

NIGHTMARE

HORROR & DARK FANTASY



ISSUE 30 | MARCH 2015

EDITED BY JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS

NIGHTMARE

M A G A Z I N E

NIGHTMARE

M A G A Z I N E

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Issue 30, March 2015

FROM THE EDITOR

[Editorial, March 2015](#)

FICTION

[Please, Momma](#)

Chesya Burke

[Featherweight](#)

Robert Shearman

[An Army of Angels](#)

Caspian Gray

[The Burned House](#)

Lynda E. Rucker

NOVEL EXCERPT

[*The Patchwork House*](#)

Richard Salter

NONFICTION

The H Word:
Zombies: They're Not Just for Breakfast Anymore
S.G. Browne

Artist Gallery
Robert Emerson

Artist Spotlight: Robert Emerson
Marina J. Lostetter

Interview: Helen Marshall
Kelly Link

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHTS

Chesya Burke
Robert Shearman
Caspian Gray
Lynda E. Rucker

MISCELLANY

Coming Attractions
Stay Connected
Subscriptions & Ebooks
About the Editors



© 2015 *Nightmare Magazine*

Robert Emerson

Ebook Design by John Joseph Adams

www.nightmare-magazine.com

FROM THE EDITOR

Editorial, March 2015

John Joseph Adams

Welcome to issue thirty of *Nightmare!*

Lightspeed's Queers Destroy Science Fiction! Kickstarter campaign has now concluded and we're happy to report that it was extremely successful; we asked for \$5,000 and got \$54,523 in return, which was 1090% of our funding goal. As a result of all that success, we unlocked several stretch goals, including additional special issues Queers Destroy Horror!, which will be published in October as a special issue of *Nightmare*, and Queers Destroy Fantasy!, which will publish in December as a special issue of *Fantasy Magazine*. Thanks again so much to everyone who supported the campaign, and thanks of course to our regular readers and subscribers! And, next year, we're planning to ask People of Color to destroy science fiction, so stay tuned for that!

• • • •

Awards season is officially upon us, with the first of the major awards announcing their lists of finalists for last year's work. *Nightmare* had two stories — “A Dweller in Amenty” by Genevieve Valentine and “Sleep Paralysis” by Dale Bailey — on the preliminary Stoker Awards ballot (and your humble editor was represented in the anthology category as

well, for *The End is Nigh*), but alas, none of them made the final ballot. Well, we can't get nominated for everything, I suppose! Congrats anyway to Dale and Genevieve, and to all of the finalists. You can find the full slate of what *did* make the final ballot at horror.org. The Stokers will be presented at the 25th annual World Horror Convention, held this year in Atlanta, Georgia, May 7–10.

In happier news, *Nightmare* was announced as the winner of the This is Horror Award for Magazine of the Year. It's quite an honor to be selected as Magazine of the Year, especially amongst such stiff competition! Thanks so much too to all of the writers and editors who work on *Nightmare* with me — without them, of course, it wouldn't exist. You'll find the rest of the winners and other finalists at thisishorror.co.uk.

In other awards news, we are pleased to announce that “We Are the Cloud” by Sam J. Miller (*Lightspeed*, September 2014) is a finalist for the Nebula Award for best novelette. Congrats to Sam and to all of the other Nebula nominees! That brings *Lightspeed's* lifetime Nebula nomination total to twelve since it launched in June 2010. You can find the full slate of nominees at sfwa.org/nebula-awards. The Nebulas will be presented at the 50th annual Nebula Awards Weekend, held this year in Chicago, Illinois, June 4–7.

And last but not least: the Hugo Awards! Nominations for the Hugos close March 10, so if you're planning to participate, you've only got a short time left to do so. Anyone

who is or was a voting member of the 2014, 2015, or 2016 Worldcons by January 31, 2015 is eligible to nominate. If you need some help remembering which *Nightmare* or *Lightspeed* stories fit into which categories, I put together a list of all of the material I worked on that is eligible for this year's award, which you can find at bit.ly/Hugo2015.

••••

In other news, this month sees the publication of *Operation Arcana*, my new anthology of military fantasy, which will be published by Baen on March 3rd. *Operation Arcana* contains sixteen never-before-published tales (about 100,000 words of material), from Glen Cook, Myke Cole, Genevieve Valentine, Elizabeth Moon, Django Wexler, Weston Ochse, Yoon Ha Lee, Jonathan Maberry, Tobias S. Buckell & David Klecha, Ari Marmell, Tanya Huff, Carrie Vaughn, T.C. McCarthy, Simon R. Green, Seanan McGuire, and Linda Nagata. The stories run the gamut from military epic fantasy to military urban fantasy to military historical fantasy — and everything in between. You'll find a reprint of Linda Nagata's story, "The Way Home," in this month's issue of our sister-magazine, *Lightspeed*. If you'd like to learn more about the book, read additional stories from the anthology for free online, or read interviews with the authors, visit my *Operation Arcana* website at johnjosephadams.com/operation-arcana.



In case you missed it last month, *Wastelands 2* (the sequel to my bestselling — and first! — anthology, *Wastelands*) was published by Titan Books. It contains nearly 200,000 words of fiction, including stories by George R.R. Martin, Seanan McGuire, Hugh Howey, Nancy Kress, David Brin, Ann Aguirre, Paolo Bacigalupi, Lauren Beukes, and Junot Díaz, among others. Learn more about it at johnjosephadams.com/wastelands-2.

Speaking of *Wastelands*, Titan also just recently released the original *Wastelands* in mass market paperback edition. So if you've been wanting to read it all these years and just couldn't abide paying more than \$7.99 for it, now's your chance!



With our announcements out of the way, here's what we've got on tap this month:

We have original fiction from Chesya Burke (“Please, Momma”) and Caspian Gray (“An Army of Angels”), along with reprints by Robert Shearman (“Featherweight”) and Lynda E. Rucker (“The Burned House”).

For nonfiction, author S. G. Browne talks about the new flavor of zombies in the latest installment of our column on horror, “The H Word.” We've also got author spotlights on this month's authors, a showcase on our cover artist, and a

feature interview with up-and-coming author Helen Marshall — conducted by acclaimed author Kelly Link!

Our issue this month is sponsored by our friends at Nightscape Press. Check out the excerpt of *The Patchwork House* in our ebook edition this month, and visit nightscapepress.com to learn more.

That's about all I have for you this month. Thanks for reading!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Joseph Adams, in addition to serving as publisher and editor-in-chief of *Nightmare*, is the series editor of *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy*, published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. He is also the bestselling editor of many other anthologies, such as *The Mad Scientist's Guide to World Domination*, *Armored*, *Brave New Worlds*, *Wastelands*, and *The Living Dead*. Recent and forthcoming projects include: *Help Fund My Robot Army!!! & Other Improbable Crowdfunding Projects*, *Robot Uprisings*, *Dead Man's Hand*, *Operation Arcana*, *Wastelands 2*, *Press Start to Play*, and *The Apocalypse Triptych: The End is Nigh*, *The End is Now*, and *The End Has Come*. Called “the reigning king of the anthology world” by Barnes & Noble, John is a winner of the Hugo Award (for which he has been nominated eight times) and is a six-time World Fantasy Award finalist. John is also the editor and publisher of *Lightspeed Magazine* and is a producer for Wired.com's *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. Find him on Twitter @johnjosephadams.

FICTION

Please, Momma

Chesya Burke

1989

In the car. On the way to see Her.

She scares us. They say . . .

Why do you always do that? I hate when you do that.

Do what?

Narrate our story. Where we're going. What we're doing.

You know I can hear you. I hate it so much.

But they'll want to know one day. She said they'll need to know.

No one cares about you, girl. No one cares about us.

They will.

Cars never bounce around the way they make them appear in the movies. No, instead they glide, more like the lull of a boat on stale waters. And they're just as loud as the boat's engine, even with the windows rolled up there are always loud swooshing noises assaulting the senses. The sounds should be calming, like the ocean, but they never are. They are annoying and invading. Or at least it's what the girls always imagined what the beach and ocean should sound like. They had never been farther than Kentucky Lake, a few hours away from where they were now. The water there was so muddy that you couldn't see your hands in front of your face and everything that moved within its depths looked like invading, misshapen

piranha out to devour your flesh. But the girls loved it so. Except when the motion threatened to make them sick.

The car swerved around a sharp corner, another wave threatening to take over, and the girls swayed in the back, holding on to each other. Their tummies were not holding up well under the stress, though it probably had nothing to do with the car ride and everything to do with their destination. The girls looked at each other, their minds quiet for a moment. There was no need to speak, nothing to say.

In the driver's seat, the girl's aunt turned to stare at their mother. Auntie's eyes, dark and weary, stared for so long that it was scary. As the car veered toward the middle of the street, the lines on the road before them slid by between the tires of the car. After what seemed like a long moment, the woman turned away and righted the car, putting them all back on track.

March 26th

6:30 p.m. on Sunday afternoon.

In the car with momma. She's sad. Auntie's driving us to see her, but if she's not careful, she's gonna kill us before we can even get there.

So, that's what you're worried about? Dying? The girl seemed insulted. *Momma's not sad, she fucking sick. She's not getting better.*

She's not sick. Stop saying she's sick.

She's fucking sick. Stop pretending that you don't see that.

You stop cussin'. I'm the oldest, so I said stop it! I mean

it, Baby. Stop it.

Sissy reached out to nudge her little sister, reassuring her. They didn't fight often, but when they did, she always pulled the "oldest" sister card to get her way. It had always worked in the past but it was beginning to get old — literally — and her sister, Baby, wasn't going to be so easily controlled anymore. Baby avoided her touch, rolling her eyes. Why couldn't she just get her sister to understand that she knew what was best for them, she just wanted to protect her? It was her job, to protect her sister.

Baby put her cold hand on her sister's face. *I do understand. But you can't protect me. It's not your job anymore.* She smiled. *Let me protect you sometimes.*

"Sissy, Baby, stop it. Stop fooling around!" Momma turned toward the girls, her eyes fixed, moving between the two. "You're so loud. You're so goddamn loud. In my head. All the time. Talkin', talkin', talkin'. Just stop it!"

Their aunt put her hand on Momma's leg. "That's enough, Mae. Stop it. She wasn't saying anything. It's the roots. We're gonna get it off ya. Just . . . calm down until we get there. Just . . . just stop it." The woman looked at Sissy through the rear view mirror, tried to smile but failed, then looked away quickly.

In the silence, Momma burst out laughing. For a long time. "Roots. Roots. Roots," she mocked. "You think someone put roots on me? You're gonna wish that's it, by the time I'm done with her."

Auntie pulled the car into a parking spot in a tiny little shopping plaza. The neon lights blinking PSYCHIC were the only visible signs of life inside. White curtains covered the storefront windows. Auntie switched the car off, dropped the keys in her purse, then turned to her sister. “I’ve listened to the things you’ve said about your own children lately — the nasty, vile things you’ve said about them — and I’ve tried to understand, because I know you’re hurting, but if you think about putting a hand on her again, I will lay you flat. Do you understand me?”

Momma smiled. “Not her,” she placed a finger to her temple. “Her.”

• • • •

Momma is not sad. She’s sick. It’s something in her mind. Something really bad.

I can’t see it. I keep trying but I can’t see what’s wrong with her. I’m scared.

Me too. She don’t talk to me anymore. She seems scared to look at me. I think she hates me.

Baby shook her head. She don’t hate you. She just ain’t well. The Lady will help her, Iyaafin can help her, I’m sure of it.

I don’t like her and I don’t like it here.

She’s gonna help momma.

She’s not. I don’t think anyone can help momma anymore.

The sisters held each other standing in the dimly lit foyer of the PSYCHIC with the giant neon hand. They didn't want to let go, didn't want to move, didn't want to have to be in that room, for that reason, with these women. Grownups are supposed to protect children, supposed to keep them safe, but they don't. Not, the girls realize, because they don't love their children, but because that is how things are. The world is a very big place, and very big things happen and grownups are never big enough to stop them. Instead, Iyaafin had constantly reminded them, *mommas, aunties, and grands have little girls and they want everything to be perfect, and pink and happy and it never ever happens that way; and daddies, uncles and papas just want little boys and are never ever happy if they don't get them.*

But their daddy had not wanted little boys. He had been happy to have his baby girls from the day that they had entered the world, one right after the other, within minutes of each other. He had held them and cared for them and protected them. But his heart wasn't big enough for all the love that he held for them, so it gave out one day. It just stopped beating in his chest and he died. He took his big heart with him, and left only its weakness. The girls had been four years old, and now they were eight and a half. Almost big girls, their auntie told them. Almost big enough to understand things, big, grownup things, almost big enough to put away childish things, let go, accept what had happened. The twins did not want to let go. They did not want to accept what had

happened. They wanted to stay like this, holding on to each other for as long as they could, until they were forced apart.

“I see that for as much as things change, they forever stay the same between you two, ômôbìn-rins, eh?” The girls, as she’d called them, looked up as the woman walked from the back of the building, through a sheer curtain. She was wearing a long, one piece dress with drawings of eyes of all shapes and sizes. Auntie said that the woman did enjoy her comedic side, playing into what everyone expected of her. The Lady thought it was funny, but she always looked the same, spoke the same, behaved the same way, always. They’d been coming to her since their father had died and the girls didn’t like the way she always wanted to separate them, wanted to force them to grow up too quickly, accept things that they weren’t ready to accept. Iyaafin had convinced their auntie so now she mimicked what the woman said. They all trusted her so. The whole town and the surrounding community trusted her.

The twins did not.

“È ku abọ, all!” she welcomed the group, ignoring the girl’s disdain for her. Suddenly the woman stopped for a moment, and slowly turned her neck to look at Momma. She squinted her eyes, cocked her head. Walking over to the woman, she placed her hand on her forehead for a long while. Nothing moved, no one spoke. They all knew to let the woman do whatever it was that she did. After what seemed like forever, she turned to look at Sissy. “Does it still hurt?”

Your eye. Your mother did that, right?”

Sissy shook her head. “No.”

“She did. Don’t lie for her, ômôbìnrin.”

“I’m not lying. I mean . . . no, it doesn’t still hurt.” Beside her their auntie began to cry. Their mother just stood, quietly. Unblinking, unfeeling, emotionless. She had been that way lately. She only ever showed emotion anymore when she was angry. At Sissy. Always at Sissy. As if she blamed her for everything.

The Lady looked back at their Momma. “They do it to please you, you know. Always have.”

“Iyaafin . . . Lady — ” their Auntie started to interrupt, but the woman put up a finger to silence her.

“That’s why they can’t let go. Because you can’t let go.” Momma acted as if she could not even hear the woman, as if she didn’t have a care in the world. As if she did not have children that depended on her.

“What the hell is wrong with her? What’s wrong with my sister? Did someone put roots on her? Can you fix it? Please!”

The woman did not speak for a long while, as was her way. She spoke slowly, when she was good and ready. The others waited. Still there was silence. “No. No one could do this to her. This one she invited onto herself.”

“What? We thought it was roots. Nothing else can explain why she’s so angry all the damn time.”

“No. This is no magick. No trick of roots. No one person hates her this much. This is . . . much deeper. It’s big and

wide and solid. It's the world, it's hate, it's like a big boulder of centralized hurt and anger and rage and internalized hate, all balled up into one big bad thing riding her back like a clown on a unicycle. And your sister ain't the clown."

"I don't understand. What's wrong with her? Can you fix her?"

For the first time Iyaafin could not meet the eyes of anyone in the room. She stared at the floor, seeming to think about what to say next, contemplating her words carefully. "Your sister is not in control of herself anymore. I suspect it has been like this for a long time. I . . . don't know if I can help her."

• • • •

Daddy used to lift the girls on his back, spin them around and pretend they were all helicopters, each a part of the machine that made it run safely. He was the engine and they were the propellers. Momma would stand and watch to make sure that everything was safe while they all played. Every now and again he would pitch one of the girls to her and she was always waiting to catch them, arms out, trusting daddy to have good aim, while he trusted her to be there to receive them. When the girls were too big to carry them both, he would swing them one at a time. It was never quite as much fun that way. Perhaps it was because they were getting too old for this to be fun any longer or perhaps because daddy's heart was no longer strong enough to propel the engine of their

four-person machine. Perhaps, though, being apart was not as important as being together.

The girls had never really learned to let go. This, Iyaafin insisted, was part of the problem.

Iyaafin stood in front of Momma, the woman's hands on Momma's head. Momma's eyes were closed and neither of the girls thought she was with them anymore. If the Lady were telling the truth, perhaps she had not been with them for a long time. Maybe even since that day. Auntie stood nearby in case something went wrong. She looked nervous and no doubt had no idea what she could do to help, but she was there and it made the girls feel better since they no longer trusted that Momma could catch.

The girls watched as Iyaafin, her left hand still on Momma's head, rubbed her right hand down the woman's back. She stopped mid-way, her fingers tapping Momma's spine like a drum. There was movement under Momma's shirt. At first the girls thought that it had just been their imagination, but as they watched, it wiggled again, as if a hornet's nest vibrated just under her shirt. Auntie gasped, jumped back, knocking a bottle off the table behind her. The glass clinked to the floor, bounced, then rolled toward the girls.

"Be still," the woman warned.

Very carefully the woman reached out and laid her right hand on Momma's back, right where the hornets lived. She closed her eyes and held it there, unmoving. When she

opened her eyes the whites were red, as if she had been drinking too much Whiskey, like uncle used to before he found the lord. “Help me get her shirt off.” Their auntie hesitated for only a moment, then she ran over and pulled Momma’s shirt over her head. Momma didn’t care. There was no way that if Momma had been well she could have showed her chest to anyone. Although she was wearing a bra, she always said that respectable women only bared their flesh to the lord and then only to clean any dirt and filth away.

Momma’s back was naked except for her bra strap and it looked wrong. It was much lighter than her dark brown skin and had large boils on it, clusters and clusters of them filling her back from her neck to the top of her pants. The boils bubbled just beneath the skin, threatening to burst. Momma’s eyes were closed, and the girls thought for a moment that she had passed out.

The Lady grabbed Momma, holding her tight, sending a wave of power through her body. The woman’s body jumped, looking like all the people on TV who got shocked by electricity. Iyaafin shocked her again, and again and again. As the last bolt shot through her body, a small form appeared crouching on Momma’s shoulders, its claw-like nails digging into her flesh. The Lady stumbled backward, hands up as if she was afraid to touch the thing’s pale, moldy skin.

Simultaneously the girls jumped to their feet. Sissy began to gasp for air. She tried to calm down the only way she knew how.

1989. Iyaafin's place. Momma is sick. She's very — deep breath — very sick.

The girls did not take their eyes off the creature, who stared at them, smiling. It tilted its head, peculiar-like, seeing them, actually observing them.

What the #@&% is that?

Did you say #@&%? How'd you do that? In my head. I just see a bunch of gibberish clouding my mind.

You told me not to curse. I didn't curse.

“What’s wrong? What’s wrong?” their Aunt asked. She moved closer but the Lady raised a hand to stay her.

After getting her composure, Iyaafin walked up to Momma, placed her hands on the woman’s face and sent a powerful jolt through the tips of her fingers into Momma’s mind. Momma jerked out of her seat and landed on the floor, sliding across the marble, her butt scraping the floorboards. She sat up, crawled back toward the Lady. She looked up and suddenly her eyes were clearer than they had been in a long time. She looked around the room, as if just realizing where they were.

“Oh, god, Mae! Are you okay? Jesus!” Auntie was breathing hard, like she’d run all the way here, with the girls strapped to her back. She turned to Iyaafin, “You did it, Lady.”

The thing on Momma’s back continued to grin as Auntie walked toward Momma.

“Don’t,” Iyaafin yelled. “It’s not over. Is it?” She seemed

to be talking to the thing, but it did not answer her. But it was clear to the girls that it was aware of them all, watching, almost mocking them with its crooked smirk.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

The Lady stared at the thing. “It’s an Oníràrà, a rider, a parasite. It hitches on to people who are . . . hopeless. Suffering. It feeds from them. But that’s never enough, they always want more.”

“What? What did you say?” Momma was talking clearly. She could understand what was going on. She was Momma again. The girls wanted to go to her, but the thing was still there, taunting them, daring them to come closer to it.

“How you feel?” Iyaafin asked her.

“Strange. I’ve been so overwhelmed with . . . hopelessness and I had all these vile thoughts.” She looked over at the girls. “Oh, my god, Sissy, did I do that to you? Jesus. I remember wanting to hurt you so bad, and I just could not stop thinking it. I wanted to, I knew it didn’t make any sense, I just could not stop the terrible thoughts from popping into my head. I just cannot believe that I actually did it. I don’t remember any of it.”

“This Oníràrà is really strong. It’s able to take completely over you. It feeds from you and the kids taking energy from your grief and fear and sadness. It’s a parasite, it feeds.”

“Feeds? Off what? What does it want?” Auntie had been quiet but she looked worried and scared.

“It wants her soul.”

“What? My soul?”

“No. Not you, Mae. It wants the little girl.”

Everyone turned to look at Sissy. She looked frightened, alone.

Momma stood completely still, her face filled with the emotion that she had been unable to express for the last few weeks. Sorrow, hurt, pain, anger. Her face screamed it all, at once. “It can’t have her. She’s all I got left.” Momma cried. Finally.

Iyaafin shook her head. “Not her.” She turned to the ghost of the girl who once existed but could no longer hold her mother’s hand and yet could never lose her heart. “Her.”

Then to the living daughter: “You see her, don’t you, girl. You know she’s still here, among you. When I came into the room, I could sense you two. Both of you. The way you had been just after your father died, when your mother first came to seek my advice. Is your sister afraid of what’s beyond?” the Lady asked.

No. “No.” Sissy repeated her sister’s words. *I’m scared for you and momma.* “She’s afraid to leave us. She said we need her. I’ve told her that’s not true. Lots of times, but she won’t listen.”

“Because it’s not you holding her here.” Iyaafin shook her head, angry. “I told you when you first came to me, Mae, that you would lose her. Her heart, like her father’s, just could not sustain her. You couldn’t accept it then, and you still refuse to let go now.”

The woman shook her head. “My baby girl. I miss her so much.”

“It’s your sorrow, your pain that’s keeping her here. She’s trapped because you love her so much that you can’t, you won’t let her go.”

“But you said that thing wants her.”

“Yes. It wants her soul.”

“How can you expect me to do that? What do you expect me to do, hand my baby over to that, that thing, whatever it is?”

“It’s attached to you because it senses her. If you’d let her go in the beginning, then she would have already passed over. But she’s been stuck here for so long that she’s victim to them, they smell her innocence like fresh food. If you don’t let her go, you’ll lose them both.”

“What? I don’t understand.” Auntie seemed to barely follow the conversation. She kept looking around the room as if she expected to see the boogey man jump from behind a curtain.

“This thing is powerful. It’s not leaving until it gets what it wants. It will stay in you, or anyone protecting Baby, holding on to her, keeping her on this plane. It’ll consume you with impure thoughts, making you do things to yourself, to your daughter until nothing else is holding her here. If Sissy dies, it’ll consume them both. Their strength is in the fact that they have one soul, but two bodies. They’re twins. But if it can get ahold of one, it’ll be satisfied because it can’t sense living

souls. So it'll hold on to you, Mae, take control of your memories, your thoughts, make you . . . hurt and kill her, because she is attached to Sissy, but you are what's keeping her here. It'll take them both. Do you understand? You have to let her go."

"You keep saying that. Let her go. Let her go. I cannot do that!"

"She's dead already. What do you want? A dead daughter whose soul you hold on to, or a live daughter whose soul you give away?"

"I want them both. Don't make me choose."

"Do it, Mae! Let her go." Auntie walked over, putting her hand on Sissy's shoulder, reassuring the girl.

"Then what will I have? A dead husband? A dead daughter?"

"You'll have a living, breathing little girl." The Lady was angry. She seemed so sure that this was the right thing.

"And sacrifice one for the other?"

Tell her to let me go, Sissy.

You're not scared of that thing? I'm scared. I don't want it to get you.

I just want you to be safe. And I don't want to be tired anymore.

If . . . if I die, and let it have me, then I can protect you. I can do what I couldn't do when you died. I'm the oldest, I'm supposed to protect you.

You'd leave momma alone? She'd have no one. Not

daddy. Not me. Not you.

. . .

Tell her, Sissy. Tell her to let me go.

“She said to let her go, momma.”

The woman stared at Sissy’s scarred face, tears running down her cheeks. “I can’t.”

Please, momma. “She’s begging.” She was so strong for a little girl, her pain was on the inside, deep, deep down inside.

“Tell her that I would have died for her.” Tears streamed down Momma’s face.

Would you . . . “Kill me for her, she asked? Baby . . . she wants to die to save me.” *Please, momma.*

Momma mumbled her answer and only the Oníràrà could hear.

© 2015 by Chesya Burke.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chesya Burke’s 2011 fiction collection, *Let’s Play White*, was featured in *io9* and received praise from Samuel Delany and Nikki Giovanni. She is also recognized for her critical analysis of genre and race issues such as her articles “Race and The Walking Dead” and “Super Duper Sexual Spiritual Black Woman: The New and Improved Magical Negro,” published by *Clarkesworld*. Chesya is currently getting her MA in African American Studies at Georgia State University and was a juror for the 2013 Shirley Jackson awards.

To learn more about the author and this story, read the [Author Spotlight](#).

Featherweight

Robert Shearman

He thought at first that she was dead. And that was terrible, of course — but what shocked him most was how dispassionate that made him feel. There was no anguish, no horror, he should be crying but clearly no tears were fighting to get out — and instead all there was was this almost sick fascination. He'd never seen a corpse before. His mother had asked if he'd wanted to see his grandfather, all laid out for the funeral, and he was only twelve, and he really really didn't — and his father said that was okay, it was probably best Harry remembered Grandad the way he had been, funny and full of life, better not to spoil the memory — and Harry had quickly agreed, yes, that was the reason — but it wasn't that at all, it was a bloody dead body, and he worried that if he got too close it might wake up and say hello.

And now here there *was* a corpse, and it was less than three feet away, in the passenger seat behind him. And it was his *wife*, for God's sake, someone he knew so well — or, at least, better than anyone else in the world could, he could say that at least. And her head was twisted oddly, he'd never seen her quite at that angle before and she looked like someone he'd never really known at all, he'd never seen her face in a profile where her nose looked quite that enormous. And there was all the blood, of course. He wondered whether the tears

were starting to come after all, he could sense a pricking at his eyes, and he thought it'd be such a *relief* if he could feel grief or shock or hysteria or something . . . when she swivelled that neck a little towards him, and out from a mouth thick with that blood came "Hello."

He was so astonished that for a moment he didn't reply, just goggled at her. She frowned.

"There's a funny taste in my mouth," she said.

"The blood," he suggested.

"What's that, darling?"

"There's a lot of blood," he said.

"Oh," she said. "Yes, that would make sense. Oh dear. I don't feel I'm in any pain, though. Are you in any pain?"

"No," he said. "I don't think so. I haven't tried to . . . move much, I . . ." He struggled for words. "I didn't get round to trying, actually. Actually, I thought you were dead."

"And I can't see very well either," she said.

"Oh," he said.

She blinked. Then blinked again. "No, won't go away. It's all very red."

"That'll be the blood," he said. "Again."

"Oh yes," she said. "Of course, the blood." She thought for a moment. "I'd wipe my eyes, but I can't seem to move my arms at all. I have still got arms, haven't I, darling?"

"I think so. I can see the right one, in any case."

"That's good. I do wonder, shouldn't I be a little more scared than this?"

“I was trying to work that out too. Why I wasn’t more scared. Especially when I thought you were dead.”

“Right . . . ?”

“And I concluded. That it was probably the shock.”

“That could be it.” She nodded, and that enormous nose nodded too, and so did the twisted neck, there they were, all nodding, it looked grotesque — “Still. All that blood! I must look a sight!”

She did, but he didn’t care, Harry was just so relieved she was all right after all, and he didn’t want to tell her that her little spate of nodding seemed to have left her head somewhat back to front. She yawned. “Well,” she said. “I think I might take a little nap.”

He wasn’t sure that was a good idea, he thought that he should probably persuade her to stay awake. But she yawned again, and look! — she was perfectly all right, wasn’t she, there was no pain, there was a lot of *blood*, yes, but no pain. “Just a little nap,” she said. “I’ll be with you again in a bit.” She frowned. “Could you scratch my back for me, darling? It’s itchy.”

“I can’t move.”

“Oh, right. Okay. It’s itchy, though. I’m allergic to feathers.”

“To what, darling?”

“To feathers,” she said. “The feathers are tickling me.” And she nodded off.

His first plan had been to take her back to Venice. Venice had been where they'd honeymooned. And he thought that would be so romantic, one year on exactly, to return to Venice for their first anniversary. They could do everything they had before — hold hands in St Mark's Square, hold hands on board the vaporetti, toast each other with champagne in one of those restaurants by the Rialto. He was excited by the idea, and he was going to keep it a secret from Esther, surprise her on the day with plane tickets — but he *never* kept secrets from Esther, they told each other everything, it would just have seemed weird. And thank God he had told her, as it turned out. Because she said that although it was a lovely idea, and yes, it *was* very romantic, she didn't want to go back to Venice at all. Truth to tell, she'd found it a bit smelly, and very crowded, and *very* expensive; they'd done it once, why not see somewhere else? He felt a little hurt at first — hadn't she enjoyed the honeymoon then? She'd never said she hadn't at the time — and she reassured him, she'd *adored* the honeymoon. But not because of Venice, because of him, she'd adore any holiday anywhere, so long as he was part of the package. He liked that. She had a knack for saying the right thing, smoothing everything over.

Indeed, in one year of marriage they'd never yet had an argument.

He sometimes wondered whether this were some kind of a record. He wanted to ask all his other married friends, how

often do you argue, do you even argue at all? — just to see whether what he'd got with Esther was something really special. But he never did, he didn't want to rub anyone's noses in how happy he was, and besides, he didn't have the sorts of friends he could be that personal with. He didn't need to, he had Esther. Both he and Esther had developed a way in which they'd avoid confrontation — if a conversation was taking a wrong turning, Esther would usually send it on a detour without any apparent effort. Yes, he could find her irritating at times, and he was certain then that she must find him irritating too — and they could both give the odd warning growl if either were tired or stressed — but they'd never had anything close to a full blown row. That was something to be proud of. He called her his little diplomat! He said that she should be employed by the UN, she'd soon sort out all these conflicts they heard about on the news! And she'd laugh, and say that he clearly hadn't seen what she was like in the shop, she could really snap at some of those customers sometimes — she was only perfect around *him*. And he'd seen evidence of that, hadn't he? For example — on their wedding morning, when he wanted to see her, and all the bridesmaids were telling him not to go into the bedroom, *don't*, Harry, she's in a filthy temper! — but he went in anyway, and there she was in her dress, she was so beautiful, and she just *beamed* at him, and kissed him, and told him that she loved him, oh, how she loved him. She wasn't angry. She wasn't ever going to be angry with him. And that night they'd

flown off to Venice, and they'd had a wonderful time.

So, not Venice then. (Maybe some other year. She nodded at that, said, "Maybe.") Where else should they spend their anniversary then? Esther suggested Scotland. Harry didn't much like the sound of that, it didn't sound particularly romantic, especially not compared to Venice. But she managed to persuade him. How about a holiday where they properly *explored* somewhere? Just took the car, and *drove* — a different hotel each night, free and easy, and whenever they wanted they could stop off at a little pub, or go for a ramble on the moors, or pop into a stately home? It'd be an adventure. The Watkins family had put their footprints in Italy, she said, and now they could leave them all over the Highlands! That did sound rather fun. He didn't want it to be *too* free and easy, mind you, they might end up with nowhere to stay for the night — but he did a lot of homework, booked them into seven different places in seven different parts of Scotland. The most they'd ever have to drive between them was eighty miles, he was sure they could manage that, and he showed her an itinerary he'd marked out on his atlas. She kissed him and told him how clever he was.

And especially for the holiday he decided to buy a satnav. He'd always rather fancied one, but couldn't justify it before — he knew his drive into work so well he could have done it with his eyes closed. He tried out the gadget, he put in the postcode of his office, and let it direct him there. It wasn't the route he'd have chosen, he was quite certain it was better

to avoid the ring road altogether, but he loved that satnav voice, so gentle and yet so authoritative. “You have reached your destination,” it’d say, and they’d chosen a funny way of getting there, but yes, they certainly had — and all told to him in a voice good enough to be off the telly. The first day of the holiday he set in the postcode to their first Scottish hotel; he packed the car with the suitcases; Esther sat in beside him on the passenger seat, smiled, and said, “Let’s go.” “The Watkinses are going to leave their footprints all over the Highlands!” he announced, and laughed. “Happy anniversary,” said Esther. “I love you.”

On the fourth day they stayed at their fourth stately home of the holiday a little too long, maybe; it was in the middle of nowhere, and their next hotel was also in the middle of nowhere, but it was in a completely different middle of nowhere. It was already getting dark, and there weren’t many streetlights on those empty roads. Esther got a little drowsy, and said she was going to take a nap. And the satnav man hadn’t said anything for a good fifteen minutes, so Harry knew he *must* be going in the right direction, and maybe Esther sleeping was making him a little drowsy too — but suddenly he realised that the smoothness of the road beneath him had gone, this was grass and field and *bushes*, for God’s sake, and they were going down, and it was quite steep, and he kept thinking that they had to stop soon surely, he hadn’t realised they were so high up in the first place! — and there were now branches whipping past the windows, and actual

trees, and the car wasn't slowing down at all, and it only dawned on him then that they might really be in trouble. He had time to say "Esther," because stupidly he thought she might want to be awake to see all this, and then the mass of branches got denser still, and they came to a very abrupt halt. It flung him forward towards the steering wheel, and then the seatbelt flung him right back where he had come from — and that was when he heard a snap, but he wasn't sure if it came from him, or from Esther, or just from the branches outside. And it was dark, but not yet dark enough that he couldn't see Esther still hadn't woken up, and that there was all that blood.

The front of the car had buckled. The satnav said, "Turn around when possible." Still clinging on to the crushed dashboard. Just the once, then it gave up the ghost.

He couldn't feel his legs. They were trapped under the dashboard. He hoped that was the reason. He tried to open the door, pushed against it hard, and the pain of the attempt nearly made him pass out. The door had been staved in. It was wrecked. He thought about the seatbelt. The pain that reaching it would cause. Later. He'd do that later. Getting out the mobile phone from his inside jacket pocket — not even the coat pocket, he'd have to bend his arm and get into the coat first and *then* into the jacket . . . Later, later. Once the pain had stopped. Please, God, then.

Harry wished they'd gone to Venice. He was sure Venice had its own dangers. He supposed tourists were always drowning themselves in gondola related accidents. But there

were no roads to drive off in Venice.

• • • •

He was woken by the sound of tapping at the window.

It wasn't so much the tapping that startled him. He'd assumed they'd be rescued sooner or later — it was true, they hadn't come off a main road, but someone would drive along it sooner or later, wouldn't they? It was on the *satnav route*, for God's sake.

What startled him was the realisation he'd been asleep in the first place. The last thing he remembered was his misgivings about letting Esther nod off. And some valiant decision he'd made that whatever happened *he* wouldn't nod off, he'd watch over her, stand guard over her — *sit* guard over her, he'd protect her as best he could. As best he could when he himself couldn't move, when he hadn't yet dared worry about what might damage might have been done to him. What if he'd broken his legs? (What if he'd broken his spine?) And as soon as these thoughts swam into his head, he batted them out again — or at least buried them beneath the guilt (some valiant effort to protect Esther that had been, falling asleep like that!) and the relief that someone was there and he wouldn't need to feel guilt much longer. Someone was out there, tapping away at the window.

“Hey!” he called out. “Yes, we're in here! Yes, we're all right!” Though he didn't really know about that last bit.

It was now pitch black. He couldn't see Esther at all. He

couldn't see whether she was even breathing. "It's all right, darling," he told her. "They've found us. We're safe now." Not thinking about that strange twisted neck she'd had, not about spines.

Another tattoo against the glass — tap, tap, tap. And he strained his head in the direction of the window, and it hurt, and he thought he heard something pop. But there was no one to be seen. Just a mass of branches, and the overwhelming night. Clearly the tapping was at the passenger window behind him.

It then occurred to him, in a flash of warm fear, that it was *so* dark that maybe their rescuer couldn't see in. That for all his tapping he might think the car was empty. That he might just give up tapping altogether, and disappear into the blackness. "We're in here!" he called out, louder. "We can't move! Don't go! Don't go!"

He knew immediately that he shouldn't have said don't go, have tempted fate like that. Because that's when the tapping stopped. "No!" he shouted. "Come back!" But there was no more; he heard something that might have been a giggle, and that was it.

Maybe there hadn't been tapping at all. Maybe it was just the branches in the wind.

Maybe he was sleeping through the whole thing.

No, he decided forcefully, and he even said it out loud, "No." There had been a *rhythm* to the tapping; it had been someone trying to get his attention. And he wasn't asleep, he

was in too much pain for that. His neck still screamed at him because of the strain of turning to the window. He chose to disregard the giggling.

The window tapper had gone to get help. He'd found the car, and couldn't do anything by himself. And quite right too, this tapper wasn't a doctor, was he? He could now picture who this tapper was, some sort of farmer probably, a Scottish farmer out walking his dog — and good for him, he wasn't trying to be heroic, he was going to call the *experts* in, if he'd tried to pull them out of the car without knowing what he was about he might have done more harm than good. Especially if there *was* something wrong with the spine (forget about the spine). Good for you, farmer, thought Harry, you very sensible Scotsman, you. Before too long there'd be an ambulance, and stretchers, and safety. If Harry closed his eyes now, and blocked out the pain — he could do it, it was just a matter of not *thinking* about it — if he went back to sleep, he wouldn't have to wait so long for them to arrive.

So he closed his eyes, and drifted away. And dreamed about farmers. And why farmers would giggle so shrilly like that.

• • • •

The next time he opened his eyes there was sunlight. And Esther was awake, and staring straight at him.

He flinched at that. And then winced at his flinching, it sent a tremor of pain right through him. He was glad to see

she was alive, of course. And conscious was a bonus. He just hadn't expected the full ugly reality of it.

He could now see her neck properly. And that in its contorted position all the wrinkles had all bunched up tight against each other, thick and wormy; it looked a little as if she were wearing an Elizabethan ruff. And there was blood, so much of it. It had dried now. He supposed that was a good sign, that the flow had been staunched somehow, that it wasn't still pumping out all over the Mini Metro. The dried blood cracked around the mouth and chin as she spoke.

"Good morning," she said.

"Good morning," he replied, and then automatically, ridiculously, "Did you sleep well?"

She smirked at this, treated it as a deliberate joke. "Well, I'm sure the hotel would have been nicer."

"Yes," he said. And then, still being ridiculous, "I think we *nearly* got there, though. The satnav said we were about three miles off."

She didn't smirk this time. "I'm hungry," she said.

"We'll get out of this soon," he said.

"All right."

"Are you in pain?" he asked.

"No," she said. "Just the itching. The itching is horrible. You know."

"Yes," he said, although he didn't. "I'm in a fair amount of pain," he added, almost as an afterthought. "I don't think I can move."

“Not much point bothering with that hotel now,” said Esther. “I say we move right on to the next, put it down as a bad lot.”

He smiled. “Yes, all right.”

“And I don’t think we’ll be doing a stately home today. Not like this. Besides, I think I’ve had my fill of stately homes. They’re just houses, aren’t they, with better furniture in? I don’t care about any of that. I don’t need better furniture, so long as I have you. Our own house, as simple as it might be, does me fine, darling. With you in it, darling.”

“Yes,” he said. “Darling, you do know we’ve been in a car crash. Don’t you?” (And that you’re covered in blood.)

“Of course I do,” she said, and she sounded a bit testy. “I’m itchy, aren’t I? I’m itching all over. The feathers.” And then she smiled at him, a confrontation neatly avoided. Everything smoothed over. “You couldn’t scratch my back, could you, darling? Really, the itching is *terrible*.”

“No,” he reminded her. “I can’t move, can I?”

“Oh yes,” she said.

“And I’m in pain.”

“You said,” she snapped, and she stuck out her bottom lip in something of a sulk. He wished she hadn’t, it distorted her face all the more.

“I’m really sorry about all this,” he said. “Driving us off the road. Getting us into all this. Ruining the holiday.”

“Oh, darling,” she said, and the lip was back in, and the sulk was gone. “I’m sure it wasn’t your fault.”

“I don’t know what happened.”

“I’m sure the holiday isn’t ruined.”

Harry laughed. “Well, it’s not going too well! The car’s a write-off!” He didn’t like laughing. He stopped. “I’ll get you out of this. I promise.” He decided he wouldn’t tell Esther about the rescue attempt, just in case it wasn’t real, he couldn’t entirely be sure what had actually happened back there in the pitch black. But he couldn’t keep anything from Esther, it’d have been wrong, it’d have felt wrong. “Help is on its way. I saw a farmer last night. He went to get an ambulance.”

If the Scottish farmer *were* real, then he wouldn’t ever need to bend his arm to reach his mobile phone. The thought of his mobile phone suddenly made him sick with fear. His arm would snap. His arm would snap right off.

“A farmer?” she asked.

“A Scottish farmer,” he said. “With a dog,” he added.

“Oh.”

They didn’t say anything for a while. He smiled at her, she smiled at him. He felt a little embarrassed doing this after a minute or two — which was absurd, she was his wife, he shouldn’t feel awkward around his wife. After a little while her eyes wandered away, began looking through him, behind him, for something which might be more interesting — and he was stung by that, just a little, as if he’d been dismissed somehow. And he was just about to turn his head away from her anyway, no matter how much it hurt, when he saw her

suddenly shudder.

“The itch,” she said. “Oh God!” And she tried to rub herself against the back of the seat, but she couldn’t really do it, she could barely move. The most she could do was spasm a bit. Like a broken puppet trying to jerk itself into life — she looked pathetic, he actually wanted to laugh at the sight of her writhing there, he nearly did, and yet he felt such a pang of sympathy for her, his heart went out to her at that moment like no other. On her face was such childlike despair, *help me*, it said. And then: “Can’t you scratch my fucking back?” she screamed. “What fucking use are you?”

He didn’t think he’d ever heard her swear before. Not serious swears. Not “fucking.” No. No, he hadn’t. “Frigging” a few times. That was it. Oh dear. Oh dear.

She breathed heavily, glaring at him. “Sorry,” she said at last. But she didn’t seem sorry. And then she closed her eyes.

And at last he could turn from her, without guilt, he *hadn’t* looked away, he hadn’t given up on her, in spite of everything he was still watching over her. And then he saw what Esther had been looking at behind his shoulder all that time.

Oddly enough, it wasn’t the wings that caught his attention at first. Because you’d have thought the wings were the strangest thing. But no, it was the face, just the face. So round, so *perfectly* round, no, like a sphere, the head a complete sphere. You could have cut off that head and played football with it. And there was no blemish to the face, it was like this had come straight from the factory, newly minted,

and every other face you had ever seen was like a crude copy of it, some cheap hack knock-off. The eyes were bright and large and very very deep, the nose a cute little pug. The cheeks were full and fat and fleshy, all puffed out.

But then Harry's eyes, of course, *were* drawn to the wings. There was only so long he could deny they were there. Large and white and jutting out of the shoulder blades. They gave occasional little flaps, as the perfect child bobbed about idly outside the car window. Creamy pale skin, a shock of bright yellow hair, and a bright yellow halo hovering above it — there was nothing to keep it there, it tilted independently of the head, sometimes at a rather rakish angle — it looked like someone had hammered a dinner tray into the skull with invisible nails. Little toes. Little fingers. Babies' fingers. And (because, yes, Harry did steal a look) there was nothing between the legs at all, the child's genitals had been smoothed out like it was a naked Action Man toy.

The little child smiled amiably at him. Then raised a knuckle. And tapped three times against the glass.

“What are you?” — which Harry knew was a pointless question, it was pretty bloody obvious what it was — and even the cherub rolled his eyes at that, but then smiled back as if to say, just kidding, no offence, no hard feelings.

The child seemed to imitate Harry's expressions, maybe he was sending him up a little — he'd put his head to one side like he did, he'd frown just the same, blink in astonishment, the whole parade. When Harry put his face close to the

window it hurt, but he did it anyway — and the child put its head as close as it could too. There was just a sheet of glass between them. They could have puckered up, they could almost have kissed had they wanted! And at one point it seemed to Harry the child *did* pucker up those lips, but no, it was just taking in a breath, like a sigh, a hiss. “Can you understand me? Can you hear what I’m saying?” The child blinked in astonishment again, fluttered its wings a bit. “Can you get help?” And what did he expect, that it’d find a phone box and ring the emergency services, that it’d fly into the nearest police station? “Are you here to watch over us?”

And then the cherub opened its mouth. And it wasn’t a sigh, it *was* a hiss. Hot breath stained the glass; Harry recoiled from it. And the teeth were so sharp, and there were so many, how could so many teeth fit into such a small mouth? And hiding such a dainty tongue too, just a little tongue, a *baby’s* tongue. The child attacked the window, it gnawed on the glass with its fangs. Desperately, hungrily, the wings now flapping wild. It couldn’t break through. It glared, those bright eyes now blazing with fury, and the hissing became seething, and then it was gone — with a screech it had flown away.

There was a scratch left streaked across the pane.

Harry sat back, hard, his heart thumping. It didn’t hurt to do so. There *was* pain, but it was something distant now, his body had other things to worry about. And whilst it was still confused, before it could catch up — and before he could change his mind — he was lifting his arm, he was bending it,

and *twisting it back on itself* (and it didn't snap, not at all), he was going for his coat, pulling at the zip, pulling it down hard, he was reaching inside the coat, reaching inside the jacket inside the coat, reaching inside the pocket inside the jacket inside the — and he had it, his fingers were brushing it, his fingers were gripping it, the phone, the mobile phone.

By the time he pulled it out his body had woken up to what he was trying to do. Oh no, it said, not allowed, and told him off with a flush of hot agony — but he was having none of that, not now. The phone was turned off. Of course it was. He stabbed at the pin number, got it right second time. “Come on, come on,” he said. The phone gave a merry little tune as it lit up. He just hoped there was enough battery power.

There was enough battery power. What it didn't have was any network coverage. Not this far out in the Highlands! Not in one of the many middles of nowhere that Scotland seemed to offer. The signal bar was down to zero.

“No, “he insisted, “no.” And the body really didn't want him to do this, it was telling him it was a *very* bad idea, but Harry began to wave the phone about, trying to pick up any signal he could. By the time a bar showed, he was raising the phone above his head, and he was crying.

He stabbed at 999. The phone was too far away for him to hear whether there was any response. “Hello!” he shouted. “There's been a car crash! We've crashed the car. Help us! We're in . . . I don't know where we are. We're in Scotland. Scotland! Find us! Help!” And his arm was shaking with the

pain, and he couldn't hold on any longer, and he dropped it, it clattered behind his seat to the floor. And at last he allowed himself a scream as he lowered his arm, and that scream felt good.

The scream didn't wake Esther. That was a good thing. At least she was sleeping soundly.

For a few minutes he let himself believe his message had been heard. That he'd held on to a signal for long enough. That the police had taken notice if he had. That they'd be able to track his position from the few seconds he'd given them. And then he just cried again, because really, why the hell shouldn't he?

He was interrupted by a voice. "Turn around when possible." His heart thumped again, and then he realised it was the satnav. It was that nice man from the satnav, the one who spoke well enough for telly. The display had lit up, and there was some attempt at finding a road, but they weren't on a road, were they? And Satnav was confused, poor thing, it couldn't work out what on earth was going on. "Turn around when possible," the satnav suggested again.

Harry had to laugh, really. He spoke to the satnav. It made him feel better to speak to someone. "I thought I'd heard the last of you!"

And then the satnav said, "Daddy."
And nothing else. Not for a while.

• • • •

For the rest of the day he didn't see anything else of the child. He didn't see much else of Esther either; once in a while she seemed to surface from a sleep, and he'd ask her if she were all right. And sometimes she'd glare at him, and sometimes she'd smile kindly, and most often she wouldn't seem to know who he was at all. And he'd doze fitfully. At one point he jerked bolt upright in the night when he thought he heard tapping against the window — "No, go away!" — but he decided this time it really was the wind, because it soon stopped. Yes, the wind. Or the branches. Or a Scottish farmer this time, who can tell? Who can tell?

In the morning he woke to find, once again, Esther was looking straight at him. She was smiling. This was one of her smiling times.

"Good morning!" she said.

"Good morning," he replied. "How are you feeling?"

"I feel hungry," she said.

"I'm sure," he said. "We haven't eaten in ages."

She nodded at that.

Harry said, "The last time would have been at that stately home. You know, we had the cream tea. You gave me one of your scones."

She nodded at that.

Harry said, "I bet you regret that now. Eh? Giving me one of your scones!"

She nodded at that. Grinned.

"The itching's stopped," she declared. "Do you know,

there was a time back there that I really thought it might drive me *mad*. Really, utterly loop the loop. But it's stopped now. Everything's okay."

"That's nice," he said. "I'm going to get you out of here, I promise."

"I don't care about that anymore," she said. "I'm very comfortable, thanks." She grinned again. He saw how puffed her cheeks were. He supposed her face had been bruised; he supposed there was a lot of dried blood in the mouth, distorting her features like that. "In fact," she said, "I feel as light as a feather."

"You're feeling all right?"

She nodded at that.

"Can you open the door?" he asked. She looked at him stupidly. "The door on your side. Can you open it? I can't open mine."

She shrugged, turned a little to the left, pulled at the handle. The door swung open. The air outside was cold and delicious.

"Can you go and get help?" he asked. She turned back to him, frowned. "I can't move," he said. "I can't get out. Can you get out?"

"Why would I want to do that?" she asked.

He didn't know what to say. She tilted her head to one side, waiting for an answer.

"Because you're hungry," he said.

She considered this. Then tutted. "I'm sure I'll find

something in here,” she said. “If I put my mind to it.” And she reached for the door, reached right outside for it, then slammed it shut. And as she did so, Harry saw how his wife’s back bulged. That there was a lump underneath her blouse, and it was moving, it *rippled*. And he saw where some of it had pushed a hole through the blouse, and he saw white, he saw feathers.

“Still a bit of growing to do, but the itching has stopped,” she said. “But don’t you worry about me, *I’ll* be fine.” She grinned again, and there were lots of teeth, there were too many teeth, weren’t there? And then she yawned, and then she went back to sleep.

• • • •

She didn’t stir, not for hours. Not until the child came back. “Daddy,” said the satnav, and it wasn’t a child’s voice, it was still the cultured man, calm and collected, as if he were about to navigate Harry over a roundabout. And there was the cherub! — all smiles, all teeth, his temper tantrum forgotten, bobbing about the window, even waving at Harry as if greeting an old friend. And, indeed, he’d brought friends with him, a whole party of them! Lots of little cherubs, it was impossible to tell how many, they would keep on bobbing so! — a dozen, maybe two dozen, who knows? And each of them had the same perfect face, the same spherical head, the same halos listing off the same gleaming hair. Tapping at the window for play, beating on the roof, beating at the door —

laughing, mostly laughing, they wanted to get in but this was a game, they liked a challenge! *Mostly* laughing, though there was the odd shriek of frustration, the odd hiss, lots more scratches on the glass. One little cherub did something very bad-tempered with the radio aerial. Another little cherub punched an identical brother in the face in a dispute over the rear view mirror. They scampered all over the car, but there was no way in. It all reminded Harry of monkeys at a safari park. He'd never taken Esther to a safari park. He never would now. "Daddy Daddy," said the satnav. "Daddy Daddy," it kept on saying, emotionless, even cold — and the little children danced merrily outside.

"Oh, aren't they beautiful!" cooed Esther. She reached for the door. "Shall we let them in?"

"Please," said Harry. "Please. Don't."

"No. All right." And she closed her eyes again. "Just leaves more for me," she said.

• • • •

For the first few days he was very hungry. Then one day he found he wasn't hungry at all. He doubted that was a good thing.

He understood that the cherubs were hungry too. Most of them had flown away, they'd decided that they weren't going to get into this particular sardine tin — but there were always one or two about, tapping away, ever more forlorn. Once in a while a cherub would turn to Harry, and pull its most innocent

face, eyes all wide and Disney-dewed, it'd look so *sad*. It'd beg, it'd rub its naked belly with its baby fingers, and it'd cry. "Daddy," the satnav would say at such moments. But however winning their performance, the cherubs still looked fat and oily, and their puffy cheeks were glowing.

Harry supposed they probably were starving to death. But not before he would.

One day Harry woke up to find Esther was on top of him. "Good morning," she said to him, brightly. It should have been agony she was there, but she was as light as air, as light as a feather.

Her face was so very close to his, it was her hot breath that had roused him. Now unfurled, the wings stretched the breadth of the entire car. Her halo was grazing the roof. The wings twitched a little as she smiled down at him and bared her teeth.

"I love you," she said.

"I know you do."

"I want you to know that."

"I do know it."

"Do you love me too?"

"Yes," he said.

And she brought that head towards his — that now spherical head, he could still recognise Esther in the features, but this was probably Esther as a child, as a darling baby girl — she brought down that head, and he couldn't move from it, she could do whatever she wanted. She opened her

mouth. She kissed the tip of his nose.

She sighed. "I'm so sorry, darling," she said.

"I'm sorry too."

"All the things we could have done together," she said.

"All the places we could have been. Where would we have gone, darling?"

"I was thinking of Venice," said Harry. "We'd probably have gone back there one day."

"Yes," said Esther doubtfully.

"And we never saw Paris. Paris is lovely. We could have gone up the Eiffel Tower. And that's just Europe. We could have gone to America too."

"I didn't need to go anywhere," Esther told him. "You know that, don't you? I'd have been just as happy at home, so long as you were there with me."

"I know," he said.

"There's so much I wanted to share with you," she said. "My whole life. My whole life. When I was working at the shop, if anything funny happened during the day, I'd store it up to tell you. I'd just think, I can share that now. Share it with my *hubby*. And we've been robbed. We were given one year. Just one year. And I wanted *forever*."

"Safari parks," remembered Harry.

"What?"

"We never did a safari park either.

"I love you," she said.

"I know," he said.

Her eyes watered, they were all wide and Disney-dewed. “I want you to remember me the right way,” she said. “Not covered with blood. Not mangled in a car crash. Remember me the way I was. Funny, I hope. Full of life. I don’t want you to spoil the memory.”

“Yes.”

“I want you to move on. Live your life without me. Have the courage to do that.”

“Yes. You’re going to kill me, aren’t you?”

She didn’t deny it. “All the things we could have done together. All the children we could have had.” And she gestured towards the single cherub now bobbing weakly against the window. “All the children.”

“Our children,” said Harry.

“Heaven is *filled* with our unborn children,” said Esther. “Yours and mine. Yours and mine. Darling. Didn’t you know that?” And her wings quivered at the thought.

She bent her head towards him again — but not yet, still not yet, another kiss, that’s all, a loving kiss. “It won’t be so bad,” she said. “I promise. It itches at first, it itches like hell. But it stops. And then you’ll be as light as air. As light as feathers.”

She folded her wings with a tight snap. “I’m still getting used to that,” she smiled. And she climbed off him, and sprawled back in her seat. The neck twisted, the limbs every which way — really, so ungainly. And she went to sleep. She’d taken to sleeping with her eyes open. Harry really

wished she wouldn't, it gave him the creeps.

Another set of tappings at the window. Harry looked around in irritation. There was the last cherub. Mewling at him, rubbing his belly. Harry liked to think it was the same cherub that he'd first seen, that it had been loyal to him somehow. But of course, there was really no way to tell. Tapping again, begging. So hungry. "Daddy," said the satnav. "My son," said Harry. "Daddy." "My son."

Harry wound down the window a little way. And immediately the little boy got excited, started scrabbling through the gap with his fingers. "Just a minute," said Harry, and he laughed even — and he gave the handle another turn, and the effort made him wince with the pain, but what was that, he was used to that. "Easy does it," he said to the hungry child. "Easy does it." And he stuck his hand out of the car.

The first instinct of his baby son was not to bite, it was to nuzzle. It rubbed its face against Harry's hand, and it even purred, it was something like a purr. It was a good five seconds at least before it sank its fangs into flesh.

And then Harry had his hand around its throat. The cherub gave a little gulp of surprise. "Daddy?" asked the satnav. It blinked with astonishment, just as it had echoed Harry's own expressions when they'd first met, and Harry thought, I taught him that, *I taught my little boy*. And he squeezed hard. The fat little cheeks bulged even fatter, it looked as if the whole head was now a balloon about to pop. And then he pulled that little child to him as fast as he

could — banging his head against the glass, thump, thump, *thump*, and the pain in his arm was appalling, but that was good, he *liked* the pain, he wanted it — thump one more time, and there was a crack, something broke, and the satnav said “Daddy,” so calm, so matter-of-fact — and then never spoke again.

He wound the window down further. He pulled in his broken baby boy.

He discovered that its entire back was covered with the same feathers that made up the wings. So for the next half hour he had to pluck it.

The first bite was the hardest. Then it all got a lot easier.

“Darling,” he said to Esther, but she wouldn’t wake up. “Darling, I’ve got dinner for you.” He hated the way she slept with her eyes open, just staring out sightless like that. And it wasn’t her face any more, it was the face of a cherub, of their dead son. “Please, you must eat this,” he said, and put a little of the creamy white meat between her lips; it just fell out on to her chin. “Please,” he said again, and this time it worked, it stayed in, she didn’t wake up, but it stayed in, she was eating, that was the main thing.

He kissed her then, on the lips. And he tasted what would have been. And yes, they would have gone to a safari park, and no, they wouldn’t have gone back to Venice, she’d have talked him out of it, but yes, America would have been all right. And yes, they would have had rows, real rows, once in a while, but that would have been okay, the marriage would

have survived, it would all have been okay. And yes, children, yes.

When he pulled his lips from hers she'd been given her old face back. He was so relieved he felt like crying. Then he realised he already was.

The meat had revived him. Raw as it was, it was the best he had ever tasted. He could do anything. Nothing could stop him now.

He forced his legs free from under the dashboard, it hurt a lot. And then he undid his seatbelt, and that hurt too. He climbed his way to Esther's door, he had to climb over Esther, "sorry, darling," he said, as he accidentally kicked her head. He opened the door. He fell outside. He took in breaths of air.

"I'm not leaving you," he said to Esther. "I can see the life we're going to have together." And yes, the head was on a bit funny, but he could live with that. And she had wings, but he could pluck them. He could pluck them as he had his son's.

He probably had some broken bones, he'd have to find out. So he shouldn't have been able to pick up his wife in his arms. But her wings helped, she was so light.

And it was carrying Esther that he made his way up the embankment, up through the bushes and brambles, up towards the road. And it was easy, it was as if he were floating — he was with the woman he loved, and he always would be, he'd never let her go, and she was so light, she was as light as feathers, she was as light as air.

Originally published in *Visitants: Stories of Fallen Angels & Heavenly Hosts*,
edited by Stephen Jones.

Reprinted by permission of the author.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Shearman has written five short story collections, and collectively they have won the World Fantasy Award, the Shirley Jackson Award, the Edge Hill Readers' Prize and three British Fantasy Awards. He began his career in theatre, both as playwright and director, and his work has won the Sunday Times Playwriting Award, the Sophie Winter Memorial Trust Award, and the Guinness Award for Ingenuity in association with the Royal National Theatre. His interactive series for BBC Radio Four, *The Chain Gang*, ran for three seasons and won two Sony Awards. However, he may be best known as a writer for *Doctor Who*, reintroducing the Daleks for its BAFTA winning first series in an episode nominated for a Hugo Award.

To learn more about the author and this story, read the [Author Spotlight](#).

An Army of Angels

Caspian Gray

“I have something I want to show you,” said Nancy. She stared at Jazmine from Jazmine’s front porch, wet and bedraggled. Nancy was a petite white woman with long hair the way teenage boys had long hair: tangled and perpetually in need of a good shampoo. Jazmine sighed and reached out to rest her hand on Nancy’s shoulder, then pulled back. They weren’t sixteen anymore, and that kind of intimacy was as unwelcome as Nancy showing up on her doorstep at eleven p.m., earnest and strange.

Jazmine sighed again, louder. “Are you off your medication again?”

“No.” Nancy snapped the word out, made it into shrapnel.

“Okay, then,” said Jazmine. “Okay. You can come in.” She took a towel out of the guest bathroom and offered it to Nancy, who took off her shoes and placed them neatly next to the door, then stood dripping on the carpet. Jazmine filled her coffee maker with water, then put a few bags of açai berry tea into the filter basket and turned it on. Nancy half-heartedly tousled her hair with the towel. They stood listening to the burble of the coffee maker and the quiet tap of rain against the window.

“Well?” Jazmine asked finally. “What do you want to show me?”

“It’s not here.” Nancy looked down at her feet. Jazmine noticed that one of her socks was white, the other neon pink. “You have to come over to my place.”

“Really.” Jazmine took two mugs out and put them on the counter. “You walked all the way over here at eleven at night, in the rain, to tell me I need to come over to your place. You couldn’t have called?”

“My phone died.” Nancy shrugged. “I don’t know where the charger is. Anyway it’s not that far. And I figured that once I got here you’d drive us back to my place. I know you don’t like the rain as much as I do.”

Jazmine tapped her fingernails against the counter. “Nobody likes the rain, Nance,” she said. “Not in the middle of November, when it’s freezing out.”

Nancy stared at her, blinking slowly. It was hard for Jazmine to reconcile the Nancy in her living room with the memory of Nancy in high school, the too-cool, too-loud chick full of weird ideas, without ever noticing how weird they were. Even now, Jazmine sometimes missed that girl.

“So,” said Nancy. “Are you gonna come with me? I can just walk back if you don’t want to.”

For a moment, Jazmine considered letting her do just that. She could drink tea by herself, read a little bit before bed, and congratulate herself on, just this once, not being the good guy.

But it was cold out, and Nancy was already soaking wet.

“Okay,” she said. “But let’s wait for the tea to finish. I’ll put it in a couple of thermoses. Did you even bring an

umbrella?”

“I had an umbrella. But I lost it a couple weeks ago, I think at the comic book store. Normally the guys there are real good about making sure I don’t forget things.”

“Mh,” said Jazmine. “What titles did you pick up?”

She let Nancy yammer about comic books while she poured them tea, got another towel for Nancy to sit on in the passenger seat, and poked around for an extra umbrella. Some of the superhero names she recognized from her own brief foray into geekdom, but much of it was incomprehensible. She would have needed subtitles, or at least footnotes, to follow her friend.

Jazmine followed her out to the car, still talking. She was more animated when she discussed comic books, more willing to look people in the eye, or at least enough in the face that it looked like normal eye contact. Nancy quieted on the ride back to her apartment, and fell totally silent in the parking lot.

“You know what?” she said suddenly, voice shrill. “Never mind. I don’t have anything to show you. Thanksfortheride.” She opened the door and hopped out while Jazmine was still parking, leaving Jazmine’s umbrella but taking one of the thermoses with her.

“Nance?” Jazmine called. “Nance!”

Nancy didn’t pause, and Jazmine rolled down her window.

“I would’ve just given you a ride!” she yelled. “You didn’t have to be weird!”

Nancy disappeared inside her apartment building.

• • • •

Their last year of high school, Nancy lost her mind.

“There’s an invasion coming,” she whispered to Jazmine during role call in home room. “I think I might be the only person who knows how to stop it.”

“What invasion?” Jazmine whispered back. It sounded to her like one of Nancy’s internet things, maybe a 4chan meme that hadn’t yet hit the rest of the web.

“I don’t know what to call them. I think they’re like demons. I think they come from Hell.”

Jazmine laughed, but Nancy just stared back at her, dark eyes woeful. “What we’ll need,” she said, her voice gradually gaining volume, “is an army of our own to fight them. An army of angels.”

The kids sitting around them turned in their chairs to see who was talking.

“I even know how to make an angel,” Nancy said. “It’s just that it’s so horrible. Who would be willing to do it, you know?”

“Sh,” Jazmine hissed. They were in their last semester, with an easy course load, and the last thing she wanted was detention with the warmth of summer at the door.

“I mean it,” Nancy announced, pushing her chair away from her desk with a *screech* and standing up. “Who will help me? Who will help me save the world?”

Jazmine swallowed and stopped laughing abruptly. The whole room was quiet for a moment, before the kids in the

back row started cackling and the teacher up front tried to take control of the room.

“What we’re going to need,” Nancy bellowed over everyone else, “is an army of angels!”

But that was only her first public meltdown. She had privately been getting crazier and crazier for months, tiny outbursts and non sequiturs that Jazmine dismissed as Nancy taking on the bullshit persona of a manic pixie dream girl, stretching out her teenage identity the same way all their other friends were — except it was Nancy, so she was doing it weirder.

Starting with her army of angels rant, she got weird in a way that nobody thought was funny anymore. A way that got her parents to pull her from school, and send her to a “retreat” in South Carolina for four months. Nancy came back with her GED and a different set to her face. She was an adult after that, while Jazmine and the rest of her friends remained defiantly, pathetically eighteen.

But as long as Nancy stayed on her meds, everything was fine.

• • • •

“Where did you go last night?” Tim asked. “I thought I heard the car around midnight.” He’d come home from work bearing beef with tomatoes and a big carton of fried rice.

“It wasn’t midnight.” Jazmine took a couple of beers out of the fridge and poured them into pint glasses. “It was only a

little after eleven.”

Tim raised his eyebrows.

“Nothing.” Jazmine sighed. “Nance walked over and I gave her a ride home.”

“Walked over? Here? From where?”

“I have no idea. Her apartment, maybe? Or the comic book shop. I don’t know.” Jazmine piled rice onto two plates and then distributed the beef and tomato, giving Tim a slightly larger portion than she gave herself. “She was acting a little weird.”

Tim laughed. “Nancy acting weird? I can’t believe it.”

“I do worry about her, though. I liked it better when she had a roommate. I don’t feel like Nance has anyone to ground her right now.”

“She’s holding down a job, right?”

“Yes.” Jazmine frowned. “At least, I think so. We haven’t talked about it lately.”

“You’re a great friend to her,” Tim said. Jazmine rolled her eyes. “No, I mean it,” said Tim. “You’re a really good friend. And sometimes Nancy uses that.”

“She doesn’t *use* me. She just doesn’t have anyone else to rely on.”

Tim shrugged and set up a folding table in front of the couch. He flipped on the TV, and, in a particularly chivalrous gesture, selected one of Jazmine’s period dramas over the reality television he preferred. Their DVR had caught the tail end of the program before, a local news segment. The

reporter was interviewing a woman whose crying made her so unintelligible that they'd subtitled her.

"I'd never seen anything like it," she sobbed. "I didn't know this could happen here."

Jazmine curled in beside Tim and dug into her rice, ignoring the TV. The house was warm; it had finally stopped raining. She felt good about her place in the world.

• • • •

Jazmine sat up in bed, thinking for a moment that she'd set the alarm on her cell phone wrong.

"Answer it," moaned Tim.

She realized her phone was ringing, not buzzing its alarm, and stumbled out of bed to grab it from the bureau.

The screen displayed Nancy's name. Jazmine closed her eyes and forced herself not to reject the call.

"Hello?"

"Jazmine? Are you awake?"

Jazmine closed the bedroom door behind her and flipped on the light in the hall.

"Yes," she said slowly. "I am obviously awake. I was not before you called."

"Sorry," said Nancy, throwing the word out because it was necessary rather than because she meant it. "I changed my mind again. Can you come over?"

"What?"

"I need you to come over and see what's in my closet."

“What.” Jazmine pulled the phone away from her face and stared at the screen. Instead of a photo of Nancy, her screen displayed a picture of Toyman, the drastically underpowered *Superman* villain who could’ve been another Lex Luthor but instead focused his genius on shit like building toy soldiers with real guns. Nancy was silent.

“Okay,” said Jazmine. “I can come over tomorrow on my way home from work. You can show me whatever you want.”

“No,” said Nancy. “I need you to come over now.”

“Jesus Christ, Nance. Can you not get your shit together? Can you not even pretend to be normal for one whole fucking day?” The words came out in a nasty hiss, so Jazmine wouldn’t risk waking up Tim.

“Oh god.” Nancy lowered her voice to match Jazmine’s. “Did you already find out? Is that why you’re angry?”

Jazmine inhaled, exhaled, and forced her voice to a normal volume, expressing no more than a “normal” amount of irritation.

“Sometimes,” she said carefully, “I get upset when you treat me with what I perceive as disrespect. Things like asking me for a ride home by telling a weird lie, or waking me up in the middle of the night. Does that make sense to you?”

“I’m not disrespecting you,” said Nancy. “I just got scared that when I show you this, you won’t like me anymore.”

“What is it, Nancy?” Jazmine drew out the last syllable of Nancy’s name, the way Nancy’s mother used to when she was in trouble.

Nancy swallowed audibly. “I can’t tell you. You just have to come over and see it.” She sounded like she was about to cry, and Jazmine felt like an asshole. She was getting angry with her childhood best friend for being mentally ill.

“Please,” Nancy breathed. “If you don’t come now, I don’t think I’ll have the courage to ask you again.”

Jazmine looked down at her threadbare T-shirt and flannel pajama pants. “Okay,” she said. “Okay.”

• • • •

The door to Nancy’s apartment building was busted, and hadn’t been fixed since Jazmine and Tim helped her move in. The lobby smelled like urine, but the carpeted halls of the upper levels were mostly clean and mostly well-lit.

Nancy didn’t answer when Jazmine knocked, and the anger she’d swallowed to drive over here came hurtling back to the top of her consciousness. Jazmine pounded on the door, then stopped when it slowly opened, revealing Nancy standing in the middle of a dark room. Jazmine could still see traces of sixteen-year-old Nancy in the bones of her face, but she now looked more like a stranger than a friend. Her hair was stringy, her dark eyes wide in the shadows, her whimsically mismatched socks taken off to reveal bare feet with long white toenails that curled around her toes.

Nancy looked sick.

Jazmine’s anger drained out of her again, leaving a void.

“I have your thermos,” Nancy said. “I just wanted to finish

my tea, not *take it* take it.”

“No, that’s fine.” Jazmine stepped into the apartment, but not enough that Nancy could close the door behind her. “I figured that was the case.”

“It’s around here somewhere.” Nancy gestured at the mess of her possessions, objects barely distinguishable in the gloom.

“That’s fine,” Jazmine said again. She raised her head up and stepped all the way inside. Nancy needed *help*, not awkwardness. All the same, she was careful not to lock the door behind her. “What did you want to show me, Nance? Is everything okay?”

Nancy dug the toes of one foot under the other. “It’s almost finished,” she said. “I didn’t want to show anyone, but I don’t think I can *not* show anyone, either. I don’t think there’s a right way to do this, so I’m just trying very hard not to do it all wrong.”

“Do what?” asked Jazmine. She reached out and took one of Nancy’s hands. Up close she could see that something brown had crusted under Nancy’s fingernails. She held on despite her disgust. Nancy squeezed her hand and then pulled her deeper into the apartment, to her bedroom. It was lit only by the light of a streetlight coming through the bare window.

“You can sit down,” said Nancy, releasing her hand. Jazmine looked around the room, but Nancy’s floor, her desk, even her bed was covered with a miscellany of junk.

“I’ll stand,” she murmured. Nancy ignored her, hedging

toward the only other door in the room. Jazmine squinted at it, wondering where it could possibly lead, before she realized it was a closet. There was light coming through the crack between the door and the floor.

“Close your eyes,” Nancy ordered, without looking over her shoulder. “No, never mind, keep them open.”

She opened the closet door.

Inside, it was lit with what looked like high-powered LED grow lights. Underneath them weren't pot plants or the beginning of a garden, but a raw, quivering mass of flesh, slick with blood. Jazmine gasped, and the thing opened several eyes and turned them all to look at her. The eyes were different shades of color, most brown and two of them a piercing green.

“What the fuck is this?” Jazmine shrieked, backing away and tripping over a stack of comic books. Nancy took her by the wrist to help her back to her feet, and Jazmine saw that the dirt under her nails was dried blood. Nancy started crying.

“I'm so sorry,” she said. “I didn't know how to explain. Do you hate me?”

Jazmine stared at the monster, not her friend. It didn't seem capable of movement or speech, but beneath Nancy's tears she could hear the sound of it breathing.

“It's the angel,” Nancy sobbed. “I made it to save us.”

Jazmine drew away from her. “What,” she asked slowly, “did you make it out of?”

Nancy just cried.

“I’m going home,” said Jazmine. “I’m calling the police.”
The angel blinked at her. Nancy stifled her sobs and stood up straight.

“You can’t,” she said softly. “Jaz, I won’t let you.”

Jazmine made a break for the door, scattering a pile of paperbacks. Nancy jumped after her, bare feet scrabbling for traction across the slick book covers, and she slipped and knocked her head against the door frame. Jazmine kept going, leaving the apartment door wide open and taking the stairs three at a time, clinging to the bannister for balance. Nancy charged after her, and Jazmine pulled her keys out of her pocket as she ran, determined not to stumble, determined not to drop them in the parking lot. She felt perfectly clear, aware of her own physicality in a way that she hadn’t been since she was cut from her high school basketball team. She wished she’d worn proper shoes instead of the hard-soled slippers that were the first thing her fingers found in the closet.

She made it all the way out to her car, key in the lock, before Nancy tackled her from behind, tangling her fingers in Jazmine’s braids and slamming her face into the car door. Jazmine arched her back and threw an elbow, catching Nancy in the throat. Nancy stumbled back, croaking, and released Jazmine to wrap protective hands around her neck. Jazmine hurled herself at the car, tearing the door open and clambering inside. Nancy reached for her, her own hand fumbling around Jazmine’s knee, and Jazmine hesitated only a moment before slamming the door shut on her arm. Nancy screeched, and

Jazmine opened the door enough to let her withdraw before slamming it again and reversing at a speed that knocked her against the steering wheel.

She drove to the nearest fire station instead of driving home, and tried to decide if Nancy being crazy would outweigh Nancy being white in the eyes of their suburban police. Blood poured out of her nose, soaking the front of her shirt, and she wished she'd put on proper clothes, instead of just throwing a sweater over her pajamas and tucking her flannel pants into a pair of slippers. She looked pretty crazy herself.

But one of Jazmine's uncles was a fireman, and firemen seemed like good people in a way that the police never did, so she wiped as much blood off her face as she could with her sleeve and went inside.

She passed the unmanned front desk. The whole building was dark, except for the flicker of blue television light from further inside. One man sat by himself, watching a *South Park* rerun in sweatpants and a wife-beater. He was at least a decade older than Jazmine, overweight without being obese, with a bald spot that had grown until what was left of his hair looked like a monastic tonsure. Jazmine walked toward him silently, until she stood between him and the TV.

“What the hell!” He jumped to his feet.

“I need help,” said Jazmine. “I think my best friend murdered a man.”

“What the hell,” the man repeated more softly, taking in

her bleeding face and unsteady stance. “Hold on, honey,” he said. “Sit down. I’m going to get the first aid kit, okay? Sit down, and when I get back you can tell me what happened.”

Jazmine did sit down, and she started shaking, or maybe realized that she’d been shaking for a while. It was cool and dry in the firehouse den, and she closed her eyes, listening to familiar jingles as *South Park* cut to commercial.

When the fireman came back, he brought a slew of other men with him, all of them half-asleep and yet hyper-alert, men who were used to being wakened in the middle of the night to deal with other people’s disasters.

“It’s just a nose bleed,” said Jazmine, as a different man knelt and dabbed carefully at her face. “My friend attacked me. I think she killed someone. She’s been on meds for years, but I never thought she was *violent*, just sad-normal crazy, and now I think there’s a corpse in her closet.”

Jazmine couldn’t think what to call it, or what that angel was made of — only that someone had died to create it. She thought of the different colored eyes, and realized probably more than one person had died.

But there were no words to describe the angel, so she told the firemen Nancy’s name and address, and let them deal with the police. In the long quiet wait for something — anything — to happen, she fell asleep.

• • • •

“Jesus, Jazmine,” said Tim. He hovered over her, his face

pale. “What did Nancy do to you?”

Jazmine tried to sit up without getting very far. She felt like she was wearing someone else’s body instead of her own. Someone clumsier and thicker.

“Hey,” said Tim. “Hey hey hey. It’s okay. Lie down. You want me to get you a glass of water?”

He didn’t wait for an answer, just turned around to retrieve a paper cup of water and lifted it gently to her lips.

“You have a concussion,” he explained. “Fortunately you went down surrounded by paramedics, so these guys have been taking care of you.” He gestured behind him, and Jazmine recognized the firemen in the next room, gathered around the television without paying it any attention. She was in an empty bunk room, with Tim crouched next to her and the firemen pretending not to watch.

“They said you were assaulted?” Tim said. “. . . By Nancy?”

“I think Nancy killed someone,” said Jazmine. “She showed me the corpse. I told her I was going to call the police, and Nancy attacked me. We fought in the parking lot.” She thought for a moment that she would cry, but when Jazmine paused for tears, there were none.

“Do we have to stay?” she asked. “I want to go home.”

“I don’t know.”

“Let the firemen make copies of our drivers’ licenses. Then drive me home, Tim.”

The firehouse turned out not to have a copy machine or a

scanner, so Tim wrote out all the information on their drivers' licenses long hand, and then carted Jazmine to his car. They left hers parked on the street, only a little bit crooked, with a new dent in the door that Jazmine was horrified to realize had been made with her own head.

Tim made Jazmine a mug of warm milk with whiskey and cinnamon, and kept her awake for a few hours by reading passages of *The Little Prince*, until the danger of a concussion had passed.

While she slept, the angel found her.

• • • •

The world boiled.

Jazmine hopped from one foot to the other. She was naked, and the world was a sand pit, glowing orange with the light of the sun. Even the air was hot on her tongue.

"Tim?" she called, looking around for her boyfriend. The world was empty except for sand and heat.

"Tim?" she called again. Then, as sand scalded the balls of her feet, "What the hell?"

When she turned her face to the sky, the sun burnt its image into her eyelids.

"Is this hell?" she asked, sure that Nancy's talk of angels and the apocalypse had gotten to her.

"This isn't hell," said Nancy, who suddenly stood before her, as real as the heat. It was sixteen-year-old Nancy, in her blue-and-white striped knee socks, back after her hair got wild

but before she started forgetting to wash it.

“It sure looks like hell,” snapped Jazmine, who had no frame of reference beyond childhood sermons.

“It isn’t,” said Nancy. “This is what the end of the world looks like. This is what happens without angels to defend us.”

Jazmine squinted past Nancy, then turned her head. In every direction, there was only sand, only nothingness.

“Nance,” she said slowly, “who did you kill to make that angel?”

Nancy shrugged. “I didn’t know them. It doesn’t matter.” She closed her eyes and exhaled. “No, it matters very deeply. I don’t even have the words to tell you how sad I am. But this is the only way to save the world, Jazmine. It doesn’t matter that a few people have to die. It doesn’t matter if you become a murderer.”

“Dammit!” Jazmine kicked the ground, sending a shower of sand into the air. “I’m sorry I didn’t watch you better, Nance. I’m sorry I didn’t make sure you were taking your pills. I’m sorry I wasn’t a better friend.”

Nancy put a hand on Jazmine’s shoulder. Her palm was cool, and Jazmine leaned into the touch, the only nice thing in this nightmare.

“This isn’t about schizophrenia.” Nancy offered a chalky smile. “And you saved me the only way you could. I love you, Jazmine. You’re my best friend.”

Jazmine stepped forward to pull Nancy into a hug, to forgive her for being crazy, to luxuriate in the temperature of

her skin.

Nancy disappeared, and in her place was the angel.

It was not the same lump it had been in the closet. It held something approximating human shape now, with a ring of eyes around its head and legs that were long and coltish. It opened its mouth to speak. The hole behind its lips was rimmed with layers of teeth, like a leech. Instead of using a voice, it hissed.

“This is your fault,” Jazmine told it, her voice steady now that she was safe and dreaming. “Whatever the fuck you are, you ruined my best friend.”

The angel tilted its raw flesh head and reached out for Jazmine, to rest its hand the same place Nancy had.

Jazmine woke up.

• • • •

The police came late in the morning, and Jazmine was impressed by this show of civility, until she realized that the detectives had probably just spent the morning doing paperwork and running interference with the press. Tim held her hand for their brief interview, and once Jazmine had heard what she needed to, she stopped paying attention.

The remains of multiple corpses were found in Nancy’s apartment. Not *whole* corpses, and in some cases not even *most* of the corpses. But remains. They were very interested in what Jazmine had seen in the closet, because all that was left when they arrived was bloodstains.

Nancy Morvillo was found not in the parking lot, but a block away, making her escape on foot. When police approached her, she produced a gun and started firing wildly. The police responded with fire, and by the time they got her to the hospital, it was only so that a doctor could pronounce her dead at 04:07.

None of her shots had come remotely close to hitting anyone, and one of the officers present believed it was more suicide by cop than an actual attempt to flee the scene of her crime.

“Weird,” Tim told her later, “that Nancy would kill innocent strangers but have a hard time shooting cops.”

But Jazmine could not imagine Nancy killing anyone, and the idea of her with a gun was ridiculous, comical. Who the hell had sold a gun to a schizophrenic with delusions of the apocalypse?

“Did you contact her parents yet?” she asked, interrupting the detective speaking. She had a plain face and wide hands, which she gestured with while speaking.

“Yes,” the detective said, dropping her hands to her lap. “They’ve been informed.” She returned Jazmine’s stare, and for the first time seemed to notice the thousand-yard quality of it. She stood up abruptly, and the other detective followed suit.

“Ma’am, would it be convenient for us to follow up with you tomorrow?”

“Yes. That would be . . . convenient.” She let Tim escort

them to the door. Jazmine wanted to appreciate their willingness to leave and let her mourn, but all she could think was that their friends had shot her friend, and then she hated them.

It surprised her, a little bit, how much she hated them.

• • • •

The funeral was crowded, with flowers occupying every corner, despite the family's request that, in lieu of flowers, donations be made to the Animal Welfare Society. Their choice of charity seemed somewhat inexplicable to Jazmine — had Nancy harbored a passionate love for animals, somehow kept secret from her best friend for all these years? But who would bother to keep something so normal and so nice a secret?

Probably a murderer would.

Probably a love for housecats was the least weird secret Nancy had ever kept.

The funeral was full of their friends and peers, but also enough strangers that Jazmine became convinced that most of them were reporters. They were well-coiffed, these strangers, and better-dressed than anyone she and Nancy had gone to high school with.

She hugged Nancy's parents, and her mother pulled Jazmine tight and asked her how she was holding up. Jazmine rested her head against Nancy's mother's shoulder, and left in the middle of the service. There was no possible sermon

worth hearing that could have been prompted by Nancy's life and death. There was no message to be taken away, no good that would come of it.

Tim held her hand on the walk from the car to the house, and when he opened the front door, the angel was waiting for them.

It stood taller than both of them, the top of its sticky, hairless head almost brushing the ceiling. Enormous wings sprouted from its back, like bleeding, fleshy hands, large enough to carry all three of them away.

Jazmine screamed. Tim dropped her hand and stumbled back out onto the porch. The angel lunged at him, and Jazmine slammed the door shut in its face and tipped the lock, trapping she and it in the living room.

It dropped to one knee, shaking the floor.

"I require your help," it said, bowing its head. Its voice was as raw as its face, with something harsh in it she had never heard in a voice before, like hot wind over sand at the end of the world.

"I'll call the police," said Jazmine, articulating each word carefully, and it wasn't until all of them were out of her mouth that she realized how ridiculous they were.

Tim knocked on the door. "Jazmine?" he called.

"I will need an army," said the angel, rising up to its full height. "I cannot save the world alone. And only you can build me an army."

"Get out of my house!" Jazmine yelled. "Get out of my

house and leave me alone!”

“I will teach you how to assemble us,” said the angel. “At first it will be difficult, but with time you will learn that it is easier than you might have believed.”

“Get. Out. Of. My. House,” she hissed.

“Jazmine?” called Tim again. He sounded concerned but distant, his lack of panic utterly inadequate to the situation.

“Hon, what are you doing in there? Please unlock the door.”

“I will return for you,” said the angel. “Together, the world we can create will be beautiful.”

It disappeared.

Shaking, Jazmine unlocked the door and let Tim inside.

“Hon, are you okay?” He came around to face her and looked into her face with naked concern.

“Didn’t you see the angel?” she asked. “Why did you run back outside?”

“Hon — ” Tim squeezed her shoulder, “You hollered and pushed me out the door.”

“Nancy’s angel,” she said. “It came to visit me.”

Tim’s expression would have broken her heart, if her heart hadn’t already felt so broken. “Oh, Jaz,” he whispered. “I’m so sorry. Let’s sit down, okay? You’re under a *lot* of stress right now, and I think that concussion might still be with you.”

He guided her to the sofa, where Jazmine pulled her legs up to her chest and held them there.

“Nancy’s angel was in the house,” she repeated.

Tim murmured soothing words to her, about love and

grief, words that Jazmine barely heard. Like distant fire, she could feel the heat of that desert dreamscape, no more and no less real than the angel that had shown it to her.

This was how Nancy had started, she realized. She wondered how long the angel had haunted her before Nancy capitulated to saving the world.

Jazmine hoped she could last at least as long.

© 2015 by Caspian Gray.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caspian Gray currently lives in Columbus, Ohio, where he shares a home with two humans and a small dachshund. He's a used car salesman who has previously worked as a funeral director's apprentice, a pet nutritionist, and an English teacher to a group of Korean engineers living in Japan. His work has appeared in magazines such as *ChiZine*, *Interzone*, and *Odyssey*.

To learn more about the author and this story, read the [Author Spotlight](#).

The Burned House

Lynda E. Rucker

One you're at the yard . . .

The burned house stood at the back of a scrubby lot. If a house could be said to glower, then glower it did: rising from the ashes which were all that was left of its south face, sitting back on its haunches, its wooden front porch inexplicably wrapped in chicken wire (to keep out trespassers? to keep something in?), its second floor rearing up and threatening to topple.

The *For Sale* sign had been there forever — whoever had first put it there was probably dead by now — and punctuated the scene like a particularly unfunny joke. Nobody was ever going to buy the burned house.

Agnes Swithin, jogging through the chilly dusk, her breath steaming, slowed and then stopped before it. Her kneecap had begun to throb again. She clutched at the splintery fence with hands that looked older than she felt, the skin translucent over knots of prominent blue veins, and willed the pain to move up through her body and out her fingers. The doctor said running made it worse, but Agnes couldn't bear being sedentary. *Why don't you try swimming or walking*, the doctor had said helpfully, a fresh-faced young woman Agnes might have taught just a few years earlier, who clearly (Agnes imagined)

thought that she, Agnes, ought to be engaged in a more geriatric form of exercise. Afternoons in the pool at the Y surrounded by soft fleshy women wearing bathing suits modestly trimmed with skirts. Yoga for the ancient and decrepit. Agnes had never actually been to the senior yoga class, the pool, or even the Y itself, but she felt she could picture it all the same.

She caught her breath, then, not from exertion, nor from the pain in her knee.

A girl in a white dress had emerged from round the south side of the house. The girl was thin — too thin, transparently thin, head and hands and feet like bough-breaking burdens on the ends of twig-like neck and arms and legs. The legs were bare, the dress stark white against tanned skin. Or it might have been a nightgown. She could have been twelve, fifteen, older; her frailty lent her an ageless quality. Agnes, who resolutely did not believe in ghosts, imagined for a bad moment or two that she was looking at precisely that.

Two you're through the gate . . .

The truth about the burned house was that if you thought about it too much, you realized it was an enigma, only nobody thought about it much at all. The house had stood in its dilapidated state for as long as anyone knew, including Agnes, who had just entered her seventh decade. The house had neither been condemned nor selected for restoration; it

simply was. Yet over those decades it could not be said to have deteriorated further, not in any significant sense. The roof ought to be gone, the walls collapsed, the house reduced to a pile of boards over its long years of neglect, and it was not. A gutter might have unhinged itself, a pilaster might have crumbled, but overall it aged with an enviable and impossible grace, apparently ticking along in its very own timestream.

People rarely noticed, because they rarely thought about the burned house. Sometimes it was remembered in the manner of a dream that returns moodily and incompletely to consciousness: “Oh! I wonder if the burned house is still there?” Rarely did anyone venture to find out. Just as dreams never make sense as the conscious mind tries to catch hold of them, neither did the burned house.

The lots on either side of it were empty, and an old bungalow sat on the one just behind it, a bungalow perpetually for rent because it never kept its tenants long. A weather-beaten Big Wheel waited forlornly in the weeds of the neat brick ranch house just across the street.

The dead-end street itself had bad associations: people tended to avoid it, although nobody could really say why. There was little reason to turn down it unless you were unfortunate enough to live there, for however short a time, and if you were tempted to do so — perhaps you had followed confusing and incomplete directions and needed to turn the car around and start over in the opposite direction — well, there was a more agreeable cul-de-sac a block away that

would do. Agnes rarely if ever had gone for a run down the street on which the burned house stood. Earlier, as the evening was creeping in, she had been on the phone with her brother, and something he said stirred old memories, and she thought as others had done before her — *oh! the burned house!* — and now she was here, just before the gate, like the old jump rope rhyme they'd recited as children.

Three you're at the window . . .

The girl raised an arm in greeting, and Agnes raised one back, reassured. It seemed unlikely that a ghost would proffer a friendly hello.

The girl said, "You look cold. Why don't you come in and have some coffee?"

Her voice was not ghostly, either; in fact, a south Georgia twang flattened it, same as most everyone in those parts. She pronounced coffee "cawfee." Agnes, whose curiosity had nearly been her undoing on more than one occasion, said that did sound tempting.

"Come on round the back," said the girl.

Agnes said, "No, I couldn't, really," or maybe it was, "No, I *shouldn't*;" or she intended to. Yet even as she thought to say it she picked her way through the knee-high weeds of the front yard, and heard herself not declining the invitation, but describing the scene to an acquaintance later: *It was like some unseen force had taken hold of me.* That didn't seem quite

right. If an unseen force had you in its grip, would you necessarily know what it did or did not compel you to do? Would it move you bodily, or would it nestle in the folds of your brain, induce you to actions even as you continued to believe that you were in charge of yourself? She thought this even as she rounded the corner to a backyard more overgrown than the front, as she observed the broken windows, the scattering of dead leaves across the concrete steps of the back porch, even as she knew when the girl took her hand that she took the hand of a ghost.

Four you're tempting fate . . .

More than fifty years ago, as children, Agnes and her brother and their friends had dared one another to go near the burned house — to pass through its wooden gate, to run and touch its crumbling chicken-wire porch — but Agnes, at least, never got that close. Her brother, an important (by his account) Los Angeles entertainment attorney, had not returned to town since their mother's untimely death from breast cancer thirty years earlier. *Don't know how you do it, Aggie*, he would say with false heartiness over the phone. He never said what he meant by "do it;" staying in one place, she supposed, years of teaching science at the local high school. Her life must have seemed impossibly dull to him.

I dare you; I double dare you; I double double dare you; I double triple dare you! With such linguistic improbabilities

they raised the stakes so high that somebody had to give sooner or later. They'd conjured shapes at the window of the burned house, and shadows of the dead lurching through the ash. And when they jumped rope or played hopscotch or wanted to scare their smaller siblings, they had the jump rope rhyme. Agnes could no longer remember all the words but it was a piece of silly counting doggerel. The words and cadence kept her awake as a child as she invented superstitions to accompany them; if she spoke without errors, she could pass another night safely.

Five you're past the doorway . . .

“Coffee,” the girl said again, as if to remind her.

The kitchen was an old-fashioned one, which only made sense, Agnes supposed. The neat gas stove with its quaint cupboard-sized oven bore the name “Magic Chef” in script-like letters. In the corner stood an icebox, its wooden doors fixed shut with heavy metal clasps. The room stirred a memory of her grandmother's kitchen. But a fine undisturbed ash covered the countertops, the range, the large wooden table flush against the far window, the chairs and the sink. Agnes trailed one finger through the cinders along the counter nearest her. When she looked again at the mark she'd left it was gone. *As if I am the ghost, not her.*

The girl thrust a steaming cup of not-ghostly coffee at her. “Milk? Sugar?”

“Black,” said Agnes. She sipped. The coffee tasted eighty years old.

The girl was not drinking any coffee herself. The house was as cold inside as it was outside, but the girl looked flushed. As Agnes watched, little blisters appeared on her upper lip, then the bare skin of her arms, and then, as her lips blackened, she said, “I’m sorry,” and fled through the adjoining blue door.

Agnes waited, but the girl did not reappear. She put down the mug of coffee and followed the girl through the door.

Six you’re in the hall . . .

Agnes and her brother were not, had never been, close. They did not reminisce fondly about the past. On the rare occasions that they did speak, they talked about nothing: his latest wife, the antics of his spoiled children, which of his hot new clients she might have heard of. (None — he did a lot of work for West Coast hip hop artists, whose names Agnes only recognized through the occasional overheard student conversation.) They never really discussed Agnes’s life, and they both preferred it that way; he didn’t like to listen and she didn’t like to share.

But earlier that evening she’d phoned because she thought she remembered that one of her nieces had a birthday coming up soon. She had a vague, unrequited sense of obligation toward the lot of them, although she had trouble keeping

names and numbers straight (having never met them, for one thing). And it turned out she had just missed Cameron's birthday — a nephew, not a niece — and he was out, anyway, so that left Agnes and her brother exchanging uncomfortable pleasantries.

Her brother was the one who brought it up. “The damndest thing,” he said. “One of my client's houses almost burned down the other night, and it got me thinking about that burned house, the one we used to play in. You remember it?”

She remembered it, but they never went inside; she was sure of it.

“No,” he said, “no, I did. You weren't there, maybe. I remember I was with some older kids.”

She asked what it was like.

He barked out a little laugh. “Scary as hell,” he said. “I wonder if kids still play around it. Kids there still play outside anymore? They don't here.”

“I can't imagine it's still there any longer,” she said, even though she knew better.

“Maybe not.” He sounded regretful.

“How's Veronica?” she said. Veronica was his new wife. He told her, but she wasn't listening anymore. He'd unlocked the jump rope chant in her head, at least a few lines of it, and those lines kept running circles till they ran her right down to the burned house itself.

Seven on the stairway . . .

No one waited in the hallway beyond. No footsteps, no sounds of life at all. For one moment Agnes thought it was snowing inside; then she realized it was fine cinders, swirling and falling all about her. Her footprints vanished as she made them, buried by the ash.

Framed photographs hung along the wall, covered in blackened, melting glass. She wondered then where the light source lay; it could only be glowing embers of the fire itself, but she saw no actual flames. Agnes passed several closed doors on her way to the staircase at the front of the house. She knew that stairs in a derelict house were likely to be dangerous, but she couldn't bring herself to leave after having seen so little. All along the stair runner, a blue carpet woven with gold threads, little burning rings formed and re-formed. She was sorry she hadn't asked the girl her name, so she could call for her.

Top of the stairs, and another corridor. She followed the crackling sound, and the smell of smoke.

Behind her, a child's voice said, "Hello."

The small boy was dressed in blue striped pajamas.

"Have you come to rescue us?" the boy asked.

Eight you feel the pall . . .

"No," Agnes's mother had said. "No, I don't want you

playing around that old place. Wasn't it condemned?" It was not.

"What happened?" Agnes asked her mother. "Do you remember? Who lived there? Did anybody die when it burned?" She was so young that she still believed herself immortal, and thought those capable of dying a different species altogether.

"Oh, it's a terrible story. They couldn't get the children out in time. Some people said it was the mother, that she'd drugged the household so she could run away with a man that night." Her mother paused significantly. "A Negro man," she said. "It happened in the evening, just before nightfall. The husband was out of town on business. Some people said those children weren't even his." Her mother kissed the top of her head. "You shouldn't think about it, Agnes Swithin. It happened a long time ago, before you were born. Even I was just a baby. Who's been filling your head with stories?"

Agnes, wondering who the children could belong to if not their father, said, "No one."

Nine you're walking slowly . . .

Agnes could not say why she felt some time had passed, but she was certain of it. She looked at her watch, the expensive Garmin she'd bought to train for a 10K before the knee injury, but its face had melted.

"I don't know. Do you need rescuing?"

“My sister says so. Where is she?”

“I don’t know,” Agnes said. “She asked me and then . . .” She had almost said *she vanished*, but it seemed rude; was it wrong to remind a ghost that it was, in fact, a ghost?

The boy said, matter-of-factly, “No one ever helps us.”

Agnes wondered what kind of help she could possibly render. To the south, the corridor was lost in darkness. The burned wing. “What’s down there?”

The boy, who had come to stand beside her, replied in the same matter-of-fact voice. “That’s where we died.”

They walked toward it together. Agnes had begun to shiver with the cold, but as they neared the south wing, although she could still see nothing, she felt the heat of the flames. She hoped the boy would not begin to blacken and char beside her as the girl had done downstairs.

He came to an abrupt stop long before she could see the corridor’s end. He said, “You’re not a kid.” She didn’t answer, and he added, “I can’t keep going.”

But Agnes could. She remembered as she walked that the burned wing was nothing but ash now, and wondered what she must look like to an observer: two stories high and floating on air.

Ten watch where you tread . . .

The child’s game said you were “getting warmer” as you approached the source. Agnes never saw the burned south

wing until she was in it. One moment the corridor lay dark before her; the next, she stepped into the flames.

Agnes gasped. She walked on flames; they could not touch her but they billowed out before her like a grand cascading carpet. The fire roared in her ears, and beyond that lay only silence. The smoke rose about her but she did not breathe it. She reached out to touch a doorknob licked by fire, and passed her hand through the flames without injury.

The door swung open at her touch. She passed through another doorway, where the room was engulfed, as was the four-poster bed in the center. As she drew nearer, she saw the boy and his sister there, looking for all the world as though they slept peacefully.

The boy's eyes snapped open. "You're not a kid," he said again. "It's only kids who can come here. Why are you here? Who are you? What's wrong with you?" His face had turned dark, and angry.

Agnes tried to speak, to tell them something, but when she opened her mouth, smoke wafted out instead of words.

Eleven bid goodbye now . . .

Agnes is ten years old. Someone has just told her that after you're dead, your nails and hair keep growing. For some reason, Agnes has understood this to mean that if she removes her nails and hair, she will never, ever die. She trims her nails too close to the quick but cannot yet bring herself to

go any further; she has already chopped her hair close against her scalp when her mother comes across her sobbing at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. Later her mother will take her for her first-ever hair appointment at a beauty shop downtown, where a girl will valiantly try and fail to make sense of the butchery Agnes has inflicted upon her own locks.

Agnes is sixty-one years old. Someone has just told her it's always cold where the dead sleep, even the dead who have burned to death. Who would tell her such a thing? Maybe it was a thing she dreamed. In this gloaming, in this dying of the day, the burned house is burning down and the dead are dying all the time. Soon, dying is all the dead know how to do. But this time is different. And time is different here. This time is sirens; someone has seen the flames leaping from the burned house, and called the emergency numbers. But the fire will be fought from the outside. No one will risk themselves racing into the burned house, because they imagine there will be no one inside to save.

Twelve you're here instead . . .

“One thing,” said her brother. They had said their goodbyes already. Agnes had one hand on the front doorknob; she was ready to drop the phone on the counter and head out on her run. “One thing,” he said again. “Don't go near the burned house. Or the place where it used to be, at least.”

Agnes said, “Why on earth would I do that?”
“Just don’t.”

Thirteen now you’re dead . . .

Agnes Swithin dreams in flames. Yellows, oranges blues and reds, blazing, writhing, birthing sparks that flare into new and bigger fires, blackened wood and charred flesh and all transformed, gone to cinder, gone to ash.

She can see shapes of people gathering, lining the sidewalk outside. She will run to them. She is a good runner, and she will join them easily. She leaps to her feet, but something is holding her back. They have her by the arms, the girl and her brother, and when she looks at them their faces are not the smooth unblemished faces of childhood, but burned and ravaged horrors. Surely she can shake them free; she will tear their arms from their sockets if she has to. She staggers forth and she can hear the murmur going up from the crowd.

“Someone’s in the fire.”

She tries to call out to them, to tell them yes, someone *is* in the fire, it’s Agnes Swithin, the biology teacher from the high school. They will know her. They will save her. She can even see some of their faces, some she recognizes: students, and parents of students, some of whom she taught as well. And yet the two are still tugging at her, and all of them are weeping. A large burning chunk of the second story roof plummets before her, throwing up more flames and black,

choking smoke and cutting off the rest of the world. The faces, the crowd itself, are lost to her now. Now she clutches the hands that restrain her. They are all she has, and she holds on tight. They whisper as they draw her deeper, telling of a house with a thousand and more rooms, of corridors you could walk forever and a day, telling of things born of fire, born of infernos, born of boredom, born of loss. The house is still burning, they are passing into secret and febrile places, and outside the burned and burning house, the late winter dusk is falling, falling into night.

© 2013 by Lynda E. Rucker.

Originally published in *The Moon Will Look Strange*.

Reprinted by permission of the author.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lynda E. Rucker is an American writer currently living in Dublin, Ireland. She has published nearly two dozen short stories in such places as *F&SF*, *The Best Horror of the Year*, *Black Static*, *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror*, and *The Year's Best Dark Fantasy and Horror*. She is a regular columnist for the magazine *Black Static*, and her first collection, *The Moon Will Look Strange*, was released from Karōshi Books in 2013. She blogs very occasionally at lyndaerucker.wordpress.com and tweets more frequently as [@lyndaerucker](https://twitter.com/lyndaerucker).

To learn more about the author and this story, read the [Author Spotlight](#).

NOVEL EXCERPT

Nightscape Press Presents
The Patchwork House
(novel excerpt)

Richard Salter

“Smile, everyone,” I said as I entered the kitchen.

Beth turned around to welcome me and immediately ducked away, hiding her face.

“Argh! Put that thing away.”

“Don’t tell me you hate being filmed,” Chloe said.

“Yep, Beth hates being on camera,” I said. “You’ll make an exception this weekend, right?”

“Hell no.”

Chloe shook her head. “If I was as pretty as you are, I’d go looking for cameras to take my picture,” she said.

Beth smiled and let her guard down for a moment. “Aw, you’re sweet.”

“How are the kids doing, Chloe?” I asked.

“Oh just fine, thanks. Mum’s got everything in hand so we can finally relax!”

“Excellent.”

“Dinner is served,” Beth said. She opened two bags filled with Chinese takeaway. Another three bags of snacks and junk stood on the counter by the sink. Clearly we weren’t going to be hungry this weekend. Chloe opened cupboards until she found crockery and utensils, and pulled out enough

for all of us.

“Can we get some light in here please?” Beth asked as she opened containers and put spoons in them.

Derek headed for the door. “I’ll get the lamps,” he said. It really was getting quite hard to see in here.

I taped him leaving the room and then shut off the camera.

“So, Chloe,” I asked, “just how much trouble is Derek in over the passports?”

Chloe laughed. “None. Well, none anymore, not since we saw how amazing this place is.”

“Better than Vegas?” I asked her.

“Well we’re spending a lot less money, that’s for sure.”

“I’m so glad you invited these guys,” Beth said, still hiding her face in case I started the camera up again.

“Oh what? You can’t stand the thought of being alone in this house with me?”

“Ugh, God no. You’re so dull.”

Just for that I turned the camera back on, and then moved in closer to try to get a shot of her face. She held up a bag of nachos to block me. Derek came back with the lamps. He’d brought the chill with him it seemed. Beth hugged herself and Chloe zipped up her jacket.

“That’s a heck of a draft you’ve let in,” Chloe commented as Derek turned on the first lamp. There was a momentary hiss of gas and the lamp fired into life.

“One should be enough for now,” I said. “Let’s save the others for later.”

Derek put down the lamp and we all grabbed stools. Beth spread the various dishes over the counter and I put away the camera, grabbed a plate, and helped myself. The others dived in too.

“Thank God for that,” Beth said. “I thought you were going to film us eating.”

“Screw that, I’m too hungry.”

“Pass the sweet and sour, please,” said Beth.

Even Derek seemed to come out of his funk for a little while. At first there wasn’t much conversation; we were too hungry to talk. But after a while our stomachs realized that we weren’t going to be starving them all day and we slowed down enough to take a breath.

I was the first to take a pause. “This is good. I’m surprised you found a Chinese takeaway in the village.”

“So were we,” Chloe said.

“I thought we were going to have to buy a bunch of cans and cook over a little camping stove,” Beth said. “And then we nearly drove right past this tiny little take-out joint.”

“It was pretty busy,” said Chloe. “Always a good sign.”

“Didn’t realize how hungry I was,” Derek said.

I stared at him for a moment as he ate. His appetite seemed to have lifted the air of grumpiness he’d carried since he arrived. Of course it wasn’t going to last.

“Chloe, I hope you paid Beth for half this stuff,” he said between mouthfuls.

“No, Beth insisted on paying. You should say thank you to

our gracious hosts.”

The temperature seemed to take a dip again.

“It’s okay, hon, we can pay our way. It’s the least we can do after Jim and Beth were nice enough to invite us.”

“This trip isn’t costing us anything,” I said, “so it’s fine, we can pay. I know things have been a bit tight for you guys —”

“We’re not poor,” Derek snapped. I wasn’t the only one to detect the accusation behind Derek’s words. Beth looked at me awkwardly, too. We all fell silent for a moment while Derek’s words hung in the chilly air.

Beth broke the silence. “How about if we go back tomorrow then it’s on you?” she suggested.

“Yes all right then,” Chloe agreed, but this didn’t seem to placate Derek.

“That’s okay,” Derek said in a forced tone. “Jim has all the money, so let him pay.”

“I have my own money, thanks very much,” Beth said. Now she sounded pissed.

“Oh, so both of you are doing well. That must be nice.”

“Derek,” Chloe said.

“No, it’s okay. It stands to reason that if you don’t have to work two jobs with stupid hours just to put food on the table for your three kids, it’s much easier to swan around the world staying in nice houses and spending most of the year playing computer games.”

The atmosphere was so frosty I could almost see my breath turning to mist in the lamp light.

“Derek, you need to calm down,” I told him.

“Calm down? Sure I’ll calm down. It’s your fucking fault I’m stuck with my shitty life while you never have to lift a bloody finger.”

“Excuse me?” It was Chloe’s turn to be angry now. She rose from the table. Derek knew he’d gone too far; all his bluster faded immediately.

Chloe advanced on him. “It may be hard and we’ve had to make a lot of sacrifices, but I love you and I love my children. I don’t regret anything and I certainly don’t consider my life to be shitty.”

“Hon, I didn’t mean . . . I meant financially . . .”

“I know exactly what you meant, Derek, and —” Chloe stopped suddenly. She stared upwards. “What was that?”

We all looked at her and then followed her gaze to the ceiling. I’d felt so awkward while they argued that I was ignoring everything else around me. Now we all sat in silence, staring at the light fixtures.

I broke the silence. “What did you hear?”

“Shh.”

We stayed dead still, all looking up. I couldn’t hear anything. Nobody spoke, wondering if whatever Chloe had heard might happen again. I opened my mouth to speak.

There was a bang from above, a huge bang, so loud it was like a bomb had gone off upstairs. All of us jumped to our feet. There was absolutely no mistaking it. The house was far too solid for the bang to cause anything to move, but we’d all

felt it too, like a very short, very violent earthquake.

We froze, gaping in shock at each other.

After a moment I asked, “What the hell?”

We stood in stunned silence for about a minute, our food forgotten, staring at each other, then at the ceiling, then back to each other again. Nobody made a move.

“Should we pretend that didn’t happen or go take a look?” Derek asked.

“I vote we check it out,” I said, putting down my fork and reaching for the lamp.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Chloe said, a slight tremor in her voice. “And you’re not leaving us in the dark.”

“It’s not dark yet,” I assured her. “You’ll be fine.”

“I don’t think we should go up there,” Beth said.

“I want to know what that was. Are you volunteering to take a look?”

“Hell no. Why are you taking the lamp?”

I stopped. I was halfway across the kitchen on my way to the hall. I felt a bit guilty for walking off with the only light and leaving them all in the gloom.

“We’ll take the other lamp,” Derek said, firing up the spare. “You girls stay here while we go take a look.”

“Men go find big bang,” I grunted. Nobody laughed.

Derek carried the spare lamp and headed out into the hallway. I passed my lamp back to Chloe and followed him. My heart beat loudly and my balls receded into my abdomen. As I left the kitchen, I flashed the girls a brave smile to try to

mask how I felt.

Derek was nearly at the bottom of the stairs. I hurried to catch up. It really was very dark inside the house now and I cursed Dad for screwing up the utilities. When he told me there would be no electricity, I'd seen it as a fun challenge, to survive the night in a haunted house in the dark. That was before the bang. Christ that was loud! It was far more than a bump in the night. It wasn't even the sound of something falling over. We'd all felt it reverberate through the entire house.

What I wouldn't give to just be able to turn the lights on. Slowly, we ascended the stairs.

© 2014 by Richard Salter.

Excerpted from *The Patchwork House* by Richard Salter.

Published by permission of the author and Nightscape Press.

All rights reserved.

No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the author.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Salter has been writing for over twenty-five years, so you would imagine he'd be a lot better at it by now. He is the editor of a *Doctor Who* anthology and the mosaic novel, *World's Collider*, and co-editor of the charity anthology *Fantasy for Good*, which features some huge names in fantasy fiction and is raising money for The Colon Cancer Alliance. His short fiction appears in various anthologies including *Solaris Rising: The New Solaris Book of Science Fiction*, *Warhammer: Gotrek & Felix the Anthology*, *Horror for Good*, and *This is How You Die (Machine of Death 2)*. By day he works as a glorified project manager for a telecoms software vendor, and he lives with his

wife and two young sons in the suburbs of Toronto, Canada. Find out more (if you can bear it) at richardsalter.com.

NONFICTION

The H Word: Zombies: They're Not Just for Breakfast Anymore

S.G. Browne

We all know the drill.

A plague or a virus or some cosmic dust from a drive-by comet causes the dead or recently deceased to come back to proverbial life and feast on the living, more often than not creating a dystopian world of zombies and survivors.

Twentieth century zombies, who branched off from their Haitian voodoo brethren in 1968 with George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, spent thirty-five years terrorizing audiences with their relentless pursuit of human flesh. If you think of them as a breakfast food, they were kind of like oatmeal. Or pancakes. Or scrambled eggs. Nothing fancy. No surprises. Just a basic monster with a single-minded purpose, so you always knew what you were going to get when you sat down to enjoy them.

But then came *28 Days Later* in 2003, followed by *Shaun of the Dead* in 2004, then *Fido* in 2006, and before we were more than a handful of years into the next millennia, zombies were doing things they'd never done before. Like running. And engaging in slapstick comedy. And performing household chores. They even came back from the dead in 2005 to fight for their right to vote in the *Masters of Horror* episode "Homecoming."

Now, nearly fifteen years after the turn of the century, zombies are no longer just the shambling, mindless, flesh-eating ghouls we'd come to know and love for three-and-a-half decades. Instead, they've been taken out of their proverbial mindless, shambling, flesh-eating box.

Today's zombies are faster. Funnier. Sentient.

The movie theater has provided the largest stage for the transformation of the living dead from cult status to pop-culture icon. From *28 Days Later* to *World War Z*, zombies have become tenacious and terrifying hunters, chasing down helpless humans like packs of ravenous, rabid cheetahs. At the same time, films like *Shaun of the Dead* and *Zombieland* prove that the living dead are natural-born comedians.

That's a lot of range for a monster that used to be one-dimensional.

Not to be outdone by their cinematic counterparts, authors took up the rallying cry of the twenty-first century zombie and put their own fictional spin on the living dead mythology. In addition to the countless novels that explored the ruined landscape of the zombie apocalypse with updated themes, *Zombie, Ohio* and *I, Zombie* gave us zombies who can think, while *Warm Bodies* and *Breathers* showed that even though your heart stops beating, it can still ache.

But the modern-day zombie wasn't just resurrected on the silver screen and in bookstores. The evolution of the Internet from dial-up to high-speed service in the mid-2000s gave birth to YouTube, which allowed entrepreneurial and creative

minds without Hollywood credentials to change the way zombies are perceived by the general public.

In addition to running like Olympic sprinters, making us laugh, and fighting for their civil rights, modern zombies can be found on the Internet writing poetry, starring in music videos, and appearing on reality TV shows. They also attend marriage counseling, attempt to hold down day jobs, and stand in line at the DMV — dealing with the mundane existence of daily life while suffering from the indignities of their decomposing bodies. Like the emotional fallout of a rapidly digesting pancreas. Or the embarrassment of having a body cavity burst open on a first date.

In short, zombies have expanded their range. Developed new skills. Become less one-dimensional and more well-rounded. And who doesn't enjoy a well-rounded zombie? Plus they're tragically comical, shuffling along, losing their hair and teeth and nails and the occasional appendage. What's not to love? Add in the fact that they used to be us — that we and our loved ones are just a hypothetical virus or brain parasite away from turning into a zombie — and we can't help but relate.

So where zombies were once served up to audiences as basic, no-frills breakfast items, now they're more like peanut butter pecan steel cut oatmeal. Or Belgian waffles with fried bananas and candied walnuts. Or free range omelettes with porcini mushrooms, Parmesan cheese, arugula, and cucumber wasabi cream.

Admittedly there are zombie purists out there who don't want their zombies fast or funny or covered in candied walnuts or doing anything other than shuffling along mindlessly in search of human flesh. These are the fans who tend to get very Dr. Seuss *Green Eggs and Ham* about their zombies:

They do not like them when they run, they do not like them if they're fun.

They do not like them to be smart, they do not like them with a heart.

And there's nothing wrong with that. Everyone's entitled to like what they like and reject that which doesn't fit their idea of what a zombie should be. But whether you prefer your zombies slow and relentless, fast and tenacious, or funny and self-aware, when it comes to modern-day monsters, zombies rule and vampires drool. Werewolves, too, for that matter.

Werewolves are like the jocks of the monster world. Full of testosterone and sprouting hair everywhere; all animal rage and bulging muscles; bursting through their jerseys and baying at the moon. If you think about it, werewolves are kind of dicks.

Vampires? They're like frat boys. Full of themselves and primping and preening; all charm and seduction; trying to get you into bed so they can drink your blood. Even if they're not sparkling in the sunlight, they're total stalkers.

Zombies, on the other hand, don't try to impress you with

their immortality or their animal magnetism. They don't have any ulterior motives. They don't walk around pretending to be one thing while hiding behind the façade of humanity. They're honest about what they want in a relationship. They wear their decomposing hearts on their sleeves and aren't ashamed to say: "I'm a zombie and I want to eat your brains."

They possess an unpretentious veracity. You have to admire that in a monster.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S.G. Browne is the author of the novels *Breathers*, *Fated*, *Lucky Bastard*, *Big Egos*, and *Less Than Hero*, as well as the novella *I Saw Zombies Eating Santa Claus* and the eBook short story collection *Shooting Monkeys in a Barrel*. He's an ice cream snob, a Guinness aficionado, and a sucker for dark comedy. He lives in San Francisco. You can learn more about him and his writing at sgbrowne.com.

Artist Gallery

Robert Emerson

Robert Emerson is a self-taught artist. Born in 1959, he worked in the traditional mediums of oils, water colors, pastels, pencils, pens and inks, until a broken blood vein in his brain left him without the use of his right arm. Having lost the precision of his dominant hand, he discovered photo compositing as an alternate means of artistic expression. Through trial and error, reading, and watching countless Youtube “how to” videos, Robert slowly began to learn the art of photo manipulation. He never imagined it to be anything more than a hobby--however, in the past year he has had five book covers published and various other art-related offers. He currently lives in Lufkin, Texas, with his wife and three children. He thanks the Lord for his abilities and spends time every day seeking out new inspiration for his art.

[To view the gallery, turn the page.]



Robert EMERSON
2014





K. Emerson
2013







SOMETHING IN THE AIR



Robb as left
Robert  Emerson
2014





20

Robert

EMERSON

13

RobhasLeft DeviantArt.com

Artist Spotlight: Robert Emerson

Marina J. Lostetter

First off I'd like to ask you a question in the spirit of *Nightmare*: What scares you the most?

Spiders! Can't stand them, I hate them . . . If they were put on Earth just so birds would have something to eat, then we need more birds.

What is your favorite medium to work with and why?

I used to work in pen and ink, pencils, pastels, and oils but lost the use of my right arm/hand. On my journey to being left-handed, I've learned to work exclusively in digital mediums, which I truly love.

What made you want to become an artist? Can you remember a defining moment where you knew this was what you wanted to do?

I've been interested in art my entire life. I've had a pencil in my hand since I was old enough to hold one. However, I've never worked in the field of art; it was always just a hobby. I'm not sure I would enjoy it if I did it for a living.

Tell us about this month's cover image, *Nevermore*. Who is the woman and what is she doing?

She is a woman who has discovered the ability to summon/control animals and birds. She is just discovering her powers and has much to learn. Whether her power is good or evil is at the discretion of the viewer.

[DeviantArt user Kirilee served as the model for the illustration. —eds.]

What do you imagine scares the woman in *Nevermore* the most?

She doesn't know the extent of her abilities and is unsure of herself. She's a "Carrie" that isn't pissed off . . . yet.

Your DeviantArt profile states that Ansel Adams is your favorite photographer. What is it about his photography that speaks to you?

The way he captures light and shadows. There is nothing wrong with color photos, but when you remove the distractions of the colors you're left with textures, shadows and light. I see textures in black and white that I don't notice in color.

Do you believe in ghosts? Why or why not (or why are you unsure)?

I believe that all mankind possesses a spirit. I believe there is a whole unseen realm that exists around us, I believe in God and I believe there is a devil. There are ghosts. I don't seek an audience with them but I believe they exist.

Do you have any special hobbies you'd like to share with us?

I enjoy photography (hard to find a good left-handed camera). I'm always looking for something to photograph that can be used to make an entirely new scene in a photo manipulation. I enjoy music, and killing spiders!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marina J. Lostetter's short fiction has appeared in venues such as *InterGalactic Medicine Show*, *Galaxy's Edge*, and *Writers of the Future*. Her most recent publications include a tie-in novelette for the *Star Citizen* game universe, which was serialized over the first four months of 2014. Originally from Oregon, Marina now lives in Arkansas with her husband, Alex. She tweets as @MarinaLostetter. Please visit her homepage at lostetter.net.

Feature Interview: Helen Marshall

Kelly Link

Look, we're both short story writers. So I'm sure we both get asked the same question: when are you going to write a novel? Let me turn it around, though, and ask this: why do you like to write short stories? What can a short story do that a novel can't?

There's a kind of magic to short stories. I love them, I really, genuinely love them. They're these beautiful, compact worlds that you can explode without consequences. You can just *do* things in short stories, you can make anything happen and you only have to convince the reader that it's real for about thirty pages. That's tremendously liberating. I've heard the advice — from Joe Hill most recently — that in a novel you need to pack your weirdness into the first chapter. A reader will buy anything in the first chapter so you grab your gimmies there and run with them. But in a short story you don't need to give the reader all the information they need upfront. You can feed it throughout the story. In that sense, discovering the world of the story can provide a certain kind of narrative momentum — but that's a game more easily played in short stories than in novels because a short story reader must constantly decode the logic of the story. A novel reader does most of the decoding in the first four chapters.

You have a doctorate in Medieval Studies. What specifically was your area? And how does your academic work inform your fiction, and vice versa?

I study medieval manuscripts from fourteenth-century England, mostly the rather scrappy poems and fragments that circulated just before Geoffrey Chaucer showed up on the scene. In particular, I'm interested in medieval "bestsellers": how some books became popular and widely transmitted while others fell by the wayside. This work has certainly shaped my approach to writing fiction because many of my stories deal with questions of history: how history is represented, how people shape their own personal histories, and how they respond to the choices they've made. What's past is prologue — I really believe that. But on another level I find medieval literature itself a great springboard for writing fantasy and horror. One of the biggest problems that our genre — any genre really! — faces is that it tends to replicate itself. For me, the most exciting work tends to come from unexpected places as writers try to blend genre with new forms: experimental writing, literary writing, writing from other cultures or perspectives. Medieval literature gives me something to work with, ideas to bounce off, that most people aren't playing with. For example, in *Hair Side, Flesh Side*, my first collection, I had a story about a young girl who receives the body of St. Lucia of Syracuse for her seventh birthday. At the time, I was fascinated with the way that holy

relics were commoditized in medieval culture. They went a long way toward driving the tourist trade, when you think about it! The word “tawdry” even comes from the practice of selling lace necklaces at the pilgrimage site of Saint Audrey in England, who died of a tumour of the throat in 679 AD. Over time, the word came to represent tatty lace sold at rural fairs because the necklaces had become so ubiquitous. But I love the dissonance that comes from the way we think about saints as embodiments of holiness while at the same time there was this seedy industry that grew up around them in which bodies were invented, traded, or outright stolen. That sort of dissonance runs all the way through the Middle Ages: and, for me, dissonance is the mother of invention.

I can't help but notice that the epigraph from the collection is taken from one of my favorite plays, Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*. The pleasure of an epigraph is, of course, that we get to see a dialogue of kinds between the source material and the work in the collection. What are the stories or books that stick in your mind when you sit down to do your own work?

I've now seen *Arcadia* twice: the first time was on my first research trip to the British Library in London, and I felt very much like Bernard Nightingale, the bombastic scholar who does everything by instinct. He looks at scraps of evidence and he fills in all the blanks; “Yes! Byron was here! Yes! He

fought a duel!” And that’s how I felt, looking at my first medieval manuscripts. There was a sense of recognition, almost *déjà vu*, a feeling that I could *know* something about these books. And the second time I saw *Arcadia* I was just about to submit my PhD dissertation — then I had Hannah Jarvis’s skepticism. I suspect the purpose of a PhD is to create skepticism. I had such *certainty* when I started out — but the more I learned, the more I came to doubt anyone’s certainty. *Arcadia* is a play I have read and reread many times, and if there were a single text that inspired my two collections, that crystallized the dichotomy I feel between reason and passion, between instinct and evidence, between what we *want* to know and what we *can* know — that’s it. It’s one of the most moving pieces of literature I’ve ever encountered, one of the few where I’ll tear up as I’m reading it just because *it’s so damn good!*

What was the first thing that you ever wrote where you thought: “okay, yes! This works!” And also, how do you work? Do you have a specific routine?

The first story I finished where I really thought, “Yes! This is me!” was “Sanditon.” There were various stories I completed before that, some of which appear in my collections, that *worked* — but they weren’t stories that were really about me, they weren’t stories that only I could have

written. During most of my undergraduate when I first started writing fiction, I was trying very much to emulate Charles de Lint, whose Newford stories I had been reading for years. But the problem was that although I was trying to write these fables about artsy, bohemian types just like de Lint does, that wasn't my life at all. I grew up in a very sedate little city and I never encountered the grungy urban settings that he brought to life. Those weren't my people. I wanted them to be, but they just weren't — and my daily struggles and anxieties didn't really feel like theirs. Several years later I was living in Oxford for four months doing research. It was a strangely lonely time. Anyone who has done a PhD knows that there's a period of massive uncertainty that comes as you move from coursework to the prospect of writing the dissertation. I had just started working for ChiZine Publications in Toronto and it was tremendously exhilarating to be part of that literary community — but then I had to leave it all behind. Oxford was beautiful, but I didn't know anyone, not really, and I was trying to figure out how to balance all the different things I wanted to do in life, not knowing if any of them were going to offer me feasible career paths. And about six months later I wrote "Sanditon," which was about a young editor who discovers a lost manuscript of Jane Austen on the inside of her skin. It was just supposed to be a silly idea, more of a gag than anything else, but as I wrote it the story began to feel more and more personal: it was about that time I spent in Oxford, the way I was feeling certain pressures to subordinate

my writing to those around me, as an editor, and to historical figures, as an academic. And while that might sound a little cold, a little overly intellectual, I think many early writers struggle with similar problems: what makes this path worth pursuing? Is it worth it? Will anyone really care when there are so many other writers who have already done it better?

As for how I work, well, my life has been pretty unstable in many respects over the course of the last couple of years. Early on I wrote when I had time to write and an idea — which was seldom enough — but as I started to get commissions that had to change. So I learned how to *gear up* to write a story. I find what works for me best is to read poetry — really good poetry — before I start to write. When I read poetry it's sometimes as if there's a kind of music playing in my head, and if I can keep that music going while I jump over to prose, I can run with it for a while. Beginnings, for me, are hardest. I can't start a story until I have the voice. Once I have the voice of the story, I can normally write straight through to the middle. At that point, I typically panic because I have to make a decision about where the story is going and how it might resolve itself. So I muddle around, take a walk, or simply wait. If I can't wait, I pour a finger of Scotch, close my eyes, and hope for the best. This probably sounds a bit chaotic and a bit terrifying — and it is. I wish I knew a better way to do it, but I don't yet. But that's life, isn't it? Sometimes you don't know the way so you just close your eyes, pick a direction to travel, and hope for the best.

It took me a while to realize that writers don't necessarily like to be identified by a genre. I say this as someone who thinks of herself as a science fiction writer. Do you think of yourself as a horror writer?

I never would have thought of you as a science fiction writer! Ha! That actually makes it much easier for me to say that I don't really think of myself as a horror writer. I didn't grow up reading horror — in fact, I stayed as far away from it as I possibly could — and it was only in the last five years that I started reading the field. So I still have trouble with the label, and that's, in part, because there are so many authors out there who are *horror* authors. That's what they do. That's what they've always done. And they know their stuff! I feel a bit unworthy laying claim to the title they genuinely deserve. I'm more of a writer who sometimes writes horror. But sometimes I write fantasy and sometimes I write poetry and sometimes I write articles about medieval punctuation. I'm all those things. That being said, the more I read, the more commonalities I find between my work and writers like Stephen King and Robert Aickman and Shirley Jackson, because horror isn't really what I thought it was when I first started. It's far more open and playful. What I love about horror stories is that, at their heart, they have this almost anarchic quality. There's always a moment in horror stories when the world essentially goes crazy. I'm currently rereading *The Castle of Otranto*, and it begins when the Lord's son is

crushed mysteriously beneath an enormous steel helmet. It's mad, genuinely mad — but also very funny from my perspective. And that's what I like about horror — the utter chaos that comes when the world turns out to be stranger than you believed. And as a writer, I find that exciting to explore. It's like a game you can play with your reader. You create a world, then you begin to twist it very slowly, saying, "This is the truth. Or this! Or this!" Horror is great for that because you can go anywhere, nothing's off the table.

Your titles are terrific: "We Ruin the Sky," "A Brief History of Science Fiction," "I'm the Lady of Good Times, She Said." Not sure I have a question here. Except, maybe, do you ever come up with titles first?

"I'm the Lady of Good Times, She Said" was probably one of the most bizarre writing experiences I've ever had. That story was commissioned by Jonathan Oliver for his collection *End of the Road*, and it was my very first themed commission before. I'd never had to write to spec so I was feeling very nervous. And I was on vacation with my family in Mexico when I got the email. I kept tossing around ideas for stories to my sister, Laura, and she kept shooting them down. (I had this idea about a kid who was a road dowser, you know, he'd use a hazel twig to find roads the same way someone might search for water. Anyway, Laura says to me, "Helen, that's ridiculous, you can just *see* roads. Look, there's

a road. I'm a road dowser!") The following morning I woke up at about five a.m. and that line — "I'm the lady of good times, she said; I'm the lady of the ill wind blowing" — was stuck in my head, playing over and over like an ear worm until finally I had to sneak off to the bathroom with my laptop to start writing. And I wrote the entire story in an almost trance-like state of utter concentration. It was our final day in Mexico, and I remember trying to scrawl dialogue in a notepad at the airport. Laura had to keep taking my passport from me to get us through security checks because I was completely useless.

I'm not really sure that answers your question except that titles are quite tricky. I can only come up with them in the middle of the story or at the very end, because, for me, they have to provide a sense of unity and I often don't know what a story is about — really *about* — until I finish it. The only title I've ever had at the outset of a story is for the piece I'm working at the moment, "We Have Always Lived in the Cthulhu" — the title kept making me giggle hysterically. And there's no better way to start a story than giggling hysterically to yourself.

The majority of these stories are about family. Many of the protagonists are children or adolescents. I have been mulling over, recently, the idea that a story with a young protagonist reads differently than the same story would when the protagonist is an adult. (Or maybe it's a

difference of genre, Young Adult can get pretty dark, but there's still hope that things change for the better some day after the book ends. Whereas in a story with an adult protagonist, a bad choice can pretty much be the end.) But your stories seem to suggest that patterns, set in place in childhood, are difficult — or even impossible — to work free of. Does this say something true to you, or in fact am I revealing something about myself and the way I read your stories?

That's a very good question — about patterns developed in childhood persisting into adulthood and also about how one mistake can haunt you forever. The main theme I wanted to explore in *Gifts for the One Who Comes After* was legacy, and the way the past continues to exert an influence on the future. And perhaps when I started the collection I believed more strongly in the idea of the past as something which is inescapable: it's a motif that's particularly resonant in horror fiction, I think, which frequently forces characters to encounter whatever has been buried or repressed or ignored for too long. What are ghosts, really, except a metaphor for the hold the past has on us? But I find that I have a more optimistic viewpoint now: while the past hangs around, you can still push back, reconsider, mend relationships, reclaim ground, put your ghosts to rest. But it takes work. Sometimes a lot of work. That was a realization I reached *through* writing the book rather than one I had in my head at the very

beginning.

I love writing about children because all of their experiences are so visceral, so immediate, and also so open. It's a little bit like what I was saying about short stories early on. Children are constantly forced to decode the world around them, and they're far more used to encountering things that don't make sense. A fluid worldview is absolutely necessary. I imagine it must be quite difficult as a young child, asking adults about how the world works because adults lie all the time. They lie when they don't know the answer. They lie when they don't want to share the answer. Or they lie when they think it's funny — but children are reliant upon others to help them put together a sense of how the world works. They're tremendously vulnerable. One of my favourite stories about children in *Gifts for the One Who Comes After* is “Supply Limited, Act Now” because it's about the dawning realization children have that actions have consequences that can be far-reaching — and that the world is also vulnerable to *them*. In the story, a group of kids get a working shrink ray: they run around town shrinking the hell out of mailboxes and garbage cans and trucks and baseball diamonds and each other — but the rules of the shrink ray are never quite explained. Will the stuff eventually go back to normal? *They* certainly think so. But they don't *know*, not for sure. I wanted to play with the unease an adult feels in seeing kids do something that might have disastrous consequences — and how the kids themselves react when they begin to consider

those consequences for themselves. Because part of growing up is realizing that you can do harm, even if you never meant to.

How do stories start for you?

They normally start with me turning to the person next to me and saying, “How about a story where . . . ?” If they laugh or make a face, I know it’s worth doing. Mostly I try out my ideas on my sister, Laura, who manages to be both incredibly encouraging while also possessing the most withering stare I’ve ever encountered; Rob Shearman, who reads first drafts of pretty much everything I write; and Vince Haig, the one person in Oxford always willing to meet for a pint when the writing is tough.

What do you do when you aren’t writing? (Besides the usual sorts of things, I mean.)

Right now I don’t have many hobbies, which is sad because I’m a happy dilettante. That being said, there are all sorts of things I’d love to come back to that I’ve tried out over the last couple of years including rock-climbing, karate, Argentinian tango, and axe-throwing. Because then I would make a most excellent spy.

What's the best piece of advice you ever got, writing or otherwise?

Write the stories only you can write.

I'm going to end by asking a question that the writer David Levithan always asks at the start of an interview. What did your grandparents do?

My grandfather on my mother's side was an architect in Cape Town, South Africa and my grandparents on my father's side, so I've been told, raised budgies and all sorts of animals in what was then Rhodesia. Interestingly, my paternal grandfather's last name was originally "Shufflebotham" but he changed it to "Marshall" at my grandmother's insistence before they got married. This was a family secret for many years. So. You know. Don't tell anyone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelly Link is the author of the story collections *Stranger Things Happen*, *Magic for Beginners*, and *Pretty Monsters*, as well as the founder, with her husband Gavin J. Grant, of Small Beer Press. A fourth collection of stories, *Get in Trouble*, is just out from Random House.

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHTS

Author Spotlight: Chesya Burke

Lisa Nohealani Morton

Tell us a bit about “Please, Momma.” What frame of mind were you in when you wrote it?

I’m a master’s student, so I’ve read a lot of Black Feminist writing and critical analysis on motherhood. But of course, literature has my heart, so I’ve also read a lot of Alice Walker and Audre Lorde and Octavia Butler. While the twins are the focus of my story, motherhood is the central theme for me. Mothers often love too much, and sacrifice their own health and well-being for their children. Mothers will die for their children, but sometimes it’s too much. So for the story, I just thought about the way motherhood can be both the most pure and corrupted form of love.

“Please, Momma” ends on a cliffhanger, which is sure to make it stick in readers’ heads. Do you have an idea of how it all turned out, or is it up in the air to you as well?

I’m a pessimist by heart and I tend to think that human beings as a whole aren’t capable of making the best choices. One obvious counter to this, as I mentioned above, tends to be mothers who are protective of their children, very often to

the detriment of themselves and the children. With that, no, I don't have an answer for what happens. Like everything else, I hope for the best, but fear the worst.

In addition to writing horror and dark fantasy fiction, you've widely read in the genre, having written a fair amount of critical and academic nonfiction about it. Can you name some voices in horror and dark fantasy who are doing work that really excites you?

Jennifer Marie Brissett is a great writer and I hear her new novel, *Elysium*, is amazing. Looking forward to reading it. I also really think people should check out Kiese Laymon. His novel *Long Division* is a brilliant alternative history/time travel story. Other than that, I recommend Sofia Samatar, Lucy Snyder, Nisi Shawl, Maurice Broaddus, Mikki Kendall, K. Tempest Bradford, Alaya Johnson, and so many more.

What are you working on these days? Any upcoming publications or exciting projects you'd like to tell readers about?

I'm still working on my novel about a Black woman detective in the 1920s' Harlem Renaissance. Almost finished, so maybe it'll actually get out in the world one day. But I'm also working on a comic strip for which I got to choose the

artist and pretty much write whatever I want. It's exciting.

Which character archetype in a horror movie would you most like to be? Least?

I'd least like to be a Magical Negro (i.e. a Black woman or man). I'm not sacrificing myself for nobody. I'm also not using any powers I have for the greater good of society because that society doesn't benefit me anyway.

I'd most like to be the virgin white woman. She's likely to live, doesn't have to fuck one of the idiot guys roaming around, and her hair always looks great no matter what evil is pursuing her.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in Honolulu, Lisa Nohealani Morton lives in Washington, DC. By day she is a mild-mannered database wrangler, computer programmer, and all-around data geek, and by night she writes science fiction, fantasy, and combinations of the two. Her short fiction has appeared in publications such as *Lightspeed*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and the anthology *Hellebore and Rue*. She can be found on Twitter as @lnmorton.

Author Spotlight: Robert Shearman

Kevin McNeil

Thank you for taking some time to chat about “Featherweight.” I was fascinated by this chilling story and surprised by the turns it took. What inspired the story?

Sometimes the idea for a story comes out of nothing much more complex than wanting to evoke a feeling. I had been writing lots of rather wild, rather expansive things — big “what if” stories, in which you come up with an absurd take on the world, and then see how far it can be explored. And I remember feeling the urge to write something in contrast that was much more claustrophobic. Not just in place, but in time — I wanted the challenge of reining myself in, and making every second tick by, making every little action crucial.

I had the rather simple idea, then, of trapping a man with the dead body of someone he loves. Playing upon the instinct to escape from the stark reality of death, but being forced to stare it in the face. And the idea that that person he loved would begin to transform into some sort of threat appealed to me.

Coincidentally, around this time Stephen Jones invited me to contribute a story for an anthology he was compiling about

angels. Now, I have difficulties with angels. I spend a lot of time writing at the National Gallery in London, and it doesn't take long for you to realise that all the angels that pop up in the pictures of the Renaissance aren't quite as beatific as you'd think. They look fat and bored — they look curiously malevolent. They stare down at the main action of the pictures as if they couldn't give a rat's arse about the religious significance of what's going on — they'd sooner be somewhere else pulling the wings off butterflies. So putting angels as the amoral monsters at the heart of my story really amused me. I'd walk around the galleries, sketching out the paragraphs, and look up at all the pictures — and feel as if I were taking some little revenge on them!

I read that you often write the first drafts of your fiction in art galleries. Can you tell us a little about your writing process? What's a typical writing day like for you?

Like most writers, I know, I love the idea of the job, but have a fairly ambivalent attitude to the actual process of sticking down words one after another on to a piece of paper. My brain, quite frankly, is lazy, and would much rather be doing something else. So I try to fool it. I try to pretend that when we're out writing, it's an accidental byproduct of doing something much more fun.

I'm very lucky, because I live a short bus ride from the centre of London — and London is an exciting city to be in.

Just walking around it can be hugely inspiring. I have a series of regular haunts I'll go to — art galleries and theatres and walkways along the Thames — and I'll take my notebook and my pen. I'll enjoy the sights. And whilst I'm enjoying them, I'll make sure I write a few thousand words before I'm allowed to go home. It doesn't matter how long it takes — some days my brain is more cooperative than others — but if nothing good comes out on to the page for a few hours it doesn't stress me, because I still have something exciting to look at. Eventually the words will start to flow.

I just think writing is frustrating enough a process without it being something that bores us too. And my hope is that if I can be excited by being out in a teeming city, no matter whether that excitement is remotely relevant to the particular story I'm concocting — then a piece of that excitement might make its way down on to the paper too.

You work has been described as the bastard offspring of Philip K. Dick and Jonathan Carroll. What have been some of the major influences in your writing?

Well, I'm a comedy writer by instinct. That's where I started — writing comedy plays for the theatre. And so most of my influences are comic too. I discovered a love of short stories when I began reading Saki in my teens. He's so witty, but there is a wonderful sinister edge to that wit. Woody Allen movies have been a huge part of my wanting to be a writer —

I love the way that fifty years on, he still produces his annual movie, and though the work is somewhat inconsistent in quality, at his best his films are this extraordinary mix of emotional drama and weird fantasy. The plays of Tom Stoppard are what made me want to pick up a pen in the first place — again, there's a joyful playfulness to how unpredictable he is.

You work in a variety of forms, from short fiction to television to radio to stage. What are the challenges of switching between the different forms? Do you have a preference for one over another?

Theatre will always be a great love. It's all I wanted to do with my life until I was in my mid-thirties — and there is still no greater (or more frightening) sensation than sitting anonymously in an auditorium of several hundred people waiting to see how they'll react to something that came out of your head. I didn't start writing prose until so late — my first book wasn't written until 2007, and I'm amazed I even did it, I never assumed I'd be able to. And ever since then the short story has delighted me and challenged me and exasperated me in a way that I've never felt before. Right now, if you made me an offer, I'd stick at short stories until the day I died.

Switching between the forms is something you have to do, of course — but the key to it is to celebrate the medium you're writing in. I love writing radio drama, for example. I

love the games it plays with an audience who are, by definition, blind to the action. It's funny, but a story will occur to me, and right away I'll know whether it's destined to be prose or drama, and if it's drama whether it'll be better served by stage, radio, or television. The medium isn't something you impose upon the story — the medium is the story, right from the moment you dream it up. In the same way that each short story decides its own length and its structure before you put a single word to paper — you need the reader to feel that this is the *only* way this story can be expressed, you don't want to feel you'd have been better off watching it as an action movie.

Is there anything else you'd like to share about “Featherweight”? What's next for you?

There are a couple of plays of mine — quite old ones! — that are set for revival in New York in the spring. I'm not part of the production team, but I think it's always helpful to offer advice if it's wanted. And it's strange to put myself back in time to deal with the Rob of 1992 — and it's inspiring too. I am finishing off a very peculiar short story project of 100 stories within a “choose your own adventure” format — that's been enormously enjoyable, and I'm hoping the results will be out within the year. I'm developing a television series at the moment — and though writing for TV is always a gamble, I've written pilots before — there seems to be some interest.

We'll see. You never know. And — most terrifying of all — I'm finally giving in to the demands of my agent and publishers, and will start proper work on my first novel very soon. So many words! It feels like such a commitment. But it's time.

And this year I'm very proud to be a World Fantasy Award judge. So around the writing — reading, reading. So much reading!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kevin McNeil is a physical therapist, sports fanatic, and volunteer coach for the Special Olympics. He is a graduate of the Odyssey Writing Workshop and The Center for the Study of Science Fiction's Intensive Novel Workshop, led by Kij Johnson. His fiction has appeared in *Every Day Fiction* and is forthcoming in *Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show*. Kevin is a New Englander currently living in California. Find him on Twitter @kevinmcneil.

Author Spotlight: Caspian Gray

Sandra Odell

It would seem like everyone has a friend like Nancy, the loud, slightly strange misfit who doesn't quite fit in and who may not always understand why. What do you think it takes for a character to become "real," to become someone the reader can identify with?

Whoa, that's a huge question. I want to be glib and say, "make a character 'real' by using your imagination." But start by paying attention to the human beings in your life, and then steal liberally from their histories and mannerisms. The things that you recognize in them are things that other people will recognize, too.

"An Army of Angels" doesn't rely on many of the common horror tropes that would have presented the horror with an undeniable frontal assault. The story has a fast, almost intuitive blend of action and thought, using one to support and enhance the other. How conscious were you of setting the tone of the story and creating a mood of surreal darkness?

Not very. I just kind of write the scenes as they pop into

my head, in whatever order I think of them. Eight times out of ten that makes a viable story, and two times out of ten I get a pile of dumb words.

Most writers of contemporary horror rely on a wealth of setting details to carry the story along, yet you allow readers to fill in the details from the shadows of their own minds: a smartphone with caller ID picture capability; a miscellany of junk in Nancy's room; long, white toenails. What are your thoughts on the philosophy that writers only write half the story and that readers finish the tale with their own experiences and impressions?

Just assume that your readers are smart and creative, and that they're better at scaring themselves than you are. If they weren't smart and creative, they'd be watching TV.

“An Army of Angels” is not your first appearance in *Nightmare Magazine*. What inspired your love affair with all things terrifying and creepy?

I've always liked the sad and weird and unsettling, although my favorite things manage to be all of that and funny, too. My first memory of being a creep comes from the age of eight or so, when our family canary died and my dad buried it in the garden. I dug it up three days later, just to see.

The canary's head came off in my hand, and it didn't have eyes anymore. Shit like that makes me a good writer, but an awkward party guest.

Mental illness is a component of many of your stories, most notably “Centipede Heartbeat.” What is it about mental illness that you find most disturbing to readers?

Our brains are the only instruments we have with which to perceive the world, but when they go off-kilter, we're usually the last to know. So you can't ever completely trust your version of reality, because it could be — and, for various reasons, often *will be* — wrong. So you have to constantly filter your perceptions of reality against your perception of other people's perceptions of reality, while they do the same to you, both of you working off of some imagined “objective” reality whose values you're theoretically sharing, and everyone just sits around hoping that none of it goes too wrong. And if at any point it does, haha, I'm sure it's not your fault. I'm sure you're not the crazy one.

What's in store for Caspian Gray? What other tasty bits of the macabre can readers look forward to?

I'm neither very prolific nor very successful, so once this comes out I got nothin' else on the publishing horizon. I'm

currently dividing my creative time between a cycle of literary stories about my hometown and a novel about a group of frenemies trying to retrieve a damned soul from hell and sneak it into heaven. If you're not interested in reading that, don't worry, neither is anybody else.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandra Odell is an avid reader, compulsive writer, and rabid chocoholic. She attended Clarion West in 2010. Her first collection of short stories was released from Hydra House Books in 2012. She is currently hard at work avoiding her first novel.

Author Spotlight: Lynda E. Rucker

Erika Holt

“The Burned House” features a non-linear narrative, with bits of flashback expertly woven into the story. Why did you choose this structure?

It’s sort of a form following function thing — Agnes has entered into a kind of dream state, and I wanted to reproduce that, and in all honesty, the story just came out that way and felt right. I tend to write intuitively, at least with early drafts, rather than figuring out ahead of time how a story will be told — or often, even what the story will be.

I’m tempted to ask specific questions about the story, such as why Agnes’ brother thought to warn her not to go into the house, and why she does anyway, but I’ve read in other interviews that you’d prefer that readers find their own meaning. Why is that important to you? Do you, as the writer, always know the answers, or do you leave some ambiguity even for yourself?

I think it’s really important that a story is allowed to go out in the world and breathe. It should have the ability to belong to its readers, and sometimes that might even mean readers

changing the meaning from my original intention. Of course, there is a limited range of interpretations for every story, but I don't like to be too rigid. I once spoke to a college class that had read a couple of my stories and I loved hearing some of the interpretations that were things I'd never thought of but found very insightful.

I always have my own ideas about what is going on in a story, but often there is a certain ambiguity for me as the writer as well. Still, stories need to make a kind of intuitive sense even if it's not something that can be articulated or explicated — or when it's something that would lose its power if it were. You can't just have “then some more weird shit happens” or “arbitrarily end the story here.” At the same time, for me, the stories that leave me with more questions than answers are the ones that stay with me forever — some favorites that come to mind are M. John Harrison's “The Great God Pan,” Shirley Jackson's “The Summer People” and “The Daemon Lover,” and Robert Aickman's “The Hospice.” None of the events in those stories feel arbitrary or random even though I couldn't sit down and write you a point-to-point logical essay about the meaning or reason for everything in them either.

What do you find most and least interesting about horror as a genre?

Most interesting — to use a very broad term, “cosmic

horror,” because for me, that is when horror fiction is at its most powerful — when it becomes transcendent, when terror and awe become inseparable.

Least interesting — most extreme horror. I used to kind of force myself to read/watch extreme horror from time to time and then one day I thought, you know what? I’ve had enough. I can probably go the rest of my life without dipping a toe in the extreme or gross-out subgenres and in particular explicit descriptions that revel in sexual violence against women. There’s also an idea running through some circles that extreme and explicit violence = transgressive and brave and challenging, whereas I find that is rarely the case. Just because something evokes a visceral reaction in its audience doesn’t mean it is any of those things.

To be perfectly clear, though, I have no objection to gore or violence in the service of telling a story and I think body horror can be a very effective approach to the genre. Shocking and truly transgressive imagery and explicit depictions of violence absolutely have their place in all types of art and storytelling — for example, I did recently steel myself to watch *Martyrs*, and in fact I really liked it a lot.

Do you watch horror films or television? If so, any favorites?

Oh, yes! I love horror in all its forms, and horror movies in particular. A few all-time favorites include *Don’t Look Now*,

The Wicker Man, The Tenant, The Devil's Backbone, Mulholland Drive, A Tale of Two Sisters, The Seventh Victim . . . More recently, films I've loved from the past few years have been almost exclusively indie or foreign and include *Absentia, Kill List, Sleep Tight, The Devil's Business* . . . That's only a few; I could go on and on about horror films new and old — there are so many terrible, terrible ones out there, but there is a lot of good stuff as well.

Television's been more hit and miss for me. I think the horror I've enjoyed most on TV has been genre shows that do a single contained horror episode really effectively, like *Buffy* with "Hush" or *Doctor Who* with "Blink," or some of the horrific *X-Files* episodes. I can't think of a straight-up horror TV show that has consistently worked for me. I generally enjoyed the first two seasons of *American Horror Story* once I got into the tone of it, but it lost me in season three, and *The Walking Dead* never grabbed me even after a season and a half of watching.

Are you working on anything at the moment that you'd like to share with our readers?

This is the year I'm finally going to finish writing the novel I've been saying for years I'm going to write. I'm also working on a horror novella for a new line by the UK independent publisher Salt, edited by Johnny Mains, and on

various short story commissions. I'm also working on a project in a new medium for me, and there might be more in new media — but that's all I can say on those at the moment!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erika Holt lives in the cold, white North (i.e. Calgary, Canada), where she writes and edits speculative fiction. Her stories have appeared in a number of anthologies including *Evolve Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead*, and *What Fates Impose*. She has also co-edited two anthologies: *Rigor Amortis*, about sexy, amorous zombies, and *Broken Time Blues*, featuring 1920s alien burlesque dancers and bootlegging chickens.

MISCELLANY

In the Next Issue of

NIGHTMARE

M A G A Z I N E

Coming up in April, in *Nightmare* . . .

We have original fiction from Desirina Boskovich (“The Island”) and Charles Payseur (“Spring Thaw”), along with reprints by Kaaron Warren (“Mountain”) and Nancy Kilpatrick (“The Age of Sorrow”).

We also have the latest installment of our column on horror, “The H Word,” plus author spotlights with our authors, a showcase on our cover artist, and a feature interview with author and founder of Cemetery Dance Publications, Richard Chizmar.

It’s another great issue, so be sure to check it out. And while you’re at it, tell a friend about *Nightmare*.

Thanks for reading!

Stay Connected

Here are a few URLs you might want to check out or keep handy if you'd like to stay apprised of everything new and notable happening with *Nightmare*:

Website

www.nightmare-magazine.com

Newsletter

www.nightmare-magazine.com/newsletter

RSS Feed

www.nightmare-magazine.com/rss-2

Podcast Feed

www.nightmare-magazine.com/itunes-rss

Twitter

www.twitter.com/nightmaremag

Facebook

www.facebook.com/NightmareMagazine

Subscribe

www.nightmare-magazine.com/subscribe

Subscriptions & Ebooks

If you enjoy reading *Nightmare*, please consider subscribing. It's a great way to support the magazine, and you'll get your issues in the convenient ebook format of your choice. You can subscribe directly from our website, via Weightless Books, or via Amazon.com. For more information, visit nightmare-magazine.com/subscribe.

We also have individual ebook issues available at a variety of ebook vendors, and we now have Ebook Bundles available in the *Nightmare* ebookstore, where you can buy in bulk and save! Buying a Bundle gets you a copy of every issue published during the named period. Buying either of the half-year Bundles saves you \$3 (so you're basically getting one issue for free), or if you spring for the Year One Bundle, you'll save \$11 off the cover price. So if you need to catch up on *Nightmare*, that's a great way to do so. Visit nightmare-magazine.com/store for more information.

About the Editor

John Joseph Adams, in addition to serving as publisher and editor-in-chief of *Nightmare*, is the series editor of *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy*, published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. He is also the bestselling editor of many other anthologies, such as *The Mad Scientist's Guide to World Domination*, *Armored*, *Brave New Worlds*, *Wastelands*, and *The Living Dead*. Recent and forthcoming projects include: *Help Fund My Robot Army!!! & Other Improbable Crowdfunding Projects*, *Robot Uprisings*, *Dead Man's Hand*, *Operation Arcana*, *Wastelands 2*, *Press Start to Play*, and *The Apocalypse Triptych: The End is Nigh*, *The End is Now*, and *The End Has Come*. Called “the reigning king of the anthology world” by Barnes & Noble, John is a winner of the Hugo Award (for which he has been nominated eight times) and is a six-time World Fantasy Award finalist. John is also the editor and publisher of *Lightspeed Magazine* and is a producer for Wired.com's *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. Find him on Twitter @johnjosephadams.
