing it through to light the corridor.

I jumped in my skin as I realized that my shadow was right up close beside me, as if we had never been unbound. Not only that, but he was still mimicking my actions, holding out a hand as if there were a candle in it. I supposed his habits were hard to break.

"Now, you listen to me." I poked a finger towards him, and his own hand imitated a split moment after. "Stop following me about and go to Burlington Manor. I'm sure you can find a way in. It's dark, and there are many shadowy corners in which you can lurk. Discover whatever you can about Albert Fengold. I need to find ways to humiliate him, discredit him, or otherwise thwart his plans to propose to my beloved. It seems his badly fitting bowler hat and overgroomed imperial moustache are not enough to put her off, but with your help, that girl will be mine by the time the year is out."

My shadow shrank down to knee-height and glided off towards the main entrance hall. I followed to make sure he left my house and did his duty. As I arrived behind him, he promptly faded into the shade behind the grandfather clock. A moment later, his feet were disappearing through the tiny gap under the arched front door.

I flung the door open and stared after him, but it was so dark outside he could have been anywhere. Regret filled my



heart. Why had I dispatched him on a mission so abruptly, with no plan for how he could communicate his findings back to me, or what to do if he was seen? I returned to my library, slumped onto my Chesterfield, and lit a cigar.

After a few large glasses of brandy, I fell asleep on the couch and did not wake until the dawn chorus spilled across the morning.

"Hello? Are you here?" I sat up, a little groggy. There was no sign of my new friend. Perhaps he was elsewhere in the house. Standing, still unsteady, I ran my fingers over the cabinet of curiosities. The front clicked open at my touch. I pulled wide the door of the compartment reserved for the knife. Both the sheathed blade and my handwritten instructions for its use were missing! I examined my desk, checking in the drawers, underneath on the floor, behind and against the wall. My back-alley purchase was gone.

"Where are you? I thought shadows couldn't touch real objects? What have you done with my things?"

There was a bang from the hallway, then a frosty draught. Shuddering as I followed the noise, I found the front door catching in the wind and slamming against its frame. The house had not been secured all night. Perhaps I had failed to fully close it when I looked outside for my shadow. Careless. Once I shut and bolted the door, I retreated to the library and sat, head in hands, on the Chesterfield.

Not knowing how much time had passed, I slowly became aware of a presence in the room. The hairs on my neck prickled, and I had the sneaking suspicion that I was being watched. Standing to pour myself some brandy, I glanced back to where I had been resting.

As I did so, a shadow moved somewhere under the couch.

"Show yourself!" I said, placing the decanter back onto my mahogany desk.

A shady figure crept out from under the Chesterfield, edging its darkness onto my favorite rug. I froze and stared at the grey shape as it emerged, crawling like a sheet of unwelcome black mold from beneath where I had been sitting not a moment before.

"Is that you? Did you go to the manor? What did you learn?"

The shadow, of course, did not answer. But it slithered forward until its full shape was revealed. Judging by its outline, it had a bowler hat on its head and was clothed in a smart suit. Standing up, the shady figure unfurled itself to full height, a fair five or six inches taller than me. Its right hand kept something concealed.

It was no shadow of mine.

"Where have you come from? Who sent you?"

The shadow-man strode around the edge of the library, past the bookshelves, to the fireplace. He obscured the flames with his thick shade. The temperature dropped, and the whole room darkened a touch. As he turned to face me, the unmistakable shape of an imperial moustache jutting out from his cheeks was cast against the wall.

Fengold!

"Leave my house at once. I do not care for your intrusion."

Fengold's shadow lifted its right hand and revealed the dark object it held. It was a perfect match for the knife with which I had freed my own shadow.

Fengold had found the secret, and Fengold had broken the rules.



My mouth began to water as if preempting vomit. The beggar had been very clear—any object left in a shadow's possession at the point of separation could be used by that shadow as if held in a human hand. Fengold's shadow was carrying a knife so sharp and so hard it could easily cut through bronze. It was time to find out just how dark Fengold's soul might be.

"What are you doing here?"

The shadow opened its jacket and reached inside with its left hand, presumably feeling in a hidden pocket. When the hand emerged, it was holding something. I could not make it out. Raising its arm above its head, the shady man sprinkled dark shapes onto my rug. As they fell, my stomach lurched—they were pieces of my shadow. His head, his arms, his hands and feet, exact shadowy copies of my own. All cut apart and dumped unceremoniously before me.

I dropped to my knees to try to reassemble him, but the shadow segments were just that. Shadow. They passed through my fingers like water. Tears blurred my vision. I had no instructions on how to put him back together.

"Forgive me," I said, not to the intruder but to my poor dissected friend. "I never should have sent you." But in saying that out loud, I had admitted my guilt to Fengold's shifty messenger.

Movement at the French windows caused me to spin around. The other man who hoped to marry Sybil, Albert Fengold himself, stood boldly outside my library, watching his shadow servant do his bidding. In Albert's hand was the bronze-sheathed knife.

Upon my noticing him, Fengold smashed the glass and forced his way into my home.

"Send a spy to my Sybil, will you? Devious fool! Do you have no shame?"

"Damn your eyes!" I said as I ran the few short steps towards him and grabbed the hand in which he held the knife.

"Damn *your* eyes!" Fengold retorted.

The fight was short. Fengold expressed a wish to know if *anything* removed by the knife remained sentient, or if only shadows enjoyed that freedom. It was a question I had not considered, nor thought to ask the vagrant.

It was the shadow, not the man, who made the final, terrible extraction. But it

was the man who held me down, then walked away with my cabinet, my knife, and my consciousness, leaving my lifeless body oozing blood onto my favorite rug.

Fengold's soul was dark indeed.

So here I sit, a month later, just a pair of eyes in a little glass jar, forever peering out from a compartment of my own cabinet of curiosities. The walnut-wood doors left open, facing the marital bed of my sweetheart and my mortal enemy as they consummate their union.

About The Author:

Growing up in an old rural town, local ghost stories fed Kay's macabre imagination. When she writes, her own stories naturally tend toward darkness. Kay plans to inflict her work on publishers for many years to come – maybe some more will make it off their desks and into their publications.

THE REVENANT

By: Damir Salkovic

Night had long descended, but the moon was out and the stars blazing, and there was plenty of light even as Steve tossed another log on the fire. Raw weather for October: down on the plains folks still wore shirtsleeves, but up in the mountains the air smelled of snow, the cold biting through the tents and sleeping bags.

"So," Mark said from the other side of the campfire. "What happened to the buck?"

"Got away." Richie emptied his beer in one long pull and loosed a deep belch. "We found these big tracks. More like elk than deer." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "A little bit of fur and blood. But no animal. I must have only grazed it because it didn't slow down."

"You go after it?"

"Tried to. Couldn't find shit." For a moment, Richie's face was serious and sober. "If I'm being honest, I didn't feel like going too far after it. We followed the blood to a ridge that looked down on this bowl-shaped valley. A deep one, with these huge, thick trees. We decided to turn around and head back to camp."

"Why not?" Steve settled into his camp chair, metal frame creaking.

Richie's shoulders slumped, then lifted in a shrug. The flames reflected in his pupils, tiny dancers trapped behind glass. "Sometimes you get a feeling, all right? All three of us felt it. Like something was leading us. Like maybe that blood was bait. Same for the tracks. Too easy."

His gaze drifted past the fire's reach, into the pressing dark between the trees. "I can't explain it. But there are times when you just have to let things go."

The fire popped. Sparks spiraled up, mirroring the starry sky.

Silence settled over them like a blanket, heavy with unspoken thoughts. The night moved closer—bird calls threading through pine needles, the distant scratch of small

claws on bark. Everyone wanted to break the quiet, but no one did.

Pete shuddered and reached for the woodpile. The log he threw missed its mark, teetering on the fire's edge before tumbling off in an explosion of sparks and smoke.

"Christ, Petey." Mark waved smoke from his eyes. "Your turn to get more wood, anyway."

"Thin blood," Richie chimed in. "All those years in the tropics."

"Colombia's hardly the tropics," Pete said. Something in Richie's story had touched a nerve: Mark could see it in the tight lines around his friend's eyes. "The highlands get cold. Snows in winter."

"So, you're just being a pussy." Richie toasted him with his near-empty bottle. "That's a really long-winded way of saying it."

Pete flipped him off with both hands, grinning now with something closer to warmth.

"Seriously," Richie said, warming to the topic. "Four years in South America and you come back like you've taken a vow of silence. Guy disappears into paradise, you'd expect stories. Beaches, cocktails, señoritas with eyes like dark honey." He gestured with his bottle. "Instead, the stick up your ass has only gotten bigger."

"No beaches." Pete took a gulp of his beer. "Precious few cocktails. Definitely no señoritas. Don't think I saw a woman for the first year and a half. Then it was just the few girls in the little mining town. All married at fourteen, with their menfolk swinging these ugly-looking machetes."

Richie shook his head ruefully. "Our Great White Hunter. Comes back with a pile of cash and won't even leave his front door. Your bestest friends practically had to drag you out here."

“Speaking of hunting,” Mark asked, “you do any down there? You’re the one who got us all hooked in the first place.” Pete had been hunting with his dad and uncles since he could carry a gun.

Something moved behind Pete’s features, quick as a shadow crossing water. Grief, maybe. Or fear wearing a mask of grief. It vanished before Mark could be sure.

“Nope,” Pete said. “No hunting.”

“How come? They got laws against it, or something?”

“Lost the taste for it, I suppose.” Pete stared into the flames as if seeing something else entirely. “It happens. Spilled enough blood in my life, maybe. Or spent too much time alone with my thoughts. Asked myself questions I didn’t want answered.”

Richie stacked his empties with careful precision. “On that cheerful fucking note. We better hit the sack. Early start tomorrow.”

All four of them stood up, groaning. Mark placed his hands on the small of his back and winced, then walked away from the fire to relieve himself.

The darkness swallowed him after three steps. He pushed through low branches until the fire became nothing but an orange smudge through the black columns of pine.

His urine steamed in the cold air, pattering against deadfall. The laughter of his friends filtered through the trees, muffled until it became just another night sound threading between the branches.

How long had it been since their last hunting trip together? At least a decade, if not longer. Steve had not been married yet, or Richie divorced, and Petey was still working in Arizona, before he’d moved to Colombia. Mark zipped himself up, splashing the tops of his boots. The fire felt impossibly distant now, a fairy light set to lure unwary travelers deeper into the dark.

When he turned back, the branches seemed to close around him like fingers. Each step crunched louder than it should have.

Was the campfire moving around, or had he gotten so turned round he could not retrace his few steps? The trees seemed to be getting thicker, the sounds of the camp more distant. He must be drunker than he thought: all four of them had drunk too much, trying to disperse the

unacknowledged tension between them. Mark groped toward the light, anxiety rising on the beer vapors from his gut. Calling out would earn him endless ribbing. He bit his tongue and pushed on.

Something moved off to his right, a darker shadow peeling off from the nighted backdrop, followed by the crashing of scrub. Mark yelped, almost losing his balance. The trees wheeled around him. He caught only the hint of a shape—the impression of muscular bulk, a smooth, sinuous back, long, strong legs flickering below.

Deer. But even as he thought it, his brain rejected the shape—too lean, too fluid, moving with feline grace through the clearing ahead. Anatomy and shadow twisted together into something his mind couldn’t parse. Then it was gone.

A hand gripped Mark by the elbow, steadying him.

“Easy there, bro,” Steve said, with a chuckle. “Don’t fall into the shit pit.”

Mark blinked in confusion. He was back at the campfire, three faces looking up at him, eyes bright with alcohol and amusement. A scotch bottle was pushed into his hands. He drank without thinking, barely feeling the burn.

How had he gotten back?

The memory of the strange animal was already fading from his head, as if it had failed to make an impression in his mind. Had he seen anything but shadows, or a trick of the firelight?

“Had a little too much,” Mark said, with a weak smile.

Pete, he noticed, wasn’t laughing at him. Pete stared at him with an expression blank as stone, waiting to become something else entirely.

“Yeah.” Richie cracked his neck, wincing. “Should’ve skipped the nightcap. See you assholes tomorrow.”

In the past, there would have been protests and calls for at least one more round. This time they dispersed without complaint, avoiding each other’s eyes. By the time the fire was put out and the tents zipped up, Mark was already half asleep, the night scene dissolving into a blur.

I saw something—but had he, really? The shape in the moonlight was already dissolving. The thing had been moving away from camp anyway—driven off by their racket, probably.

He burrowed deeper into his sleeping bag. Above him, the forest settled into itself under the weight of the night sky. A sound like breathing, slow and deep, merging with Richie's snores from the next tent. Like something vast and black shuddering in the void.

Bluish light prodded Mark out of a vague but disturbing dream of pursuit and bloodshed among the trees. He crawled out of the tent into a hesitant dawn. Coffee was already bubbling on the camp stove, and his friends were hunched on the logs, mumbling and groaning like old men, faces swollen with last night's drink.

Out in the shivering dawn, they drank coffee and snatched a hasty breakfast before setting out. After over a decade of neglect, Mark's muscles seemed to protest everything: the pace, the weight of his pack, the dull metal encumbrance of his rifle. He wasn't sure he remembered how to shoot the damn thing, especially at a living, moving target. The recoil, the noise, the bullet penetrating affronted, pliant flesh. Just thinking about it turned his stomach.

They ambled into the woods in a ragged line. Steve looked just as queasy as Mark felt. Killing had never been his forte. In their hunting days, Mark couldn't recall Steve ever pulling the trigger. He came for the ritual, for whatever invisible thread still bound them after all these years.

Pete had been different. Where Richie spun tales, Pete had been a natural predator, raised on hunting by uncles and cousins who lived for the season. Now, surrounded by what should be his element, he moved like a superstitious man walking through a graveyard. It bothered Mark on some level he couldn't quite describe.

Only Richie seemed energized, cracking jokes and laughing at them, his voice carrying through the trees like a bell. In a different time, Pete would have told him to shut up, to stop chasing away the animals. But now none of them told him to quiet down. They needed the noise—needed something to fill the spaces where darker thoughts might live. Richie understood this, maybe without knowing, and played his part with manic devotion.

Mark tuned him out and focused on the beauty of his surroundings. The woods curved around a lake, some four to five miles long, and fed by countless small tributaries. At morning and dusk, this was where the deer would come to graze and

drink. The air was crisp and fresh, sunlight just starting to slant through the still-thick canopies. A cold wind had come up and was blowing in their faces, taking their scent away. In spite of himself, Mark felt the excitement of the hunt stir within him.

He'd forgotten how much he enjoyed this. Not just the camaraderie and old stories, but the wilderness itself—or what passed for wilderness in a hustling, hyper-connected world. All his petty troubles and worries shrank before the mountains' indifferent vastness, reminding him how small and insignificant he was. There was something liberating about the realization, in surrendering to the boundless unknown.

The others must have sensed the same, because their sparse chatter died out, and they were walking softer on the dead leaves. Birds cried in the marshland around the lake, fluttering in the low branches. They entered a clearing surrounded by scrub and set up their blinds. Mark with Richie, Pete with Steve—the weaker shots paired with the sharpshooters, an unspoken agreement. A stream burbled nearby, and even a poor tracker like Mark could make out deer tracks in the much-trodden mud.

Killing field. Mark tried to dislodge the phrase from his mind as he crouched next to Richie. He did his best to ignore the feeling that crept up his spine, toward the crown of his head. It wasn't danger, exactly, or fear, but a vague sensation like standing too close to high-voltage lines.

Someone—something—was watching them from the stand of maples on the other side of the clearing, or maybe from the bushes, or from the stream. It wasn't an animal, but it wasn't human, either. Neither hostile nor friendly. Simply indifferent. He fidgeted, expecting a silent rebuke from Richie. But his friend seemed to have lost his earlier ebullience. He, too, was looking out into the open, his shoulders tense, the barrel of his rifle twitching at the slightest noise.

Minutes passed. The silence stretched, thickened, became oppressive. Vainly, Mark listened for birds, but whatever this was, they seemed to be sensing it too. Even the rustling of the bushes in the wind no longer sounded natural, but like a deliberate ploy. As if an invisible hand was toying with the dead vegetation, testing the hunters' nerves.

Richie's breath hissed between his teeth. A large shape moved through brown

undergrowth, snapping twigs with a carelessness that felt deliberate. Like it wanted to be seen, wanted to draw them out.

The motion of his rifle sights told Mark that his hands were shaking. Beside him, Richie aimed through the blind's opening, sweat cutting tracks down his cheek despite the cold. His finger found the trigger but froze there, eyes gone glassy and distant.

Branches rattled closer. Heavy feet pressed dead leaves into the earth. Coming for us, Mark thought with lunatic clarity. He needed to shoot, to run, to scream a warning. But paralysis held him like a fist, muscles locked, breath trapped in his throat. Stricken and powerless in that awful, stony silence, they could do nothing but crouch and wait.

It passed their pathetic shelter in stuttering frames, like film jumping through a broken projector. Part human, part animal—deer maybe, or horse. Part landscape itself, as if the barren trees had learned to walk.

Mark's mind recoiled, leaving black holes in his vision like cigarette burns. Then gunfire erupted: once, twice, several more times. The reports crashed through Mark's paralysis, shattering it. Noise poured into his frozen ears like a flood: fluttering, screeching birds, the zing of hot lead, the hooves, or feet, if a heavy form beating a hasty retreat through the scrub.

An infinity passed. Mark crawled out of the blind, not trusting his legs to hold him up. Pete and Steve were standing outside the other blind, faces slack like sleepwalkers. Richie approached with careful steps, gently took the smoking rifle from Pete's hands.

"What is it?" Richie said. His voice quavered, like that of an old man. "What were you shooting at?"

Pete's head twitched from side to side. His lips were moving, but the sounds that came from them failed to coalesce into words.

"Got away," Mark heard. "It got away."

"Fuck." Steve exhaled a long plume toward the sky. "What the hell was that?"

Richie's frantic face swiveled from one end of the clearing to the other. All three of them, Mark thought, looked like shell-shocked soldiers, shaken to the core and disoriented. He felt like one himself. Madness loomed and capered over the woods, and the thought of four loaded rifles

in the hands of madmen was suddenly terrifying.

Richie laid a hand on Pete's shoulder. Gently, as if comforting a child.

"You got spooked," he said to Pete. "It's all right. It happens."

For a moment, the rictus of tension on Pete's face threatened to collapse into fury. Then it relaxed into blank-eyed confusion, the expression of a man waking from a bad dream.

"Yeah," he said in a low voice. "Yeah. Guess my eyes played a trick on me."

"Bullshit." Steve was glancing from one man to the other in disbelief. "I saw it. We all saw it. Whatever it was."

"Just a deer." Richie shot him a warning glance. "A deer and some shadows. Light reflecting from the water."

Steve looked about to argue, then shut up, casting his gaze aside.

"We'll find another one," Mark said, trying to sound enthusiastic. In truth, he didn't want to be anywhere near these woods anymore. "Day's just starting."

They packed their gear and hiked into the fickle midmorning sunshine. Got away. The words circled in Mark's head like carrion birds. The more he thought about them, the less certain he became that Pete had meant the animal. Maybe Mark had misheard. But the alternative made even less sense.

We got away.

They saw no other animals and returned to camp in the early afternoon, tired, cold, and hungry. None of them had spoken much, but Pete was the worst, near-catatonic. He shuffled at the back like a sleepwalker, not uttering a word.

From time to time he'd stop, head cocked as if listening to something in the trees. The others would pause too, playacting as hunters when all they wanted was to be anywhere else. Among themselves, they pretended nothing was wrong, simply going through the motions, waiting for morning so they could pack up and leave. Forget this trip. This place. Maybe each other.

Mark let his backpack crash to the ground, twisted side to side to work the knots from his spine. The sun hung high overhead, but all he wanted was to crawl into his sleeping bag and let darkness take him.

Fatigue pressed into his bones,

accompanied by a dread that had no rational cause, which made it somehow worse. It seemed to rise from the forest itself like mist: from thick trees and secret hollows, from the lake's black depths. This was an ancient place, older than man, shaped by forces beyond comprehension. He sat on a log beside the cold firepit, feeling lost in all that green silence.

Steve emerged from the tent he shared with Richie. Without speaking, he began stacking wood. Mark opened his mouth several times, searching for words that would make sense of everything. But they never came.

A rustle in the bushes nearly made him bolt upright. It was only Pete, hair disheveled, parka hanging open. The scotch bottle had reappeared in his fist, half-empty already. He took a couple of shaky steps toward the log. Mark shifted away instinctively. He didn't want Pete close, didn't want that black aura touching him.

"We should leave." Steve crouched by the fire. He said it quietly, as if to himself. "Pack up and go. Right now."

Smoke drifted across camp, sharp and stinging in Mark's eyes.

Pete shook his head, gaze wandering among the tree trunks.

"Won't work." His voice trembled before he forced it steady. "There's a mile and a half to the cars. It won't let us. Going to be dark soon."

"What's he talking about?" Richie appeared in the tent opening, rifle cradled in his arms. "What won't?"

Mark stared up at the dead canopy. Orange firelight danced on bare black limbs, and the circle of sky overhead seemed to narrow, falling away from him. Like I'm in a well, he thought. Trapped and sinking. The despair felt like quicksand—the harder he fought it, the deeper it pulled him down.

Pete ignored Richie's question. He leaned forward as if about to topple into the flames. Mark's skin crawled at his proximity.

"I have a story." Pete's voice sounded like something speaking from a grave. "A hunting story. Or haunting, maybe, like Richie's buck." His teeth gleamed wet in a desperate grin. "Except mine has an ending. At least I think it does."

Richie frowned, but Steve looked up from the pit, interested despite himself.

"There were three of us in the jungle." Pete's words fell like stones. "Three partners, three shares in a rare-earth mine. That was the deal. A third would be good for me. It would get me out of some money trouble I'd fallen into. But a half—now, a half is so much bigger. Don't you think? We were far from cities, from civilization."

Mark wanted to shut his ears, stop himself from hearing more. But his hands lay in his lap like dead things.

"Out in the jungle, the rules no longer apply." Pete's shoulders moved—a shrug or denial. "You make your own. That's what I thought."

Something heavy moved in the darkness beyond the firelight. Richie jerked his rifle up, but his hands shook so violently he couldn't hold the sights level.

"We had guns," Pete continued, as if hypnotized. "Just for protection. There are still bandits in those jungles. So, when the other two went out for a survey, I followed them. Only meant to take one, you see. But then I had two cartridges, and it seemed like—" His words caught like fabric on thorns. "Like fate, maybe. Like things slipping away from me."

In the glow of the fire, his face was hung with fat beads of sweat.

"Then it was over. Just like that." His voice flattened to nothing. "I expected to feel different. To feel something. But I didn't. I was the only one left. The money, the claim—it was all mine."

Despite the roaring blaze, the fire cast only dim light, as if shining through smoked glass. Mark's friends' faces dissolved into shadow. His muscles felt severed from his brain, dead weight hanging from his bones. He wanted to unhear Pete's confession, to expel the words already lodged in his skull. But there was no stopping it now.

"The jungle made the other two disappear. That's what I told myself, and that was what I told the authorities. Not that anyone asked too many questions." Pete's grin seemed like a grimace of pain. "I was a rich gringo, and I was generous with my money."

Richie braced his rifle against his shoulder, squinting past the flames, every muscle coiled tight.

"Jesus." Steve's voice was filled with tears. "You murdered them. Left their bodies to rot."

"No one would ever know," Pete said,

with a slow nod. "The locals thought the mining site was cursed. Or sacred. It didn't make a difference to them. Because a spirit, or an otherworldly presence, can't be good or evil, exactly. Right? Those are human concepts. They don't apply to something beyond human existence."

Flame blossomed in the night. The rifle's explosion shattered the silence a heartbeat later. Richie fired again, again, the muzzle flashes strobing across his wild features.

Whatever stalked in the dark did not seem even remotely put off by the bullets. It dragged itself along the ground, a great slinking form: Mark had the impression of a panther, then of a human shape crowned by antlers, before it melted back into the darkness. Coming closer. Undeterred.

Pete's voice seemed to come from across a huge distance. "There is no reward for the holy," it said, "or punishment for sinners. Only sacrifice. Maybe punishment is all that exists in the universe."

Pure blackness swirled in the center of their camp. Not wind, not even stirring air, but a distortion, as if reality itself bent around the unnatural presence. It swept the clearing, freezing the four men in their tracks, stilling the breath in their throats.

The blackness wasn't just around him, Mark realized with what was left of his consciousness. It was inside him, spreading from the center of him like cancer, a thunderstorm devastating all in its wake. Both Richie and Steve were on their knees, weeping and drooling, shaking their heads as if to dislodge the intrusion.

The whirlwind parted, or the world parted around it. In its center was a woman, or at least a figure Mark took for a woman. Long, supple thighs, deep hips, round breasts. He understood somehow that what he saw wasn't true, just translation: his mind painting its own approximation over something beyond comprehension. Because the figure had the head of a beast—of a stag with majestic antlers, but with the muzzle of a big cat.

Pete rose and stepped forward. Alone, unaffected by the paralysis that gripped the others. In a few quick strides, he was in the eye of the swirling darkness. The woman had become a vague outline, more shadow than flesh. Inconstant limbs wrapped around Pete and pulled him into an embrace.

They spent three days in a nearby motel while the search parties—police, town sheriff, even state troopers—combed every square foot of the woods. It wasn't until a unit dredged the lake that they found Pete's body. Bloated and bleached by the immersion, but with no visible wounds on it, nothing to indicate foul play.

Mark, Steve, and Richie were released under a cloud of suspicion, but with no charges. Unsure what they'd witnessed, they gradually accepted the official story: Pete had grown disoriented, wandered into darkness. One misstep and he'd tumbled into the lake, drowning somehow in knee-deep water. None of them felt inclined to examine their memories too closely, to probe what lurked in that dark hole where recollection should have been.

In death, Pete still wore his orange vest and cap. Water had turned his swollen face unreadable. The coroner had a hell of a time identifying the tangle of vegetable matter lodged in the dead man's throat. At long last, the state university identified the plant—a flowering vine native to the tropics. How it had ended in the mountains, in the middle of October, would remain a mystery forever.

About The Author:

Damir is the author of the story collections "In Lost Country" and "Collapse Years", the novels "Pareidolia", "Blood Ground", "Kill Zone", and "Always Beside You", and short stories featured in multiple horror/speculative fiction magazines and anthologies. He lives in Virginia with his wife and a dynamic duo of cats. When not writing fiction, he reviews horror movies, discusses books, and shares unsolicited opinions on just about everything on his blog, *Darker Realities*.

TWILIGHT DAYS

By: Michael Wentela

**“I think perhaps I will always hold a candle
for you—even until it burns my hand.”**

— Ranata Suzuki

Through weary and watery eyes he stared at the faded image of the couple, forever young and centered in the matte-finished photograph held within the wooden molding and acrylic glazing of the elegantly simple frame. He frowned with a weak sigh and pushed his glasses up his nose, his head unsteady.

The man in the picture was maybe twenty-two years old and strappingly handsome, with piercing pale blue eyes set in a tanned face and a head topped by unruly brown hair. The woman was a year or so younger, with a strikingly gorgeous face, her eyes the color of emeralds glimmering brightly above freckled cheekbones and blonde hair cascading about bare shoulders. Attired in swimwear—he in multi-colored board shorts and she in an orange string bikini—both were sun-bronzed and lean with the fitness that came easily to many young people.

The photo had been taken many decades earlier by a friend whose name he could no longer recall. They had both been so young, so vibrant.

He was now an old man. And she was now...

Gone.

Just... gone.

The old man, his brown hair now gray and thinned atop his head, felt the familiar tidal pull of loneliness spread within him, sluggishly filling the cavities of his weary heart and the vacuum on his fatigued soul. Over time, that never-ending emptiness had diminished from a debilitating pain to a constant, dull-edged ache that existed as reliably as a shadow.

He clutched the photo in feeble and trembling hands; the skin littered with age

spots and as dry as ancient parchment. Sitting in the cushioned recliner near the window of his too-warm suite on the ground floor of Oak Prairie Assisted Living facility, he silently cursed the ravages age had taken on his body, robbing him of his strength, lessening his mobility, diminishing many of his senses, stealing his courage, and taking away all his friends and family. The years had stolen everything from him, leaving him a hollow and bitter shell of the man he had been. With the whitened knuckles of weakened fingers, he clutched the frame and studied the youthful faces—her visage, in particular—eternally captured within the pixels.

That photo and his dreams of her were all he had left of the young woman, of his wife.

The candid image had caught for posterity their youth, their vitality, their strength, their nonchalance. And, most definitely, their love. That was plain to see, even with an old man's poor eyesight.

They had been at a windswept beach on Topsail Island with a group of friends on a four-day, sun-soaked Carolina weekend. There had been swimming in the ocean waves, hunting for shells and fossilized shark teeth, late-night beach strolls, fresh-caught seafood steamers, lots of uncontrolled laughter, and plenty of alcohol. Copious amounts of alcohol. It had been the kind of mini-vacation that left an indelible mark on all who had been there.

It was unfathomable to believe that less than a month later, she was gone. Vanished just like that—snap!—never to be seen again.

As her husband, he was the first suspect in her disappearance, which happened seemingly out of thin air on an evening run in one of the city's arboreal parks. Their

less-than-a-year-old marriage had been good, no telltale signs of spousal abuse, no rumors of infidelity, no hidden financial woes, no crazy ex-lovers lurking behind the scenes. By all indications, they were a happily married young couple.

No matter how hard the police tried to cast doubt upon his near-impossible-to-substantiate alibi, to scrutinize his story, to catch him in a lie, they were unable to find a misstep and crack his resolve. But the truth, it seemed, didn't set him free. It took eight days of aggressive probing with disparaging innuendoes and veiled threats—not to mention a successful lie detector test—to ultimately eliminate him as a suspect. But it did nothing to remove being a target of malicious looks.

After eight days wasted on him, detectives reluctantly changed the focus of their investigation, but not the results. The police turned their attention to the CCTV recording that showed her leaving the apartment building and the security footage that captured her running along the route to the park, which had no cameras. The final images showed the young woman crossing a street and heading into the park. She never came back out.

His young wife remained missing, with her whereabouts unknown, and there were no new persons of interest to interview.

Eight days became two weeks. Two weeks turned into a month without any new leads, much less a body. One month drifted into six. Six months shifted to a year without a shred of new evidence to pursue. One year transitioned into another year and then yet another, all without a single sighting of the beautiful blonde-haired young woman or the discovery of unidentified skeletal remains. The years slowly and inexorably piled up into a decade. One decade became two and then three, and still nothing. After nearly six decades—fifty-eight years, to be exact—not one credible lead about what had happened to her or where she had gone subsequently surfaced. There had been no death row confessions, no drunken barstool bragging, no sun-bleached bones discovered in the woods by hunters.

There was nothing.

She had just—disappeared.

The world continued to spin.

Time moved on. But he didn't.

He couldn't.

Once cleared as a suspect, he had taken matters into his own hands, convinced he

could discover leads law enforcement had missed or overlooked. Questioning both their competency and commitment to finding out what had happened to his wife, he believed he could uncover what they had missed. He was sure of it. He began with a red-hot intensity and conviction of certainty, but after several months, a frustrating lack of progress eventually doused that burning fire and reduced it to cold ashes. Despite how easy it appeared on all those dead-body television shows, his lame-ass amateur investigative efforts went nowhere and turned up nothing—the same as the professional police detectives had uncovered. The various private investigators he hired over the years had generated the exact same results: not a damn thing.

She had vanished without a trace. And her disappearance haunted him.

It had left a gaping void in his heart—his soul—one that could never be filled.

There had never been another special woman in his life, another true love. There was no one like her. Oh, sure, many ladies, at first young and then eventually mature, had tried to claim him as their own, willingly and eagerly surrendering their bodies to his lustful needs, but their avowals of undying, forever love had rung hollow to him and their romantic aspirations had fallen short. As gently and delicately as possible, he rebuffed their desires for commitment and a ring.

She had been his one and only.

And he missed her.

On those lonely and forlorn nights, when melancholy overwhelmed his logic, and liquor weakened his perseverance, he wondered if she had ever been there. Was she even real? Had she ever existed, or was the gorgeous blonde-haired beauty a figment of his overactive imagination? In reality, she had been out of his life much longer than she had been in it.

He still dreamed of her, young and beautiful.

Always young, forever beautiful.

A pale vision of wraithlike loveliness, she came to him during the long, empty hours of night, when the ethereal stillness that crowded in the lightless suite was ominous and unnerving, not peaceful and tranquil. It was during the forsaken lull that death called its own when she came to him in his dreams.

In his mind, he invited her into the small and strictly functional living room of the suite. The room was void of any homey

touches or personal effects, outside of a single framed photograph kept atop a no-frills end table beside the Lane recliner. He never thought it odd that she entered through the sliding window and sometime later, after he had dozed off with his hand loosely in hers, left in the same manner. He never questioned that he fell asleep in his dreams. It wasn't strange to him that her touch was cold, that her breath smelled of spearmint, that Spellbound perfume teased the air around her, and that she never graced him with a full-on smile. No, none of that mattered. She was with him, even if for just a short while, and after all that hollow and aimless time spent without her, those precious moments together in dreamland were all that mattered.

In his head, he had shared with her the stories of his life, one filled with long and lonely years without her. During her visits, he regaled his dream-wife with tales of his many business successes and how those triumphs had always been tempered by her absence. His entire life was affected by her not being with him, from that very moment when she headed out from their apartment for an evening run until decades later when he found himself sitting with a myriad of aches and pains in a recliner in an assisted living facility where the ever-dwindling number of his acquaintances withered and passed on, sometimes in their sleep.

In his dreams, he never asked his wife what had happened to her or where she had gone after she disappeared. It wasn't that he didn't want to know—he did—but he didn't want to jeopardize her coming back to him by asking those troubling questions with perhaps equally troublesome answers. That was a risk he wasn't willing to take. If not knowing was the price he had to pay to keep her eerie, spectral presence spending time with him during his twilight days, he would gladly pay it and consider the fee a bargain.

Then again, maybe the long, lonely years had stolen the last remnants of his sanity.

Who knew?

Who cared?

She always came back to him in dreams...

More asleep than awake, even with marginally functioning ears, he somehow heard the soft tapping on the glass pane of the window beside the recliner. He jolted fully awake—well, as fully awake as someone who was eighty years old and snoozing could be—and he realized what it meant. In the darkened, analgesic-smelling room that no amount of air fresheners

could completely eliminate, he eased his glasses up to the bridge of his nose, shifted his body with a groan, and tugged aside a panel of the heavy, light-blocking tan-colored drapes.

It took his weary blue eyes and sleep-addled brain a few seconds to settle on the ghostly apparition that glimmered on the other side of the glass. A smile creased his lips and wrinkled the weathered skin around his mouth and eyes, while his eight-decade-old heart fluttered like that of a teenager as the pale vision solidified into focus.

Through the dirt-filmed pane, emerald eyes set in alabaster lightly dusted with faint freckles sparkled mischievously, while nearly colorless lips curled into a closed-mouth smile. Long blonde hair seemed to shimmer in the night as it tumbled over her shoulders. Some disappeared down her back, and some rested on her bosom, while the pale valley of her cleavage was a sharp contrast to the silky blouse so dark red in color that it almost appeared black.

He glanced down at the old photograph still gripped in his hands and resting on his lap, and then back at the pallid shadow watching him through the glass. It was her, young and beautiful.

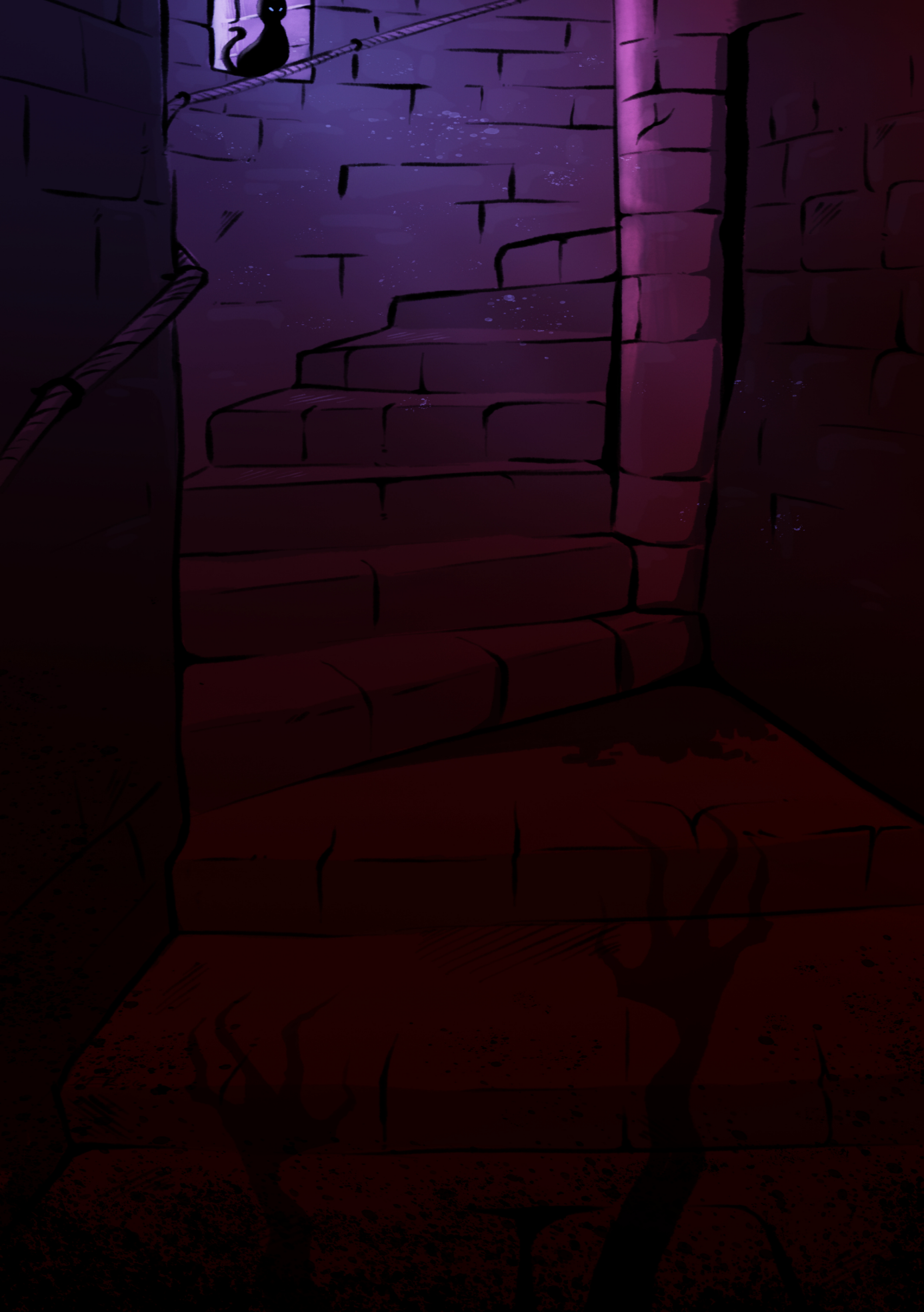
Always young, forever beautiful.

She reached out with one delicate hand and slid the window open, the metal frame traveling nearly silently along the aluminum track at the top and bottom. A soft but cool October breeze with subtle hints of Spellbound on the current drifted through the gap. She placed both hands, lethal-looking crimson nails tipping each finger, on the window sash and leaned forward.

"Hello, Joshua," she said, with twinkling emerald eyes and a pirate smile. "May I come in?"

About The Author:

Michael Wentela is a lifelong writer, drawing inspiration from an overactive and creative imagination along with a diverse work experience that includes time spent as an award-winning journalist, a corporate trainer, an economic development specialist, a marketing professional, and a gravedigger. He has had a pair of novels published and numerous short stories. You can get more information about his writing at www.michaelwentela.com. He and his wife, Stephanie, live in southwest Wisconsin.



THE DARKNESS ALWAYS FEEDS

By: Norbert Góra

November 15, 1952, evoked memories of the specter of World War II in Scotland. The media remained vigilant. Despite the wartime friendship with the USSR, relations cooled after 1945. Scotland became a key NATO defense point due to its geographical location between the US and the USSR, making it a potential target in the event of a nuclear conflict. Alastair Dunflay was constantly preparing for the call. He would get up early in the morning and run from Carnish Beach to the Abhainn Dearg distillery, regardless of the weather.

He had waited too long. Doubt had already settled in his heart when the Royal Navy finally contacted him. An attack from the Norwegian Sea was becoming increasingly likely.

In the face of the threat, the Fleet Air Arm decided to undertake regular patrols within thirty nautical miles of the Isle of Lewis, using Westland Dragonfly helicopters.

At the controls of them, Alastair was on another routine night patrol. He himself did not know whether the common fear of attack also affected him. Anxiety still wouldn't leave his head. It became especially intense when flying over the Flannan Islands. A violent headache made it difficult for him to control the machine. Alastair gritted his teeth. None of the Dunflays bowed to pain. He swallowed and turned his attention to the lighthouse. He had flown over it so many times, but now something was wrong.

A crimson light emanated from the lantern room, equipped with a lamp featuring an integrated optical system and shutters. It used to glow white.

He slightly descended the ceiling and leaned forward, trying to spot the lighthouse keeper. He may have gone downstairs. Alastair moved the cyclic to the left. The machine turned its nose toward the building. Alastair smacked his lips. He

probably went outside because the entrance door was wide open. Straight into the arms of a cold night? He involuntarily thought that the lighthouse keeper was losing his mind, just like Finn Rubentry, a thirty-year-old lunatic from Mangersta. Poor Caitriona Mollendy. She could have done so much good with her foundation if it weren't for that bastard. He kidnapped her, killed her, and disappeared. Alastair interrupted the grim flood of memories. Rubentry had to vanish; he would have suffered the same fate.

There was no point in thinking any longer. He landed near the building. Alastair never left the helicopter without a weapon. Webley Mk IV .38, a gift from his grandfather, Magnus, for his twentieth birthday. May God grant him endless meadows in heaven. It was Alastair's strength in moments of doubt.

He had barely crossed the threshold when the door banged shut. Alastair screamed in terror, almost pulling the trigger. He turned towards the exit and pressed the handle. It didn't even budge. He tugged a few times to be sure.

Alastair muttered a fierce curse under his breath and sniffed. The wind wasn't that strong at all. The door was made of thick wood and was well-hinged. A simple breeze wouldn't close it. The lighthouse keeper! He must have been watching him from the moment he landed. Son of a bitch. He'd regret these stupid jokes. Alastair decided to kick the door with all his might, but it changed nothing. He growled with anger and aimed the gun at the lock. The gun's roar echoed off the walls, but the attempt failed. He couldn't believe it. The metal had achieved the impossible. It had transformed into a dense mass that sealed the space. The hole under the handle disappeared in the blink of an eye. The old Dunflay maxim (fear has big eyes, but is too small to defeat us) no longer appealed to him.

Alastair glanced back and then walked to the first step of the stairs leading to the top. If only I could fly, he thought sadly. The issue of the scarlet light was secondary.

The nightmare seemed to be just getting started. Alastair found the lighthouse keeper. He stood motionless by the lamp, with his arms outstretched.

Alastair came closer to the body and grabbed his head. Finn Rubentry! This degenerate! What was he doing here? Alastair bit his lip. Caitriona Mollendy's killer was dead. He had blood all over his fists.

The Fresnel lens was smeared with scarlet. Hence the crimson. So, it was his work. What was the reason? Alastair snorted. Anyway, who entrusted him with the care of the lighthouse? Alastair was beside himself with astonishment. He was even more surprised by how this scumbag had gotten to the island—so many unanswered questions.

The only justice in this world was the fact that Rubentry bit the dust. Alastair even wanted to kick him in the groin but held back. Instead, he glanced to the right, at the small, scratched mahogany table. Parchment and a pen were lying on it. Finn probably decided to write a letter. The headline alone was disturbing enough. Alastair felt shivers.

**52 YEARS TO REVEAL THE TRUTH.
The curtain—it took them.**

It feeds. Always feeding. Now I am a part of it.

The rest of the letter sounded equally unbelievable.

James Ducat, Thomas Marshall, and Donald McArthur. They experienced it in December 1900. The veil of darkness took them away. It came for me too. It will take everyone. We only have to wait; time is all we have left.

These were the three missing lighthouse keepers. Magnus searched for them persistently. "What the hell is going on here?" Alastair thought and turned towards the stairs. Finn stood on the first step.

Terror hit Alastair in the face with the force of a battering ram. He jumped, almost bumping into the table. Communication between his brain, eyes, and heart began to fail. Caitriona's murderer was in two places at once. Finn's corpse was leaning against the Fresnel lens; however, Alastair saw him three, maybe four steps away, alive, watching him intently. He looked too good to be a ghost. Fortunately, Alastair was still holding the revolver.

"I don't know who the fuck you are, but don't come closer," Alastair croaked in a trembling voice. Rubentry ignored the warning.

"I'm already behind the curtain," Finn announced and shrugged. He took a step forward.

"Stop!" Alastair shouted and aimed a gun at the Mangersta monster.

"There is nothing left. Pain has evaporated, existence has vanished, and only darkness remains in the vastness of empty eons," Finn replied.

"What the hell are you talking about, you fucker?" Alastair screamed even louder.

"Explanation at this stage is pointless." Rubentry laughed and shook his head. "Until you are fed by it, you will not understand."

Alastair lowered his weapon gently. The Mangersta monster's eyes were devoid of their former mischievous glint. Rubentry seemed deprived of emotion. He acted as if he had encountered an indescribable phenomenon, and every nightmare in the world was merely a pathetic cloud of dust, leaving no trace.

"How on earth did you get to the island?" Alastair asked a bit more calmly.

"Is it really that important how I got here? Why don't you ask what happened? Aren't you interested in how I'm talking to

you, but my dead body lies a few steps away?" Finn reacted with anger.

"Everyone in Mangersta knew you were crazy. You could have stolen someone's boat and sailed to the island yourself. Eventually, your conscience overcame you, so you committed suicide. I wonder if you were given a second chance at the Last Judgement?" Alastair began to lose faith in ultimate justice.

"You're a poor idiot," Finn muttered and turned towards the stairs. The repeated creaking of the boards suggested that someone else was coming up the stairs. Then Alastair saw the three lighthouse keepers who had disappeared fifty-two years ago.

The pilot dropped his gun in surprise. Strangely enough, he remembered an article with a photo published in a local newspaper in 1925. He was eighteen years old at the time.

The journalist tried to explain what might have happened to them, but his theories brought nothing new to the case. Their appearances had not changed at all.

They lined up next to Finn.

"James Ducat, Thomas Marshall, and Donald McArthur," Rubentry introduced each of them. "They were the first to recognize the power of the curtain," he added after a while.

"It feeds but also demands nourishment. By giving up our souls and humanity, we gain knowledge. Thanks to the curtain, we are no longer bound by understanding," the lighthouse keepers spoke simultaneously, which fueled the surrealism of the situation. Alastair took a step back and glanced nervously to the right, toward the sea. The sky was covered with a band of thick black clouds. They moved toward the building at an extraordinary speed, as if they were actually a dark cloth-clad Zeppelin airship. Alastair felt his head throbbing more and more violently.

"What about..." Alastair wanted to ask, but Finn answered him immediately.

"All the wickies are here. The curtain pierced everyone. Some commit suicide, others venture out into the open sea and never return."

As if to confirm Rubentry's words, the stairs began to creak again. Alastair noticed more men. They were climbing one by one. He associated some of them with the Isle of

Lewis, like old Angus Toutter from Cradhlastadh. The poor fellow set off on a boat toward Carnish Beach in 1939. He never made it there.

"The curtain wants to meet you, Mr. Dunflay," the trio of lighthouse keepers said after a long moment. "There are no more secrets on the other side."

The clouds began to transform. They seemed to break apart gradually, leaving dense, murky bands toward the water. Alastair realized they weren't lying. He had actually been watching the curtain unfold. Finally, it slipped through the glass of the dome and embedded itself in his body.

Alastair slowly opened his eyes. He was still sitting in the helicopter and noticed traces of blood on the window to his left. An accident? He tried to start the engine, but it was no use. After ten minutes of intense thinking, he remembered what had happened.

He was flying over Flannan Island when the gauges started going crazy. During the landing, he was jolted hard. He probably hit his head on the glass, hence the blood. Alastair reached for the on-board radio. He sent out a short message requesting backup. Afterward, he looked at the lighthouse and almost screamed in horror. Above it, something that looked like a monstrous dark veil hovered. Alastair put a hand to his mouth.

The curtain wants to meet you, Mr. Dunflay. The voice he heard came from inside his mind. Why did it seem strangely familiar?

About The Author:

Norbert Góra is a 36-year-old poet and writer from Poland, the author of more than 130 poems published in many poetry anthologies and magazines around the world. His pieces were published in 40 countries around the world. He also wrote four dark poetry books in English - "A globe bathed in horror", "Darkness in the end", "Deadlines", "There must be something between dark and light"(a collection of haikus)".



WATER QUALITY ADVISORY

By: J.S. Douglas

Predawn moisture slicked Camile's skin as she stepped onto her paddle board. She was looking forward to an early-morning ride, just her and the Willamette River as the sun stretched golden across the world, banishing the night's shadows.

It was the only time of day when she could be alone. No children demanding breakfast. No husband wondering where he put his belt (in the closet, where it always was). No reminders or early morning rush. Just her and the water. Until the alarm on her watch went off and she had to paddle back to the real world.

She had silenced all the alerts and texts that normally came through to her smartwatch. That's why she didn't see the water quality advisory from the City of Portland even though she was only a few feet from the shoreline when it was issued.

The river's current pulled her along, small waves bumping the board. She focused on the minute adjustments necessary to stay balanced. This meditateness, this need to be in the present so she didn't fall off, was why she woke up before her two kids, Moira and Bentley, and hauled her board out to the water as often as she could.

Peachy light glimmered against the trees on her right as she dipped her paddle into the water and pushed her craft toward downtown Portland. Light shimmered against the shoreline and the buildings beyond. Birds twittered and warbled, first in bursts, then in harmonized song. She breathed in the clean scent of water and watched the world wake up.

Ahead, she spotted another boarder. The figure stood serene, gold-limned in the glorious dawn. They weren't paddling. Just standing and letting the current take them where it wanted.

Good idea, she thought. Camile shifted her gaze toward the sunrise and pulled her

paddle from the water, drifting and watching the light as it streamed through the trees.

A splash interrupted the morning calm. She scanned the water until her eyes reached her fellow boarder, who was no longer on their craft. They were flailing in the gleaming water. The reflected light forced Camile to squint as she watched the person grab their board and haul themselves back up. They sat, dripping, their feet dangling in the chill river, their hands resting on their knees, palms out. No paddle in sight.

"You okay?" called Camile.

The boarder laughed, the sound grinding up from deep in their lungs like a hacking cough but with a "haw, haw, haw" mixed in. It made her throat hurt in sympathy.

"You should try it," the person said in a raw, scraping voice. "Nothing like a morning swim!"

Camile wanted to leave them and get back to enjoying her morning. But she couldn't abandon someone stranded on the water. Not only was it terrible etiquette, but it was dangerous.

"It looks like you lost your paddle. Do you need a tow?" she asked. She'd drifted closer to the stranger, her own paddle poised in sweaty palms.

She could see them more clearly now. A thin, dripping man. His long, lank hair clung in stringy strands against his cheeks. He turned toward her. A grin stretched across his clammy, pale face. His eyes didn't match the expression. They looked dead. No. Afraid? She couldn't tell with the dawn light bouncing off the water and glaring into her eyes. All she knew was he was creepy as hell. Her stomach clenched and released. Something was very wrong with this guy.

"What a kind offer!" he exclaimed. "I accept!"

Camile pressed her lips together in an approximation of a smile. She couldn't back away now. She'd been raised to override her instincts. To be polite at all costs.

"Great. Glad to help."

She dipped her paddle into the water, guiding her board closer to his.

"Where can I clip on?" she asked, squinting at his board. It was an inflatable, and he hadn't installed a net or visible handle. She unclipped a length of cord from her own netting and shaded her eyes, looking for a place to hook on.

"Hand it to me, and I'll attach it to my handle," the man said. He stretched out his arm.

Their fingers brushed as she handed him the carabiner at the end of her cord. The feel of his skin triggered a wave of nausea. Something about that single touch made her brain scream at her to run, to get away, to get back to shore.

His skin felt bloated, beyond pruney, as though it were filled to bursting. Like a bulb of kelp. That brief touch had set her fingertips burning, but the sensation vanished as she snatched her hand away.

It reminded her of something from childhood. She'd swum through some dangerous algae, and it had felt as if small, slick particles coated her skin and burned against it. The touch of the man's fingers had that horrible slick, flaming quality.

The man gripped the rope and carabiner. Yanking the cord, he pulled her paddleboard closer to him, his grin widening.

Camile stumbled, finding a moment of balance at the back of her board.

"Hey!" she yelled.

The man's grin widened further. It was so wide that she thought she saw skin splitting at each corner of his smile. Dark liquid dribbled from the sides of his mouth. Was it blood? No, that was impossible, right? She didn't know, and frankly, she was done with this entire interaction.

One more yank and he'd dump her in the water and take her board. The man's arms tensed. She had no intention of handing her craft over to this psycho. She dove forward and grabbed at the netting the rope was clipped to. She snatched the cold, wet carabiner that connected them and unclipped it just as the man yanked. The metal went flying. Camile slammed her hands to the back of her head and buried her face against the fiberglass to protect herself.

Something let out a meaty *thwack*, followed by one of those horrible laughs.

She scrambled to her knees and felt for her paddle, which was resting on her board as if she'd placed it there. Maybe she had. Everything she'd done in the past few minutes had been driven by instinct, and she'd practiced properly shipping her paddle in case of an emergency. She swung her paddle into the water.

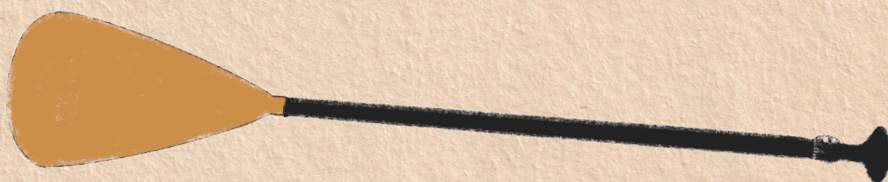
Into the sticky, strange-feeling water.

Leaning over slightly, Camile saw a vast dark mass beneath the river's surface. Something giant lurked under there, in the shadows. The thing snagged her paddle, yanking at it. Trying to rip it from her grasp. Camile jerked it left and right and then up. The paddle came free with a horrendous slurping sound.

She started to turn, her brain grasping for other options to take her out of the mass's range. As she turned her head, she was greeted by a *thwack* and a burst of pain across her temple. She felt her head sway on a suddenly loose neck. Then she felt nothing more.

Camile gasped water and small, stinging particles.

Algae, she thought as she flailed through the darkness. It pressed into her mouth, into her lungs, slicking down her throat and burning, burning, burning. The choking mass filled her throat, and she tried to cough, inhaling more water and algae and thrashing, trying to turn her head and scream, to retch it all out.



Her arms stopped moving erratically and formed a clean breaststroke. Only two strokes pulled her to the water's surface. Her head popped up, and she gasped, coughing.

Strange, she thought as her hands paddled her through the algae bloom. They slapped onto her board. Her muscles screamed for a moment before the sensations shut off. One hand gripped the far side and the other the handle. She pulled herself out of the water and onto solid fiberglass. She could see she'd done it, but couldn't feel any of it. Couldn't feel the hard board under her palm or the rough nylon against her fingers. Couldn't feel her burning throat. Felt absolutely nothing.

She tried opening her mouth. Tried wondering aloud, tried to say, "What?" but she couldn't. She looked at her right hand, stared at it, and willed it to move. To grab the side of her board so she could pull her feet out of the water.

No response.

Her mouth opened and her throat filled with air. It pushed out a horrible, braying laugh that didn't belong to her. Panic filled her brain. Panic that did not surge through her body. It just stayed with her and vibrated, cracking through her detached brain like lightning in a bottle.

Her hands hoisted her body flat on the board and draped themselves into the murky water, makeshift paddles pushing her toward shore.

I have to calm down. Camile told herself. Because this was impossible. Impossible to think that the algae had done something. Had changed her. Had taken her over. No. She was running on pure instinct. Her adrenaline was too high to feel what was going on. She tried again. Tried to force her legs to kick against the board. Tried to stop her hands from moving. Tried to feel the water slipping past her fingers. Tried to squint her eyes against the sunlight.

Her body moved forward mechanically, like a robot with someone else piloting the machine.

That isn't algae. Can't be. Right? Is it some kind of parasite? Something like that fungus that makes ants climb to the top of grass and get eaten by cows?

She wanted to scream, to tear at her hair, to cry. She wanted to run to the nearest hospital and beg them to examine her. More than anything, she wanted out of this damn water.

Her board bumped against the shore. She'd landed in front of a kayaker who was standing a foot away from the water, squinting at the shadowy depths.

Camile's body rolled off the board and splashed into the shallows.

Her arms pushed her up as her toes crunched through sandy gravel and muck. Plumes of mud filled the water, hiding the masses of algae floating in the river. If only she could step out of the water, remove her body from the algae, maybe then she'd be able to dry out and regain control of herself.

The kayaker met her eyes. Eyes that Camile tried to fill with terror. Eyes she couldn't control.

"Does it seem okay out there? I just saw the water quality advisory. It's kind of weird. Something about parasitic algae blooms? What does that even mean?"

"Looked great to me," a voice completely unlike Camile's emerged from her mouth. A smile stretched too wide across her face. Camile hoped, prayed, the kayaker would be creeped out by her strangeness, this dripping woman with a weird voice who was standing in strangely dark water and grinning at him. She hoped he would decide against stepping into the water.

The kayaker shaded his eyes with one hand and gazed out at the sun-drenched water. He shrugged.

"Ah, what the hell. As long as I don't fall in, I should be fine, right?"

Camile's body nodded. It sat down on the paddleboard and let its feet dangle in the river as the kayaker pushed off into the rippling water. Her watch beeped an alarm, telling her it was time to go home.

Camile's body let out a throat-wrenching laugh.

Inside her head, Camile screamed.

About The Author:

J.S. Douglas is a horror author living in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, daughter, dog, and a growing collection of plants. Her work is published in several magazines and anthologies. Her stories most often address the topics she knows best: existential dread, ghosts, monsters, and the everyday horrors of existence.

THE MAN OF COLORS

By: W.P. Walsh

Every time Gram visited the Man of Colors, he never knew which color to expect. When the man's robe was wine red, he knew the man would be full of vigor, telling Gram proud tales of his youth. If the robe was pale blue, Gram would have to share the man's regrets and sit with him until the man felt ready to move again.

He'd seen many different colors, their experiences like the weather, driving rain and light showers, violent storms and sunshine. Gram learned how to prepare himself: what clothing to wear, what gifts to bring.

Today, the Man of Colors wore black.

The man lived at the end of a winding cliffside road, in a cottage that seemed ready to plunge into the rocky shores below. Its facade told the story of poverty: simple stone and wood, surrounded by weeds, in disrepair.

Inside, however, the Man of Colors made reality his plaything.

If Gram stepped in on a day of aqua, he'd find a grand plaza bisected by marvelous fountains gushing shimmering water; then he'd climb a long step to the man's temple of marble and upside-down waterfalls.

On a day of sage, there'd be a verdant paradise full of flora Gram had never seen, the air laden with the scent of sweet pollen. He'd pluck crossbred fruits that the man had named—a *papple* (peach and apple), *raspbanas* (raspberry and banana).

Birdsong would ring through the endless golden forest.

After wandering, Gram would find the man sitting on a lignified throne, waiting for his company.

Gram had stood in front of the cottage's ramshackle wooden door, readying himself for what lay beyond.

He found only shadows.

Gram stepped in. The door slammed shut behind him, leaving him in darkness.

"Hello?" he called out. The words carried like a whisper.

He tried once more. "Hello?"

Even when he shouted, his voice traveled like a fly through jelly.

He slid his shoe across the floor in front of him. The ground felt coarse under his leather sole. His footfalls produced no echoes as he walked forward, searching for the man.

Was this one of the Man of Colors' tricks?

Once, Gram had found himself tied to the bench of a boat that rowed itself toward a waterfall. As the prow tipped downwards, he thought how foolish he'd been to trust this man: no promise of power was worth dying for.

He felt the boat go over—then swoop up, soaring into the sky, and he found the man dressed in ivory, sitting on a tower of clouds.

"A fool, indeed," the man had told him.

If this darkness were a trial, it was a cruel one.

After noticing that the ground was without obstacles, he walked faster. After nearly an hour of walking, he felt like a fool. The man didn't assuage his feelings.

An hour later, Gram felt hungry.

He patted his leather satchel until he found the latch, then opened it and felt around inside for the piece of bread he'd brought. The man enjoyed Gram's baking, and he'd often let Gram bribe him in exchange for a lesson. Gram held out the heel he'd brought—the man's favorite—into the dark.

The darkness remained.

After half a day of walking in the dark, Gram felt like singing to improve his mood. He started humming a melody, a song the man had taught him about a woman who coveted the moon. He sang...

*She married a man who'd given her all
No more he could give, she knew
His jewels were plain; their love had
waned
So she eyed the prize of the moon.*

The song seemed to cut through the thick silence. Gram thought that maybe his singing was the answer to some implied riddle. He continued...

*To claim the moon, a god she'd woo
One who would give her his all
A god she knew, whose stars he'd strew
To catch it and bring it to fall*

He heard skittering above.

A shiver tingled through his body. He stopped. Gram held his breath and listened for the sound again. He heard it—getting louder, faster.

Right in front of him.

He closed his eyes.

Gram felt a humid breath on his face. It smelled like ashes and rotted fruit. He dared not open his eyes—stupid because he couldn't see even with them open.

He tried not to move. A guttural growl shook him, spittle flecking his face. He nearly pissed himself.

"So, a spider can teach its prey to seek it out willingly."

The voice echoed in a disfigured harmony.

Had the Man of Colors brought Gram into a nightmare? A test of his resolve, perhaps, before he finally made him an apprentice?

"I do not fear you," Gram said.

"I do not fear you." The voice mimicked him. It snarled, "Yet your eyes are closed."

Gram swallowed.

"Open them."

He couldn't.

"Open them!"

His eyes opened.

The darkness was gone.

Gram now stood at the edge of a circular room. The Man of Colors sat at a table in the middle of the room atop a round obsidian slab. Alternating pieces of polished black and white stone radiated from the slab like spokes on a wheel. His robes were as black as the darkness before.

He was playing a game.

"Gram," he said. "Don't just stand there! Come, sit."

Gram looked around. Many braziers burned in sequential chromatic lights around the edge of the room. One was unlit. He thought about the words the creature in the dark had told him.

The man waved him over.

Gram went and sat across from him.

"You seem worried. Is something troubling you?" The man's gaze felt heavy.

"I met something in the darkness."

"Darkness?" The man seemed surprised. "There's no darkness here."

The combined light of the braziers created a warm tone. There were no shadows in the room.

The man set carved wooden pieces on a stone board with different geometric shapes inlaid into its surface. It was the man's favorite game—*sacirclo*.

The man enjoyed many games. Once, while wearing bone yellow, he had set up an elaborate game of hide-and-seek using mirror images of himself that Gram had to find in a sprawling desert labyrinth. The images would reveal how many remained and then vanish.

Gram never found the real Man of Colors.

"Did you bring me any bread?"

Gram reached into his bag and found none left. He turned to the man and shook his head.

"Then this will be difficult."

A standard bout of *sacirclo* was a best-of-three match. First to move their conciliator in a cycle around the outside of the board would win the game.

Gram had never beaten the man.

For the first game, the man arranged a traditional defense. He planned to stall and make Gram struggle for every point.

Gram tried aggressive tactics, focusing his fury on one section of the board, but the man escaped his assault and made him pay for being overextended.

"A good try," the man said with a yawn.

In the next game, Gram attempted caution. He began to set up his pieces to cover the travel lines etched into the stone between sectors.

"Would you like to know how I became the Man of Colors?"

Gram paused. Was this the moment he'd waited for?

Gram nodded.

"My life was once full of colors. More vibrant and varied than I am now."

The man brought a trio of gryphons across to an island between zones. Gram found it hard to imagine him *more* vibrant.

"My colors were stolen. They tore the happiness from me."

Gram moved archers to meet the gryphons.

The man moved a squad of knights toward the archers. "And when one's soul is devoid of happiness, what can he do? Where can he find it?"

Gram thought about his question, then countered with a spear.

"In the souls of others, of course." The man brought a finger to his lip, then brought his dragon around to create a three-fronted attack and claimed a bounty of points that moved his conciliator over half a cycle toward victory.

"The color of my first soul was red. *She* made me feel happiness."

She? Gram looked up. It was the first time he had mentioned anyone other than Gram.

The man smiled at him. "Your turn."

Gram observed the board and saw a hole in the man's defenses—he'd left a travel line unguarded, allowing Gram to threaten his conciliator with a spear.

The man seemed unaware and said, "The second soul was lilac. He was a harsh lesson that happiness could be attained and lost at the same time." The man sighed and looked at a purple brazier mournfully.

Gram almost questioned him. Instead, he moved his spear, following the curved line to the outer ring, and placed it down with a grin. The Man of Colors would be forced to take a turn to retreat, and Gram could use the lost turn to take pieces, gaining points and moving his own conciliator toward victory.

"The colors that I have collected—I use them to paint life every day. You've seen! Such wonders, such joy. I try to create happiness. And my palette grows with every soul; my paintings get nearer to perfection, but still I'm left..."

The man reached over nonchalantly to

the threatening spear and banished it from the board with a flick.

The piece clattered onto the ground.

"... wanting more."

Gram stared at the board with his mouth open. How could he not have seen it? The man expanded his archer's range with not one, but two towers. Gram flushed after realizing his blunder.

Instead of a retreat, the man moved his conciliator toward victory. "You could help me achieve true happiness, Gram. I know it."

The loss of Gram's spear wasn't just embarrassing—he'd also felt like something within him had changed. Like a piece of himself was missing, but he couldn't say what.

"I could use you—teach you to paint such beautiful things."

Gram mobilized a counter, hoping to demolish a tower with his catapult and use a fast-moving ship to threaten the conciliator once more.

"*Such.*"

The man ran through his catapult with a pincer of knights.

"*Beautiful.*"

With each lost piece, Gram felt a drop in his heart, a pain in his stomach, a spell of dizziness.

"*Things.*"

When the man's conciliator finished its cycle, he looked up at Gram. His eyes were as black as his robe. Hard lines formed on his face.

The Man of Colors breathed heavily.

Gram looked at the board. He felt his eyes glass over.

The man regained his composure.

"You have lost," he said. "Do not feel ashamed. You played a better game of *sacirclo* than any of my former students."

The compliment didn't reach Gram. His face was clammy. He felt cold.

The Man of Colors stood.

"And now it is time for me to claim my prize."

Gram felt his consciousness slipping as the man approached him. He could not move. The man's face blurred, but Gram could see him smiling with his teeth.

When Gram awoke, he was lying on a table, his arms and legs bound with cold metal. The Man of Colors stood next to him.

He wore white.

"You're awake," he said, holding a small, ornate knife. "Good."

The knife's blade had a mirror finish. Gram could see himself in it. His cheeks looked sunken, his skin pale, and his once-full hair thinning.

The man moved the knifepoint to Gram's right armpit. He found he could not flinch.

"It is always a surprise, you know—the color of one's soul."

The knife pushed into Gram. It did not cut, and Gram did not bleed; instead, a dim light flared where it penetrated the skin. He felt like his insides were being tugged toward the knife.

"Each one is unique," the man said as he slowly pulled the knife across Gram's chest. A glowing, hot-white line trailed behind it. "I've been excited to know yours."

Gram didn't feel pain. The first thing he thought of was his mother. He couldn't imagine her face but could sense her presence: a warmth that hugged his body and brought him calm.

The knifepoint pulled that memory like a consuming void, tearing it from his mind like it was never there.

Every inch that the man dragged the knife fractured him more, pounding at his mind like a hammer against crystal. Gram experienced old memories that sailed through his mind anew, and then they were gone forever.

The man turned the knife downward toward his stomach.

He remembered his childhood, a time when he played with his friends in a field and fell. His knee bled, and his father was there. His father looked unhappy. The words that came from his mouth were like daggers falling. He would have stayed on the ground and continued crying, but the knife dried his tears and lifted him.

His life bled from him in fragments, each one flooding his mind with a distinct color. Gold like autumn trees, red like blood, light blue like a pond of ice. He felt his face move

from a smile to a frown. He shivered and then sweated. His loins stirred and then went numb.

With every memory lost, Gram became a stranger to himself.

"A brilliant soul indeed. I've never felt one quite like it."

The Man of Colors set down the knife. He climbed onto the table over Gram.

"And now, show me your color!"

The man pushed his fingers into Gram's mouth and began to pull at his cheeks. He lifted his hands, clutching light like gossamer silk with a pearlescent hue. The man pulled and pulled, as if he were ripping the hide from an animal, until he stood above Gram, holding the length of cloth over his arms in reverence.

"It is beautiful, Gram. I've never seen a color like it before."

It existed. Was it once Gram?

"Do you not see? Are you not proud of what you've made?"

It saw nothing.

The man's smile faded.

"But it is not hers."

It did nothing. Everything went black.

About The Author:

W.P. Walsh writes speculative fiction from Long Island, New York. A railroad conductor by trade, he's drawn to characters that history and heroism often overlook. He also has a corgi named Finn.

A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH

By: Gina Easton

Trevor waited in the dark outside the door to his father's dental surgery. The door that connected the family dwelling to the office was always locked after his father finished work for the day, but Trevor knew where the key was kept in his dad's study. It was past midnight, and all was quiet except for his father's gentle snoring from the master bedroom above.

Soundlessly, smoothly, Trevor slid the key into the lock and opened the door. From habit, he knew where the plastic disposal bin was kept, and he walked over to it, the light from his flashlight leading the way. He opened the plastic lid and peered inside the bin. The beam of light allowed him to view his prize. His eyes lit up in gleeful avarice at the sight of the teeth lying inside. Teeth that had been extracted for any number of reasons, all given up by their owners in the last couple of days.

Trevor reached in with his latex-gloved hands and sifted through the assortment, looking for the teeth that were least damaged. He chose three, wrapped them in a cloth, and quickly pocketed them. Then he replaced the lid and left the surgery as silently as he'd entered.

Upstairs in his bed, Trevor pulled the cloth out of his pocket and unfolded it. Using the flashlight, he examined his specimens with a critical eye. He grinned as he selected one and placed the others, still wrapped in the cloth, into his bedside drawer. At almost nine years old, he'd finished shedding his "baby" teeth, but that hadn't stopped him from figuring out a way to cash in with the tooth fairy. While most kids his age had given up the practice when their permanent teeth arrived, figuring their parents would object to continuing to finance a tradition they'd literally outgrown, Trevor happily, and somewhat smugly, kept up the pretense.

You see, Trevor knew something the other kids did not.

The tooth fairy was real.

The day of his sixth birthday, he shed his first tooth. He proudly displayed the bloody little kernel, nestled in his palm, to both his parents. Later that day, his father sat him down. His expression was serious as he said, "Now, son, I want you to listen carefully. When the tooth fairy comes tonight, should you awaken, you mustn't, under any circumstances, look at her."

Trevor screwed up his face in puzzlement. "Why mustn't I see her, Daddy?"

"She is a magical being, son, and humans should not look upon her. It could...change...you. And not in a good way." His father sighed. "I know it's not easy to understand, Trevor. But the world of magic has its own rules, different from those of humans. That's all you need to know. So, promise me." He regarded Trevor sternly.

Trevor nodded, despite his confusion. "I promise, Daddy."

That night, Trevor had difficulty falling asleep. His first baby tooth lay nestled underneath his pillow, awaiting the fairy's arrival. His thoughts focused on the shiny silver dollar and what it might buy him. Finally, he drifted off, his mind awash with the promise of new treasures to be acquired once all his baby teeth were gone. When he awoke suddenly, it was to utter darkness and an eerie silence.

Despite the pitch darkness in his room, he was aware of a presence besides his own. It was strange, unfathomable, sheathed in impenetrable layers of mystery. Dread-ridden, petrified, sure it wasn't the fairy but the boogeyman finally coming to get him, he lay still, limbs paralyzed by terror. He squeezed his eyes tightly closed, willing the monster to change its mind, to decide that some other little boy would make a better dinner than he.

But when he sensed the figure hovering over him, staring down, he could stand it no longer. His eyes flew open, and his mouth widened to scream loud and long for his

daddy. A soft hand gently covered his mouth, and a soothing, lullaby-like voice whispered, "Shh, little one. Everything is fine. Just go back to sleep now." Something very much like magic gold dust drifted over him (at least, he imagined it was what magic gold dust *would feel* like). As the dust tickled his face, a warm tingling sensation came over him, a comforting blanket of solace and safety. It reminded him of when his mother wrapped him in the big fluffy towel after his bath and hugged him close to her bosom. With a contented sigh, he snuggled into his bedclothes and drifted off to pleasant dreams.

When he woke in the morning, Trevor remembered everything. He knew it hadn't been a dream. The tooth fairy was real, and she'd been in his room last night. Quickly, he groped under his pillow, his fingers locating the coin. Excited, he drew it out. The silver dollar glinted in the sunlight streaming through the bedroom curtains. He recalled the fairy's reassuring words, her nurturing manner, and smiled.

Then he frowned, realizing he couldn't picture her face. A glimpsed outline of a face, but it had been too dark for him to see her features. Yet he knew from her lilting, dulcet tone that she must be very beautiful, as all fairies were. He vowed then and there that the next time he left a tooth beneath his pillow, he would make sure to leave his nightlight on. And the tooth fairy's visits would remain his secret alone. He knew his father would be angry to learn that his son had broken his promise.

To his chagrin, despite his hopes, he was never awakened again by the fairy's arrival. He tried every trick he could think of to stay awake, but sleep always claimed him. Yet she continued to leave the shiny coins under his pillow. Inevitably, one by one, his baby teeth were replaced by their permanent usurpers. However, Trevor wasn't about to relinquish this opportunity to keep raking in the cash. His weekly allowance, plus the coins from the tooth fairy, permitted him to save up for the things his six-, seven-, and eight-year-old selves desired.

Now, as Trevor sat on his bed in the darkness, his smile turned to a smirk. With luck, he could maintain the charade for another few years. As long as he kept

placing teeth under his pillow, the tooth fairy would be obliged to take them in return for the coins. So what if he was almost nine? The tooth fairy didn't know that. She was just a dumb fairy.

In the corner, hidden in shadow, the creature observed the child as he slipped his hand underneath the pillow. The fairy had been aware for some time that the boy was a cheat. She recognized that the teeth no longer came from him. Although he tried to give her the best ones, she could sense their undesirable quality. She *smelled* the disease that ravaged them, or the fractures and cracks that marred their aspects. No longer blessed by the pure whiteness and vitality of youth and innocence, these teeth were yellowed and stained and old. She abhorred their foulness.

It sickened her that she was obliged to handle them, to accept them in place of the young pearls she so dearly coveted. Nevertheless, she had no choice in the matter. As long as the little cheat continued to put the offerings under his pillow, she was compelled to retrieve them, no matter how despicable the task, how odious the specimens.

She watched the boy as he settled under the sheets, sensing his insatiable greed. And the terrible truth hit her. This child would never stop his consuming selfishness. Greed would continue to fuel his behavior, warping the shape of the man he would become, the spiteful meanness that would grip him, the obsessive yearning to hoard for himself, even if it meant depriving others of their needs.

The fairy's wings drooped in sorrow. She had lived a long time by human standards and had witnessed both decent and appalling behavior from the children she visited. This boy had seen her once, when he was still innocent, uncorrupted by the avarice that now festered within him. It was time to act. The child had been given enough opportunity to correct his behavior. She had to free herself from this insufferable burden.

The boy thought her to be the commonly depicted being of fairy tales, with nacre-tinted gossamer wings and ethereal beauty. Yet her wings were leathery in texture, ashy gray in color; her skin was mottled and scaly. While she could present a pleasing

countenance when she desired, it was merely a mask in deference to human sensibilities. There would be traumatic consequences should a child accidentally awaken during one of her visits and see her true visage.

The creature waited patiently until the boy was in a deep sleep. Then she soundlessly crept from the shadows to stare down at the sleeping form. So angelic and peaceful-looking. But that, too, was a ruse. A small sigh escaped her. It was a pity that yet another child must pay for his transgressions.

The fairy bent down over the boy. Her mouth began a slow opening, growing ever wider without jaw hinges to impede its movement. In the full moonlight, her teeth were visible. Too many teeth to count, cruelly white and blade-sharp, they hung like stalactites from the cavern of her impossibly gaping mouth. The creature fell upon the child, her mouth covering his. Time to collect what was rightfully hers.

The next morning, Trevor's father leaped out of bed when he heard his wife scream. The sound terrified him with its fear and anguish. As he rushed to his son's room, a profound dread gripped him. His wife continued to scream, as though she would not, could not stop the sound escaping her.

He careened into the room. His wife stood at the foot of Trevor's bed, blocking his view, her whole body violently trembling.

"Geraldine," he whispered hoarsely. He came up behind her, gently resting his hands on her quaking shoulders. He peered over her at the bed.

He gasped. A mangled sob of horror erupted from his throat.

Trevor lay in his blood-soaked sheets. The man ran to the bed, whipping away the bedclothes. His son's pajamas were unsoiled by blood, his body uninjured. He forced himself to look at Trevor's face. The upper part was intact. His eyes were closed, his brow smooth and untroubled, as though death had peacefully claimed him while he slept. But below that...

Where the lower half of his face should have been, devastation and ruin. A gaping mess of blood and gore, mouth and chin obliterated. Flesh and muscle stripped away,

to reveal the stark whiteness of jawbone. The father sobbed again as confusion took hold of his senses. The jawbone was exposed, but...the teeth were missing. His gaze was riveted to the empty space. All Trevor's teeth had been savagely wrenched from the bone by their roots.

In horrified realization, the man sank to the floor. "How could she do this?" he wailed. He raised his head, blinded by the tears streaming from his eyes. "He promised me he wouldn't look. He *promised*."

A glint on the carpet by the bed snagged his attention. Mind awash with grief, he slowly bent down to the object and picked it up. Held it in his palm. Stared at it with an agonized gaze.

A silver dollar coin.

About The Author:

Gina Easton has had short stories and poetry featured in anthologies of horror, speculative and fantasy fiction. Her debut horror novel was published in 2020 and a paranormal romance in 2024. She lives in Toronto, Canada.



MTD 26

HUNGRY EYES

By: Nick Young

Ask any man at all in the whole of Terrebonne Parish, and he would say the same thing—no one knew the bayous of south Louisiana better than Armand Guidry. On rare nights when his savvy would be foolishly challenged after the Jax beer and Canadian Club had flowed for hours at Thibodoux's in Dulac, Armand would invariably sweep his winnings off the bar, a smile barely curling his lips, and buy a round for the house to the raucous cheers of the shrimpers and crabbers who made the bar their second home. As much as Armand Guidry was held in awe for his encyclopedic knowledge, he was also universally regarded as *un sacre bon gars*—a really great guy. So when he disappeared without a trace in the late summer of 1959, it caused the kind of shock and disbelief from one end of the parish to the other that the locals talk about to this day.

For Armand Guidry, there was no life beyond the bayous. A world, yes, but *life*—the blood and marrow of it—that was in the marshes and swamps and the innumerable unnamed waterways that snaked their way south to the Gulf.

Armand was born in 1923 into a devout Catholic family of eight children—two older brothers and five sisters, his junior—with deep Cajun roots in Terrebonne Parish. His grandfather, Hervé, often spoke proudly of the Guidry lineage stretching back to the early Acadian settlements in the latter half of the 1700s. And with the rare exception of an uncle who migrated to New Orleans and became a jazz musician, the Guidrys stayed. They made their livelihood as most others—from the waters. Some men earned decent money fishing for speckled trout, black drum, and catfish. Others lured blue crabs by baiting and setting dozens of pots along stretches of Bayou Dularge. The Guidrys were shrimpers, using mostly small boats inshore, though there were a few in the clan who ran bigger craft in the Gulf. All were after *les grosses blanche*—the

big whites—or the jumbo browns that fetched the best prices when the catches were sold to processors in Houma, bound thereafter for stores and the tables of fine restaurants in New Orleans and as far north as Chicago.

The horizon was a smear of indigo and dull orange as the sun sank and the clouds from the heavy evening squall moved slowly east. The rain had not cooled the countryside but only made the air heavier, more oppressive as Armand Guidry pushed his pirogue away from the dock on Bayou Bonne Chance the night of August 29, 1959. The weather bothered him not in the least. The heat, the humidity, were facts of daily life, and he wasn't about to let pass a free Saturday night. With scant moonlight, he could count on the best fishing for crappie and largemouth bass. And because he might spot a raccoon or nutria worth keeping, or to ward off a mean-tempered alligator, he packed, along with his fishing gear, kerosene lantern, and small cooler of beer, a Marlin .22 rifle his father had given him when he began hunting on his own in his early teens.

By the time Armand had graduated from high school, the war was on, but he didn't wait for the Army to come calling. Instead, with the blessing of his father, who looked upon the Navy as the only fitting service for a Guidry, he enlisted and was deployed aboard the *USS Yorktown*, where he was assigned as a gunner's mate. Wounded in 1942 during the Battle of Midway, he was shipped back to the States with a Purple Heart, a healing left arm, and Uncle Sam's thanks. He recuperated quickly and joined his father shrimping during the warm weather and trapping river otter and muskrat in winter. Along the way, he romanced Marie Louise Gachaux, a pretty Houma waitress, for most of a year before he proposed. In short order, they were expecting their first child, and with a

hungry mouth to feed on the way, at the urging of several friends, he landed work as a roughneck on one of Shell Oil's new gulf rigs.

Armand paused, guiding the pirogue slowly through the duckweed and marsh algae, retrieved his hurricane lantern, lifted the globe and struck a match to the wick, adjusting the flame until it threw a pool of light on the water ahead. In truth, those waters were so well known to him that he needed little illumination beyond that cast by the half-moon through breaks in the canopy of cypress. After lazily poling for the better part of half an hour, he reached a narrowing of the waterway. A short distance ahead, where the channel bent gently to the west, he would stop and begin fishing in earnest.

He had spent countless nights out in these waters; his ears keen to the sigh of the breeze when it stirred the drapery of Spanish moss. And he was attuned as well to the ever-present chorus of the creatures that plied the sluggish water, nosed through the choking undergrowth, and those who made the oppressive air vibrate with their rasping. And he learned an important lesson early on. As a boy on trips with his father, he was taught to keep to the middle of the channel, well away from the reflected eyes that glowed red in the lantern light where the alligators lurked in the shallower water.

He left off poling long enough to dig for a cigarette from the pack in the pocket of his work shirt. Striking a match with his thumbnail, he lit the smoke, drawing a deep lungful. It was moments like these when he wished he could convey to Marie Louise the deep sense of peace, of *belonging* that settled over him. But often, chafing at the hard life the bayou demanded, when flipping through the pages of a magazine, she would come upon a picture of mountains or rolling prairie and talk wistfully of life far away from the marshes. He kept silent, allowing her to

vent her frustration, knowing these flashes of discontent would pass.

Overhead, the hoot of a barred owl broke through the insistent choir of cicadas and frogs. To Armand's left, came a snort and squeal as a feral hog crashed through the undergrowth. At that moment, to his right, the air stirred suddenly, causing the Spanish moss to shudder in the dim moonlight. He squinted in the direction of the disturbance and took up the lantern, holding it at arm's length toward where the rustling continued. As the arc of light fell upon the spot, something happened that Armand had never experienced before in all his years in the marshes. The ever-present nocturnal thrum fell away to a whisper, a burst of wind rose and parted the curtain of moss to reveal the opening to a channel not much wider than the pirogue. Setting the lantern back on the thwart, Armand flicked the butt of his cigarette out into the gloom where it died silently in the murky water. He planted the pole and turned the boat in the direction of the opening. After traveling that stretch of bayou more times than he could count, he believed he knew every twist, every turn, every tributary, yet he could not account for this one. Poling carefully, he maneuvered the pirogue into the narrow channel and soon became aware that the air was heavier, more cloying. The familiar nocturnal sounds were there but changed in pitch as if slowed down by half. And there was something more, something different, a *sense* that he could not put into words but which was nonetheless very real. As he continued, the channel widened slightly, but he found the going more difficult, the water viscous and fetid.

How could I have not known about this? C'est fou! Crazy.

The minutes passed, and he traveled on, periodically lifting the lantern to get his bearings and survey what little he could see of the landscape in the umbra, deepened by the thicker canopy of cypress. The boat moved slowly, the poling more

difficult. Presently, he became aware that there were eyes following him. These were not the red eyes of the ever-present alligators, but eyes that reflected an amber glow, like none he had seen before. And these eyes were not upon the water but were marking his passage from among the swamp privet and sedges that choked the channel banks. At the same moment, a very faint sound caught his ear. As he strained to listen through the muted chorus of the night's creatures, he was certain he was hearing the whispering of human voices, but their utterances were too indistinct for him to understand.

Now, Armand was not a man given to superstition. To be sure, he had grown up listening to all the tales told around the fish campfires after the sun set—*Le Rougarou*, a man with the wolf's head who stalked the swamps; the evil witches who lived alone in the bayous and put black curses on those who crossed their path. But as he floated deeper into the swamp, more convinced with each stroke of his pole that he was being watched, he was reminded of another story that frightened children—that of *Les Yeux Affamés*. As the legend went, these Hungry Eyes belonged to a race that in the dim mists of antiquity had been completely cut off from civilization, dwelling in the most remote region of the bayous, ready to lure the wayward to their doom. This had made a deep impression on five-year-old Armand sitting at the knee of the crone Boyeaux, staring wide-eyed as she croaked a tale of horror, her breath hot and sour on his face. So vivid was it that the boy awoke from his sleep shuddering and crying out for his mother in the nights that followed.

Though he could not see it, his ears detected movement on the bank and more whispering, still unintelligible to him. He pulled a bandana from the pocket of his jeans, and as he mopped the sweat from his forehead and face, he felt a shift in the channel's current, picking up strength and pulling the boat toward the near bank on his left. This startled Armand, who jammed

the pole into the muck and tried to force the pirogue in the other direction. But he could feel it wasn't working, and in short order, the nose of the boat slid through the thick duckweed and struck the bank with enough force to topple the lantern into the water. This left Armand nearly blind. There was so little moonlight filtering through the trees that he could barely see his hand in front of his face. But he did see the *eyes*, more of them, converging on him. And there was excited babble in that strange tongue he had never heard before—neither Cajun nor Creole but a jumble that made no sense to him.

"Mo ka un loup entendu on fê comme!"

"J'ai bagay!"

On his guard, Armand dropped the pole and turned to reach for his rifle—

"Mo ka vit! Faim! Faim un loup!"

—when he felt powerful hands around his neck, arms, and torso, dragging him from the boat.

"Pa ka ti nou!"

"Me bato! Brume gason!"

He came to slowly, struggling like a swimmer through intense fatigue and a vertiginous fog that enveloped his mind.

Dieu, where am I?

As his head cleared, he realized that he was on his back, naked, lying sweat-soaked on the marshy ground beneath an outcropping of giant elephant ears. Between the leaves which hung deathly still, he could make out flickering orange light, leaping and dancing against the inky night, accompanied by otherworldly chanting punctuated by bursts of riotous laughter. Armand felt himself tormented by dread made more unbearable by the stifling heat and swarms of large, hungry mosquitoes. There was little he could do to fight them off since he was bound at the wrists and ankles by vines that had been fashioned into a rough rope that dug into his skin. And he could not cry out, because his bandana,

salt-sour from his sweat, had been tied tightly around his mouth as a gag.

At length, he heard the hurried padding of footsteps as several figures burst through the overgrowth.

“S’il deux ma prends!”

He felt hands thrust under his shoulders.

“Da vingt voir! Da vingt voir!”

His feet were seized, and he was carried a short distance into a clearing ringed by thick vegetation and a scattering of ramshackle huts. Laid on his back, Armand was able to turn his head enough to make out what appeared to be a firepit fifteen to twenty feet away in the center of the clearing, with the remnants of logs burnt to a thick bed of red- and white-hot embers. And around their pulsating glow was a semi-circle of half-naked men, women, and a few children clad in little more than rags, raising their voices in a droning incantation while shuffling from one foot to another, edging forward and back, forward and back. Armand was astonished at their appearance, for they had a feral look—wild, matted hair, their pale bodies glistening with perspiration.

As he watched, the intensity of the chants increased—a call and response.

“Faim ont qui!”

“Quéqué chose!”

Finally, with a blood-curdling shriek, the chanting subsided to an insistent murmuring, and from the line, two men scampered toward Armand, using their knuckles on the ground in the fashion of gorillas to help propel them. When they reached him, one bent close to his face, and it was only then that he saw clearly for the first time that this was no man he had ever encountered. The head was misshapen, conical and devoid of all but a few strands of greasy hair that hung limply. Two large eyes bulged obscenely from their sockets above a nose flattened grotesquely on a countenance that shone fish-belly white. But to Armand what was most arresting and horrifying was the *mouth*, for it was round, and with pallid lips parted and jaws working spasmodically, revealed a ring of pointed, razor-like teeth such as possessed by the ravenous piranhas he had once watched in a movie house newsreel consume a calf that had fallen into a river in Amazonia. His mind raced, and his fear intensified as a stout pole was passed

through the ties at his hands and feet until he was bound securely to the staff. Lifting him from the ground, one of the creatures rasped in a loud voice,

“Gadé ça!”—to which the crowd shouted in unison,

“Mo faim!”—followed by another burst of maniacal laughter.

As he was carried closer to the fire pit, amid a fresh wave of feverish chanting, Armand’s terror rose to its peak, for his memory broke through the wall that he had built to shield him from the full horror of the crone Boyeaux’s tale that had fueled his nightmares all those years before. In the legend, it was not the *souls* of the unfortunate victims seized deep in the swamps that the hellish race of Hungry Eyes craved, but their very *bodies*, to be taken, placed upon a spit, roasted alive, and *devoured!*

About The Author:

Nick Young is a retired award-winning CBS News Correspondent. His writing has appeared in dozens of reviews, journals and anthologies. His first novel, "Deadline," was published in 2023. He can be found on Bluesky @youngnick.bsky.social. He lives outside Chicago.

THE NAMING WALK

By: James Garry

The Ordnance Survey map of 1888 called it Loch nan Eunan, the Loch of the Birds, though the name had lapsed from local usage long before digital topographic surveys began. On her screen, Isla watched the contour lines collapse into a featureless basin.

The peat had split. Where open water had stood within living memory, there was only a bed of cracked sphagnum, exposed boulder clay, and the blackened stumps of a submerged birch forest.

The hydrologists in Inverness blamed the summer drought and a suspected subterranean collapse in the underlying limestone. Isla unclipped her GPS receiver from her vest and logged the elevation.

Dry, the digital display read.

She walked the perimeter of the vanished shore. Along the eastern embankment, a herd of red deer had recently crossed—or tried to. Isla stopped, kneeling beside a cluster of fresh hoofprints pressed deep into the damp mud. Ten yards into the dry bed, the prints simply stopped. No turn marks, no signs of a struggle, no prints returning to the heather. Just four clear, deep depressions in the soil, followed by untouched moss.

She reached down to touch the rim of the last print. Though the sun was high and the afternoon air warm, the earth inside the depression was lined with a fine, hard crust of frost.

In the small archive room of the estate office, Isla turned the yellowed pages of the parish register. The ink was faded, the copperplate hand tight and hurried.

Most entries noted fish yields, turf rights, or disputes over grazing boundaries. Here, the minister's hand recorded something else.

1742, September 29. Paid Alasdair McRae for the Naming Walk. Three shillings.

Two pages later, an entry from a different hand, dated twenty years after:

1762, September 29. No payment made. Mr McRae absent. No naming undertaken this Michaelmas. God preserve the hill.

An estate notebook from 1804 added three unfamiliar Gaelic place-names for the same hollow. A shepherd's diary from 1840 recorded two variants. A margin on an uncatalogued sheep-dip map contained another.

None matched entirely.

By afternoon the next day, mist settled thick into the corrie, swallowing the ridge above.

Isla set up the launch pad for the drone at the edge of the basin. The rotors cut sharply through the air as the craft rose fifty feet, hovering over the dry loch bed.

She monitored the feed. The thermal imaging showed standard readings across the exposed peat until the display flickered with static.

Something moved across the basin—not on the surface but tracking beneath the buried birch roots. The thermal sensor picked up a narrow, sudden drop in temperature, a cold patch that absorbed the infrared entirely, drifting beneath the crust.

The feed went dark. The drone dropped straight into the heather twenty yards away.

In the silence, Isla heard a slow, heavy slosh—the sound of displaced water rising against a bank—echoing from the center of the dry bed.

The GPS on her hip beeped: 0.0% surface moisture.

On her way down the track, she met Hamish MacRae repairing a drystone dyke near the lower burn. The old crofter didn't look up, but his hands rested on a granite boulder as her boots crunched on the gravel.

"You've been up at the lochan," he said.

"The drone cut out," Isla said, wiping peat from her cheek. "The water didn't leak out, Hamish. The basin was emptied from below."

Hamish fitted a wedge stone into the gap.

"Water has a name," he said, his voice flat. "Shadow doesn't."

He picked up another stone, his gloved fingers rough against the granite.

"Best not forget either."

"The parish records mention your family," Isla said. "They mention a circuit."

Hamish turned back to the wall, his posture rigid. "You'd do best to stay off the hill after the sun drops."

She didn't stay off the hill.

At dusk, Isla stood on the ridge, looking down into the basin. The air was calm, yet across the valley floor, the rushes began to change. A line of white frost moved across the vegetation—uptrack, against the slope, toward the high pastures.

Nothing visible moved over the ground. Only the frost following, marking a path through the heather that crossed the slope far faster than the setting sun.

Isla pulled her notebook from her pack. She stepped toward the edge of the basin and spoke the names she had gathered from the margins and diaries.

"Loch nan Eunan."

The frost on the slope stopped advancing.

"Loch Mhòr. Loch na Fèith."

Silence. The frost remained frozen on the rushes, halfway up the ridge.

She looked down at her notes, then at the parish register copy. The register listed three names; the sheep-dip map gave four; the shepherd's diary recorded others. No single page held the full circuit. It hadn't lived in books.

Behind her, gravel crunched.

Hamish stood in the heather a few paces away in a worn wax jacket, hands in his pockets. He didn't look at her, his eyes fixed on the line of white grass on the hill.

He began to speak.

His voice was unhurried, carrying the cadence of something recited until the lips remembered it without the mind's help. Gaelic words—dense and low—rolled out into the cold air.

On the valley floor, the ground answered with a subterranean sigh. Black water bled upward through the fissures in the soil, rising silently, covering the birch stumps, submerging the cracked moss inch by inch.

The line of frost on the hill dissolved. A sudden, rapid dimming slipped down the slope, crossing the heather toward the rising basin. It met the black water without a sound, slipping beneath the surface like ink dropped into a well.

The water rose until the basin was full, settling into a sheet that reflected the first stars.

Hamish stopped speaking. He stood for a moment, turned, and began the walk back down the track, his boots steady on the stone. He didn't look back.

Isla remained on the ridge, watching the loch until the dark swallowed the valley. Deep beneath the center, far below the starlight, something shifted once and became still again.

She listened until she could no longer hear Hamish's boots on the track.

About The Author:

James Garry is a Scottish folklorist and writer based near Edinburgh, working on Scottish ghostlore and paranormal folklore.

LOCKED IN

By: Toni Nicolino

The alternating-pressure mattress sighed as air redistributed beneath Lillian's paralyzed limbs. Every four minutes, the hospital bed shifted her inert flesh, preventing ruddy, leaking bedsores from worsening along her backside. The mechanical *hush* barely disguised the intruder's furtive whisper, and her heart twitched.

It was in the room.

A shadow roiled just beyond her line of sight—a quiver of black and gray. Lillian strained her eyes to the left. The blur had just dissipated, but *it* was here. She felt the damp, musky air and detected an earthy, sulfurous aroma. Close—likely crouched in the corner. Daylight kept it at bay. Soon enough, darkness would fall, and it would rouse and stretch, a nocturnal animal shaken from slumber.

It would come for her again.

The stroke had bought her four extra weeks of life—wordless, motionless, sure—but *life* nonetheless. Breath and sight and the sound of her daughter's voice. She was safe in a hospital, far, far away from here.

Until now.

"You good, Mom?" Tess leaned over her, watching Lillian's fingers flex and tremble, boneless worms poking out from the dirt. "Do you need to tell me something?"

Lillian's brain throbbed. She could almost hear it laboring between her ears, an engine coughing, as she aimed every ounce of mental energy at the only appendages she'd learned to control over the last four weeks: two fingers in her left hand. She had to warn her daughter and get her out of this house before the sun went down. She'd tried in the rehab center, but using a communication board was a tedious, infuriating task. Words and letters bled, pooling in her brain, a stagnant stew of meaningless text. She tired easily; simple sentences took hours—*Home no go. Scared it come. Spirit thing house*—but without the nuances of speech to fill in the blanks, communication was subjective and meaningless.

And so, here they were.

Tess lifted the alphabet board from the bedside table. The oversized block letters made Lillian feel simple and incompetent. She had been an editor for a prominent publishing house: ambitious, discerning, eloquent. A high-effort, high-output dynamo who never missed a soccer game or movie night with her child. She'd spent decades *doing it all*, only to be reduced to shift eyes and two trembling digits.

Tess positioned the marker between Lillian's fingers. It slipped from her feeble grasp and hit the mattress, the crinkle of waterproof bedding a deafening reminder that Lillian couldn't even relieve herself at her own will. Blinking would be faster—once for *yes*, twice for *no*, once for *left*, twice for *right*—but she'd grown to hate it. The frantic flutter of eyelids caused a sharp pain to burrow in the soft matter between her ears.

Tess patiently tried again, handling her mother like a porcelain doll. As Lillian took in a sharp, frustrated breath, a familiar scent invaded her nostrils, wet and dank and moldy. The spirit was closer now. The floorboards groaned as it dragged itself around the perimeter of the room; she pictured its belly pressed against the hardwood, limbs shifting in demented, ghastly spasms. Long, jagged fingernails packed with spoiled flesh. It would be smiling, teeth bared, a shark tracking fresh blood.

This time, Lillian held the marker between her fingers; she was determined to get Tess out of here. She held steady just long enough to mark the letter R.

"R," Tess cooed. "Amazing work, Mom."

Lillian bristled at the high-pitched, exaggerated tone in her daughter's voice. The doctor called it partial locked-in syndrome: physical paralysis despite full consciousness and normal brain activity. She was still Lillian on the inside, yet something about being bedridden brought out everyone's best baby talk. For the first time, she considered death a blessing. Anything but this.

But that wasn't what *it* wanted.

It wanted to possess her. Her first night in the new house, as soon as the sun slipped below the horizon, it came for her. A pulsing, thrashing scribble. A human husk but skittery like an insect. It could scale walls and cling to the ceiling like a rabid bat. It was everything and nothing, alive but amorphous. It forced its way into Lillian's mouth and up her nose, liquified and herbaceous, like fresh Bloody Mary mix.

She'd fought back—biting, clawing—the underdog of a caged death-match. It was the first night of her new life, *goddammit*. She hadn't left one oppressive, thoughtless leech just to succumb to another. Plus, her daughter had been en route. Lillian wasn't going to let that *thing* anywhere near Tess. Tess was everything: her only child and her best friend. Lillian would kill for Tess—or be killed.

But she hadn't stopped it at all. Instead, she'd staved it off, fled, and suffered a massive stroke thirty feet down the road. And after four weeks of intense rehabilitation, she'd ended up

right
back
here.

Focus. The next letter was close, just the slightest bend in the knuckle... a tiny mark.

U

Tess repeated the letters back to her.

One more. One more, and she hoped her girl—her fierce, intelligent child—would heed her warning.

The spirit was getting restless. A flicker of movement overhead. She strained to look upward as far as her muscles would allow, but it lingered just out of sight. It was tucked away on the ceiling now, a shadow splattered upon the wooden planks.

Lillian's fingers trembled as she readied herself for one final effort.

The doorbell sounded then, a musical, lilting burst that caused her fingers to shudder and the marker to fall. An unnatural, candy-coated giggle floated down from the rafters.

"One sec, Mom," Tess said. She plucked the marker from the folds of the blanket and laid it and the letterboard on the side table. "That's Dad."

Just what she needed: Jack's gleeful presence, dripping with vindication and

pity. He thought he'd won. She left him and was promptly punished. Now, when he saw her, he thrust out his grotesque belly, preening, overcome by his own superiority and good karma.

Voices carried from the entryway. Tess told her father that full-time care would arrive in the morning. She'd taken care of everything. Lillian closed her eyes and prayed that her daughter wouldn't sub in for her, wouldn't be forced to care for her paralyzed mother *and* her helpless father for the rest of her life. Tess was only twenty-six—Lillian didn't want that for her girl.

She wanted her to run.

"Hey, Lil." Jack leaned over her, whispering into her mouth. His breath carried the aroma of stale cigarettes with a tangy, unpleasant note that reminded her vaguely of vagina. "Comfortable? Blink once for yes."

He chuckled and straightened up, and Lillian suspected he'd been practicing that joke, repeating it to himself in the car. She wondered if the spirit could read her mind. If it could, *kill him, please. You can kill me too but kill him first.*

"I'm starving," Jack said to Tess. "Should we make dinner?"

The sharp tapping of overgrown toenails against the wall, a quiver as it tiptoed—quick and squiggly like a centipede—down the wall. The bed jittered beneath Lillian. The heat of feverish limbs amassed beneath the mattress as it crouched under the bed.

Tess and Jack hustled into the kitchen. Lillian matched sound with action: the *shhhhhh* of porcelain sliding against porcelain. The *whack* of a cabinet, the metallic *clang* of her oversized pot greeting the stove. The *click click click* of the gas burner. Tess had forgotten about Lillian's message, and now the sun hovered low on the horizon. Her left foot ached; the sensation clamped down on her atrophied toes like teeth on flesh. Muscle spasms wracked her thighs, a thousand tiny papercuts beneath her flesh. She could only lie there while the pain devoured her, wondering. If she let the spirit possess her, would she move again?

If so, she welcomed it.

Do you hear that? she thought, eyes blinking furiously. *I welcome you.*

She would rather be possessed than paralyzed.

The light in the room dimmed, the sun almost entirely obscured behind the thick trees of the surrounding forest. Beneath Lillian's motionless limbs, air hissed from one mesh cylinder to the next. The spirit quivered beneath her, growling, chawing—teeth grinding in a salivating mouth. The room darkened again, taking on an eggplant purple cast. Tess flicked on the light.

"So sorry, Mom," she said, returning to Lillian's side. "I forgot to let you finish."

She gathered the letterboard and positioned Lillian's fingers around the marker.

One more letter. One more push.

The sun dipped, vanished from view.

Lillian strained, her left fingers slick with the effort. She nicked the letter and dropped the marker, exhausted.

RUN

Tess's eyes narrowed, brows furrowed. Her gaze met Lillian's.

"Run?"

And then she was gone, feet swept out from under her. A tiny squeak, followed by the sickening *thwack* of her skull meeting the hardwood. Lillian's muscles flexed and writhed beneath her skin. A scream gurgled in her throat, caught behind her tongue, unable to escape.

She finally understood.

It didn't want Lillian anymore.

It didn't want to possess a limp, useless vessel.

It would take Tess.

On the other side of the room, a clang—water spattering, followed by a deafening sizzle. Jack's voice rang out, "*—the fuck!*"

The stomp of feet, rubber soles flapping.

Lillian's mouth twitched. The lamp cast a monstrous, inhuman shadow onto the smooth, white ceiling: arms and legs, heads and tentacles and mouths.

A sudden, violent gasp for breath—Tess. A phlegmy, guttural grunt—Jack. Then the bed jerked, the *squeak squeak* of wheels as Lillian drifted helplessly across the room. She could see a bit of the fray now: Jack twisted, his toes and the back of his head pointed in the same direction.

"Holy fu—" The words died on his tongue, and then he was airborne. A patch of hair and skin had been torn from his scalp. Bone glistened beneath a pebbly mess of blood and meat. Lillian blinked furiously, her

pointer finger stiff, petrified. Jack's limp body collided with the wall, a thunderous crash, the tinkle of glass.

Tess's cries were cut short by a sickening *squelch*. A spate of warm droplets peppered Lillian's forehead, nose, and chin. She breathed it in, sniffing the gore up her nostrils, unaware of how fast her breath was coming and going, heart thudding. Warmth spread beneath her thighs as her bladder failed. She wanted to scream, and then, miraculously, the sound emerged. It was inhuman, wretched: the final, desperate bleat of a gazelle disemboweled by a predator.

But not from her lips. Her body was still painfully, indignantly frozen.

The lights flickered and died.

It was so quiet, she could hear the swoosh of her eyelashes *blink blink blinking* in the dark. The mattress hissed, the air tunneling out and back, right on schedule.

The bed dipped at her side with a crinkle of plastic. She pictured a hand in the dark, grasping for leverage.

Please let her be okay oh God Tess I tried to warn you but I couldn't I'm so sorry I—

A gasp. Lillian strained, her insides alive, a hive of frantic wings and stingers. Warm breath in her ear. A mass crouched beside her, just beyond the perimeter of her view. A ripple of fear scuttled down her spine.

Let it be Tess oh God let it be Tess.

The lights burst back on. The surrounding trees pressed against the windows, their leaves an unnatural, fluorescent green.

Tess's voice, low but unmistakably hers. Lillian's eyes rolled back. Relief flooded her system.

It was short-lived.

"You shouldn't have resisted," Tess whispered. "But I'm glad you did. This body is so much better."

About The Author:

Toni Nicolino's short fiction has appeared in magazines, anthologies, and podcasts, including *Morpheus Tales*, *Last Girls' Club*, *Spooklights*, *High Strange Horror*, *The Creepy Podcast* and *Pseudopod*. She shares micro-horrors on TikTok and Instagram (@toniwritesinthedark) and lives in Manhattan with one teenage demon—er, daughter—and a cat who stares at the same corner for far too long.

THEY'LL NEVER FIND THE BODIES

By: C.E. Stern

The call of the loon echoed through the woods, bouncing off trunks of pine and cedar and birch. Weak morning light trickled down through the canopy. Woodsmoke was thick in the air, the campfire crackling and popping from within its circle of stone.

Meredith held a metal camp mug of coffee tightly, both hands wrapped around the green enamel coating in lieu of the handle. Her breath fogged, the cold air prickling at her lungs and nose.

She could smell the snow in the air, the portent of a storm.

"We need to head out soon," she said. "Want to get back before it starts really coming down."

"Sure, sure," said James, her boyfriend. "I know a shortcut. We'll be back in time for lunch. Promise."

She bit back the words that she wanted to say. She wouldn't poke fun at his shortcuts. She wouldn't. This was supposed to be a fun camping trip. And it had been, for the most part. They'd been successful in fishing, even if James had grouched about not catching as much as she had. The pair had hiked up to a vantage point, surveying the mountain and the river from high above, only for James to get the runs and spend the evening doubled over behind a bush. But grumpy attitudes and some bowel problems aside, the last few days were some of the best times the two had shared from the last few months. The last thing she wanted was to get into an argument right at the end and spoil the memories of the weekend.

Okay, maybe getting stranded out here in a blizzard was the last thing she wanted, but an argument was a close second. She would bite her tongue, unless it looked like things were going wrong. That would be okay, right?

Besides, it shouldn't really have been likely to snow. It was late spring, the beginning of what those in the Adirondacks called "black fly season." If it snowed at this time of the year, it was unlikely to be

heavy. Still, the weather in the mountains could be unpredictable, and they were far from civilization and without any sort of cell service. If they got stuck, they'd be there for a long time.

"I'll start packing," she said instead of voicing her concerns.

She pushed herself to her feet, mindful of the mug in her hands. The ground was covered in a plush carpet of pine needles that had gone red and brown and half-rotted, giving the ground a springiness that felt good against the soles of feet that had hiked for miles the day before.

"We've got time. Drink your coffee first. You know how you get."

She clamped her teeth together, fighting the urge to spit words at him. *Just wait until we're back home. Then you can say what you want to. Wouldn't want him to throw a fit and leave me out here,* she thought.

She didn't think he actually would. But she'd heard the news reports about it happening a little earlier in the season, with another couple who had gone in, and only the husband had come back. Police and the search teams still hadn't found that woman's body.

She ignored him, something she had become well-accustomed to doing, and set to work breaking down their tent. James remained by the fire, nursing his own coffee.

By the time their campsite was packed and cleaned, Meredith was seething. James had been anything but helpful, leaving her to do all of the work, while he threw out snide comments about how she had folded the tent or sleeping bags. Which, really, he wasn't entitled to say jack about since he didn't fold his own laundry, much less the tent they had been sleeping in for the last two days. She had briefly contemplated stabbing him with one of the tent stakes but had shoved the impulse aside in favor of glowering at him.

Once they were packed and loaded, James set off without waiting to see if she was ready, leaving her to scamper after him, nearly tripping over a rock, as she adjusted the straps of her pack.

"We'll need to head due north for a few miles, then take a trail down along the river," James said. "From there, it'll be a short jaunt to the parking lot. Easy."

Meredith frowned at his back. Of course, he wasn't asking. He was ordering. Never mind that she knew these woods, having grown up hiking and camping in them. While he was just some flatlander from the city, playing at being a mountaineer. But fine. As it was ordered, so shall it be.

By noon they had not reached the river. Nor by three o'clock, when the snow had started falling. Nor had they reached it by five, when the snow was already ankle-deep. By six it had stopped snowing, and James had given up with all the bluster of one who refused to admit their fault. He had wandered off into the surrounding tree line while Meredith had been left to establish camp.

She swore as she drove the tent spike into the cold ground. With each swing of the mallet, she imagined it was James's head she was beating instead of the spike. Her jeans were soaked through at the knees, her fingers were going numb, and she had snot running down her face. She sniffled, only for the snot to wad in her throat and make her gag. She spit on the ground, picturing what James's face would look like if she had spat it at him.

And where was he? It had been long enough for him to wander off to sulk, get cold, and berate her for not having the fire going, and yet, she had heard nothing.

"James?" she called. Her voice echoed in the silent, still air, the snow blanketing everything. The evening sun was setting, casting the surrounding trees in deep shadows that slanted across snow which had turned orange and red. "James, are you there?"

A scream answered her.

Meredith jumped to her feet, heart galloping in her chest, head on a swivel, eyes searching the shadowed woods. But

there was nothing, no movement, no sound. Nothing.

"James?" she repeated, this time a ragged whisper.

Her blood pounded in her chest, her temples, her fingertips, her thighs. Her hands curled into fists, tightening around the mallet still in her grip. She wanted to run. But where? She had no idea where the sound had come from, the scream echoing and bouncing until it seemed like it had come from every direction. She took a hesitant step back, her boot making a soft sound in the snow. She could feel heat at her back.

But there wasn't a fire. The wood had been too wet to light.

Fear clogged her airways, freezing her muscles. Ice bolted down her spine.

She needed to turn, to look, to see what was behind her. She needed to run away, forget James, and get as far away as she could.

"Meredith! Run!" James screamed.

She caught the faint outline of his silhouette through the trees as he ran full pelt toward the camp. But she couldn't move. That *thing*, whatever it was, was still behind her.

"Move!"

All of a sudden she found herself moving, running faster than she ever had in her life. Every wilderness survival class where they had warned her to never run from a predator was forgotten as she fled the campsite.

At first, there were no sounds behind her, only those of her and James sprinting through the snowy forest, feet pounding, breath heaving. But then she heard it. Heard the strange sounds coming as *it*, whatever *it* was, gained on them.

Her mind was blank with panic, not thinking about directions or strategy, thinking only *away* and *faster*.

"What the fuck is that thing?" James panted.

He was starting to lag, his steps clumsier. He sounded exhausted. Unconsciously, she slowed her pace slightly to match his.

"What happened—" Meredith started to ask. But she was no longer moving. She had hit the ground, landing on her butt in the snow. She stared dumbly at James, her mind refusing to process what had just happened, that he had just *pushed* her while they were fleeing from *whatever the hell was chasing them*.

"Why...?" She started again, only to remember the old adage about not needing to be the fastest person in your group when running away from something, only that you needed to be faster than the slowest.

"It's not going to be me," was all he said.

The sounds of the creature's pursuit were growing louder, closer. Meredith couldn't tell what it was, sometimes the slithering of a snake, sometimes the heavy gait of a bear, sometimes the delicate tread of a deer.

Her head turned slowly toward it, eyes wide and pupils blown in panic. But the shadowy figure that emerged from the trees wasn't anything she could recognize. It was a massive thing, easily taller than either she or James. Parts of it resembled different animals, with the antlers of a deer, feathers around where the head should be, the fuzzy outline of fur, but they were pieces that couldn't form a coherent creature. The whole of it was obscured by the burning reds and purples of twilight, by the slanting shadows of trunks and the swirling swaths of branches and leaves.

And then there were the glowing red eyes, the only part she could see clearly, as they bored into her, focused with a predator's intensity.

It stopped when it was about a dozen feet away from her, the movement of the antlers and eyes suggesting it had tilted its head to the side.

No, no, no, no. Fuck that. I am not going to die like this.

She shuffled about on the ground, bracing to push herself up, when her hand brushed against the shaft of the mallet. She had dropped it when she'd fallen, had unwittingly been running with it. Her hands curled around it.

It still hadn't moved, like it was waiting for something. It made a noise, a chittering, rumbling sound that sent the hair on her arms standing on end. The eyes blinked slowly.

The whole thing strangely reminded her of a cat she'd had as a child.

She rose, shakily, to her feet, never taking her eyes from the creature's form.

Still, it made no move. Her fingers flexed around the mallet's shaft as anger supplanted the fear that had frozen her. That fucker had meant to leave her to die. And she'd be damned if she'd let him get away with it.

"Let me live, and I'll get him for you," she said.

She couldn't say what possessed her to think that the creature would understand her, much less accept the bargain. Perhaps she'd finally snapped. The two of them stood there in silence, long enough for Meredith to think she'd really lost it and that she was going to be eaten at any second. But then the creature did another of those slow blinks, made a noise similar to a purr, and then seemed to melt back into the shadows from whence it had come.

Meredith exhaled slowly, adrenaline spreading through her veins anew. She had prey to hunt.

It hadn't taken her long to find James. She had grown up in a family that went hunting every season, and she'd been trained to track animals through all manner of terrain. Following the path of a panicking human through virgin snow was simple.

She found him collapsed against a birch tree, sweating and panting. He startled when he saw her, his body tensing.

"Meredith!" he nearly shouted before collecting himself enough to speak at a quieter volume. "I'm so glad you're okay. How did you get away from it?"

She kept her face carefully blank, even as her fingers tightened around the handle of the mallet.

"It didn't want me. Guess I didn't seem worth the trouble."

"Oh," James said dumbly. "That's good." He braced himself against the tree, and attempted to stand, only to collapse. He huffed before barking out, "Help me up, and we can go. We've got to get out of here before it shows up."

"Right, of course," she said.

She stepped closer, the mallet held at her side. It was dark enough that James couldn't see it against the color of her coat. And he didn't see it when she raised her arm and struck him with the mallet, connecting with the thin bone at his temple.

She felt the crack of his skull reverberate up her arm. James's eyes rolled back in his head, and he collapsed back against the birch.

She didn't stop with one. And she didn't stop with two. She didn't stop until his head was nothing more than a mess of red and white and pink against the snow.

Her part of the bargain done, she whistled, clean and sharp and clear. A moment later, she heard the strange cacophony of noises that heralded the creature's arrival. Its form melted from the shadows, those red eyes glowing.

She spread her arms wide and bowed to the creature, like a supplicant making an offering. The creature responded with a bow of its own, the antlers dipping, narrowly missing Meredith's body. When it resumed its full height, it made a chirping sound, like one she had heard owls make.

She stepped back slowly, moving away from the creature and from what remained of James. She watched as the creature descended upon the body, cloaking it in those shadows it wore like a veil. Only then did she turn her back on it and begin walking through the woods, trying to ignore the wet crunching noises behind her.

The sun had long since risen by the time Meredith found her way out of the woods. It was little more than dumb luck that she had picked the correct direction after getting so thoroughly turned around during the dark of the night, but once she had seen a break in the trees, she had pushed through. She was rewarded with an old farmhouse set in a clearing, a long, winding dirt driveway carving a path back into the woods.

She stumbled on legs numb with cold and exhaustion, making her way up the four steps to the porch and then to the front door. She rang the bell, shouting, "I need help!" just in case the resident had any notion to come outside with a twelve-gauge.

The door swung open a few moments later, revealing a young woman with brown hair still sleep-mussed, dressed in a blue bathrobe. The woman rubbed her eyes as she took in Meredith.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

Tears welled, the reality of her night finally crashing into her. Her breath heaved out, her lips trembling, before she broke down into tears. "Camping in the woods . . . Attacked . . . My boyfriend's dead."

The woman's eyes widened, and she pulled the door open, ushering Meredith inside.

"Christ! Come in, come in and get warm. You've gotta be freezing!" The woman directed her toward an overstuffed couch, fussing about blankets and tea and promising to turn the heat up. "I'm June," the woman, June, said. "Shit, I've gotta call the police, I guess." She turned to leave the room, presumably to grab a phone, before stopping in her tracks. "Are you hurt at all? Have you got frostbite? Do I need to call the EMTs?"

Despite it all, Meredith found herself smiling. "Probably best."

Within the hour, the police and medics had arrived. She told them it was a bear that had got James. It seemed the most believable thing to say. Besides, she knew they would never find the body.

About The Author:

C. E. Stern is the penname of Cate Csillag. Previously, her short stories have appeared in *Voyage YA by Uncharted* and *Ghostwatch Paranormal Zine*, with work forthcoming in Dead Fox Publishing's *Wichelen Anthology Vol. 2*. She can be found on Instagram @ c.e.stern_writes or cesternwrites.com.

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