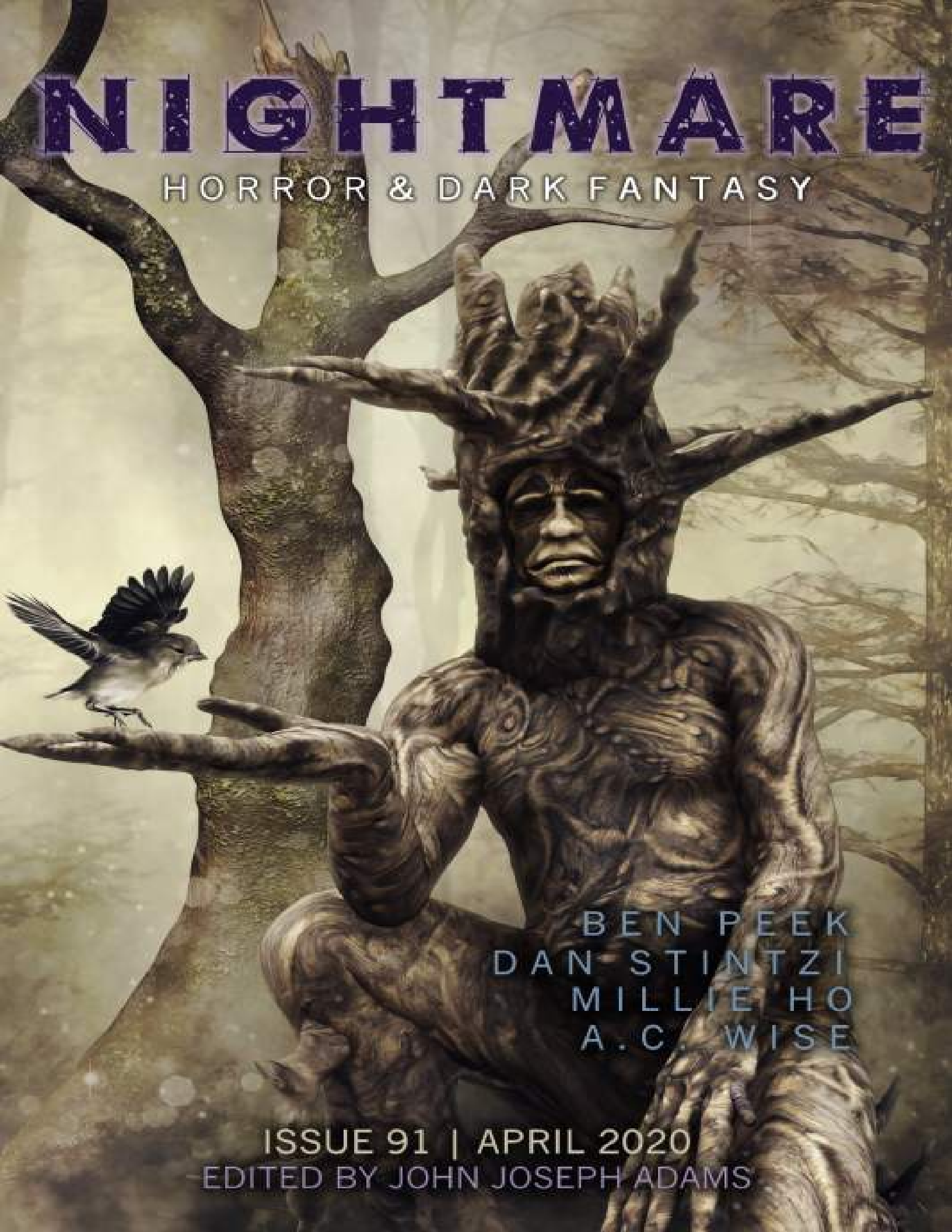


NIGHTMARE

The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric illustration. It features a large, gnarled tree trunk on the left. In the center, a muscular, tree-like figure with a human-like face and a crown of branches is depicted. To the left of this figure, a small bird is perched on a branch. The overall color palette is dark and moody, with shades of brown, black, and a hint of blue in the sky.

HORROR & DARK FANTASY

BEN PEEK
DAN STINTZI
MILLIE HO
A.C. WISE

ISSUE 91 | APRIL 2020
EDITED BY JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS

NIGHTMARE

M A G A Z I N E

NIGHTMARE

MAGAZINE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Issue 91, April 2020

FROM THE EDITOR

[Editorial: April 2020](#)

FICTION

[See You on a Dark Night](#)

Ben Peek

[Surrogate](#)

Dan Stintzi

[A Moonlit Savagery](#)

Millie Ho

[And the Carnival Leaves Town](#)

A.C. Wise

BOOK EXCERPTS

[Velocities](#)

Kathe Koja

NONFICTION

[The H Word: Mental Health, Ableism, and the Horror Genre](#)

Evan J. Peterson

[Media Review: April 2020](#)

Adam-Troy Castro

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHTS

[Ben Peek](#)

[Millie Ho](#)

MISCELLANY

[Coming Attractions](#)

[Stay Connected](#)

[Subscriptions and Ebooks](#)

[Support Us on Patreon, or How to Become a Dragonrider or Space Wizard](#)

[About the Nightmare Team](#)

[Also Edited by John Joseph Adams](#)



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FROM THE EDITOR

"A welcome addition to the Best American series."

—WASHINGTON POST

"An almost unheard-of diversity of tales absolutely sing in this superlative anthology of short speculative stories."

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY,
starred review

"The year's most innovative and interesting. These are stories to take your breath away, to make you laugh, to bring you to despair, to give you hope, to creep you out, and even to break your heart."

—BOOKLIST, starred review



LOOKING BACK AT PREVIOUS EDITIONS . . .



"Dystopic, sometimes darkly humorous collection of twenty hard-hitting stories feels timely."

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY,
starred review



"Intellectually demanding . . . a very elite, highly curated . . . set of primal, classic-seeming tales from our past, present, and future."

—KIRKUS REVIEWS,
starred review



"Stellar . . . An illuminating anthology for genre devotees and curious readers interested in exploring science-fiction and fantasy."

—LIBRARY JOURNAL,
starred review

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Editorial: April 2020

John Joseph Adams | 114 words

Welcome to issue ninety-one of *Nightmare*.

It's always risky, writing a story about vampires—but Ben Peek spins us a novel take on the monster in his new short “See You on a Dark Night.” Millie Ho’s new story, “A Moonlit Savagery,” uses two different kinds of monster to span the gap between Bangkok and the Toronto suburbs. We also have reprints by Dan Stintzi (“Surrogate”) and A.C. Wise (“And the Carnival Leaves Town”).

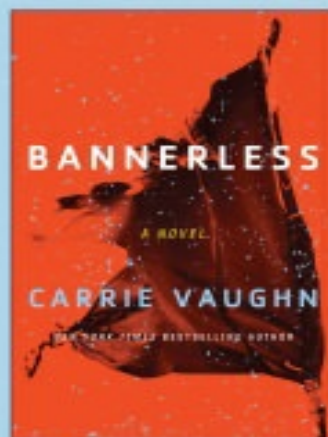
In the “The H Word,” Evan Peterson talks about some of the stigmas against mental illness that exist within our genre. Plus we have author spotlights with our authors, and a media review from Adam-Troy Castro.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Joseph Adams, in addition to serving as publisher and editor-in-chief of *Nightmare*, is the editor of John Joseph Adams Books, an science fiction and fantasy imprint from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. He is also the series editor of *Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy*, as well as the bestselling editor of many other anthologies, including *The Mad Scientist's Guide to World Domination*, *Robot Uprisings*, *Dead Man's Hand*, *Armored*, *Brave New Worlds*, *Wastelands*, and *The Living Dead*. Recent projects include: *Cosmic Powers*, *What the #@&% Is That?*, *Operation Arcana*, *Loosed Upon the World*, *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 two-time winner of the Hugo Award (for which he has been a finalist eleven times) and is a seven-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

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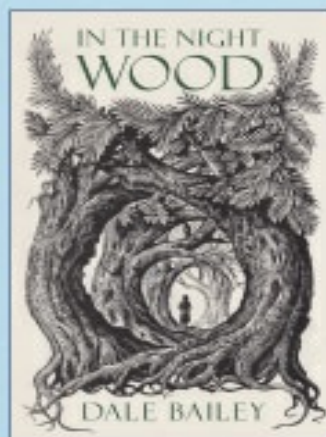
BANNERLESS
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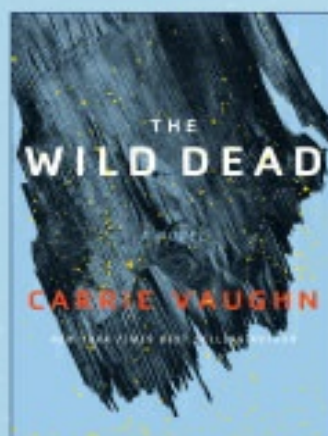
**IN THE NIGHT
WOOD**
DALE BAILEY

"Luminously written,
transporting, and all-
around excellent. I
couldn't put it down."
—KAREN JOY FOWLER



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MOLLY TANZER

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Wilde pastiche with
the heart of a
paranormal thriller."
—DIANA GABALDON



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THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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—MEG ELISON



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See You on a Dark Night

Ben Peek | 5674 words

W— went to the vampire club a couple of nights after E—’s death. It was on M— Street, in an oddly-shaped bar. When W— gazed at it from the outside, when he stared through the dirty windows and advertisements, the old stools and tables looked like the rotten teeth in a giant’s mouth.

The bar was struggling. W— hadn’t seen more than two or three people in it for months. In an attempt to bring people in, the owner had begun to organise events. He’d put flyers around the neighbourhood advertising trivia nights, happy hours, ladies nights, and more. The flyer that appeared outside W—’s brownstone was for the vampire club. When W— saw it, he tore it off the pole and took it home to show E—. The sick man lay in his bed, a collection of thin lines beneath a heavy blanket. He would die early in the morning, but when W— sat down next to him that night and showed him the flyer, E— laughed. It was a shallow, wheezy laugh. He told W— he should go, and W— laughed as well.

W— didn’t plan on going. On the night E— died, W— was two hundred and thirteen years of age. He had seen a lot of people die. None of those deaths were as exhausting as E—’s.

W— had been his carer for just over a decade, but it was only in the last three years that he had been forced to change the bedclothes, help him to the bathroom, and sit him in the shower and wash him. He spent every night of those three years in a chair beside E— watching old TV shows that he ordered for the sick man. In the nights that followed E—’s death, W— found himself walking to E—’s bedroom at set times, to continue the routine the two had given birth to.

Before W— arrived at the bar, before he shook the hand of the man who owned it, he’d tried to break the routine by reading. The book was one that he’d owned for years. He thought highly of the author. But he couldn’t focus. The words were just words. W— could find no joy in them. They were dull. Everything was dull. He thought he should be watching the last handful of episodes of the show he and E— had been watching, even though he disliked it. But then, with nothing to prompt the thought, nothing whatsoever, W— remembered the vampire club. He remembered what E— said. Before he had

time to stop himself, he was standing outside in the gently falling snow. Then he was inside, shaking the owner's hand.

There were no vampires. W— knew that immediately. There were only ten people in the bar. Most of them were students. He felt out of place, but didn't look it, fortunately. The bar's owner was a fleshy white man with a beard in search of his chest hair. He had a t-shirt advertising a vampire film released a few years ago. W— hadn't liked the film, but he was grateful that the man wasn't wearing fake teeth, or a robe, or a cloak, or sitting on a casket. Of course, all of that was exactly why E— said he should go. It was the cheap horror of the situation that had made E— laugh. Still, the owner had a fake accent he thought sounded vampiric. He used it when he introduced the film of the night. The vampire club, it turned out, was not a club for people who wanted to be vampires, but a film club.

W— had seen the film they ran that night, but stayed anyhow. The movie played on a portable screen in the back of the bar and was better than he remembered. At one stage, a vampire named P— talked about how he was nearly human because he had learned to control his lust for blood. He had learned to sleep. He ate food and drank wine. He used the toilet. He had a job. The dedication to humanity struck a chord with W—. He saw a lot of E— in the character on the screen. He was, personally, nothing like the vampire P—. W— had no desire to be nearly human. But he heard again all the things E— said about responsibility, about the world, and W—'s memories of the dead man carried him through the film.

After it finished, he went up to the bar. There was a big mirror on the back wall, but bottles hid most of it, and he considered himself pretty safe from anything but the most determined stare. Even if he hadn't been, he supposed he would've ordered a beer in memory of E— anyhow.

A girl came up next to him while it was poured. She had brown skin. She had short hair that was dyed blue and green. She was slim and pretty and she was young. W— was surprised by the last thought. After all, everyone was young compared to him. The girl was very young, though. He wasn't sure she was old enough to order the beer she did. Not in this country, anyhow.

Her name was Z—. She held out her hand after she introduced herself and he took it. "Did you like the film?" she asked.

"Yes." He could still feel her pulse after he let go. "I'd seen it before, but I liked it more this time."

“It was my choice.” She smiled. “No one else had heard of it in the last meeting we had. We’re going to vote on the next film tonight. You’re welcome to vote on it if you plan to come again.”

“I might. I didn’t realise it was a film club before I came here. I thought, well, I thought people would be dressed up like—”

“Wankers?”

He smiled. “That’s not a word I hear very often around here.”

“I had a boyfriend who used it.” Z— picked up her beer, motioned to a free table at the back of the bar. “I thought you had a similar accent.”

She wore skinny black jeans and a red hooded jacket that that ended above her ass. He tried not to stare.

“I’m a bit of mongrel these days, I’m afraid,” W— said after they sat. “My father and I travelled a lot when I was young. I’m not sure my accent fits anywhere anymore. He would have hated the film, by the way. He hated all vampire films.”

“I have friends like that. I guess they don’t understand the attraction. There’s just something about such an immortality that’s very romantic.”

“It sounds tiring. Have you ever noticed that in a lot of films, being a vampire means overcoming your monstrosity, or giving into it? Their life is one of constant struggle, of years and years of control until they can no longer resist the horror that is in them. It’s a strange, beautiful tragedy, I guess. Living it must wear you down.”

“I agree with you about the films, but don’t you think, if they were real, that they could grow instead? That they would find endless education and culture? That they would reach an understanding of life that far exceeds those of us mortals?”

“I’m sure some would strive towards that, but then I think about my father.” He said it before he realised what he had said. “When my father was old, he became cruel. He made no attempt to do any of the things you just mentioned.”

“I’m not a therapist, you know,” Z— said.

“I’m sorry?”

“All this talk about your father. If you’ve got issues with him, I can’t solve them here in this bar. Not with one drink, at any rate.”

He gave an embarrassed laugh. “I’m sorry. A friend of mine died not long ago. I’d been looking after him. This is the first night I’ve been out since it

happened.”

“And you decided to come to a vampire club? One that you didn’t even know was going to play a film?”

“Grief is a terrible thing. It’s my only explanation.”

Z— laughed. She had a lovely laugh, the kind of laugh W— could’ve listened to all night. He was pleased when he heard it a second and third time. Because of it, he stayed and voted for the next film, the film Z— wanted, though he knew by then that he wouldn’t return to the club. Z—’s film didn’t win. Another one, one that starred a recently deceased actor, did. Z— bought W— a beer to thank him for his part, and they talked at the back of the bar until it closed. It was still snowing when they stepped out. Two of the lamp posts on the other side of the road were out and the darkness seemed to bloom around them. W— gave his number to Z—. He didn’t ask for hers. He could have. He could have made her give it to him, as well. She wouldn’t have been able to deny him. But he didn’t.

E—, he knew, would have approved.

• • • •

A week passed before W— heard from Z— again. She called and asked if he wanted to go to a gig. “Sure,” he said, though he’d never heard of the band.

A lot of people hadn’t. The tickets were cheap and the bar they played in was only half full. W— thought he recognised the drummer when she walked out on stage, but once she began to play, he wasn’t sure. Besides, what did it matter? She wasn’t like him. She had nothing he could see deep inside her, nothing that hinted at a dark majesty that linked two worlds, a dark majesty that he himself hadn’t felt for months. In the end, he decided she must have been a local. He must’ve seen her somewhere on the street, or in a store. Or maybe she just looked like someone he had seen fifty years ago.

E— had said he was constantly mistaking one person for another. It was one of the experiences of being old. He described it as a very human experience. He said that well before he moved into W—’s brownstone. When E— moved in, he was seventy-two. He used a cane but still struggled with the stairs. On the first day, W— told him that they were good for him. A week later, he had a railing put in because he didn’t want E— to fall. He’d already fallen twice in his old flat. That was why he moved in with W—.

He should never have let E— stay there for as long as he did, anyhow. He had a tiny pension. He could barely afford his medication, much less food. W— could still remember the day he stepped into E—’s flat to help him move. The other man had two suitcases of clothes and one box of items to bring with him. The rest of his life was rented, broken, or simply absent. That first night, after E— went to bed, W— opened the box he had carried over. He found an unloaded pistol. A family photograph. An old Bible. A collection of children’s books. A doll without hair. Loose ammunition made from silver. W— closed it before he reached the bottom. Even after E—’s death, he hadn’t opened it again. He simply put the box in the closet, beneath the clothes that would no longer be worn.

At the gig, Z— wore the same skinny black jeans from the week before. She wore a different t-shirt, a red t-shirt advertising a radio station he’d never heard of, and a black jacket. Half way through the set, W— found his hands resting under her jacket. More than once, his white hands touched her brown skin under the shirt. If Z— thought his touch was cold, she didn’t say anything. In fact, Z— said very little to him. She simply moved with the music and he moved with her. By the time the band finished, they’d kissed twice. She tasted of whisky and beer. He hoped that he didn’t taste stale. After they left the bar, they went to a small diner and ate. W— hadn’t eaten properly for two days for no real reason. The burger he had didn’t help. It wasn’t bloody and it had a rotten, awful taste, but he worked through it for appearances. He told himself that he’d eat properly when he got home. When Z— suggested that they go back to his place after, he hesitated briefly because of that. In the end, he thought it would be fine and said yes.

He worried that the smell of death lingered inside the brownstone. At the diner, Z— told him she was a medical student. If she brought it up, W— would tell her that E— had been bedridden in his final months. It was still winter and difficult to air everything out. Also, he hadn’t expected to bring anyone back. He’d stopped bringing people back to his home when E— started to deteriorate. If Z— smelt anything, though, she didn’t say. She just smiled at him after she stepped through the door. She took off her heavy jacket and put it on the hook. She took her lighter jacket off and laid it across one of his fraying chairs. It was in the front room, where the bookshelves were. When she approached them, he went into the kitchen and poured a glass of wine for them both.

When W— returned, he found Z— sitting on one of his couches with a book. It was a collection of stories, one of which was a very early vampire story, written before the most famous of all vampire stories. It was a curious choice. A small part of him, a hungry part of him, whispered a warning, but W— ignored it. He placed the glass of wine down beside her and asked her if she liked it.

“This book is over a hundred years old,” she said. “It’s not a first edition, but it still must have cost some.”

“I inherited most of what you see. My father—”

“Was a vampire.”

“I guess you’d say that emotionally, sure.”

“No, I meant literally. Really. He was a vampire. Just like you are.”

He sat across from her. The hungry part of him wasn’t so easy to ignore now. “I only ever went to the one vampire club once. I saw a film. Nothing in it looked like this.”

“There was a mirror behind the bar. You didn’t appear in it.”

He made a small sound. It was somewhere between a laugh and a sigh.

“I’m sorry,” Z— said.

“No, don’t be.” He wanted to grab her, but he didn’t. He kept himself calm.

“I didn’t think anyone would notice. There were a lot of bottles.”

“No one did. No one but me.”

“Yet you called.”

“I did.”

“And how do you think this goes now?”

She lifted a finger to him, then herself. “This?”

“Yes, this.”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t want to have to hurt you.”

She came to him then. He wasn’t afraid. He had no reason to be afraid. Yet, when she sank down onto his lap, his hands trembled.

“I don’t want to be hurt, either,” she murmured. “I know what it’s like to be hurt.”

Her lips were moist. He thought, in the middle of the kiss, how E—’s earlier approval would have become disapproval by now. The two had met after W— left a woman’s house, sixty-two years before. The woman wasn’t dead, but E— didn’t know that. He placed the gun to the back of W—’s after he stepped

out of the door. He said, There are silver bullets here. They'll not kill a monster like you, but they'll hurt you. Hurt you enough for me to kill you.

E— had been so sure. His kind were always so sure. W— took the gun off him quickly. He knocked E— to the ground and stunned him with the force of his blow. He crouched beside him. You need a new job, he said. You need a real trade. But of course, the young man had a real trade. He had a teacher who had filled him with truth and lies and skills that had no practical use outside hunting monsters like him. Yet, even after all the years that followed, after all the misconceptions were fixed on both their sides, E— would never have approved of what W— and Z— were doing.

Z— approved. That was clear. Her pulse was rising. She was pushing into W—. His thoughts of E— faded beneath her body. It reached out to him, the pulse of her youth, her wellness, her fitness, her newness. It reached out to him, to his hunger, and soon he was intoxicated by it. He pulled at the buttons of her jeans and she stepped off him. She smiled, grinned really, and pulled her pants off. Her underwear came off as well. When she came back to him, he grabbed her by the waist and pushed her back into the chair, kissed her as he did. Then he kissed her legs. Then her cunt. He let his tongue lead him through her wetness. He had to leash a part of his desire, the part that had begun to mingle with his hunger. He wanted to bite her. He wanted to latch on to her thigh. He wanted to tear the skin. He wanted to drink. But he knew he couldn't. He didn't want to be rough with her. He might be later, but only later. When he had better control of himself. When he'd eaten. He could—no, *no*. He picked her up suddenly and carried her up the stairs to his bedroom, to his bed. By the time he was there, he was back in control. He sank into her. Later, she sank onto him. He lost track of time. He lost himself. It was the first time he had since E— died. When he came aware of himself again, Z— was lying next to him.

He went downstairs while she slept. His hand shook when he opened the fridge. He pulled out one of his silver containers and drank. Every need, every sharp edge, every desire to hurt, slipped away from him. He felt everything inside him settle. The majesty he hadn't seen in his life for a so long returned just briefly. Just for a moment. He saw a giant's skeleton shackled on a shoreline. When he closed his eyes, he thought he could touch it.

"Are there many like you?" Z— asked. She stood at the bottom of the stairs in one of his t-shirts, nothing else. She had watched him drink. "Out there in

the world, that is?"

"No."

"Just you?"

"There's maybe a dozen of us."

"Why so few? Are you like animals who've lost their natural habitat? Or have people hunted you?"

"Some have, but they've never been a real threat. And this is my natural habitat." W— motioned to the kitchen table. "You don't have to stand there."

She took one seat, he the other. "What do you mean?" she asked. "How are there so few if the people who hunt you aren't a threat?"

"They're not a threat to me." He smiled. Blood still stained his teeth, but he didn't care. "To others, yes. To those not like me they are a threat. You see, they think, that is, the hunters think that I don't come from their world, but I do. Another world shadows this world, and that is where many of their monsters live, but not me. I'm banned from that world. I'm an abomination in its eyes. A half-breed. I can see it, I can travel it, I can even live in it. But I am not born in it. I come from this world. This is my home. No matter what others tell you, sunlight doesn't burn me. Crosses mean nothing. Silver bullets are as useless as normal ones. The only threat to me in this world is myself."

"You mean you and the other vampires kill each other?"

"No. I mean we kill ourselves."

She stared at him.

He shouldn't have said that, but he was languid, happy. It was the blood, yes, but it was her as well. It was Z—. The very smell of her filled him. The smell of him and her.

"My father made me to take his place in this world," W— said. "I didn't understand that, not at the start. I remember when I first woke, when I was first given my new life, my father was my idol. He was a warrior. He was a scholar. When I was old enough, he took me to the other world. He travelled it fearlessly. He taught me the languages and customs of it. He told me this world hated us. He showed me giants and dragons and more that defies this language the two of us share right now. He made sure I knew how dangerous it was. Then, later, he became crueler and more dangerous than it. He was over five hundred years old. He became cruel towards me on purpose. He wanted to make me kill him."

A breath escaped Z—. A low breath, an amazed breath. "I didn't expect that."

But then, I haven't known what to expect from you since I met you."

W— smiled.

"You could have drank from me. If you wanted." He knew what she thought she was offering. She thought she knew him. "I wouldn't have—I mean, I wouldn't have been disappointed if you had."

"I would have," he said. "It's not what you think it is. It's not like the movies. It's not a pretty scar that's left afterwards. But more importantly, I have no need. I have blood. I can get it easily in this day and age. I don't have to hurt you."

"My ex-boyfriend used to say that." She looked at him when she said that. She held his gaze. She wouldn't turn away from him, not now. "He would say it after he hit me."

"The one with the accent?"

She nodded.

"I'll not kill him for you."

"I wasn't—"

"You were," he said, but not angrily, gently. "If you want him dead, if he's still around, if he still bothers you, you should kill him. Don't let him be your horror. Be it yourself."

• • • •

W— said too much that night. He wasn't ashamed of what he said and he wasn't sorry, but he didn't expect to hear from Z— again. The next night, when he was alone, he laughed at himself for what had happened. He was such a fool. He needed to remember who he was. If E— had been alive, he would've laughed until he cried. A girl seduced him. A girl seduced him in hopes that he would murder her ex-boyfriend. It was funnier than the vampire club when you thought about it.

When Z— called W— two nights later he was surprised and said so. She asked to come over. She came with a gift, a book she'd found in a second hand store, an apology. Was she truly sorry? W— didn't know. That night, after they had sex, Z— ran her fingers along his scars. They were on the inside of his leg, a mess of brutal lines made by W—'s father when he created his son. She said nothing about them and he let her keep her hand there. Three nights later, she introduced him to two of her friends. Afterwards, W—

wondered what E— would've said now.

He probably would have called him a fool. E—'s voice asked a series of small, nagging questions over the next two weeks. The main one, the one that collected the others, was how long W— planned to keep this relationship with Z— going? It was short term. W— wasn't going to be her partner. Not in any serious way. He wasn't going to watch her grow old. He wasn't going to sit by her side and watch bad TV with her. He wasn't going to collect her medicine and pretend to be a grandson or something similar at the pharmacist. He'd done that already. Such an event was years away, but he was exhausted at the thought. W— knew he was overthinking it, that a few nights out with a girl, a few nights in with her, wasn't anything serious. But he remembered what he said to Z— that night, when he was full of blood, about not letting another person become your horror. He'd been talking about himself. He knew that. Maybe he'd even known it then. To W—, Z— was her youth, the smoothness of her skin, the bend of her back, the flexibility of her legs. She was the steady beat of her pulse. He didn't care what she studied, who she admired, or what she wanted from her life.

She was just part of his grief.

Then, one night, she called him in tears and asked him to come to her house.

• • • •

Z— lived in a series of near-identical flats whose windows were peppered with old, square air conditioning units. W— stepped out of the subway a block away shortly after the snow stopped. Most of the lights in the building were out and the few that were on failed to pierce the night sky. The front door didn't have a lock. The elevator took him to the sixth floor without question. It rattled unpleasantly the entire way. Outside it, the hallway was empty and quiet. He didn't have to knock on Z—'s door. She opened it for him.

She had bruises and cuts on her face. It was the first thing W— saw. Her right hand was bandaged as well. After she closed the door, she hugged him hard. He hugged her back, but gently because she looked so small and so frail. It didn't help that her flat stretched out behind her, filled with overturned furniture.

After he let her go, W— said, "Where is he?"

“In the kitchen.” She hesitated. “I’m sorry.”

“What are you apologising for?”

“You shouldn’t have to see this.”

W— had seen worse. The ex-boyfriend was a bloody mess in the corner. He had a dozen stab wounds in the chest. The knife was in the last of them. It was just an average kitchen knife.

W— tilted the ex-boyfriend’s head around to look at it. He was white, dark-haired and clean shaven. He wore expensive clothes.

“He told me he had a couple of things he wanted to collect,” she said while he knelt. “I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t have said yes. I just didn’t think it would—I didn’t know one of my friends told him about us. It was one of the friends you met. He said something mean to her and to get revenge she told him about us. About you. But I didn’t know. He was so angry after I let him in. He wouldn’t leave. He just wouldn’t. He took my phone off me. When I tried to get it back, he hit me. He started throwing everything around. I didn’t know what to do. I just remembered what you said and I picked up the knife. Once I did that I couldn’t stop. It was just—” She stopped. She met W—’s gaze. “It was just so easy.”

“It always is,” he said.

“I don’t know what to do now. I don’t want to go to jail. Not for him.”

“I called a friend on my way over. He’s an undertaker. He makes bodies disappear all the time. He’ll make this one disappear for you.”

She tried to thank him, but she started to cry. W— supposed that they were tears of relief. He had never cried such tears himself.

Quietly, he made her tea. E— had loved tea. He drank it from a straw when he couldn’t lift a cup easily. At his brownstone, W— had a dozen boxes of different kinds. Z— had half a loose dozen bags in the cupboard.

Z— was half way through her first cup when the undertaker arrived. She jumped when he knocked on the door. W— let him in. He was a short, greying man, somewhere in his sixties. His assistant was a dark-haired young woman who looked familiar. It wasn’t until she bent down to lift the ex-boyfriend’s body that W— recognised the drummer from a few weeks ago. He must have seen her when the two came to pick up E—. If the drummer recognised him, she made no mention of it. The undertaker did what little talking took place. In response to his one question, W— told him that he would settle the bill.

Once they were alone, Z— asked him to stay. He accepted. He hadn’t

planned to leave, anyway. Z— spread out blankets on the living room floor and he slipped under them with her. Unsurprisingly, she just wanted to be held.

After a while, he began to speak. “My friend, the one who died, was called E—.” The room around the pair of them was dark and W—’s voice was soft. “When I met him, he thought I was monster. He had been taught all about monsters, you see. He had been raised on the stories of them. A monster acted this way, or that way. A monster had this physical attribute, or that. Later, he told me, the organisation he worked for had a book that explained it all. I was amazed. I couldn’t imagine such a book. When he finally showed it to me, I was shocked to see that it was only three hundred pages long. I had expected it to be this great, massive series of books, but it was just this one small book.

“E— told me that for a long time he had believed in everything written in this book. He believed in it completely. But after I didn’t kill him, he began to question it. For a while, we met in bars and restaurants to talk about it. He wanted to know how a monster could show mercy, but how someone who was human could not? I didn’t know the answer. I went to the meetings initially because I thought they were funny. I didn’t want to make him question anything, or doubt his beliefs. I was quite capable of monstrous acts. He asked if I thought of myself as a monster and I said I didn’t, but for the times I did. It was difficult to explain.

“Yet, I found myself enjoying our conversations about the nature of people, no matter who they were. E— was a smart man. A creative man. After a while, I started to look forward to these meetings. I found that I enjoyed his company. To my surprise, we had a lot in common. We became friends. I had never had a friend like him before. When he became old, I became his carer. His family were dead by then. All he had left were his monsters like me. When he died, I realised that I didn’t even have that.”

“And now?” Z— asked.

He looked down at her. “Now?”

“Now you’re not so alone, are you?”

Yes, he was.

Z— cried out when W— rolled her over, but she did not cry out in fear. W— did not know what she thought would happen. Would he take a little of her blood? Would he leave a scar? Would it be as intimate as when he penetrated her weeks before? She whispered, “Promise you won’t hurt me,” and he lied and told her that he wouldn’t.

No, he wouldn't hurt her straight away. Not this night. Not when he tore open her thigh, the way his father had. No, he wouldn't hurt her. He would show her the two worlds before he hurt her. He would show her the shadowed world and this world and he would teach her all that he knew about both. Then, he would show Z— how to be a monster, the way W—'s father had. He would show her that E— had not been wrong when he first met him. It was just that W—'s monstrosity, W—'s cruelty, could not be fully explained by a single book, or any of the acts he performed. In fact, at times, W— thought the worst of the things he did were when he was the kindest. He would show Z— that as well.

For he knew that the only person who could understand the labyrinth of a true monster was the one who had survived it.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ben Peek lives in Sydney. He is the author of *The Godless*, *Leviathan's Blood*, *The Eternal Kingdom*, *Twenty-Six Lies/One Truth*, *Black Sheep*, and the collection, *Dead Americans and Other Stories*.

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

Surrogate

Dan Stintzi | 4464 words

Emmons found the body by the riverbank. He spotted it by the color of the coat, a dark green against the white and gray of the snow and ice. There was warmth buried somewhere deep below the skin. He lifted the body, untangled its foot from the barbs of a rusted fence, and carried it over his shoulder, trudging back through his old bootprints. Inside, he set the body upright against the tree that had grown inside his home. The tree was dead now. Emmons tried to make the body speak again but it would not.

From his bedroom, he took the spare coats he had collected during the raids and piled them across the body until only the face was visible. He had seen the face move days before; he had seen it chew and breathe. But the cold had changed the body's appearance. Now the eyes were bruises, the mouth an open sore. The heat he had felt was gone. The boy was dead. He went out to find the mother.

The mother's name was Stena. She lived on the city's edge in a ruined schoolhouse. She hid knives in the old desks. She cracked stones and made chalk, wrote words and numbers on the blackboard. In this way, she had taught the boy to read. She had lived with Emmons some time ago but then the boy arrived and everything changed.

In the schoolhouse, Stena sat beside a fire pulling the skin off a rabbit. The tiny fibers that held the skin to the muscle would not separate so she weaved a knife sideways along the meat.

"I have something I need to show you," he said.

"I thought you weren't talking to me," she said.

"It's important."

"I'm right in the middle of something here." The knife tore through the last thread and the skin came loose.

He was momentarily sidetracked by the scene, thinking about himself as the rabbit, wondering if his skin could be removed in the same way, all at once with a single strong tug. She drove a pointed stick through the meat and held it over the fire.

"I have bad news," he said. "I'm sorry."

"Spit it out," she said.

He told her. The fire cast new shapes on her face. Her eyes were black, orange, then black again. He went to comfort her with his hands but the place where she had been was empty. She was three buttons up on her parka, the hood over her head. Her face was gone. He followed her out the door and into the cold.

She did not take steps; she kicked through the snow with Emmons just behind her. His breath came in shallow waves. His heart felt too big inside his chest.

From the outside, Emmons's house looked as abandoned as the buildings that surrounded it. The windows had melted; the gutters were filled with ash. Stena knew how to access the crawl space hidden on the back side of the house, through the body of a hollowed-out minivan, past a washing machine on rollers, under the porch, into a tunnel of chiseled out foundation ending in a foot of half-frozen water slicked across the basement floor.

Up the stairs, in the room with the dead tree, Stena saw the body, which had somehow slumped over in Emmons's absence. She fell to the floor and cried into the moldy rug. The noise she made reminded him of a pheasant he had seen shot out of the air . . . not dead, screaming a bird scream, doing one-winged loop-de-loops—earthbound spirals—until it pranged headfirst into the trunk of a tree and fell silent.

During the time when they had shared this home, he had, as a kind of protest, made a point of ignoring the boy. It was Stena who decided they would offer him shelter. Now he straightened the child upright against the tree and used his thumb to close his dead eyes. The body had thawed while he was gone. The skin was a fish's skin. The color of it was gray and blue.

Stena had rolled over. She was staring up at the ceiling. The hood of her parka made her head seem engorged, grotesque.

"Where did you find him?"

He told her. She started making the shot pheasant sound again. He said: "What business did he have being down there?"

"I believed in him having freedom. I wish that he didn't go to the river but that was his choice and he made it."

The kid was dead and his eyes were closed, but Emmons still had the sensation of being watched. Stena stayed on her back. He followed her eyes and saw the snowy light through the holes in the ceiling. The light made him blink repeatedly.

“I need you to do me a favor,” Stena said.

“No.”

“You have to at least listen.”

“I sure as hell do not. You lost the opportunity to ask me for favors when you left for that schoolhouse.”

“My moving is irrelevant to the favor. My son is dead for Christ’s sake.”

“That is not your son.”

“Oh, fuck you.” She rolled back over and screamed at the floor.

“You keep that up and they’ll find us.”

The rug muffled her voice. “Those freaks gave up on me and you a long time ago.”

The boy’s body slumped sideways again. Snow began to fall through the holes in the ceiling. The light coming through the holes illuminated the sideways body like something in a painting.

Painting was a word that struck Emmons as strange sounding. He had forgotten what it meant, but the light, the body, the colorful coats all piled together, they moved his mind back in time and the meaning returned. Things fell out of use and were forgotten. He could not remember all the things that had gone away.

“If I come back will you do this for me?” she asked.

“No,” he said, feeling uncertain. He returned the body to the sitting position.

“I’ll kill myself.”

“That’s not fair.”

“You think this is fair?” Still face down, she stretched out her arm and pointed toward the boy.

“Why can’t you go?”

“I’m grieving. I have to go through a process.”

The body slumped over again, dust jetting out of the coat pile in different directions.

“This whole place must be crooked,” he said. He chose to leave the body as it was.

“Consider me moved back in. I never should have left in the first place.” Her voice sounded like it was coming from a different room. “I hate the way I’ve treated you,” she said. “Sometimes I think that I’m separate from my brain. I do things and I’m not sure why I did them. I’m not always sure who does the deciding.”

He stayed silent and stacked logs, heavy and damp, in the pit he'd carved out of the floorboards. He snapped kindling and made a pyramid beneath the logs. He lit the fire and stood there breathing smoke.

"I was hoping we could be a family," she said.

"I know," he told her. Smoke curled in the black part of his eyes.

"I'm serious about killing myself."

"I know," he said.

She flipped back over and brought her knees to her chest. She hugged herself and became a ball.

"You understand what you are asking me to do?"

"I love you," she said. "I've always loved you."

"I won't be the same when I come back."

"I loved you the first moment I saw you. You were with that band of raiders."

"I remember."

"You were dragging bodies to be burned. You gave me clean water. I thought: this man is a protector."

"Who knows what will happen to the boy. There's no guarantee that it'll work. You've heard the stories."

"I can't live like this. Talk to the Surrogate. See what it can do. Please."

The fire hissed. White bubbles, like the saliva of a rabid animal, boiled on the cut edge of a log. Stena lay upright and rigid. He could not look at her. The damp logs refused to fully burn. The fire wavered and let off weak heat.

"I love you too," he said.

Stena smiled.

• • • •

Out in the city, the snow was so thick, Emmons was practically swimming. He followed back roads between the rubble of the old hospital, beside toppled smokestacks, weaving past homes reduced to steel and foundation. The route through the outskirts was impassable. The river had not frozen fully, and the bridge was out again. That left the path through the city. He would have to pass the settlement, and possibly engage with and possibly maim or murder at least some of its inhabitants. He brought with him a hunting rifle he believed could still fire and a revolver he was sure could not. He had not seen the locals in

years. He had heard the noises they made, but he had not seen them. The noises were difficult to classify. They came to him at night, in half-dreams, bounced off the city's ruins, carried over the empty fields, over the snow. The sound was human—labored and sundry—rising up in unison like a chorus, but it was rigid too, mechanical, the noise an engine might make if it had a mouth and the desire to sing.

Emmons saw the settlement in the distance. The walls were made of wood; sharpened spears, aimed out at the road, jutted from the stockades. The settlement was built in the carcass of some ruined structure. Smoke rose in black plumes from the settlement's center. The afternoon sky looked flat and hollow. It was a gray piece of paper that could be torn through. The smoke had a flavor that made Emmons's stomach bubble.

He followed the old road through the ruins, through the snow, until he came along a cleared path. He followed the path, climbing over concrete and metal, winding through the burnt out car frames, the piles of frozen garbage. He saw a purple hand in one of the piles, an unblinking eye in another. The ice never melted so the bodies never broke down. He sent his mind searching for memories of the days when bodies were piled up on street corners, when cars were left to rust on highways and sidewalks, but he came back empty. His brain had been strip-mined long ago, those old nightmares replaced with white space.

He arrived outside the settlement where a man in a camouflage jacket sat hunched on a metal folding chair beside the settlement's gate. Across from the gate was a series of wooden sawhorses placed in a line blocking the path forward. The man looked up and gripped the shotgun in his lap. Metal rivers ran in crisscross stitches across his face skin. The rivers were mercury colored, they flowed and rippled as if windblown. The man's eyes were black orbs. His left leg was made of metal.

Emmons wondered if this was a normal way for people to look. He could not remember. He stuck the rifle in the crook of his shoulder and took shuffling steps, walking parallel to the settlement's gate, moving toward the barricade.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." The man spoke, his words slow and slurred like a drunk's. "Let's de-escalate there, comrade. Let's go back to square one."

"I don't want trouble," Emmons said, looking down the barrel of the rifle. It had been so long since he had talked to anyone other than Stena and the boy.

“All I want is to pass through.”

“Of course. Of course. I get it.” The man’s teeth were too white, whiter than the snow. The strange lines on his face shimmered and bent when he spoke. Emmons saw the silver lines on the man’s neck and hands. “All I need for you is a little information and then boom, that’s it, you’re on the road again.”

Emmons did not speak. He did not lower the gun.

“Like for instance, where are you coming from? Why are you using a path that is not your path? Where is your family? Do they have all of their arms and legs?”

“I come from far away . . . the bridge is out,” Emmons said and then tried to remember the other questions. “I have no family.”

Behind the man with black eyes, through the slats of the gate, Emmons saw vague shadows moving slowly. He could see a fire. He noticed then that the man’s breath was not visible.

“I’m afraid I’m going to need a little more than that. We have certain protocols here. We’ve realized, after a lot of trial and error, that in order to make any real progress certain sacrifices must be made. We’ve become a much more open and honest people. We make known our intentions.” He straightened his back against the chair. He shifted the shotgun in Emmons’s direction.

“I have a home three miles southeast. I live alone. No family.”

“That must be hard,” the man said, turning his mouth down in a way that struck Emmons as genuine. “Tell me about your plans for the future. Where is it that you are going?”

Emmons could not think of a lie quickly enough so he told the truth. “I’m on a pilgrimage. I need to speak to the Surrogate.”

“I like the look of your torso,” said the man with black eyes. The mercury rivers twisted subtly.

“What?” said Emmons.

“I didn’t say anything,” said the man with black eyes.

“I’m not sure that’s right.”

“A pilgrim? Why didn’t you say so before? We make exceptions for the penitent. Believers have the blessing of the Great Body. You may proceed.”

The man with black eyes rose from his chair and used his hips to shift the sawhorse blocking the path. He gestured for Emmons to pass.

“Do not be afraid,” the man said. “The god we serve is not like those that

came before.” His metal leg spun and twisted when he stepped. It was made of no metal Emmons had ever seen.

The man saw Emmons staring at the leg. He said: “If your right leg causes you to sin, cut it off and give it to me. I will eat the leg. I will take the leg into myself and give new life to the many-legged.”

Emmons did not know how to respond. He walked past the man and the barricade.

“That’s the good word, my man. That’s the truth.”

“Thank you for your help,” Emmons said.

The man smiled his too-white teeth, the silver rivers on his face had stilled. Emmons turned and left him there, but he saw himself go . . . felt his body reflected in the black eyes as he worked his way up the path, toward the factory, toward his blessing . . . growing smaller and smaller in the man’s eyes until he crossed the horizon and disappeared into the far-off white.

• • • •

When everything else had crumbled, the factory remained. The walls were black, the windows long gone, but the structure had held, house-sized snowdrifts butting up to the second story, icicles like tree trunks hanging from the eaves. The white print on the brick had been stripped away by wind and time but the outline of the logo remained, the ghost of an animal that no longer existed. He remembered what they called places like this, he couldn’t forget the word. Slaughterhouse, he thought and considered for some amount of time the character of that old place-namer. You knew what you were getting, he thought, at the slaughterhouse.

Emmons entered through a hole in the wall. The space smelled like rust and old blood. Crooked shafts of light fell through the broken windows, through the holes in the roof, giving shape to the hooks and chains, the decomposed rubber hoses, the metal grates where the blood had once run off. Emmons remembered an old cathedral he had visited as a child. He remembered the vaulted ceilings and colored glass, the way the air felt inside. His fingers twisted around the wooden barrel of the rifle.

He did not know what he was looking for. He assumed it would be obvious when he found it. Behind his eyes, he saw the boy’s body in the snow . . . the green jacket, the wire wrapped around his boot. He descended into the factory.

The air grew warm. There were too many rooms.

He walked through thick strips of plastic into a new place. The ceiling here was gone. It was in pieces on the floor. The room was lit up like high noon. Metal troughs lined the walls; the bright sparking across the surface made Emmons squint. In the room's center, he saw a swarm of insects spinning in a dense cloud. Their wings made no noise. They spun and spun around one another, made a loose sphere that breathed like a lung. He crossed a wall of shadow. He moved into the light and saw that the bugs were too large to be bugs. He remembered too that all the bugs in the world were dead. The spinning objects were spherical: little round bulbs. He thought of the black eyes of the man at the barricade. The spheres were silver. They spun so fast as to create the appearance of a solid object. The swarm did not respond to his presence. It continued its indifferent spinning. Moving closer, Emmons was dwarfed by the thing. It was him that was the insect.

Below the swarm, just beside the troughs, was a body, naked and upside down, the face submerged in a pool of water. The body had belonged to a man and it was missing parts of itself, chunks of skin had been carved out, digits removed. He heard Stena's sobbing in the part of his memory responsible for the storage of sound. He waited for an indeterminable amount of time, and when the swarm did not respond to his presences, he spoke.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do here," he said. The swarm swarmed. He felt the air following the spheres in invisible cyclones.

"My son is dead." He tried to trace the swarm's movement with his eyes. Had it changed somehow?

"I want him to be not dead anymore."

Dull lights blinked inside the spheres. They glowed like distant stars. Emmons turned and saw that the body from the floor was standing beside him. It was covered with those same silver scars that he had seen on the barricade guard. The body blinked. Emmons saw that it was missing the left side of its head. The space was filled with silver light. The other gaps in the body, the removed flesh and bone, had been replaced with liquid metal. The thing was made whole. God is a machine, Emmons thought.

"Remove your jacket," the body said. Its voice was wet and empty. "Roll up your sleeve."

Emmons did as he was told. The body was the Surrogate, he realized then. What had he expected? He could not remember.

“Arm,” said the body. It gestured with its own rotten limb, raising its right arm straight out from its chest.

Emmons raised his right arm. He looked up at the swarm . . . it was the color of a sunset now, deep red, crossed with streaks of gold. The body opened its mouth in a smile. It had no teeth. There was something silver in its throat.

Below his elbow, Emmons’s arm began to burn. He went to touch the burning skin and found that he could not move. He was clinched in a great, unseen embrace. The hairs on his arm cracked and smoldered. An ash-colored smudge formed a ring around his forearm, the sensation becoming unpleasant. The smudge gained depth, moved inward, further into the skin, pressing and pressing until the black gave way to red and the blood fell in twin lines onto the concrete. An invisible blade passed through the arm in halting increments, separating tendons, passing through the bone as if it were made of snow. Emmons saw colors inside himself that he did not know were there. There was more movement beneath the skin than he would have imagined, a great amount of writhing. The limb hung separate from his body, suspended in the air. He had forgotten how to scream. Blood pumped in thick, heartbeat pulses out of the stump until the Surrogate whispered something unintelligible and the wound scabbed over in an instant.

The Surrogate snatched the limb out of the air and lifted it to the swarm. “We appreciate your contribution,” it said. “The Great Body grows larger.” Swooping down, the red spheres congealed across the severed limb and when they separated, pulled back to the larger mass, the arm was gone.

Emmons inspected the stump. His fingers were far away. His vision was tinted and hazy; the light behind the ceiling had taken on a new aura. It had weight that pushed down. It flattened out the whole world.

The Surrogate approached. It would give him what he needed for the boy to live again. He had made his offering, now came the blessing.

It limped when it walked. The silver lines on its body had turned red, in time with the swarm. It looked as if the body was in the process of separating from itself, as if the light contained within was trying to escape. Now face-to-face, the Surrogate raised a hand, held a finger, pointed up, against its cheek. It pulled at the bottom lid.

It was then that Emmons left himself . . . floated far enough away that he could not hear the sounds that his own mouth made. He drifted off through the

ceiling up so high he saw the ruined city covered in white, the concrete skeleton buried beneath. The scab on his stump cracked and began to spurt blood and he found himself back in his body.

The Surrogate pulled down the skin of its face.

“Eye,” was all it said.

• • • •

It was dark now. Emmons found the path back through the city. His face was wet with blood or tears, he could not tell which. In his jacket pocket was a silver sphere the size of a walnut. Every few steps he would reach into the pocket to make sure the sphere was still there. He wished the eye and arm had been taken from opposite sides. As it was now, he felt unbalanced.

The clouds parted above him. The moonlight made the icicles glow. He thought of water freezing as it dripped, of rivers and lakes solid enough to walk across. He pictured the boy’s snow-covered jacket, the barbed wire glinting in the sun. What was he thinking when he froze to death? Emmons wondered. *Please help*, was probably what it was. *If only there was someone who could help*.

After that, the night turned static-colored and liquid. The ground moved beneath his feet. The wind licked the crevice where his eye had been. It felt like being tickled from the inside. He left blotches of red in the snow as he stumbled his way back to the house. Time slithered away.

When he arrived back in his home, having forgotten for a moment what he had gone to do and why he had done it, he found Stena curled up in the coats, her body wrapped around the boy. Emmons tried not to wake her as he pried open the child’s mouth and, using two fingers, pressed the silver sphere down his throat until only a dull gray half-moon was visible behind the tongue. When it was done, he let the body fall limp again and fit his own back against the trunk of the dead tree. Stena lay beside him. He put his hand on her shoulder and looked down at the stump where his arm had been. It was purple and bleeding. The side of his skull thumped with pressure; something watery drained down past the corner of his mouth.

The fire pit smoldered. There was very little light left. Stena grumbled, rolled her body off the child and put her head on Emmons’s thigh. Deep inside her hair, white specks—tiny creatures—moved across her scalp in jittery, stop-

start motion. He felt the warmth of her skin through her clothing. She smelled like a graveyard. He loved her in a way that was painful.

She whispered to him. He could barely hear her.

“I knew you could do it,” she said. “The Great Body makes old things new again.”

“I don’t understand,” he said. The room was glowing.

“He’s waking up,” she said. The room was so bright he couldn’t see. “I love you.”

He should have never let her go to the schoolhouse. They should have been a family the first time. Now things would be different. He fell asleep with his hands in her hair.

When he awoke the boy was tending the fire. Tiny sparks burst from the embers and gave off smoke. The silver lines on the boy’s face burned orange in the firelight. The coat pile was covered in fresh blood. Emmons could only feel half his face. His brain tried to see through his missing eye.

He long had he slept? Months? Years? Had he been resurrected from the dead? Had the earth been renewed?

The sun was up. He saw the light through the boarded up windows. On the floor behind the boy was a lump of skin and hair and fabric. The hair was coated in dried blood. The skin was bruised and lined with small cuts.

The boy turned from the fire and spoke. “I didn’t want to wake you,” he said slowly. “But I’m afraid something’s not quite right. I don’t feel well.” Emmons saw the hint of silver in the back of his mouth as he spoke. “Mother doesn’t feel well either.”

He was too weak to move, so he listened. He noticed that his arm was missing. He felt unable to keep his balance against the tree. His body was slipping and he knew that he would soon fall.

“I need you to do me a favor,” the boy said.

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A Moonlit Savagery

Millie Ho | 4960 words

My eyes snap open at night. I float out of the tunnel under the concrete wall and settle on the roof of the abandoned hostel. The starry chaos of Yaowarat stretches before me like rows of crowded teeth. It's tourist season, and my belly aches with hunger at the sight of all the farangs: slurping shark fin soup in restaurants, being measured for crocodile skin suits in tailor shops, ducking into tuk-tuks with their sunburnt arms around a local girl or two.

But I can't eat any of them unless they fall asleep within three hundred meters of the hostel I'm bound to. The locals are aware of my presence and steer clear of my soi, but the farangs who visit Bangkok know nothing about ghosts like me. I crouch on the rusty DUSIT SKY HOSTEL sign and wait for a farang to appear.

I smell him before I see him: intestines coated sweetly with coconut milk, clumps of green papaya dissolving in stomach acid, everything numbed with flakes of red chili peppers so spicy, they must taste bitter. A young farang in a t-shirt and sweatpants steps into my soi, his face covered by a dark mask with holes for his eyes, the milky skin of his arms peppered with chestnut brown freckles. He squats in the moonlight and pulls out a spray paint can from his backpack.

I float down behind him and watch the goosebumps ripple over the back of his neck. He's so lost in spray painting my wall that he doesn't notice the sudden chill in the air, or how thin ropes of saliva drip down his shoulder. My mouth waters at the thought of eating him—should I gut him from the throat, or slurp the good stuff at the bottom first?—but then I smell the lemongrass digesting in his stomach, and laugh. Trust a farang to eat the herbs used in soup stock.

He whirls around, his eyes as round and green as peeled grapes. "Who's there?" he says, his voice steadier than I expect.

I planned to wait until he's drowsy before I pounce, but now that he's aware of my presence, I don't mind gobbling him up sooner. I float into the moonlight to show him the full horror of what I am: five feet of white skin and glistening teeth, a ghost woman with long hair that flies out in veins as black as soy sauce. I want to pierce him with bright terror, to scare the consciousness

out of him and eat him after he faints. This is what I do to stubborn humans who won't fall asleep by themselves.

The farang stumbles back. His outstretched arms brace his fall and smear a wet-paint trail down the wall of the hostel. The imprint of his chattering teeth is clear against the fabric of the mask, and I stare at him for what feels like hours, willing his eyes to flutter shut so that I can dig into him—but he doesn't faint.

"Oh," he breathes, once he stops hyperventilating. "Oh."

And then, impossibly: "Cool."

• • • •

His name is Khun Sebastian. He's backpacking across Southeast Asia to see the world and to make a name for himself as an artist.

"I'm from a place called Mississauga, which is boring and sleepy as hell," he says, and sprays a black outline around the face of the woman he's painting. His index finger trembles on the nozzle of the spray paint can, either from residual fear or the Red Bull he's been sipping all night. "It's full of people who say I can't do shit. My parents don't believe in my art. Even my friends applied for jobs after college because they're too scared to go after their dreams. Everyone said I was crazy to ditch everything and go travel. 'You're throwing your life away, Seb,' they said. 'You're supposed to be earning money, not spending it.' Well, I'll show them. I'll show all of them."

I piece together what he says thanks to the translation app on his phone and the bits of English I picked up in the decades since tourists started flooding Bangkok. It's hard to focus on his words when I'm close enough to smell his intoxicating natural scent, a salty flavor with an undercurrent of something aromatic, like basil or thyme. I want to stuff him into my mouth right now, but I'll turn into ash if I eat a human who's awake. So I lace my hands over my rumbling stomach and fantasize about Mississauga instead, which sounds like the perfect place for me, a land where humans sleep all the time, their stomachs full of roast beef and kale salad and other interesting flavours that might be good to taste.

The clink of the spray paint can against the ground jolts me from my thoughts. The painting is done now, and I gasp when I see that the woman has long black hair and wears a white nightgown. She kneels in a blade of

moonlight, her small hands folded in her lap, her eyes like black marbles pressed into the pale dough of her face. The resemblance is unmistakable, and an unfamiliar heat washes over me at the thought of Khun Sebastian working all night to paint me.

Khun Sebastian peels off his mask. His wet brown curls and easy smile make my insides seize up with want. He snaps off his glove and cups my cheek with his hand, his fingertips slick with sweat. I shiver. I have never experienced the touch of a human that wasn't their knuckles cracking against my jaw or their feet cycling against my chest to kick me off, and the sensation is enough to drive me mad with hunger.

"So what's your deal?" His breath is a heady mist in my face, something I can almost taste. "Are you stuck to this wall or something?"

"มีแต่น้ำลายของแม่มดที่ทำให้ฉันหลุดจากที่นี่ได้," I say. *Only the saliva of a witch can free me from here.* Ghosts like me sleep in witches during the day and supply her with our powers, then come out at night to feed. My witch used to own Dusit Sky Hostel, but shut it down after all the gutted carcasses of the guests I hunted destroyed its reputation. She quit being a witch, too, and bound me to the tunnel under the wall, which has been my host ever since.

"Uh, say that again into the app," Khun Sebastian says, and holds the phone up to my face.

After I tell him about the tunnel and the witch, he sets the translation app back to English to Thai. "To be honest," he says, "I knew about you before I came down this street. I heard a rumour about a phi pop who haunts an old hostel in Bangkok's Chinatown, but didn't believe it until I saw you with my own eyes. I still pumped myself full of Red Bull, though, just in case."

His smile, a loose, playful thing, brings tears to my eyes. This is the longest I've spoken to anyone since I was abandoned, and I forgot how good it can feel.

His face quivers. "Poor ghost," he whispers, and wipes a tear off my cheek with his thumb. "You must've been lonely for a long time."

I lean into his touch and graze my teeth against his wrist. He chuckles, his heartbeat slow and strong, not afraid of me at all. "I'll come back tomorrow night, how about that?"

"ได้," I mutter against his skin, already dizzy with fantasies of splitting his ribs open.

Humans are as common as rice, but this one is special. I haven't met anyone who can stay in my presence for so long without screaming their throats raw, without their crotches growing dark with urine.

Over the next few weeks, Khun Sebastian visits me every night. When there's no one to hunt, we sit on the roof of the hostel and watch the neon activity buzzing in the distance: men chatting up bored-looking girls outside massage parlours, taxi drivers honking at each other with homicidal impatience, tourists in elephant print pants haggling with street vendors over the price of counterfeit goods.

When a prey sleeps within hunting range, Khun Sebastian lingers in the shadows and watches me gut them open one by one: the farang who passes out in the parking lot of a music bar after a night of heavy drinking and running his hands up the tattooed thighs of bar girls; the tour guide who falls asleep during a foot massage, her intestines tasting of sugar and onions, likely from the durian she must've eaten before she closed her eyes for the last time; the homeless local man who should've known better than to stumble into the hostel from an unlocked back door and nap on the frayed bamboo sheet in the lobby. I ache for him as I tear into him—his loneliness and feral existence is familiar—but I exist to eat, so eat is what I do.

"I love your savagery," Khun Sebastian says, when we lie on the roof of the hostel after one month of knowing each other. He's sketching me again. "All great artists have subjects they paint over and over again, and I feel like you're that for me. You're my muse."

"Muse?" I say. Another English word to add to my growing list.

"Yeah." He slides me his sketchbook. His drawings have gotten starker and more vicious over time, and I recoil from all the images of me with claws for hands or a mouth full of bloody teeth. These depictions are closer to who I am than the painting of the woman on her knees with her hands folded in her lap, but old anxieties—I'm a monster, I'm not good enough—still shoot out of me like poisonous snakes when I see them.

"Hey, don't be like that." Khun Sebastian grabs my wrist. He leans towards me, his cheek bleached by moonlight, his eyes so green. "I told you you're my muse. That means something, okay?"

"Why," I say, my lips trembling around the foreign pronunciation, "you not

afraid me?”

He smiles at my use of English. “Why?” His fingers graze up my arm and leave trails of heat across my skin. “Because you’re beautiful.”

I stare at his mouth. Would pressing my lips to his and tasting one bead of saliva be enough to kill me?

He yawns. He slides his hand off me and glances at the orange dot glowing on the horizon, the first sign of dawn. Roosters crow, and the last of the street food carts are folding up. It’s strange how the place you lived in all your life can look so different through the eyes of someone else: the tiled roofs covered by blue tarp are shabbier than I remember, and the lanterns hanging above the garages where the Thai-Chinese families sell herbs and candy look more grey than red.

“I should get back.” Khun Sebastian rises to his feet. The early sunlight outlines him in gold and makes his hair light up like a halo. “I’m off to Ho Chi Minh City tomorrow, by the way. That’s always been the plan.”

I swallow my grief. He climbs down the roof and looks up at me. His smile lacks its usual lightheartedness, and for a moment he looks older and more world-weary, which makes me wonder if there’s a side of him I haven’t seen yet.

“You can come with me, as long as you promise not to follow me to bed.” He winks at me, probably means it as a joke. We both know I can’t follow him anywhere. I’m stuck here forever.

Still, I fly after him as he blurs away on his motorbike. My energy evaporates as the sun rises, but I strain forward until the magic that binds me to the hostel hurls me back and my skin starts to hiss in the sunlight. Khun Sebastian grows fainter behind the fumes of his motorbike, and then he turns a corner and is nowhere to be seen.

• • • •

The years after Khun Sebastian are difficult.

Every time I see the primal fear that spikes in my prey’s eyes before I slash them apart, I’m reminded of the one human who wasn’t afraid of me at all.

The moon becomes my only friend again, the one constant that’s always around when I wake up at night. Sometimes I stare at it and wonder if Khun Sebastian is still in Asia and looking up at the same one. And then I don’t need

to wonder anymore.

One night, I see Khun Sebastian on a billboard near the entrance gate. *SEBASTIAN MADDER RETURNS TO BKK, Sept 8—Oct 3, at Aatit Gallery, Saladaeng Soi 14*. Images of his paintings flit across the screen, all of them raw and blazing with emotion like I remember, and still—my heart aches—featuring a woman with long black hair and dark gem eyes. I watch the billboard every night and burn every pixel of his face into my mind until he gets replaced by an advertisement for a new skin whitening cream.

He was in Bangkok but didn't visit me. The devastation hits me harder than I expect, and I stay curled up in the tunnel for longer stretches of time after that.

How long does it take a ghost like me to waste away? Weeks? Months? I stay in the tunnel until my belly turns concave and my skin becomes as translucent as rice paper. But even when I hunt, each mouthful of viscera I gulp only serves as a reminder that I'm still here, still existing without Khun Sebastian.

Over time, more of Yaowarat gets torn down. Old cinemas and shops get replaced by condos, and bamboo scaffolding starts to crisscross around more buildings near where I sleep. I start to wake up regularly to a cacophony of drills and hammers, the noises of construction echoing deep into the night.

Eventually, Dusit Sky Hostel will be torn down, too. And without a new host to sleep in, I'll crumble in the sunlight and scatter in the wind.

• • • •

Light pierces the slit between my eyelids. Tires crunch into my soi and heavy work boots stomp on the ground. Someone barks out instructions about wall removal, and I tuck myself deeper into the tunnel.

It's happening. Dusit Sky Hostel is getting torn down. I keep the image of Khun Sebastian bright in my mind—I want my final thought to be of him splashing colours on my wall—and wait for my wall to be cracked open.

"Hey." I smell salty skin, the aroma of herbs. "You still in there?"

I look up. Green eyes blink at me from above, and my breath dies in my throat.

I float out of the tunnel with a groan. My joints creak as I straighten out, my muscles not used to movement since I started hibernating for weeks at a time. I

rub my eyes and glance down at my soi, where construction workers climb down a dump truck with tube steel under their arms. This must be what I heard earlier.

“Jesus, you look famished.” Khun Sebastian turns off his flashlight and looks me up and down. He’s much older than I remember, his brown hair now gelled back and streaked with grey. He wears a dress shirt with a popped collar and crocodile skin shoes that are pointy at the toes. Crinkles form around his eyes when he smiles, and his teeth are an unnatural shade of white. “It’s good to see you again, ghost.”

It hurts to look at him directly. I wonder if he’s a hallucination constructed by my mind to help me deal with the pain of his absence, but his stomach, drenched in lime juice and salty flakes of dried shrimp, smells too real for this moment to be an illusion. Hunger uncurls in my gut and my teeth start to grow, but Khun Sebastian doesn’t seem to notice.

“It’s a good thing I’m here.” He gestures at the bamboo poles that jut around the base of Dusit Sky Hostel, construction that took place while I slept. “Someone told me there was an old painting of mine on a hostel that’s getting renovated, so I flew in to collect it. And save you, too.”

We watch the workers enter the hostel and bolt the tube steel to the back of the painting, which Khun Sebastian explains will help anchor the bricks in place once the cutting of the wall begins. The painting of me on my knees has faded with age. Her eyes are two white holes on a vacant face and her smile has eroded into a wince.

“I got something for you,” Khun Sebastian says, and puts a hand on my back. I sigh at the warmth that ripples down my spine, but the comfort fades when I smell the foul metallic scent wafting out of a white Lexus sedan parked at the end of the soi.

“I can’t get human organs for obvious reasons, so this is the best I can do.” Khun Sebastian pops the trunk of the car and pushes me towards it.

Pig’s organs gleam on cubes of ice in an icebox. My stomach lurches—everything smells like rust, like spoiled blood—but I still lower my head over a heart and sink my teeth into the tough muscle. It tastes like iron and dirt, but this is a gift from Khun Sebastian, who has finally come back to see me. I slurp down a fat liver, which mushes easily under my tongue, and swallow its jellylike rot even as my throat convulses, every cell in my body urging me to throw it back up.

“I’m glad you like this.” Khun Sebastian’s breath is a caress on the back of my neck. I eat with as much stillness as I can, afraid that he’ll leave if I move too suddenly. “I want to ask you something, actually.”

The blue tint of the translation app glows on his phone. He holds it up to his face and tells me what I already pieced together from that billboard—how he’s a famous artist now and has exhibited his work all over the world.

“I have a hometown show in Mississauga in two days,” he says. “It’s not a big show, but it’s a show I worked all my life for, something that shows all the critics back home just how far I’ve come.” He closes the space between us and smiles a playful smile that makes it feel like no time has passed. “I want you at the show. You were there when I was hustling, you saw how it all happened. And you were my inspiration.”

Something inside me loosens like a blood clot in water. I think about my fantasies of Mississauga from long ago, how the organs of those sleeping humans must be as delicious as Khun Sebastian’s must be. I glance back at the tunnel, my mouth open around a question I don’t know how to ask.

Khun Sebastian chuckles. “Don’t worry, I’ll hire a witch to free you.”

I stare at him. “จริงหรือ?” *Really?*

“Of course. Give the Thais some money, and they’ll do anything.”

He curls his fingers around my knotted wrist, and this time when he smiles, I try to smile back.

• • • •

I travel to Canada inside a hole drilled in the painting’s tube steel frame. It’s dark when I float out again. Moonlight filters in from high dusty windows, and metal shelves full of spray paint cans rise tall on either side of me. Large sheeted canvases line the walls, and a violent discomfort twists through me when I pull off a sheet and see the portrait of a naked woman with long hair climbing out of a kiln of blood. Her breasts droop down her front like wilted eggplants, and her smile, a wide gap that starts from her ears, looks crazed.

My eyes burn. Is this still supposed to be me?

The front door creaks open. Khun Sebastian comes in with a bucket in each hand. I know they’re full of animal organs even before he flicks on the light. Bile gathers in the back of my mouth at the thought of having to eat them.

“Welcome to my storage unit,” Khun Sebastian says. I try to focus on his

natural scent to cover up the heady rot of the animal organs, but he smells oddly stale and unfamiliar, like dust and cigarette butts instead of something I want to eat. “We’re in the outskirts of Sauga, so there’s nothing around for miles except asphalt and greenery. There’s no one for you to hunt, but I took care of that.”

He nudges a bucket towards me with his foot. The pig’s intestines look grey and rubbery, the pancreas a pale spongy thing that makes me cough up bile.

“What’s wrong?” Khun Sebastian tilts my chin up until I meet his gaze. The ceiling light hits his face at a harsh angle and makes his eyes look bulging and cruel, but then I blink and the moment is gone. “I thought you’d be hungry after a twelve-hour flight.”

“ฉันไม่หิวค่ะ,” I say. *I’m not hungry.*

He frowns, then takes out his phone. Instead of setting the app to translate Thai, he starts to translate his English for me instead. “I see you saw the paintings I’m exhibiting at the show.” He tugs another sheet off a canvas. I wince when I see the painting of the long-haired woman licking the wrinkled neck of a gutted farang man, both of them covered by blood vessels that sprout from the man’s rib cage like overgrown weeds. “You’re a massive hit, you know. My fans love you. They’ve been wondering about your identity for years, dissecting you like you’re the freakin’ Mona Lisa. ‘Who is she?’ they ask. ‘An ex-girlfriend? A Thai hooker?’ Just flooding me with questions, man. Which is good, since mystery is what keeps people talking.”

Khun Sebastian uncovers more canvases: a long-haired woman, naked again, sitting in the lotus position, the folds of her labia looking like a rose in bloom; the severed head of the same woman floating over a dark background, her bottom jaw unhinged and bright with needle-thin teeth; a woman reclined on velvety sheets, her hair tied up in a high glossy ponytail, her sabai wrapped tightly around her bleeding torso like a tourniquet, her lips pouty and pink.

Khun Sebastian taps a knuckle against the sabai. “I can already picture the reviews: *a commentary on the lives of women from third world countries, or shameless shock art? What’s Sebastian Madder thinking this time?*” He laughs, and the sound makes me want to retch more than the animal organs did. He points to something behind me. It’s the painting of the woman on her knees, except the colours are sharper now, and her nightgown is replaced by a translucent naked body so emaciated that the imprint of her intestines is visible under the shell of her ribs.

“I fixed it up to look like you right now.” Khun Sebastian’s smile looks less playful and more engineered, like he designed it to produce an effect in me just like he designed his art to stir up attention. “I think I’ll call it ‘A Moonlit Savagery.’ Pretty good, huh? Anyway, this is gonna be the centerpiece at the show. And that’s where you’ll come in.” He grabs a fistful of my nightgown and starts to lift it up. “We’ll show the centerpiece once night falls. When you wake up, get on your knees and pose like her. Then, when I lift the sheet, you’ll float out in a slow and sensual way, like you did when I first found you. Of course, you’ll also need to be naked when you emerge, to match the painting.”

No, no, no.

I made a mistake coming here.

I push him away, but his grip on my nightgown is tight. “Think of it as performance art.” Every syllable is a hiss of heat in my face. “People have been speculating about your identity for years, but no one guessed that you’re a ghost. It’ll be a real shocker when I reveal the truth. All my haters and doubters will be pissing their pants when they see you.”

“ฉันไม่อยากทำ,” I say. *I don’t want to do this.*

His eyes turn cold. “Speak English.”

A chill cuts me to the bone. I see, with unmistakable clarity, how foolish I’ve been, thinking he likes me for who I am when he only likes the idea of me, what I represent. What I can do for him.

“No,” I say, and shove him hard enough to break his hold on me.

Khun Sebastian stumbles back. His lips curve into an ugly smirk when he steadies himself. “You don’t have a choice, ghost. See this?” He taps at the tube steel behind the painting. “If I destroy this, you won’t have a place to sleep in once the sun comes out. I can leave this painting out in an open field and watch you scramble for shelter you won’t have. You’ll die. But that would be too cruel, don’t you think?” His eyes glint, the green too solid, too clear, like glass with nothing behind them.

Is this why he doesn’t fear me? Because the part of him that keeps out fear also keeps out love?

“You should be grateful.” His smile morphs into a snarl. “I saved you from that shithole you lived in and gave you a better life here. You can even become famous if you do what I say. So take off that nightgown and put on a show tomorrow night, yeah?”

After he drives away, I float to the window, where the sky burns red with dawn. He wasn't lying: there really isn't anything out here except highway roads, grassy fields, and the occasional cluster of trees. I fly back to the painting—my host now—and clamp my arms around its concrete body. I manage to lift it for a few seconds before I start to wobble. But even if the morning isn't fast approaching and my limbs aren't weakening, there aren't any buildings around to hide the painting from Khun Sebastian's tampering.

There isn't anyone around for you to eat.

You should be grateful.

Put on a show tomorrow night, yeah?

I glance at the many versions of me that lean against the walls, none of them an accurate depiction of who I am.

My fingers curl into claws. There's only one thing left to do, something I should've done a long time ago.

• • • •

Voices hum around me when I wake up the next night. I float out of the steel tube and blink in the darkness. The painting is covered under curtains, and the faint outlines of bodies move on the other side.

The humans here smell stale and bland, nothing like the interesting flavours I imagined myself enjoying in this part of the world. Maybe Khun Sebastian only smelled good back then because his stomach was full of Thai food.

"You'll love it; the centerpiece will blow your mind."

I hear Khun Sebastian's voice to my left. Through a crack in the curtains, I see his hand slide down the small of a woman's back. They speak too fast for me to catch all the words, but I piece together a conversation about doing a TV feature on the centerpiece. On me.

I retreat back to the wall and fold myself up. My heartbeat screams in my ears, but I force myself to stay still, to be as demure as the woman in the painting. I exist to eat, but it isn't much of an existence if I can't eat on my own terms.

So when Khun Sebastian peels back the curtains, I pounce.

Screams explode around us as I sink my teeth into his throat and drag all the way down to his bowels. His ribcage splinters open and coils of viscera spill onto the floor. His eyes bloom with silent rage and his knuckles smack

against my jaw, but I keep shredding and gulping until he goes still for the last time.

Khun Sebastian tastes like wet cement and secondhand smoke, but I buzz with ecstasy all the same. In many ways, this is the most delicious last meal I can possibly have, and I laugh through my tears as I swallow the last of him and taste the ashes my body is crumbling into, laugh as I think of that moonlit farang and all the years I spent waiting for him to return.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Millie Ho's work is forthcoming from *Lightspeed Magazine* and also appears in *Strange Horizons*, *Uncanny Magazine*, *Fireside Magazine*, and others. She was a finalist for the 2019 Rhysling Awards and lives in Montreal. Find her at www.millieho.net and on Twitter @Millie_Ho.

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And the Carnival Leaves Town

A.C. Wise | 7210 words

The first piece of evidence appears on Walter Eckert's desk in a locked office to which he has the only key. It is wrapped in brown paper, neatly labeled with his name, no return address. He unwraps it with wary hands.

Cheap plywood, as if from a construction site wall, pasted with a handbill-sized poster. It could be advertising any event around town—a rock band no one has ever heard of, an avant garde art exhibition no one will ever see—but it appears to advertise nothing at all.

The paper is grayed. Darkened by soot, slush, city smog. Carved into the bottom right hand corner of the wood is a date—October 17, 1973—a date currently forty-one years, one month, and fourteen days in Walter's past.

The image: A clown in whiteface, black crosses over his eyes, tilted slightly so they resemble Xs. A conical hat. Pompoms in black against the whiteness of his baggy uniform. The clown cradles an infant's skeleton in his arms.

The skull is human, but subtly wrong, enlarged. There is a hair-thin fracture, widening and darkening as it runs back toward where the skull meets the spine. Out of the camera's view, one can only imagine the clot of darkness where the fissure disappears, the fragments of bone, caved in beneath a terrible blow. The rib cage appears human as well, but unnaturally small in comparison to the skull.

Below the waist, the skeletal remains are not remotely human.

• • • •

Walter Eckert has investigated almost everything in his time— domestic violence, cheating partners, insurance fraud, arson, petty theft, and even murder. He has never encountered anything quite like this before. Cold case. Two parents, one child. House, abandoned. Cups half-filled with coffee. Beds, immaculately made. Clothing, neatly hung. Refrigerator, humming and full. Television, left on.

The house remains; the evidence of daily life remains. The Miller family is simply gone.

Walter isn't certain what motivated him to look up the case. It wasn't even his, back when he was on the force; he inherited the file from his partner, Don.

Walter should be actively pursuing new clients, sleazily patrolling social media for rumors of infidelity and foul play. But there's something about the poster, something about the date. They remind him of something, two seemingly disparate events that lodge in his mind and refuse to let go. So instead of seeking new business, Walter chases down the cold trail of business over forty years old.

A carnival enters town in the fall of 1973. The Millers are a seemingly happy family, living the American dream. The carnival leaves town, and the Millers are gone.

Their house is left in perfect condition. The only remarkable thing is thirteen-year-old Charlie Miller's room. The posters of his favorite baseball players have been turned to face the wall; his baseball cards have been removed from their plastic sleeves and dealt out across his bed, face down. In his closet, his stuffed animals—artifacts of a younger age—have all had their eyes removed.

Three days after the Millers disappear, a group of kids gathers in an empty lot to play. Midway through the game of tag, the dust in the lot blows slightly to the west and uncovers the remains of two complete adult skeletons. The bones are aged, colored faintly as though with years buried under desert sands. The remains, lying side by side, holding hands, are eventually identified through dental records as Jasper and Anita Miller.

Charlie Miller is never found.

• • • •

The second piece of evidence comes into Walter Eckert's possession much as the first: Appearing in his locked office, part of his life as though it has always been there. It is a flat, gray canister, holding an old reel of film. Walter is at a loss until he remembers the storage locker in the basement of the building. He finds the key in his desk, descends into the chilly, ill-lit space, and digs out the old film projector left behind by his former partner, Don. The man never threw anything away, and it seems Walter has picked up his habit.

The film is black and white, jittery, and popping in the way old movies do. The camera fixes on an empty room, which contains only a surgical operating table. A man enters the room, walking from the left side of the frame toward the right. He strips out of his clothes, folds them neatly upon the floor, and lies

on the table, face up. He wipes his palms against his legs, licks his lips, and blinks.

His fingers twitch restlessly at his sides; his eyes are open, staring at the ceiling. He never looks at the camera. The film continues to skip and pop, phantoms skating through the scene, flaws in the medium or deliberate splices, Walter can't tell.

Another man enters from the left of the frame and stops in front of the table. He looks at the camera full on and smiles. He wears a white surgeon's robe, but no mask or gloves. His motions are jerky and exaggerated, like any actor in a silent film. He reaches to his left, just beyond the frame. His arm returns with a scalpel held in his hand. He shows it to the camera, letting the blade glint as much as it can in black and white. This done, he makes a single, precise incision in the chest of the man on the table. He draws a line, in stark black against gray-white, from the man's clavicle to his pelvic bone. And so the surgery begins.

For the next fifteen minutes of film, the surgeon dissects the man upon the table, who appears conscious the whole time. His fingers twitch once more, drumming the table before he clenches them still, and with their stillness, holds his whole body rigid. The cords of his neck strain, his mouth set in what might be agony, or a wild, delirious grin, but he makes no attempt to leave. The surgeon slits open the man's arms, his legs, his cheeks, and each one of his ten fingers and toes. The movement of the blade is straight and true every time. Blood is wiped meticulously away after each pass of the knife. The skin is peeled back, pinned. The surgeon's eyes gleam and the crook of his mouth never wavers. There is no soundtrack, but one can imagine the movements set to a jolly tune.

When there is only bone left, the skin and muscle vanishing by degrees between the lapses in the film, the surgeon once more reaches to the left of the camera frame, and returns with a silver mallet. This too gleams in the lack of light. The bones of the man lying upon the table are systematically and utterly shattered, one by one.

The surgeon leaves the frame, but perhaps not the room. It is impossible to tell. Perhaps he waits, breathing, just out of the camera's view.

Another minute passes with the camera fixed securely upon the ruins of what was once a man.

After that minute is done, the surgeon reenters the frame backward. From

there, the film proceeds as though it is being run in reverse, though when Walter checks, the projector is still running as it should. The surgeon raises the mallet and the bones are restored; he runs the knife up from pelvis to clavicle and the skin is healed.

At the end of the film, the dead man stands up from the table. He does not reclaim his clothes, but he takes the surgeon's hand. Together, one smiling, one shaking, they face the camera and bow. Still holding hands, they exit the frame.

The camera remains steady on the empty room for an additional thirty seconds. Within the last five seconds of film, a date flashes across the screen: December 14, 2015—a date three months and seven days in the future of Walter Eckert, who watches the scene over and over in a small, poorly lit room smelling of stale coffee and cigarettes, smelling of noir cliché and whiskey, smelling of, above all, fear.

• • • •

The pieces of evidence don't match. Walter isn't even certain they are evidence yet. Only Walter's mother insists they are and they do.

Walter's mother is psychic, or claims to be. She even had her own 1-800 number once upon a time. His childhood memories are littered with phone calls landing like exotic birds at all hours of the night, lost souls seeking counsel and hope, weeping and giddy, desperate to be told exactly what they want to hear.

Holding his breath so it wouldn't be heard, Walter listened to his mother listen to Jeannie from Paramus asking about her job. He listened to John from Denver worrying about his health, Kirk from Sault Sainte Marie wanting to know if he'd ever find true love, and Tina from Havertown who played the lottery every day and was willing to pay his mother \$2.99 per minute for lucky numbers.

December 14, 2015, is still two months and twenty-seven days in Walter Eckert's future when his mother calls from her nursing home to tell him the pieces of evidence, the film and the photograph, are connected. There are two things Walter never discusses with his mother—his work and his dreams, which are usually about *Twin Peaks* and who really killed Laura Palmer.

Walter has never entirely believed in his mother's psychic powers, but when she calls him as he's staring at the photograph of Charlie Miller paper-clipped

to the cold case file, a shiver traces his spine.

He hasn't told her anything about the Miller family or the cold case file currently sitting open on his desk. He hasn't said one word about the two pieces of evidence, not even that they exist, but she knows, and she tells him they are connected anyway.

Just before he hangs up, she says, "There's more. Lemuel Mason. The name came to me in a dream. Find him."

After he hangs up, Walter slips the Miller file into his briefcase. He puts the picture of the clown, pasted to the section of plywood, and the reel of film into his briefcase, as well. Following what he would call a hunch and his mother would call a prediction, Walter ventures out into the blustery September weather and goes to the local library to do some serious and irrational searching.

• • • •

Virginia Mason, a resident of Pottstown, Pennsylvania, from 1863 to 1887, wife of the Reverend Lemuel Mason, was generally known to be a pious woman. She aided her husband in his ministerial duties, and was much loved in their town, known for organizing women's charity drives and bake sales with all the proceeds going to support Mr. Clement and his one-room schoolhouse. The great tragedy of her life, as far as the town was concerned, is that she never bore the reverend a child.

So the stories say.

So some stories say.

But there are other stories, too.

There are stories of a certain tree where the devil was said to appear, and of Virginia, walking at night, restless and unable to sleep. Stories of Virginia growing large although her husband was away, conducting missionary work in Peru. Stories, contrary to the tutting of the townsfolk over the Masons' childless life, that Virginia was indeed delivered of a babe. But what babe? Was it born sad, mad, twisted, and deformed, as rumors claimed? And who was its sire?

Other tales say Reverend Lemuel Mason was never a missionary and, devoted husband that he was, he rarely left his wife's side.

What can be confirmed by public records is Virginia Mason died at a young

age. Or, at least, that a stone sits on the outmost edge of the churchyard, indicating she was given a Christian burial. Her cause of death is unknown. Some terrible, wasting illness is suspected, as Virginia was little seen by anyone but her husband in her final days.

Lemuel Mason mourned deeply. Some good folk of his town, when they came upon him unexpected, heard him talking to Virginia, even after she died. On occasion, he was also heard talking to a child, rocking it in his empty arms and singing lullabies.

Some rumors suggest the desecration of Virginia Mason's grave. But they are only rumors.

There are wilder stories still, of Virginia Mason's body found in a tree, with only scraps of cloth clinging to its bones, and wisps of hair adhering to its skull. The body was found wedged in a crook of the tree, arms and knees raised to wrap around a conspicuous absence, just the size of a child. The remains were discovered three days after Virginia Mason was supposedly buried—not long enough for her to decompose to such a state, if those were indeed her bones.

Two months after the stone was raised in the churchyard bearing Virginia Mason's name, words in white chalk appeared upon the tree where the bones were found: *Who put Ginnie in the tree?*

Whatever the truth, this is a publicly recorded matter as well, appearing in the local Pottstown newspaper: three months after Virginia Mason died, Lemuel Mason vanished.

No trace of his fate was ever discovered. He was never seen again.

A day before he vanished, the carnival entered town. The day after his absence was noticed, the carnival left town again.

• • • •

It's impossible to tell whether the grainy, black and white image of Lemuel Mason accompanying the news story of his disappearance shows the same man depicted in the black-and-white image of the clown cradling a child's deformed bones. The greasepaint is too thick. It could be anyone lost in all that whiteness, with black crosses over their eyes.

Who would even think to compare the pictures? Walter would not, unless his mother had called him to say the name Lemuel Mason, which came to her

in a dream. He would not, if the paper reporting Lemuel Mason's disappearance had not also contained a note regarding the "funfair" leaving town.

The pieces of evidence are connected, Walter thinks. It is not an advertisement; it's an invitation.

"It's coming back," a voice just behind Walter says.

He twists around in his chair to hide his startled jump. "What is?"

The librarian is slender, nervous, like a young colt. Her hands flutter in the direction of the newspapers spread in front of him—stories of carnivals, *the* carnival, as Walter has come to think of it, coming to town and leaving town. The librarian's hands settle, falling to clasp and twist in front of her.

"The carnival," she says. "I'm sure I saw it somewhere."

She lifts the top paper from Walter's pile, the local paper from today, and scans it briefly, frowning, before replacing it.

"Maybe I imagined it." The librarian shrugs, but her frown lingers. Her expression is one of someone who has misplaced an object they were holding just a moment ago, an object they could swear they never set down.

The same finger of dread that touched Walter when his mother called touches him again. He resists the urge to grab the librarian by the shoulders, shake her, and demand she tell him everything she knows about the carnival.

As evenly as he can, trying on his most disarming smile, Walter Eckert meets the librarian's eyes and asks, "Would you like to have dinner with me?"

• • • •

The third piece of evidence is the oldest thus far. It is not a piece of evidence yet, but as he digs deeper, following tenuous connections and unexplained coincidences, Walter will encounter a glossy, full-color reproduction in a museum catalog, and file it as such.

The original is under glass at the University of Pennsylvania Museum. It is a shirt found among the grave goods of a nomadic steppe warrior, believed to have lived in the early 1200s, during the time of Ogedei Khan. It is remarkably well preserved. There are words stitched into the fabric, in a jumble of languages, as though each part was stitched by a different hand.

The words tell a fairy tale about a tame flock of crows and a girl who

trained them to do tricks and follow simple commands. Like all good fairy tales, it is laced with darkness of the most brutal kind. The girl, who is only known as the daughter and never given a name, asks the birds to do something for her after she has taught them all the tricks she knows. She asks them to pick the flesh from her mother and stepfather's living bones.

The crows obey.

And, hungry, wicked birds that crows are, once they are done, they devour the nameless girl's eyes, too. It is not clear whether they do this as punishment, or as an act of mercy. After all, who would want to walk around with the image of their parents' flesh-stripped bones fixed in their skull until the end of days? None but the most heartless of creatures, carrying feathers where their heart should be.

After the crows swallow the girl's eyes and everything she has seen, they lead her away. It is never specified where. The story only says that for the rest of her days, the girl made her way through the world by following the sound of her tame birds' wings.

No other versions of this fairy tale have ever been found, despite the natural tendency of stories to travel far and wide, much like crows. How it came to be stitched onto the shirt of a steppe warrior, no one can say.

At the end of the fairy tale there is a date, unfathomably far in the steppe nomad's future—June 17, 1985.

• • • •

"It's not the same carnival, of course," the librarian, whose parents named her Marian, thus guaranteeing her future career, says.

She toys with her salad fork as she speaks. She's shy, Walter has learned, but he's also learned the second glass of wine, currently warming her cheeks with a delicate glow, has given her more of an inclination to talk.

"It's *a* carnival. I went to it . . . *one* . . . when I was little. My father took me, after my mother left."

Marian hesitates, and Walter feels as though he should say something, but he doesn't know what. After a beat, Marian goes on.

"I don't remember any of the shows. I must have been really young. All I remember is holding my father's hand and being convinced we would find my mother at the carnival, and bring her back home."

Marian blushes. It's the most she's said all night. Walter breathes out, and only then does he realize he's been holding his breath. He finds himself leaning forward, as though his proximity will draw out more words, but it has the opposite effect. Marian reaches for a bread stick. Breaks it into pieces, but doesn't put a single one in her mouth.

Walter leans back, trying not to let his disappointment show. The next thing out of his mouth surprises him.

"My mother is a psychic," he says.

His fingers twitch, and he hides the motion by reaching for his glass. He can't remember the last time he told anyone, and it's not what he meant to say. The cynical part of him wonders if he's manipulating Marian, giving her a piece of himself in order to keep her talking. But why? It's too late for Charlie Miller and Lemuel Mason. He's never been one to obsess over unexplained mysteries. Some things simply are, and cold cases don't pay the bills.

But December 14, 2015, is still in the future, and there's a possibility, maybe even a hope, that it is in *his* future. So he has to know.

Marian raises her head, her expression wary as though she suspects Walter is making fun of her.

"I'm sorry." Walter shakes his head.

Marian's expression softens.

"Don't be."

Then, in another move that surprises them both, she reaches across the table and touches his hand. It's a gentle thing, brief, just a tap of her fingers along his bones, there and just as quickly gone.

Guilt comes like a knife. A rift opens in Marian, and Walter sees a wanting in her that goes all the way through. Suddenly, he doesn't care about the carnival. Suddenly, Walter wants to tell Marian about holding his breath, pressing the phone to his ear, and listening as his mother dispensed fortunes. He wants to tell her a true thing, an apology for a deception he's not even sure he's made. The need wells up in him, bringing memories so sharp he is there again.

Rain pats against the window, streaming down and making odd shadows on the wall. Walter clutches the phone, holding his breath, wrapped in a communion his ten-year-old mind doesn't have the language to understand. But he knows, deep in his bones, that he and his mother and his mother's client are all connected. The rain and the telephone lines make a barrier,

separating them from the world. He is *essential* in a way he can't explain. If he breaks the connection, if he breathes out and lets on that he's there, his mother's prophecies will never come true.

The sensation is so real and overwhelming, Walter can scarcely breathe. Here and now, he is still holding his breath, listening to the whisper of words down the line. It terrifies him. He swallows deep from his glass, washing the memories away. They're too big. He tamps down the impulse to speak, far, farther, until it is gone.

He will not ask Marian about her father, or the hitch in her breath when she said the word *mother*. He will not tell her about his own life. And with this decision, a new impulse wells up in Walter, one he knows he will not be able to resist. Before the night is through, he will show Marian something terrible; he will make her afraid.

Because he is afraid.

For years, his job has shown him how easily people can fall apart—friendships, relationships, even all alone. Humans are fragile. If he opens himself to Marian, if she opens herself to him, they will become responsible for each other, and that isn't something Walter wants or needs. And, paradoxically, he is afraid precisely because he isn't responsible for anyone and no one is responsible for him. December 14, 2015, is in the future, but what if it isn't in *his* future? What if he isn't essential and never was, only an observer, trapped on the outside?

Marian looks at him strangely and Walter realizes his hand is shaking. He sets his glass down, regrettably empty, and reaches for his water instead, swallowing and swallowing again. Even so, his throat is still parched when he speaks.

"Do you know anything about the Miller family? They lived in this area back in the seventies. They disappeared."

As he says it, Walter knows it is the wrong thing to say. Something indefinable changes, a thread snaps. Marian tucks her hands back in her lap. Her shoulders tighten.

"My neighbor, Mrs. Pheebig, knew them." Marian looks at her hands, her voice edged. "She's ninety-one."

"Does she have any theories about what happened to them?"

"No." Marian has barely touched her pasta, twirling and twirling the noodles around her fork. Her plate is a minefield of pasta nests, cradling

chunks of seafood, surrounded by rivers of sauce.

“Mrs. Pheebig told me everyone in the neighborhood suspected the parents were abusive, but no one said anything because people just didn’t talk about that sort of thing back then. I don’t understand how anyone could stay quiet about something like that.”

Marian finally lifts her head, and it’s almost like an accusation. In the rawness of her gaze, Walter finds it difficult to breathe. The terrible thing coming for him, for both of them, is almost here. Walter’s head pounds. He looks at Marian, and she’s nothing human.

She’s running ahead of him. Her eyes are inkwells. Her skin the finest kind of paper. The whorls of her fingerprints smell of the dust particular to libraries, the spines of books, the rarely touched yet time-stained cards of the archaic catalog, bearing the immaculately typed numbers of the Dewey decimal system. She is a prophet, an oracle. Somewhere, buried deep in her bones, are the answers to all his questions.

Because it had to be one or the other, kindness or cruelty, Walter reaches out to catch Marian before it’s too late.

“Can I show you something?”

Marian puts her head to one side, considering. For a moment, Walter has the sense of her looking right through him, knowing he’s dangerous, and weighing risk against reward.

“All right.” Marian reaches for her purse.

The bill settled, they walk two blocks to Walter’s office. He flicks the lights off, switches the projector on, and watches Marian watching the film. Walter doesn’t know what he expects, what he wants—a companion, someone to share the burden? Confirmation that he isn’t mad, someone to say, yes, I see it too? His pulse trips, watching the play of light reflected in Marian’s eyes. Despite the horror on the screen, her expression doesn’t change. She says nothing. Only her fingers curl, tightening where she leans against Walter’s desk. But even as her fingers tighten, she leans forward slightly, waiting.

This is it, Walter thinks, without ever knowing what *it* might be. The air shifts, and for just a moment the scent is salty-sweet, popcorn and candy apples, and it tastes like lightning.

Whatever it is sweeps past him, leaving the aftertaste of electricity on his tongue. The date flashes across the screen, and Marian’s expression finally changes. Her mouth makes an O, and she raises a hand to cover it.

“What . . . ?” Walter says. And, “No.” He reaches for her, but it’s too late. When Marian brushed his knuckles, that was the moment to take her hand.

“Wait,” he says.

Marian is past him, her shoulder striking his so he’s off balance. He follows just in time to see the cab door slam.

There are puddles on the street, reflecting stoplights and neon, and the night smells of freshly departed rain. The cab pulls away in a cloud of exhaust and ruby-burning headlights. The faint sigh of a calliope hangs in the air. Walter raises his hand, but the cab doesn’t slow. What was he thinking? What has he done?

• • • •

Walter returns to the library the next day. He asks after Marian, and the young man at the desk presses his lips into a thin line before telling Walter Marian isn’t here today. But he cuts his eyes toward the frosted glass office door without meaning to as he says it, so Walter scribbles a note on the back of an old circulation card, before shoving it into the young man’s hands.

“Just give her this for me, will you?”

It’s only two words: *I’m sorry*. Walter stations himself at a table, surrounding himself with books and drifts of paper. After twenty- three minutes, Marian emerges. She is polite, but closed. She brings him books, helps him find articles buried deep in the archives room, but doesn’t linger. He watches her, but the wild creature of paper skin and inkwell eyes has vanished. Slipped around a corner. Disappeared. Gone.

Perhaps he imagined it all. Perhaps he’s made a fool of himself and hurt a woman who wanted nothing more than a friend.

“Marian. About last night . . .” he says, as she lays a heavy tome of town records beside him.

“There’s nothing to talk about.” Marian’s lips press into a thin line identical to the one worn by the young man behind the desk when Walter asked after Marian. Is there a school that teaches librarians that expression?

Walter’s hand hovers in the space between them. He lets it drop even before Marian turns. The subject is closed.

Confused, uncertain, Walter retreats behind his own wall. Stories of the disappeared and unexplained surround him like birds coming to roost, like

carnival tents rising from the ground.

There is the story of three men and seven women vanishing from their retirement home, leaving in their wake doctors and nurses who can only speak backward from that moment on.

There is the story of an opera, performed only once, telling of the beheading of St. John at the request of Salome. The lead singer walked off the stage halfway through the final act and was never seen again. The lighting rig above the orchestra pit detached while the baffled audience was still trying to sort out whether the departure was part of the show, and the conductor was instantly killed.

There is a bone pit in Pig Hill, Maryland. An ossuary in Springfield, New Hampshire. The entire town of Salt Lick, Indiana, which, in 1757, simply disappeared.

Walter studies. He combs news articles, conspiracy websites, birth and death records. He consults any and every source he can. He doesn't know whether he's chasing something, fleeing something, or trying to hold something back.

Walter dreams, and sometimes he's trying to catch Marian, sometimes he's trying to outpace her, and sometimes, he's running scared.

• • • •

This is what Walter Eckert knows from the research he's done: There are never any advertisements of the carnival coming to town. There are only stories reporting where it once was before it vanished, packed up, moved on.

This is what Walter Eckert knows deep in his bones: If you are not invited, you cannot attend. You will not be invited unless you would give up anything, *everything*, to have the carnival steal you away.

This is what Walter Eckert doesn't know: Does he want it badly enough?

• • • •

From January 1983 to May 1985, Melissa Anderson, one of the top accountants at Beckman, Deniller & Wright, quietly embezzled nearly two million dollars from her employers and their clients. On the sixteenth of June 1985, Beckman, Deniller & Wright received notice of an impending IRS audit.

On the seventeenth of June, Melissa took the elevator to the thirty-fourth

floor of her office building, and climbed the fire stairs to the roof. She removed her jacket and folded it neatly by the door. She slipped off her shoes and placed them beside her jacket. In her stocking feet, she climbed onto the building's ledge. The wind tugged her blouse and hair. She looked down at the traffic on Market Street below.

In that moment, she could conceive only of the fall. Her muscles forgot how to turn around, walk to the door, descend the stairs. Elevators didn't exist. If she wanted to get back down, she'd have to jump. And she was terribly afraid.

She told the wind, "I don't want to die today."

Perhaps the distant notes of a calliope reached her. Perhaps it was simply the way the birds turned, a scattered flock of pigeons appearing much larger and more sinister as they banked away. Or it was the scent of popcorn. Candy apples. Sawdust. The flicker of lights lining a fairway.

Whatever it was, Melissa remembered how to turn around. She climbed from the ledge and tore the delicate soles of her stockings as she crossed the roof to reclaim her shoes. She put her jacket back on, rode the elevator to the ground floor, and instead of returning to her desk, she walked three blocks to the university museum.

Melissa Anderson did not return to work the next day. Or the day after.

On the twentieth of June, the car carrying the IRS auditors to the firm of Beckman, Deniller & Wright was struck by a city bus. The driver and all three passengers were killed.

The next day, the carnival left town.

• • • •

How long does it take to fall in love? Seven minutes? Five hours? Two months, fourteen minutes, twenty-six days?

Walter catches his gaze drifting to Marian as he reads of the lost and disappeared and it gets harder and harder to look away.

Maybe it isn't love. Maybe it's only that he missed her when she was sitting across from him, so distant he couldn't bear to take her hand.

Maybe it's only that he knows he lost her the moment he asked about the Miller family instead of telling her about the hushed, connected world of held breath, psychic predictions, telephone lines, and rain.

• • • •

The fourth piece of evidence . . . Well, no one's really counting anymore, are they? There is a postcard of a standing stone in Ireland, carved with Russian characters. There is a blurred Polaroid showing a body frozen into a chunk of ice, scribbles on the back in pencil indicating there exists forensic evidence dating it from the 1760s, though its brow is sloped like a Neanderthal's. There's a handwritten set of coordinates leading to a planet no one has yet discovered. All delivered in nondescript envelopes, no return address, bearing Walter's name.

Whatever the evidence, it is always the same. The carnival enters town, the carnival leaves town. People disappear.

• • • •

As the clock ticks over from December 13 to December 14, 2015, Walter Eckert wakes in a panic. It's Marian. Marian is gone. Of course she's gone. Because the invitation was never meant for him.

Frantic, he drives to her apartment—an address he shouldn't have, because she didn't give it to him, but which wasn't particularly hard to find. He told himself just in case at the time. In case what? This, he thinks, hunched forward, windshield wipers struggling to keep up with the rain. He parks catty-corner to the curb, leaves the car door hanging open, takes the stairs two at a time. He pounds on Marian's door, not expecting an answer, and eventually he kicks it in.

The windows are open. Rain blows in and dampens the sill. The air smells faintly of mildew, as though it's been raining in Marian's apartment for a very long time. She could be out, visiting friends, on vacation, at a Christmas party, but Walter knows she isn't. He goes through Marian's apartment, room by room.

The clothes in her closet and her drawers, the towels in her bathroom, the bed sheets, the curtains—every bit of fabric in Marian's apartment has been carefully knotted and left in place.

Under the scent of mildew is the lingering odor of lightning and popcorn. And Marian is gone.

• • • •

On New Year's Eve a stray firework ignites a blaze that burns the library to the ground.

• • • •

"Follow her." Walter's mother calls him in the middle of the worst ice storm in memory.

It's New Year's Day plus one. His mother's voice is slurred. It's dark, and Walter can't work out whether it's from ice coating the windows or the time of day. His bare feet kick empty bottles as he fumbles toward the bedside clock and its ruby light.

"Mom? I can barely hear you." Walter's tongue feels thick, as though he's trying to shape words in a dream. Maybe the dwarf will show up soon and tell him how Laura Palmer really died.

"Go after her," his mother says. Walter grips the phone.

"I don't know how. Mom?"

There's a hush like static. Like a secret world of rain. Like ice freezing on the telephone line sealing up his words. His world.

"Go." His mother's ghost voice is buried under a fall of not-snow. The line dies. As it does, instead of a dial tone, Walter hears the murmur of a calliope.

• • • •

It is January 4, 2016, and Walter awakes from a dream.

It must be a dream.

It *is* a dream because he enters the carnival with no invitation, only the evidence in his hands—the poster, the shirt, the film, the postcard, the Polaroid, the notes. He is allowed in. Even though none of the invitations are for him. They are for Charlie Miller and Melissa Anderson. They are for Lemuel Mason and Marian. But not him.

Unless, taken all together, they are. Evidence numbers 1 through To Be Determined—case files, half-vocalized conversations, newspaper articles, microfilm, archives, cigarettes smoked, and alcohol consumed. Perhaps these are Walter Eckert's invitation to step right up, come on in.

It hurts. And Walter will never admit this.
What has he been chasing?
It *has* to be a dream.

• • • •

Walter passes through the turnstile, evidence clutched in his hands—the photograph, the film reel, a reproduction of the shirt, the standing stone, the Neanderthal man. He holds them out to a blank-eyed boy at the ticket booth who waves his hand and makes the gate standing between Walter and the carnival disappear.

Walter steps inside.

The boy, no longer blank eyed, runs ahead of him. Walter follows, hurrying to keep him in sight. No older than thirteen, the boy is naked, loping on hands and knees between tents staked into the dusty ground. Skinny. Faint bruises trace the ladder of his ribs, the knobs of his spine. Walter almost remembers the boy's name. But every time he opens his mouth to speak, it slips away.

Down narrow ways. Between tents pulsing with breath, buzzing with the sound of tattoo needles, humming with the burr of electricity and the importance of a honey-producing hive. Walter is utterly disoriented.

There!

When Walter catches sight of him again, the boy wears a wolf's head in place of his own—muzzle frozen in a snarl, glass eyes reflecting the glow of the pale fairway lights.

Fried crickets served here. Ten for a dollar, all skewered up neat and crunchy in a row.

Skin of mice. So nice. Peeled fresh and heaped with shaved ice. Drizzled with any flavor syrup you want.

Try your luck, Ma'am-Sir. Prizes no worse than your heart's desire! Careful what you wish for. At-any-cost is a steep price to pay.

Walter almost loses sight of the boy again as he ducks into a tent. Walter follows.

Seats rise in concentric circles from the center ring. A spotlight, dusty-dim, pins the boy, who throws his head back and howls. The sound is muffled inside the echo chamber of the wolf's skull.

In the spotlight there is no mistaking the bruises—dark purple scars that

will not fade numbering his ivory bones.

The boy crouches and the light snaps off. Wolves, real wolves, who bear no human skin, creep between the seats, which are full now. The rabbit-masked audience holds its collective breath, leans forward. The wolves ignore them, dripping slow between the seats. Trickling down. The boy curls in the middle of the ring. Skinny, scarred arms wrap around the taxidermied wolf's head. He waits.

Walter can't bear to watch.

He flees.

And stumbles into another tent with a single man, a clown, spotlight in the center of the ring.

The clown stands behind a table, stitching. His eyes are downcast, covered in crosses. He works with infinite care, unpicking seams and redoing them, crooning softly all the while. A lullaby. The needle goes in, the needle comes out. The thread is a form of weeping, one that won't smear his makeup, joining rust-colored bone to gleaming fish scale. The child's skull is exaggerated, swollen. A hairline crack runs from brow back to somewhere Walter can't see.

There are other tents, other exhibits. A woman rides a bicycle. Her legs churn the pedals, turn them insistently. Blood flows. Walter traces it from the wheels to her heart, to her legs, to her arms, and back again. Her skin is translucent. The bicycle, too.

A flock of crows follows her around the ring. If she slows, the blood will stop moving. If she slows, the birds will swallow her eyes.

Walter runs, on and on. Faster through the carnival: through the fortune-teller's tent where tarot cards chase his heels like fallen leaves, past the world's strongest man, the living skeleton, the ring toss game. He is looking for something, someone. A woman whose eyes are inkwells, whose spine is a card catalog, whose skin holds the tales of a thousand library books lost and burned. He needs to tell her he's sorry; he needs to take hold of her hand.

But all he finds is a snake woman—half mechanical, half flesh and blood, selling lies for twenty-five cents a go in a sawdust-filled ring. All he finds is a surgeon with a silver mallet and a scalpel in his hand. A band of seven old women and three old men, playing flute and drum, xylophone and horn, with each other's bones.

The exhibits are endless. They smell of popcorn. Cotton candy. Lightning.

Eternity. Walter keeps running, but he never arrives anywhere. There is always another corner, some trick and fold of the carnival, keeping him close but at bay. After all, if there's no audience, no one there to observe just outside the ring, how can the show ever go on?

• • • •

It is a dream. It must be a dream. It doesn't matter that his boots are sitting beside his bed in the morning, caked with dust when he left them neat and clean on the mat beside the door before going to sleep. It doesn't matter that his hair smells of greasepaint. It doesn't matter that his palm remembers the touch of a librarian he didn't have the courage to reach for across a table spanning the gulf of a thousand years.

Once invited, once the invitation is turned down, it will never come again.
It has to be a dream.

Because right now, Walter's entire world is made of wanting. If he really went to the carnival, he would still be there, wouldn't he? If they invited him in, asked him to stay, dear God, why didn't he?

And more importantly: How will he ever get back there again?

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BOOK EXCERPTS

EXCERPT: *Velocities* (Meerkat Press)

Kathe Koja | 3849 words

Kathe Koja's second short fiction collection, *Velocities*, is dark, disturbing, and heartfelt. It includes thirteen stories, including two never before published, all flying at the speed of strange.

Coming April 21, 2020 from Meerkat Press.

From "At Eventide"

What he carried to her he carried in a red string bag. Through its mesh could be seen the gleam and tangle of new wire, a package of wood screws, a green plastic soda bottle, a braided brown coil of human hair; a wig? It could have been a wig.

To get to her, he had come a long way: from a very large city through smaller cities to Eventide, not a city at all or even a town, just the nearest outpost of video store and supermarket, gas and ice and cigarettes. The man at the Stop-N-Go had directions to her place, a map he had sketched himself; he spoke as if he had been there many times: "It's just a little place really, just a couple rooms, living room and a workshop; there used to be a garage out back but she had it knocked down."

The man pointed at the handmade map; there was something wrong with his voice, cancer maybe, a sound like bones in the throat; he did not look healthy. "It's just this feeder road, all the way down?"

"That's right. Takes about an hour, hour and ten, you can be there before dark if you—"

"Do you have a phone?"

"Oh, I don't have her number. And anyway you don't call first, you just drive on down there and—"

"A phone," the man said; he had not changed his tone, he had not raised his voice, but the woman sorting stock at the back of the store half-rose, gripping like a brick a cigarette carton.

The man behind the counter lost his smile, and “Right over there,” he said, pointing past the magazine rack bright with tabloids, with *Playboy* and *Nasty Girls* and *Juggs*; he lit a cigarette while the man made his phone call, checked with a wavering glance the old Remington 870 beneath the counter.

But the man finished his call, paid for his bottled water and sunglasses, and left in a late model pickup, sober blue, a rental probably, and “I thought,” said the woman with the cigarette cartons, “that he was going to try something.”

“So did I,” said the man behind the counter. The glass doors opened to let in heat and light, a little boy and his tired mother, a tropical punch Slush Puppie and a loaf of Wonder Bread.

• • • •

Alison, the man said into the phone. It's me.

A pause: no sound at all, no breath, no sigh; he might have been talking to the desert itself. Then: Where are you? she said. What do you want?

I want one of those boxes, he said. The ones you make. I'll bring you everything you need.

Don't come out here, she said, but without rancor; he could imagine her face, its Goya coloring, the place where her eye had been. Don't bring me anything, I can't do anything for you.

See you in an hour, the man said. An hour and ten.

• • • •

He drove the feeder road to the sounds of Mozart, '40s show tunes, flashy Tex-Mex pop; he drank bottled water; his throat hurt from the air conditioning, a flayed, unchanging ache. Beside him sat the string bag, bulging loose and uneven, like a body with a tumor, many tumors; like strange fruit; like a bag of gold from a fairy tale. The hair in the bag was beautiful, a thick and living bronze like the pelt of an animal, a thoroughbred, a beast prized for its fur. He had braided it carefully, with skill and a certain love, and secured it at the bottom with a small blue plastic bow. The other items in the bag he had purchased at a hardware store, just like he used to; the soda bottle he had gotten at the airport, and emptied in the men's room sink.

There was not much scenery, unless you like the desert, its lunar space, its

brutal endlessness; the man did not. He was a creature of cities, of pocket parks and dull anonymous bars; of waiting rooms and holding cells; of emergency clinics; of pain. In the beige plastic box beneath the truck's front seat there were no less than eight different pain medications, some in liquid form, some in pills, some in patches; on his right bicep, now, was the vague itch of a Fentanyl patch. The doctor had warned him about driving while wearing it: *There might be some confusion, the doctor said, along with the sedative effect. Maybe a headache, too.*

A headache, the man had repeated; he thought it was funny. Don't worry, doctor. I'm not going anywhere. Two hours later he was on a plane to New Mexico. Right now the Fentanyl was working, but only just; he had an assortment of patches in various amounts—25, 50, 100 milligrams—so he could mix and match them as needed, until he wouldn't need them anymore.

Now Glenn Gould played Bach, which was much better than Fentanyl. He turned down the air conditioning and turned the music up loud, dropping his hand to the bag on the seat, fingers worming slowly through the mesh to touch the hair.

• • • •

They brought her what she needed, there in the workshop: they brought her her life. Plastic flowers, fraying T-shirts, rosaries made of shells and shiny gold; school pictures, wedding pictures, wedding rings, books; surprising how often there were books. Address books, diaries, romance novels, murder mysteries, Bibles; one man even brought a book he had written himself, a ruffled stack of printer paper tucked into a folding file.

Everything to do with the boxes she did herself: she bought the lumber, she had a lathe, a workbench, many kinds and colors of stain and varnish; it was important to her to do everything herself. The people did their part, by bringing the objects—the baby clothes and car keys, the whiskey bottles and Barbie dolls; the rest was up to her.

Afterward they cried, some of them, deep tears strange and bright in the desert, like water from the rock; some of them thanked her, some cursed her, some said nothing at all but took their boxes away: to burn them, pray to them, set them on a shelf for everyone to see, set them in a closet where no one could see. One woman had sold hers to an art gallery, which had started

no end of problems for her, out there in the workshop, the problems imported by those who wanted to visit her, interview her, question her about the boxes and her methods, and motives, for making them. Totems, they called them, or Rorschach boxes, called her a shaman of art, a priestess, a doctor with a hammer and an “uncanny eye.” They excavated her background, old pains exposed like bones; they trampled her silence, disrupted her work, and worst of all, they sicced the world on her, a world of the sad and the needy, the desperate, the furious and lost. In a very short time it became more than she could handle, more than anyone could handle, and she thought about leaving the country, about places past the border that no one could find but in the end settled for a period of hibernation, then moved to Eventide and points south, the older, smaller workshop, the bleached and decayed garage that a man with a bulldozer had kindly destroyed for her; she had made him a box about his granddaughter, a box he had cradled as if it were the child herself. He was a generous man, he wanted to do something to repay her although “no one,” he said, petting the box, “could pay for this. There ain’t no money in the world to pay for this.”

She took no money for the boxes, for her work; she never had. Hardly anyone could understand that: the woman who had sold hers to the gallery had gotten a surprising price, but money was so far beside the point, there was no point in even discussing it, if you had to ask, and so on. She had money enough to live on, the damages had bought the house, and besides, she was paid already, wasn’t she?—paid by the doing, in the doing, paid by peace and silence and the certain knowledge of help. The boxes helped them, always: sometimes the help of comfort, sometimes the turning knife, but sometimes the knife was what they needed; she never judged, she only did the work.

Right now she was working on a new box, a clean steel frame to enclose the life inside: her life: she was making a box for herself. Why? And why now? But she didn’t ask that, why was the one question she never asked, not of the ones who came to her, not now of herself. It was enough to do it, to gather the items, let her hand choose between this one and that: a hair clip shaped like a feather, a tube of desert dirt, a grimy nail saved from the wrecked garage; a photo of her mother, her own name in newsprint, a hospital bracelet snipped neatly in two. A life was a mosaic, a picture made from scraps: her boxes were only pictures of that picture and whatever else they might be or become—

totems, altars, fetish objects—they were lives first, a human arc in miniature, a precis of pain and wonder made of homely odds and ends.

Her head ached from the smell of varnish, from squinting in the sawdust flume, from the heat; she didn't notice. From the fragments on the table before her, the box was coming into life.

• • • •

He thought about her as he drove. The Fentanyl seemed to relax him, stretch his memories like taffy, warm and ropy, pull at his brain without tearing it, as the pain so often did. Sometimes the pain made him do strange things: once he had tried to drink boiling water, once he had flung himself out of a moving cab. Once he woke blinking on a restaurant floor, something hard jammed in his mouth, an EMS tech above him: *'Bout swallowed his tongue*, the tech said to the restaurant manager, who stood watching with sweat on his face. *People think that's just a figure of speech, you know, but they wrong.*

He had been wrong himself, a time or two: about his own stamina, the state of his health; about *her*, certainly. He had thought she would die easily; she had not died at all. He had thought she could not see him, but even with one eye she picked him out of a lineup, identified him in the courtroom, that long finger pointing, accusing, dismissing, all in one gesture, wrist arched like a bullfighter's before he places the killing blade, like a dancer's *en pointe*, poised to force truth out of air and bone: with that finger she said who he was and everything he was not, *mene, mene, tekel, upharsin*. It was possible to admire such certainty.

And she spared herself nothing; he admired her for that, too. Every day in the courtroom, before the pictures the prosecutor displayed: terrible Polaroids, all gristle and ooze, police tape and matted hair, but she looked, she listened carefully to everything that was said, and when the foreman said *guilty*, she listened to that, too; by then the rest of her hair had come in, just dark brown down at first, but it grew back as lush as before. Beautiful hair . . . it was what he had noticed first about her, in the bar, the Blue Monkey, filled with art school students and smoke, the smell of cheap lager; he had tried to buy her a drink but *No thanks*, she had said, and turned away. Not one of the students, one of his usual prey, she was there and not-there at the same time, just as she was in his workshop later, there to the wire and the scalping knife, not-there to

the need in his eyes.

In the end he had gotten nothing from her; and he admired her for that, too.

When he saw the article in the magazine—pure chance, really, just a half-hour's numb distraction, *Bright Horizons*, in the doctor's office, one of the doctors, he could no longer tell them apart—he felt in his heart an unaccustomed emotion: gratitude. Cleaved from him as the others had been, relegated to the jail of memory, but there she was, alive and working in the desert, in a workshop filled with tools that—did she realize?—he himself might have used, working in silence and diligence on that which brought peace to herself and pure release to others; they were practically colleagues, though he knew she would have resisted the comparison, she was a good one for resisting. The one who got away.

He took the magazine home with him; the next day he bought a map of New Mexico and a new recording of Glenn Gould.

• • • •

She would have been afraid if it were possible, but fear was not something she carried; it had been stripped from her, scalped from her, in that room with the stuttering overheads, the loud piano music and the wire. Once the worst has happened, you lose the place where the fear begins; what's left is only scar tissue, like old surgery, like the dead pink socket of her eye. She did not wait for him, check the roads anxiously for him, call the police on him; the police had done her precious little good last time, they were only good for cleaning up, and she could clean up on her own, now, here in the workshop, here where the light fell empty, hard and perfect, where she cut with her X-Acto knife a tiny scrolling segment from a brand-new Gideon Bible: blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Her hand did not shake as she used the knife; the light made her brown hair glow.

• • • •

The man at the Stop-N-Go gave good directions: already he could see the workshop building, the place where the garage had been. He wondered how many people had driven up this road as he did, heart high, carrying what they

needed, what they wanted her to use; he wondered how many had been in pain as he was in pain; he wondered what she said to them, what she might say to him now. Again he felt that wash of gratitude, that odd embodied glee; then the pain stirred in him like a serpent, and he had to clench his teeth to hold the road.

When he pulled up beside her workshop, he paused in the dust his car had raised to peel off the used patch and apply a fresh one; a small one, one of the 25 milligrams. He did not want to be drowsy, or distracted; he did not want sedation to dilute what they would do.

• • • •

He looked like her memories, the old bad dreams, yet he did not; in the end he could have been anyone, any aging tourist with false new sunglasses and a sick man's careful gait, come in hope and sorrow to her door; in his hand he held a red string bag, she could see some of what was inside. She stood in the doorway waiting, the X-Acto knife in her palm; she did not wish he would go away, or that he had not come, wishing was a vice she had abandoned long ago, and anyway the light here could burn any wish to powder, it was one of the desert's greatest gifts. The other one was solitude; and now they were alone.

• • • •

“Alison,” he said. “You’re looking good.”

She said nothing. A dry breeze took the dust his car had conjured; the air was clear again. She said nothing.

“I brought some things,” he said, raising the bag so she could see: the wires, the bottle, the hair; her hair. “For the box, I mean . . . I read about it in a magazine, about you, I mean.”

Those magazines: like a breadcrumb trail, would he have found her without one? Wanted to find her, made the effort on his own? Like the past to the present, one step leading always to another, and the past rose in her now, another kind of cloud: she did not fight it but let it rise, knew it would settle again as the dust had settled; and it did. He was still watching her. He still had both his eyes, but other things were wrong with him, his voice for one, and the

way he walked, as if stepping directly onto broken glass, and “You don’t ask me,” he said, “how I got out.”

“I don’t care,” she said. “You can’t do anything to me.”

“I don’t want to. What I want,” gesturing with the bag, his shadow reaching for her as he moved, “is for you to make a box for me. Like you do for other people. Make a box of my life, Alison.”

No answer; she stood watching him as she had watched him in the courtroom. The breeze lifted her hair, as if in reassurance; he came closer; she did not move.

“I’m dying,” he said. “I should have been dead already. I have to wear this,” touching the patch on his arm, “to even stand here talking, you can’t imagine the pain I’m in.”

Yes I can, she thought.

“Make me a box,” as he raised the bag to eye-level: fruit, tumor, sack of gold, she saw its weight in the way he held it, saw him start as she took the bag from him, red string damp with sweat from his grip, and “I told you on the phone,” she said. “I can’t do anything for you.” She set the bag on the ground; her voice was tired. “You’d better go away now. Go home, or wherever you live. Just go away.”

“Remember my workshop?” he said; now there was glass in his voice, glass and the sound of the pain—whatever was in that patch wasn’t working anymore—grotesque, that sound, like a gargoyle’s voice, like the voice of whatever was eating him up. “Remember what I told you there? Because of me you can do this, Alison, because of what I did, what I *gave* you . . . Now it’s your turn to give to me.”

“I can’t give you anything,” she said. Behind her, her workshop stood solid, doorframe like a box frame, holding, enclosing her life: the life she had made, piece by piece, scrap by scrap, pain and love and wonder, the boxes, the desert, and he before her now was just the bad-dream man, less real than a dream, than the shadow he made on the ground: he was nothing to her, nothing, and “I can’t make something from nothing,” she said, “don’t you get it? All you have is what you took from other people, you don’t have anything I can *use*.”

His mouth moved, jaw up and down like a ventriloquist dummy’s: because he wanted to speak, but couldn’t? Because of the pain? Which pain? and “Here,” she said: not because she was merciful, not because she wanted to do

good for him, but because she was making a box, because it was her box, she reached out with her long, strong fingers, reached with the X-Acto knife and cut some threads from the bag, red string, thin and sinuous as veins, and “I’ll keep these,” she said, and closed her hand around them, said nothing as he looked at her, kept looking through the sunglasses, he took the sunglasses off and “I’m *dying*,” he said finally, his voice all glass now, a glass organ pressed to a shuddering chord, but she was already turning, red threads in her palm, closing the door between them so he was left in the sun, the dying sun; night comes quickly in the desert; she wondered if he knew that.

He banged on the door, not long or fiercely; a little later she heard the truck start up again, saw its headlights, heard it leave, but by then she had already called the state police: a sober courtesy, a good citizen’s compunction because her mind was busy elsewhere, was on the table with the bracelet and the varnish, the Gideon Bible and the red strings from the bag. She worked until a trooper came out to question her, then worked again when he had gone: her fingers calm on the knife and the glue gun, on the strong steel frame of the box. When she slept that night she dreamed of the desert, of long roads and empty skies, her workshop in its center lit up like a burning jewel; as she dreamed her good eye roved beneath its lid, like a moon behind the clouds.

In the morning paper it explained how, and where, they had found him, and what had happened to him when they did, but she didn’t see it, she was too far even from Eventide to get the paper anymore. The trooper stopped by that afternoon, to check on how she was doing; she told him she was doing fine.

“That man’s dead,” he said, “stone dead. You don’t have to worry about him.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Thank you for coming.” In the box the red strings stretched from top to bottom, from the bent garage nail to the hospital bracelet, the Bible verse to the Polaroid, like roads marked on a map to show the way.

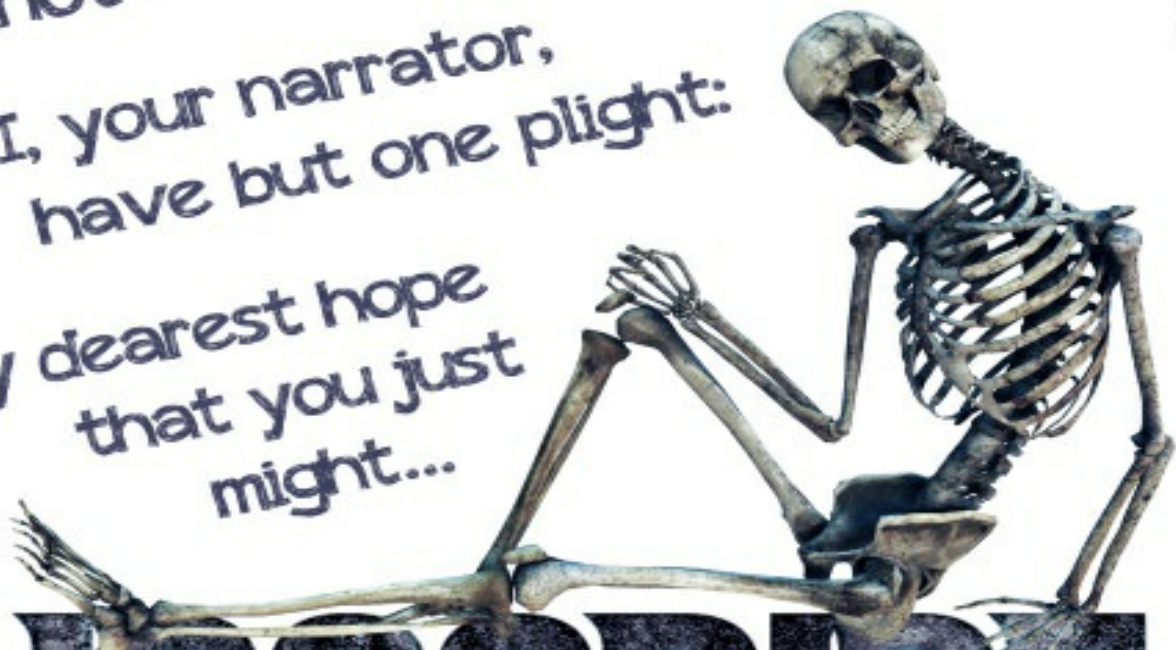
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Kathe Koja writes novels and short fiction, and creates and produces immersive fiction performances, both solo and with a rotating ensemble of artists. Her work crosses and combines genres, and her books have won awards, been multiply translated, and optioned for film and performance. She is based in Detroit and thinks globally. She can be found at kathekoja.com.

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The H Word: Mental Health, Ableism, and the Horror Genre

Evan J. Peterson | 1859 words

Our genre isn't known for its warm and compassionate embrace of disability. From physical disfigurement to mental illness, those with disabilities are an all-too-convenient Other to demonize. The current battle for greater inclusion in the genres continues to shed light on those stories and voices that have been excluded. As we look beyond race, gender, and sexuality for inclusion and representation, ability is vital for us to reexamine. With the epidemic of mass shooters and the opioid crisis showing no end in sight, American culture is starting to rethink our approach to mental illness. Nick Jonas is doing mental health PSAs for Cigna—that's a watershed moment. We have an opportunity here and now to take the horror genre into fresh territory. That's going to mean rethinking and dropping our clichés about mental illness.

This is not an essay of politically correct bluster and offense. This is about worn-out clichés and their effects on the quality of the writing itself, let alone on the readers. As a person with no physical disabilities, I won't be tackling that area of ableism in the genre. As someone with a personal and family history of mental illness, I'll do my best. First, let's get a handle on the terms “crazy” and “mental illness.”

Many of our villains, and some protagonists, are “crazy.” This is a catchall term for anyone whose personal reality doesn't match the traditional or popular definition of reality, and they're usually extreme. Maybe they hallucinate (*Videodrome*). Maybe they're delusional and at times believe themselves to be another person entirely (*Psycho*, *Friday the 13th*). Maybe they just think murder is fun.

Mental illness, on the other hand, currently includes everything from depression and anxiety to drug and alcohol addiction to schizophrenia. It's clear that most (indeed, most) of twentieth century horror film and fiction had no idea what schizophrenia actually is, often confusing it with dissociative identity disorder (DID, also/formerly known as multiple personality disorder). Schizophrenic people are rarely a mortal threat to anyone but themselves, if even. Those with DID are no more likely to kill than anyone else. The idea of a bloodthirsty killer tucked into the fragmented psyche of a mild-mannered neighbor is at least as old as *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

(1886). It's much older if you include legends of werewolves and other predatory shape-shifters.

From a professional, artistic, and critical perspective, this is just lazy writing. It was fresh when Stevenson did it over a hundred years ago, but as creators we would do well to get past these overused plot points. Let's not call them a "crutch" in the current context. Sure, the fear of the unknown is the oldest and most potent fear, etc., and mental illness is scary and unpredictable. But mental illness is especially scary for the people who are mentally ill. Poe, Shelley, Lovecraft, Dick (Philip K.)—all lived lives shaped by mental illness, and each drew from this experience to create great works of storytelling. Consider how each uses their creative talents to portray mental illness, neurosis, paranoia, addiction, and other conditions in a more personal way than the stab-happy murder machines that ruled the eighties. That decade came to an end thirty years ago.

The lack of research by writers into sanity and neurosis is clearly a problem. We live in a time in which psychological conditions such as OCD, antisocial behavior, and PTSD triggers have been robbed of their significance in our common conversation. Hating clutter doesn't make you obsessive-compulsive. Trigger warnings are for trauma survivors who cannot avoid reacting in panic to depictions of rape or violence; they aren't for angsty young people who don't want to encounter uncomfortable material in the classroom. And, if I may really get up on this soapbox, stop saying "antisocial" when you mean "introverted." Antisocial personalities are "characterized by a long-term pattern of disregard for, or violation of, the rights of others. A low . . . conscience is often apparent, as well as a history of crime . . ." This quote is from Wikipedia for heaven's sake. Google it.

To reduce such inaccuracies, start by doing your homework like a professional. By all means, write about mental illness, but do it with an accuracy (and, if you don't mind, some empathy) that stands up to real world experiences of disease and disability. Extremes are our sandbox in the horror genre, but consider how commonly your peers are presenting the rarest cases. Has someone written murder and torture in ways that you probably can't top? Then don't; find your own angle and create something new.

It's challenging, though. Some mental illnesses may be unavoidable in our genre—are we really going to promote the idea that spree killers are "differently sane," even healthy? Don't be PC about it, but be socially just:

someone who rapes and kills repeatedly, or who walks into a house of worship and guns down dozens, is almost certainly mentally ill, but they're very unlikely to be schizophrenic. Psychopaths and people enduring psychotic breaks very likely make up the majority of serial, spree, and mass murderers. I'm not a psychologist or a scientist, and I'm not sure where to look for that data (I, too, need to do my homework). I do know from research that many psychopaths and sociopaths don't commit acts of personal violence, but they do tend to excel in business and politics, and that's no joke.

Some tropes are still fruitful, and all they need is a little reinvention or updating. Although gaslighting has been a trope for a century or more, it's still fresh and scary as hell. Gaslighting, for those unfamiliar, is a form of abuse in which the perpetrator manipulates the abused by making them doubt their reality, memory, and sanity. This happens *far more frequently* in the real world than spree killers. Many readers know what I'm talking about. It's especially scary when the target of the manipulation has a history of mental illness, mistrusting their own senses already. While an unreliable, mentally ill narrator or protagonist is nothing new, we're still finding ways to make them fresh, and gaslighting is tried, true, and scarier to many of us than a masked madman with a knife.

Complicating this trope are examples such as Angela/Peter in *Sleepaway Camp*, whose manipulative and clearly mentally ill aunt misgendered and gaslighted the character into a new identity. This child's bloody rampage seems to be a direct reaction to years of mental abuse, but that nuance was lost for decades on audiences. Most viewers only think of the film's closing shots of the femme Angela, naked and presenting male genitalia, while wild-eyed, hissing, bloody, and holding a knife. Countless other films and stories lay the blame of the killer's derangement on an abusive mother figure, especially if she was promiscuous and neglectful. This is pure misogynist fantasy, utter slut-shaming bullshit. Plenty of people had neglectful moms; some had mothers who did sex work to get by. We don't see the killer's rampage inspired by his mother's boyfriends or johns nearly as often as the blame is laid on Mom herself. As a creator, you can do better than this.

Does a murderer need to be batshit crazy in order to kill multiple people? Why can't Pamela Voorhees simply murder all those horny camp counselors out of grief and obsessive revenge? This would still be a form of mental illness, but on top of this grief, Mrs. Voorhees speaks in her own son's voice

—“Kill her, mommy!”—in a kind of inverted Norman Bates delusion. Personally, I want to see some (fictional) mothers kill a bunch of horny teens because they *want to*, not because their dead son has possessed their psyche. Maybe I’ll go write that story.

Other crazy slasher tropes have died out due to social and medical progress. For instance, we seem to have left behind the cliché and repeated portrayal of trans characters as villains, perverts, and clowns. For decades in the horror genre, gender identity was sewn to DID, schizophrenia, and murder. The trope of the insane, murderous crossdresser was prevalent. No distinctions were made between transvestites (those who dress as the opposite sex for thrill or escape), people with schizophrenia (the possible illness of Norman Bates, who thought he was literally his own mother), people with DID (likely the villain in *Dressed to Kill*, who adopts a separate female persona when killing), and transgender people, whose gender identity simply doesn’t match the one enforced on them since birth. *Penny Dreadful* introduced an intriguing and dignified trans character a few years back with Angelique, but she was quickly reduced to a plot device to support the arc of a more prominent character. Then she was murdered. *The Silence of the Lambs* attempted to tear down the cliché of the crazy trans person, but the exposition adds up merely to “he’s not trans, he’s just insane.” This effort to reduce prejudice against trans folks rests on the ableism of demonizing the mentally ill, and it still connects the two.

For more and better alternatives, look around. Read widely and beyond your comfort zone. I love the various versions of the Chinese-Buddhist *Journey to the West*, in which demons and monsters can be rehabilitated, often with their own consent. To merely kill them would be a waste of a good monster. For something Western and modern, Shirley Jackson routinely explored mental illness in ways that articulate the experience in compelling and succinct ways. Mary Katherine Blackwood, the narrator of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, is one of the most interesting in English-language literature precisely because of her sympathetic mentally ill perspective.

Loving the horror genre doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with you. You know this. Loving slasher movies and gore doesn’t make you a pervert or less sophisticated than an opera fan. Opera is a genre brimming full of murder, for what it’s worth. Likewise, loving a good old-fashioned crazed killer doesn’t make you a bad person, but continuing to add to outdated and prejudiced tropes does make you a less interesting artist. Do not doubt: no matter who you

are—and I’m talking especially to the traditional majority here—you have a unique story to tell. I’m white, male, and from a middle class upbringing, but believe me, I’ve seen some shit, especially growing up in Florida.

So I ask you, dear writerly reader: do you want to churn out endless discount Buffalo Bills, or will you reach into your own abyss and see what fresh perspectives you can dredge up? Do your homework, and don’t forget to delve into your own experience. Norman Bates got one thing right: we all go a little mad sometimes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Evan J. Peterson is an essayist, journalist, fiction author, poet, professor, and editor living in Seattle. He’s the author of *Skin Job* and *The Midnight Channel* and editor of Lambda Award finalist *Ghosts in Gaslight, Monsters in Steam: Gay City 5*. His writing can also be found in *The Myriad Carnival*, *Nightmare Magazine*’s “Queers Destroy Horror!” issue, *Weird Tales*, *The Stranger*, *The Queer South* anthology, *Arcana: The Tarot Poetry Anthology*, and *Drawn to Marvel: Poems from the Comic Books*. His first nonfiction book was published by Lethe Press in 2017, and he also reads tarot for international clients. Check out Evanjpeterson.com for more.

Media Review: April 2020

Adam-Troy Castro | 1323 words

Color Out of Space

Directed by Richard Stanley

Produced by SpectreVision, ACE Pictures Entertainment, BRO Cinema
January 26, 2020

The Alpacas out of Space

By far the most interesting motion picture connected with the talented Richard Stanley is not one he made, but one that was made about his most famous misstep: the last feature film he worked on even briefly as director, the 1996 version of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. (That's a quarter of a century ago to you and me; a substantial layoff.) The subsequent documentary *Lost Soul: The Doomed Journey of Richard Stanley's Island of Doctor Moreau* (2014) details how that film spiraled wildly out of control, in part due to difficulties on location, and in part because of the dueling egos of the two stars, Marlon Brando and Val Kilmer. You don't need to know all the details here, as they are available if you want them, but essentially those two formidable egos existed in an apparent direct competition over which of the two could make Richard Stanley's life difficult; he ended up being fired only days into production, and instead of returning to civilization from the remote location fled into the surrounding jungle, living off the grid until ultimately returning to the set in disguise. This is not the sort of thing any director wants happening on a dream project. *Lost Soul* relates the chaos in jaw-dropping detail, which renders it a highlight in the sub-sub-sub-genre of documentary making-of movies as good as or sometimes even better than the disaster-prone productions they're about—a ridiculously narrow category that includes *Burden of Dreams* (1982), *Heart of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* (1991), *Lost in La Mancha* (2002), and *Overnight* (2003, a movie that can be described as the study of a guy who worked with Harvey Weinstein and easily managed to beat him for the title of biggest asshole in the room.)

In any event, Richard Stanley had that career catastrophe behind him, and so it is difficult to not wish him well as he comes out with a new film, in this

case *Color out of Space*, based on the H.P. Lovecraft story. (The on-screen title is actually *Color out Of Space*, not *The Color Out Of Space*, or even *H.P. Lovecraft's The Color Out Of Space*, which have been alternatively reported). And this caveat needs to be reported right away. Your humble correspondent is not a Lovecraft fan. He has read the story, but it made no real impression on him and he only barely remembers it, recognizing a couple of the plot elements as they flitted by, but not having any cause to expend his critical faculties on open-mouthedly expostulating on the degree to which the film honored the master, or defiled him. For that kind of commentary you must go somewhere else, and I write these words with every possible confidence that you will not have to go far. Suffice it to say that what exposure to Lovecraft your correspondent has leads him to the suspicion that there must be reasons why faithful adaptations to the letter of that bard must be thin on the ground. Legend says that with Dashiell Hammett, John Huston was able to write his *Maltese Falcon* script by instructing a secretary to go through the novel and type up all the dialogue; the same instruction given some secretary asked to transcribe a Lovecraft story would in most cases result in almost nothing. Written for film, the work was not.

So what we have instead of the Lovecraft original is a contemporary story about a well-to-do family that happens to live in an isolated farmhouse, where they are living their human-scaled if eccentric lives when a meteorite lands and starts subjecting the local flora and fauna to various horrific transformations. But before that starts happening, we have the family dynamic, centering on Lavinia Gardner (the terrific Madeleine Arthur), whose tinkering with witchcraft is here treated as that typical teenage-girl complaint, the eye-rolling mortification at a family too embarrassing to be borne. Before the horrors begin, she barely says anything to her financial-advisor mom, her stoner brother, her younger brother, and especially her father, that does not reflect snotty disapproval of some sort, and it's one of the lesser grace notes of the movie that this largely goes unremarked by anybody else. It's just her being her, and Dad Nathan (Nicolas Cage), the object of much of her adolescent embarrassment, is among the best at just letting it all slide off him, as if he doesn't hear it.

This much needs to be said about Cage, in particular. The man is known as an enthusiastic over-actor. This means that he is sometimes mistaken for a bad actor, an easy mistake to make given how often he flails about in fringe indies

made for the paycheck; and it is certainly true that he is the go-to guy when you have a character who is meant to melt down, or freak out, at some point, as he will inevitably do here, once his character is deranged by the titular alien forces. But the man who made *Leaving Las Vegas*, *Birdy* and *Adaptation* is capable of modulation, of providing the relative normality that such meltdowns depart from, and so I must report that in the early going he is exactly the geeky, corny, and apparently out-of-touch Dad that girls like Lavinia hate in their teens but love madly the rest of their lives. In this film he raises alpacas, despite apparently not knowing that they're raised for their wool and not their meat, and he is given time to dote on them, and you know what? To the extent that this movie functions as comedy, it does because of Cage's reactions. His obsession with his alpacas becomes a running gag, to the point that the word itself becomes funny long before terrible things happen to the beasts in question. Certainly there has been no more gaga line delivery this year, in any genre production, more funny than Cage's "'They're alpacas!' (Wild gesturing) 'ALPACAS!'" Nor has there been a scene as instantly sympathetic as the one where Nathan is humiliated by a TV news crew which has come to interview him about the meteor but is intent on painting him as a drunk who has made a false report about UFOs. Later, watching the report on television, he does not realize that he has bigger problems.

Ultimately, the alien forces start to wreak their havoc, some of it quite gory, some of it just weird, some of it seen more clearly than the family by a local squatter named Ezra (Tommy Chong). It is the dark comedy about the destruction of a family that never really had a chance once that rock fell on their land; and I cannot testify whether it's scary, as that is a visceral reaction I cannot predict. Nor can I tell you that it ends in a satisfactory manner, as the weirdness builds to an apocalyptic crescendo and then, seemingly, just stops; as if the alien forces wanted this family gone, and were forever satisfied with that. It worked for me, but will frustrate the hell out of many others. I can tell you that with these elements taken into account, the result is certainly chilling and frequently beautiful; that the reaction in this household was as split as it will likely will be in yours; and that I ultimately loved it, hoping what we should hope, that there will not be another twenty-four-year gap before the release of Stanley's next project: another Lovecraft, *The Dunwich Horror*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adam-Troy Castro made his first non-fiction sale to *Spy* magazine in 1987. His twenty-six books to date include four Spider-Man novels, three novels about his profoundly damaged far-future murder investigator Andrea Cort, and six middle-grade novels about the dimension-spanning adventures of young Gustav Gloom. Adam's darker short fiction for grownups is highlighted by his most recent collection, *Her Husband's Hands And Other Stories*. Adam's works have won the Philip K. Dick Award and the Seiun (Japan), and have been nominated for eight Nebulas, three Stokers, two Hugos, and, internationally, the Ignotus (Spain), the Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire (France), and the Kurd-Laßwitz Preis (Germany). His latest release was the audio collection, *And Other Stories* (Skyboat Media), which features thirteen hours of his fiction, including the new stories "The Hour In Between" and "Big Stupe and the Buried Big Glowing Booger." Adam lives in Florida with his wife Judi and a trio of revolutionary cats.

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHTS

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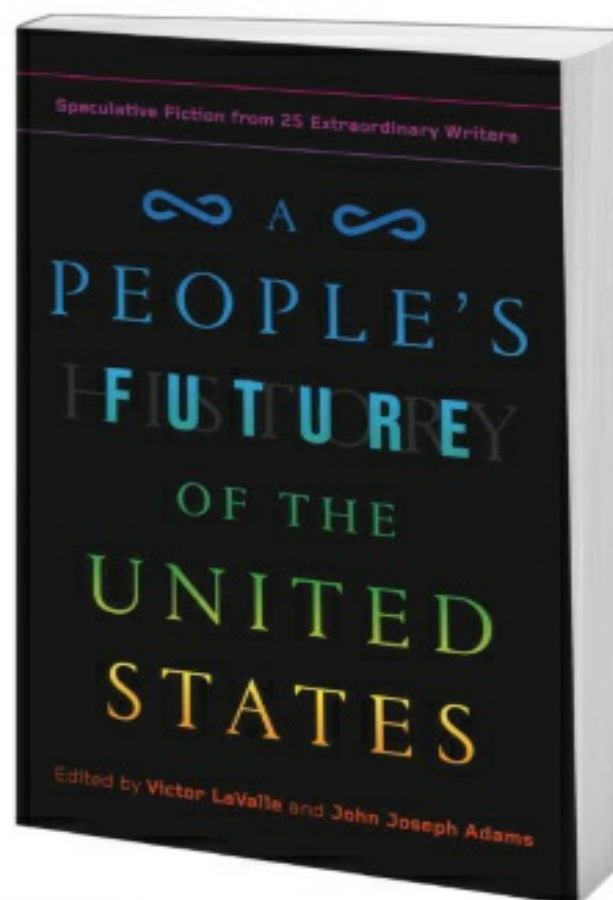
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Author Spotlight: Ben Peek

Sandra Odell | 718 words

“See You on a Dark Night” is an intricate dance of grief, loneliness, and slow horror. Tell us something about the inspiration behind the story.

I had this idea that rattled around in my head for a while, this idea about a vampire and a vampire hunter, but I wasn't sure what to do with it. The hunter was old and his only friend was the vampire, who was ageless, at least in appearance. The vampire's only friend, he was shocked to learn, was the vampire hunter. Anyhow, I didn't really know what to do with it. Ideas are like that sometimes. Usually, I just let it rattle around until something happens. Then, one day, I was doing my groceries. When I do that, I usually plug in headphones and stroll around, getting what I have to get and just zoning. In the second aisle — among all the bread and health foods — Grimes' “Oblivion” turned on. The chorus is the title of the story, “See you on a dark night.” And then the rest of the story was there — the vampire club, the girl, the grief you feel after you've cared for someone for a long time, up until their death. I had the whole thing done within a week after that.

I was intrigued by the anonymity of the character's names, how W, E, and Z could be anyone, a facet of the horror at the heart of the story. Why did you choose this particular narrative tool rather than assign individual names and identities to each character?

In the first draft, they had names, but I didn't like them. I thought, what if I just assigned them letters? I thought it worked pretty nice, so I kept it and started stripping out details like place names, streets, all of that. I thought it gave the story a nice, unsure quality, as if everything is not quite there, indistinct, lost.

Vampires are a much beloved horror trope and are frequently reimagined to explore the nature of what it means to be human and, through that, what makes us monsters. Given the choice, would you want to be a

vampire like W?

No, not really.

You are an accomplished writer, tackling short stories, novels, and reviews. Are there any writing projects you would like to try?

I have a new novel I'm writing, and I like that. It's called *Snowtown*, if anyone is curious. After that, I have another novel, and another. I kind of see myself as a poor, shabby, half-lost writer these days, and nothing says poor and shabby like working in prose, especially in Australia. But with that said, I've had a few ideas for different mediums, like comics and films and plays — I've even written poetry — but a lot of those are prohibitive in terms of cost and layout, so I usually ignore them, or adapt them for other things. Very occasionally, I write them just for the mental exercise. But I like prose most of all. I like working by myself. For a long time, prose is just you and the page, or screen, and not much else. It's easy to just forget who you are during those moments. That absence of yourself, that loss of yourself in your work, is hard to replicate elsewhere, and hard to give up.

If you could reach out and share a bit of writerly wisdom with those just dipping their toes in the ocean of words, what would you say?

Read more. Don't just read your friends, or who your friends say you should read, or who you're comfortable reading, or who your model of literature is. Push yourself. Take risks. Read small things, big things, translated things, things in your native language but from different countries. Understand language is fluid, that it's forever changing, that there are no rules. There are writers of every kind out there doing interesting and fascinating things and you want to find them. Setting aside time to read is just as important as setting aside time to write.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Sandra Odell lives in Washington state with her husband, sons, and an Albanian miniature

moose disguised as a dog. Her work has appeared in such venues as *Jim Baen's Universe*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Crossed Genres*, *Pseudopod*, and *Cast of Wonders*. She is a Clarion West 2010 graduate, and an active member of the SFWA. Find out more at writerodell.com or follow her on Twitter at @WriterOdell.

Author Spotlight: Millie Ho

Sandra Odell | 965 words

“A Moonlit Savagery” is a wonderful story; evocative, stirring, and unafraid of its own horror. What happened to inspire this particular tale?

Bangkok is such a beautiful and diverse city, with rich cultures and people I’m lucky to call my lifelong friends, but it’s also filled with contrasts. “A Moonlit Savagery” is about one of these contrasts. When I first came to the city, I cluelessly rented a place not far from Nana Plaza, one of the biggest red-light districts. I used to jog past it, and learned the story of a woman who used to work there. She came from a poor background, moved to the city to support her family, and had a consensual but contractual relationship with a tourist—or farang—who just came and went as he pleased. It wasn’t that she was weak in any way—in fact, being a foreigner, the tourist depended more on her to navigate, receive medical care, and work through his visa issues—but I was affected by her steely sadness when she shrugged off the fact that he still sees other people despite knowing how it made her feel. Unless the foreigner married you and committed to staying long-term, there’s always this understanding that the guy could leave on a visa run and may not come back.

The experience made me think about my own privilege as a Chinese Canadian woman living in Southeast Asia, someone who looks the part of a local but mentally is all westernized. I can hang out with other immigrants (let’s never use the term expats), hop on a plane to an island for a weekend, and get invited to Muay Thai fights and family dinners because local people are super kind to someone like me. But what if I didn’t have a Canadian passport, or speak a language that’s commonly spoken by foreign-educated (and therefore more socioeconomically well-off) Thais? What would my experience be like then? Then again, as a foreigner, I also have less status than a local. I’ve been in a few bad situations where I couldn’t reach out to police because—until I started taking Thai lessons and got more integrated into society—I didn’t speak the language.

But the seed for “A Moonlit Savagery” was really planted by my own feelings of isolation from living abroad as a young, female and single person. After my core group of Canadian and American friends left, there was this

sense that all my relationships were transient, that the bonds between me and someone I clicked with just weren't strong enough to magnetize both of us to the same physical location. These are the natural lows of uprooting yourself and moving to a new country, and I imported these feelings into the story, which stars my favourite ghost—phi pop—which, fittingly, I discovered thanks to my Thai friends.

One element of the story that stayed with me long after the initial read was the casual brutality of “but old anxieties—I’m a monster, I’m not good enough—still shoot out of me like poisonous snakes when I see them,” the threshold to the horror of an abusive relationship. When writing the story, how difficult was it to humanize the supernatural in a way that made it relatable to modern readers?

The ghost may be powerful in that she can maim and kill and slurp up entrails, but she's also bound to a tunnel under an abandoned hostel and can only eat people when they're asleep. This keeps her isolated and starved of love. She's strong physically, but deep inside, she's massively insecure and feels undeserving of anything better than the scraps that Sebastian—this cool rising artist—throws at her.

Desperation is very relatable. We've all been in situations where we don't feel good enough. We may have even been shamed for being ourselves or had our trust broken by someone we thought loved us. I think humanizing the supernatural comes easily when you're being honest. I wrote this story in a blind animalistic frenzy, with no filters and no blueprints except the map of my own experiences. It was a delight to write this and finally crystallize on the page my thoughts about power, injustice, and ultimately, self-love.

How has attending Clarion West changed your writing? What was your biggest take away from the program?

The biggest takeaway is that I don't need a lot of things around me to write. Books, a swanky apartment, all my clothes neatly folded and arranged by season and colour — forget all that. You simply sit in a room, put your fingers on the keyboard, and write. When you have a deadline to meet and seventeen

peers and a teacher to not disappoint, you magically (and sometimes haphazardly, with lots of coffee) find it in you to get all the words down and hit SUBMIT.

The first step to writing is to read. The second step is to read more. Who are some of your favorite authors? Who tickles your fancy between the covers?

I love Stephen King. I have a special place in my heart for *Carrie*, which I devoured in one sitting in my middle school library, and was the first novel that made me feel completely understood. I also enjoy Ken Liu's translations of Chinese science fiction and other non-English authors like Keigo Higashino and Gabriel García Márquez. For short stories, it's Ted Chiang and Alice Munro, and I'll always be grateful to Alyssa Wong and Sam J. Miller for showing me that underrepresented voices have a place in science fiction, fantasy, and horror.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Sandra Odell lives in Washington state with her husband, sons, and an Albanian miniature moose disguised as a dog. Her work has appeared in such venues as *Jim Baen's Universe*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Crossed Genres*, *Pseudopod*, and *Cast of Wonders*. She is a Clarion West 2010 graduate, and an active member of the SFWA. Find out more at writerodell.com or follow her on Twitter at @WriterOdell.

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Coming Attractions

The Editors | 118 words

Coming up in May, in *Nightmare* . . .

We have original fiction from Yohanca Delgado & Claire Sorrenson (“The Blue Room”) and Decorating with Luke (“Adam-Troy Castro”), along with reprints by Jarla Tangh (“The Skinned”) and Steve Toase (“Call Out”).

We also have the latest installment of our column on horror, “The H Word,” plus author spotlights with our authors, and a feature interview with Molly Tanzer.

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

Looking ahead beyond next month, we’ve got new fiction on the way from Carlie St. George, Vajra Chandrasekera, and G.V. Anderson.

Thanks for reading!

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The Editors

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The Editors

If you're reading this, then there's a good chance you're a regular reader of *Nightmare* and/or *Lightspeed*. We already offer ebook subscriptions as a way of supporting the magazines, but we wanted to add an additional option to allow folks to support us, thus we've launched a Patreon (patreon.com/JohnJosephAdams).

TL;DR Version

If you enjoy *Nightmare* and *Lightspeed* and my anthologies, our Patreon page is a way for you to help support those endeavors by chipping in a buck or more on a recurring basis. Your support will help us bring bigger and better (and more) projects into the world.

Why Patreon?

There are no big companies supporting or funding the magazines, so the magazines really rely on reader support. Though we offer the magazines online for free, we're able to fund them by selling ebook subscriptions or website advertising.

While we have a dedicated ebook subscriber base, the vast majority of our readers consume the magazine online for free. If just 10% of our website readers pledged just \$1 a month, the magazines would be doing *fantastically* well. So we thought it might be useful to have an option like Patreon for readers who maybe haven't considered supporting the magazine, or who maybe haven't because they don't have any desire to receive the ebook editions—or who would be glad to pay \$1 a month, but not \$3 (the cost of a monthly subscriber issue of *Lightspeed*).

Though *Nightmare* and *Lightspeed* are separate entities, we decided to create a single “publisher” Patreon account because it seemed like it would be more efficient to manage just one account. Plus, since I sometimes independently publish works using indie-publishing tools (as described above), we thought it would be good to have a single place where folks could

come to show their support for such projects.

Basically, we wanted to create a crowdfunding page where, if you enjoy my work as an editor, and you want to contribute a little something to help make it easier for us to produce more cool projects, then our Patreon is the place to do that.

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If you've read this far, thanks so much. We hope you'll consider becoming a backer on Patreon. That URL again is patreon.com/JohnJosephAdams.

Thanks in advance for your time. We look forward to hopefully being able to make the magazines—and my other publishing endeavors—even better with the support of people like you.

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