

# OCTOBER

FEATURING THE ART  
OF  
EL HUTHER

WITH STORIES AND POEMS

BY:

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DEAN SCHRECK

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AND MORE!



OCTOBER 2022



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

HAVE YOU SEEN FLUFFY? BY ZAHER ALAJLANI	4
CROSSROADS BY A.J. MORGENSTERN	11
BRENDA LEE BY DAWN DEBRAAL	15
POEMS OF ED BLUNDELL	18
THE ARTIST BY KATE SEGER	20
INTERVIEW WITH THE COVER ARTIST: EL HUTHER	23
ENTOMBED BY FREDERICK PANGBOURNE	33
POEMS OF DEAN SCHRECK	39
X-O BY D.L. SHIREY	41
TASTE OF FEAR BY K.N. NGUYEN	45
HII! BY ANDRE SCHUCK	52
BLOOD FEAST BY LAVERN SPENCER MCCARTHY	55
FURY BY DOUGLAS SCHWARZ	58
THE ORANGENESS BY SHEILA KIRK	61
NOTE FROM THE MAGAZINE	67



# Have You Seen Fluffy? By Zaher Alajlani



I was at an underground party in an abandoned warehouse in Cluj-Napoca when I smoked Esentia for the first time. The toothless man smiled when he handed me the pipe. His dark, wrinkled face seemed like a worn-out mask. I had always hated the man's rattish look. His bloodshot eyes were far apart, and the lower part of his face was thin and protruding. His hands were always wet and had a pinkish hue.

"Take a long drag and trap it in," he said.

After the first hit, I could feel the presence of my dead father and smell his whisky breath in the bluish vapor. After the second hit, I could hear the crack his belt used to make before landing on my back. "I'll make a man out of you, boy!" his throaty voice shouted after the third. By the fourth hit, I was drowning in a cesspool of memories, hallucinating about all the needless torture.

"What the fuck!" I snapped before throwing the bong away. "I'll never smoke this shit again," I said. That was five years ago; since then, I must've said the same exact words a thousand times.

Esentia, a bluish paste, was unlike any other drug. It did not numb you or offer you an escape. Quite the contrary, it resuscitated your worst memories and feelings, evoking a special kind of fear that was gripping, exhilarating, and eternal. It was like a bad therapist who unpacked your past traumas only to leave you hanging.

"It's controlled by the leadership of the Communist Party, the higher-ups. They control everything, the evil bastards," a fellow addict once told me. But back then, people either demonized or glorified the party—there was no middle ground.

The drug was extremely hard to get, and its effect lasted about two hours. The craving usually showed its claws four hours later, becoming unbearable in eight. I started as an occasional user. "I'll never get dependent on anything," I used to say. But within months, the habit snowballed into a full-blown addiction. I began taking too many sick leaves, and when they were over, I was either showing up late for work or never at all. Eventually, I found myself jobless. The Cluj-Napoca Public Transport Company could do with one less bus ticket collector. My savings dwindled, then vanished. My landlord warned me, then threw me out for not paying.



Experiencing that terror and reliving the past through Esentia became my life's purpose. At twenty-five, I became a vagabond who spent his days trying to get money and find a dealer.

I got lucky, however. I found a regular supplier: Emanuel, a sketchy former party member expelled for repeated sexual misconduct. A stocky, bald man with a beer belly and sunken eyes, he looked more creepy than intimidating. He worshiped a few things: Esentia, money, and sadistic sexual encounters. When I managed to pickpocket the unassuming, I gave him cash. When I didn't, I got down on my knees, unzipped his pants, and had him in my mouth. "Swallow it. Swallow it all, boy," he'd say before climaxing.

Out of this twisted arrangement, an unlikely companionship formed. Emanuel and I became drug buddies. We'd often smoke Esentia, enjoy that sweet terror, and then roam the streets of Cluj-Napoca until the craving would hit again. Emanuel was not generous, neither with drugs nor with words. He never spoke about his Esentia trips or gave me anything for free. It was either my mouth or my money.

"There's something great about the fear Esentia induces," I once told him as we sat under a tree in a public park, seeking refuge from mid-August's burning sun.

"What's that?" came his cold reply.

"I don't know how to describe it exactly, but this fear makes me feel part of this horrific life. When I'm sober, I feel like I'm on the outside, merely watching the world go by. Disassociated. Detached. But when I smoke Esentia, I relive my past traumas, and the pain makes me feel alive."

Emanuel didn't respond.

That night, I pleased him for Esentia, and he said the same thing when he finished, "Swallow it all, boy."

The next day, as we wandered the city streets like two stray dogs, we saw a poster on a streetlight pole in Gheorgheni. It said, "Have you Seen Fluffy? She went missing from our backyard. One million RON award for anyone who finds her. Call us!" The poster had a photo of a white Persian cat with piercing blue eyes. A phone number was listed at the bottom.

"One million RON! That's a handsome amount of money," I told Emanuel, placing my hand on his shoulder and shaking him.

"Yes, it is." He rubbed his belly, pulled a pen out of his breast pocket, and wrote the number on his hand. "We'll split the money fifty-fifty if we find the cat."

I gave him a thumbs-up.

"Da (Yes)," a woman with a shrill voice answered when I called from a payphone.

"Da, buna (Yes, hello)," I stuttered. "Is it true you'll pay one million to those who find your cat?"

"Da, dragul meu (Yes, my dear). See, I love my Fluffy. I'm an old, lonely woman. She's my only friend. Oh, how I love her eyes."

"My friend and I will find her for you."

"Oh, dear. Thank you. May God bless you. I'm an old woman in a wheelchair. I'm homebound, you se—"



“Who hanged the poster for you then?” I asked.

“My neighbor hung the poster for me but couldn’t look for Fluffy himself. He had to care for his sick child.”

“Okay, we’ll find her. We want the reward. One million, not a bani (penny) less.”

“A promise is a promise, son. Once you find her, call me, and I’ll give you the address to collect the money.”

“Any tips before we begin?”

“Try the big park in Gheorgheni. She could be there. Fluffy responds to her name by purring, then meowing three times. She’s a very clever cat.”

Emanuel poked my side, wanting to know what was happening.

I pinched my fingers together. “Wait,” I mouthed.

“Okay. We’ll find her for you. You pay us cash. We hand you the cat, and you hand us the money. Deal?”

“Sure. I’d do anything for Fluffy.”

Emanuel and I headed to Parcul Detunata, the only big park in Gheorgheni. With tall birch trees and thick bushes, it was a beautiful green space split in the middle by a paved path, where joggers and cyclists would often be seen. The course ended with a short chain-link fence that separated the park from a small grove. A sewer entrance with a rusty barred metal door was in the furthest corner.

After searching both sides of the trail and yelling the cat’s name at the top of our lungs, we decided to rest in the quiet shade of the grove. We jumped over the fence and walked toward a tree stump.

I sat on it, and Emanuel stood before me, his crotch at my face level.

“Do you want to smoke some Esentia?” He flashed a toothy smile.

“Sure.”

“Do you have money? Or would you—”

“You know that I don’t have money. Let’s smoke now, and if we find the cat, I’ll pay you from my share. If not, I’ll give you head.”

“Well, it doesn’t work this way. Payment is always in advance.” He raised his eyebrows. “What if we don’t find the cat?”

“I’ll give you two heads, then.”

He sized me up. “This time, I’ll make an exception.” He sat opposite me.

We lit the bong and began sharing it. The blue vapor rose idly in the air. Fear washed over me like a tidal wave, and those horrible visions filled my being. I glanced at Emanuel and saw him trembling, his eyes divulging agitation. As we were coming down from the high, I looked unseeingly at him and shouted, “Fuck that cat! Where the fuck is she, anyway?”

“Fluffy! Fluffy! Where the hell are you?” shouted Emanuel.

“Prrr. Meow. Meow. Meow,” the cat finally responded.

Emanuel and I eyed one another.

“Finally.” I stood up and began scanning my surroundings. “There, that’s her.” I pointed at the sewer entrance. “Easy. Don’t scare her.” I motioned to my friend to remain seated.

“Here, little kitty. Don’t be afraid,” I whispered as I trudged towards her. “We’ll take you home.” I extended my hand as I neared her.

“Hsssss.” Fluffy ran away into the sewer through the barred door.

“Fuck! The million RON. You idiot. You scared her,” yelled Emanuel, running toward me.

“I didn’t. She just ran away.”

“Now what?”

I could feel my eyes bulging at him. “We follow her, of course.”

I kicked open the rusty door, which broke almost effortlessly. “Let’s get in. Let’s catch this freaking cat.” One million RON. My cut will be five hundred thousand, I thought.

We recklessly advanced, our footfalls echoing in that poorly-lit, damp tunnel. Small, far-apart lamps were hanging from the ceiling, while two large pipes ran parallel to the tunnel’s walls. I led the way until we were ankle-deep in greenish, murky water. The rancid odor assaulted my nostrils. I gagged, then threw up. After wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I finally got myself together.

Emanuel grabbed my arm and pulled me back, whispering, “Don’t be a cunt. Toughen up.”

I shook my arm free without looking at him. “Here, Fluffy. Come here, girl,” I said. When my words ceased echoing, I heard Fluffy’s distinct reply.

I looked at Emanuel. He smiled and bobbed his head.

“Here she is.” He pointed at the farthest part of the tunnel we could see.

Her blue eyes glowed in the distance.

I ran after her, with Emanuel on my tail. But the accursed cat was fast. She turned left, and we followed. She sprung right, and we went after her. Left. Right. Left. Left. Right. We chased that awful creature through the labyrinth until I was breathless. I stopped, rested my hand on the wall, bent over, and began panting. “The b-bitch. She’s so damn fast,” I told Emanuel.

I didn’t hear a reply.

“I think we’re lost. We should cut our losses and find our way out.”

I stood upright and looked back, but Emanuel wasn’t there.

“Man, this is not funny. Stop fucking around.”

I heard nothing but the echo of my voice briefly drowning out the buzzing of the old lamps.

“Emanuel, please. Come on, man. It’s not funny,” I begged.

A blood-curdling scream resonated through sewers.

“Emanuel! Where are you?”

“Help! Aaaaah! Dear God! Help!” his cries rang out before the unsettling silence swallowed them whole.

The unknown intrigued me, and although I was never a hero and will never be, I preferred to find him than to escape. I roamed the sewers, often yelling, “Emanuel, where are you, man?” But apart from the echo, there was nothing. After a long search, I realized that I was lost and had no chance of finding Emanuel or my way out. Giving up hope was now the only logical course of action. There was a little splash when I sat in the black water. I hugged my knees and began rocking back and forth.

I’ll die here, miserable and forgotten. A man like me should die this way. What do I have to live for anyway? Death is nothing to be scared of! But dying! Hell! Dying is hard. It could take you a lifetime to die. That’s a long time. I bet the rats will feast on my dead body. Eh, at least I’m good for something. I can hear them chitter even now. I wonder if they could sense a man with no will. Maybe I should hang myself to avoid the agony of starving. Or perhaps I can survive by eating rats. Damn! I have nothing to bait them in with. I’ll live in the sewage forever. I can easily see myself living among feces and rodents. I’ll be the king of the sewage. The king of the rats, maybe. But what about Esentia? The withdrawal symptoms will show soon, and I’ll surely need my fix. Hanging is—

An intense chatter interrupted my downward spiral, then ceased. I got up and looked around. There was no one. My hair stood on end when something tapped me on the shoulder from behind. I turned around, and there he was: the man whose rattish face seemed like a worn-out mask dressed in a black hooded cloak and standing with his hands together like a praying mantis. He wore a thick chain pendant necklace with an old skeleton key, one as big as a chef’s knife.

Terror gagged me, and this terror was unlike the one Esentia induced. It was gripping, all right, but neither exhilarating nor primordial. With a presence that flooded my whole being with hopelessness, it is beyond description. I can only liken it to that abominable, universal dread one feels upon seeing a decaying corpse with its hollow eyes, purple skin, and gaping jaws.

The monster moved his head to the right, then to the left, and then to the back. His repulsive hand reached the top of his head, and the mask was off. The most horrific sight lay beneath it: His head was that of a giant rat with wild boar tusks. I began retreating while still facing him. I could feel my stomach twisting and cold sweat racing down my spine. The air around me turned thick and unbreathable.

“Here.” He put his hand underneath his garment. “Are you ready?”

I couldn’t speak. I took a few steps back, still gazing at him in terror.

“You want her, right?” He pulled out the seemingly dead Fluffy. “How about we share her?” He held the cat up by the head, tilted his head back, lowered her towards his mouth, and bit her. He jerked his head, and Fluffy was in his hand and her body in his mouth. He swallowed the body in one gulp, then grinned. “Poor cat. You take the head. Here, catch.” He threw the head at me.

It hit my chest and fell at my feet. I gazed at it; its blue eyes suddenly opened wide, and its mouth flashed a broad grin. I wanted to flee, but that sadistic fear was determined and incapacitating.



“Look,” the monster said, gagged, then vomited Emanuel’s head. It fell at his feet, its eyes bulging. “I have a head, and you have one. But that is not fair. I want two. I deserve two.” The sound of his grotesque laugh still makes me shudder to this day. “I want yours. Give me your fucking head,” he added and came after me.

When I could finally move, I turned around and began running. I didn’t look back, yet I could still hear the creature chittering and shouting, “I want your head.” I took as many turns as possible to confuse him, but he remained on my tail until I reached a dead end. I put my back against the wall and stared at that grotesque beast in defiance. His feet pitter-pattered as he approached me, grinning and blinking his eyes. He grabbed me by the neck with his wet, disgusting hands, lifted me up, and jerked me sideways. He pressed harder and began strangling me. My eyes blinked frantically, and my body twitched. The metallic taste of blood flowing from my nose made me feel that death was inevitable.

“I want your head, boy,” the creature grunted.

Boy! Boy! Boy! The word banged in my head, summoning up rage I’d never felt before. In that monster, I could now see my father, Emanuel, my addiction, and all the abuse I’d endured. I placed my feet against the wall and pushed myself forward. The monster tripped and fell on his back, his head slamming on the ground. I fell next to him. I took advantage of his disorientation and sat on his chest. He began scratching my face with his claws and hissing. Before he had the chance to throw me off, I snatched the skeleton key off his neck and stabbed him in the eye. He let out an unnerving squeak. I pulled the key out.

“Die,” I yelled and stabbed his other eye. “Die, you bastard.” I stabbed again. And again, and again, and again until I lost count. When I was sure he was dead, I got off, put my hand on the sidewall, bent over, and screamed, “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!”

It was late at night when I finally found my way back to the entrance. Still shaken, I went to the drinking fountain and washed up. I contemplated reporting the incident to the police, but being a drug addict, I was not a credible witness, and the police wouldn’t waste time looking for someone like Emanuel. Their reply would be something like, “Ah, we see. A man with a rat head! You’re doing drugs with your friend. You had a fight. You killed him.” The judge would eventually say, “Guilty,” and I’d be hanged.

The withdrawal from Esentia was tough. I shook, threw up, and could barely sleep for two weeks. Yet, I terribly missed the hallucinations and thrilling fear. I slept in the park for a while, then in abandoned buildings when it got colder. My hunger was intense, and in those Communist times, one could barely find discarded food in dumpsters. But I survived. After three months of sobriety, I moved to Hunedoara and got a job as a refuse collector. My meager salary enabled me to live as an honest man, an often-hungry, nonetheless. I rented a room in a shared house, leaving my homeless days in Cluj-Napoca behind.

The faces of the monster and Emanuel haunted my dreams. Every time I woke up drenched in sweat, I’d say to myself, “Stop dwelling on the past. Emanuel is dead. Maybe you beheaded him. Maybe it was an accident. Maybe he never existed, and both he and the monster are figments of your imagination. The most important thing is that you’re here now—alive and

sober.” Despite the hardship, life went well for a year. That was until the next mid-August when my manager assigned me to sweep the narrow alley leading to Corvin Castle. As I began moving my broom back and forth, I heard a distinct hiss. I turned around and saw a poster on the wall. “Have You Seen Fluffy?” it said. It had the photo of the same cat—that accursed cat with her piercing blue eyes.

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# Crossroads By A.J. Morgenstern



My name is Maxwell Harrington and on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1996, I was seventeen years old when I realized I was going to die. Everyone comes to that realization at some point, usually later in life, but I knew that on Friday, August 28<sup>th</sup>, 1998, I would be dead. Exactly six hundred and sixty-six days after I made a deal with my best friend, Julian.

Everyone loses a friend; I just didn't know what it would cost me.

It happened that same day in October. I was set to graduate and was getting ready to ask out Alisa, my dad's boss's daughter. Her dad owned the car dealership down the way, and I was going to work there after graduation as a mechanic. Alisa was sweet, smart, and had never shown any interest in me. Not that I had tried to get her attention yet.

"She might not like it when you tell her that you almost got arrested for stripping cars," Julian said as we ate lunch that day.

"She'll never know," I said, eyeing her from across the hall. "Because you and I are the only ones who know."

"And Billy's gang." Julian watched me as he said this. "Speaking of Billy, are you only eating with my because he's not here?"

Billy was not a bad kid. He was suspended for the week and had really been my ticket to social existence. He was kind of a dick, but wasn't everyone?

"Julian," I started. "How many times do I have to tell you? We just have a lot in common."

"And you and I don't?" He dropped his sandwich. "We've been friends since our mothers were in that birthing class together."

I sighed and began to clean up, piling everything onto the tray. "I've done everything you want. I've played video games, been to the weirdest movies, joined your stupid role-playing club and none of that is interesting to me. It's kind of embarrassing."

That had done it. It had been inside me for months, maybe years, but Julian had never heard me say it.



“Billy and his friends are pretty great then, huh?” Julian said, his face stone still. “Smoking behind the building, harassing girls.” He made a false smile that made his eyes manic and showed all his teeth. “That’s great, Max. Tell me how that works out for you in ten years. Oh,” he stopped and grabbed his backpack, “unless you’re, I don’t know, in jail for grand theft auto.”

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Julian and I were going to hang out and walk my little sister around for the holiday. Mom asked if I was ready when I got home from school, but I was still mad about Julian’s reaction.

“Let her walk herself,” I shouted. I put on my black skeleton hoodie and left right away. I knew I’d be back, but I also felt like I had to show them I wasn’t going to be ordered around.

I met Billy outside a gas station. He had the coolest car in our circle, and I had none, so I drove with him everywhere.

“Thought you’d be with Droolian,” Billy teased, using the awful nickname for Julian he had come up with.

“No, he’s annoying me.” I realized how flat my tone came out, but didn’t say anything to soften it.

We went to a park near the outside of town and sat on the play equipment to watch people as we waited for the sun to set.

Billy didn’t ask what was going on, so I just had to spill it out. “I think it all started here,” I said, looking at the old park. “We made a promise at this park to always be there for each other. He said he’d always come for me, but I guess I didn’t reciprocate often enough. That night—this park—was the crossroads in our friendship. He wanted to move forward, and I wanted out.”

Lighting a match on his jeans’ zipper, Billy lit his cigarette. “Good choice too. He’s a square. Not like us. Our future is undecided. We have all the time in the world, and he wants you to go to school every day.”

“How long are you suspended?” I asked.

“Doesn’t matter.”

We stood up, the darkness finally touching the horizon.

“Hey,” Julian called, coming down the walkway towards us. “I kinda doubted you’d show.”

“Then why are you here?” Billy sneered.

Julian waited for me to defend him. I shuffled from foot to foot, biting my lip, hands in pockets. I wanted to spend tonight with Billy; he was dangerous and cool. If I went with Julian, I’d be walking my little sister from door to door—no chance for something thrilling.

“Why don’t you go hang out at the quarry, Droolian?” Billy said. “So you don’t muck up the sidewalks with your dribble.”

His eyes dimmed and shoulders slumped. “Is that what you want, Max? You want me to leave you alone, after my promise?”

“You promised to come get me if I was in danger,” I finally said through the awkward tension in my throat. “It’s just Billy.”

Defeated, Julian left. I watched his short, hooded form walk towards the quarry. I wondered if he’d be safe since that’s where the older guys hung out to drink and play music loudly out of the back of their pickup trucks.

Distracting me with a backpack full of toilet paper, Billy and I leapt into his convertible and raced down into the neighborhood. Other wild hooligans were running amok in the streets

with spray paint, silly string, and a few other harmless forms of vandalism. A few houses were already shrouded in the mummy-like veils of toilet paper.

“Ever think about death?” I asked, trying to be spooky and take my mind off Julian.

“I think about killing low-lifers,” Billy laughed as he pulled up to a house with no outer lights on. “Throw it!”

He chucked a roll with perfect form, a beautiful arch of white tissue up into a tree where it bounced down, tangling branches on the way.

I touched the paper, remembering the time I went through an entire roll. The night my mom died. I had cried for days. I was old enough to know what death was, but not old enough to understand.

“My dad said that when my mom died, she turned into an angel.”

Billy retorted, “When mine died, my dad didn’t have to hide his drinking. Here.” He handed me a second roll and cocked my arm back for me.

With a grunt, I tossed the roll high up onto the eve of the house. It ping-ponged down and wrapped around the front gate like police tape.

We were just getting into a rhythm when another convertible screeched down the street. The guys inside yelled, “This was our turf, Mulligan!” using Billy’s last name as rivals do.

Before he could respond, the kid grabbed a metal bat from his back seat. Loud and metallic, the bat took off Billy’s side mirror. Billy roared, leaping from the car to run after him. With an animal roar, Billy ran after the rival gang. They got in one more swing at his headlight before peeling out into the night. Forgetting me, Billy revved his engine and chased the idiots into the night.

I sighed.

I got out of the secluded neighborhood and wandered back to the park. There was a weird lack of kids around as I sat on the swing. It was full to bursting the day Julian and I made the pact with each other here—when we came to a crossroads in our friendship.

A little girl dressed as an angel saw me on the swing and came over while her group pulled out a map they made of all the best candy stops.

“You’re too old to swing alone,” she chirped.

“I like to be alone,” I muttered. I kicked a large pebble and then looked up to meet her eyes, but they were gone, not a kid in sight.

“You always did,” replied a voice that made my hair raise up in chilling attention.

“Holy hell!” I gasped, leaping up to face the intruder.

Julian was there, soaked from head to toe. His lips were blue, and he was pale, but he smiled. “Something like that.”

Something about him made my skin crawl right at that moment. He walked around and sat on the swing next to me. I felt compelled to sit down again. Almost forced.

“Are you sorry for how you treated me?” Julian asked softly, his dim eyes boring into mine.

He wanted the truth? Fine. I felt reckless, and tonight seemed like the time to just spill everything.

“Not really, man, no.” He didn’t flinch, so I went on. “You were always clinging to me like a spider. I had to be thinking about you all the time because if something happened and I wasn’t there for you to spill your guts to, you’d lose it, like I’d abandoned you or something. You’re not my sole purpose for existing. I’m not your guardian angel, okay?”



Julian nodded. He expected this. “Then let’s make a new pact. This is our crossroads, right? This is where it all went down the first time.”

I sighed deeply, feeling the cold air fill every crevice of my lungs. “Yeah, this is it. This is *it*,” I repeated, laying heavy emphasis on the word. I wanted to be done.

He stood up. “Let me show you one last thing.” He sensed me about to refuse and added quickly, “If I can show you this one last thing, I promise you’ll have a great life. The life you’ve always wanted, the one you think Billy can get you. And I won’t be there to mess it up for you. But you have to promise to meet back here, one last time in six-hundred and sixty-six days.”

At last, a small smirk broke my icy visage, and I scoffed a little. “Deal,” I said, shaking my head. Never seeing him again after he broke all records for being weird would be great.

He led me to the quarry where the truck guys were amassed on the shore of the lake. They seemed to be shouting, panicked. One ran to his truck and peeled out, saying he was going for help.

“What happens to people when they die?” Julian asked as we watched the madness.

“Good people go to heaven and become angels,” I said, Julian speaking with me. He heard me say it so often about my mother.

“And bad people?” he said, when I didn’t add the alternate.

My heart froze. I gasped, leaning forward close to the edge of the cliff. The guys had a body in their arms, pulled from the water. It was Julian. I leapt down and ran towards them, thinking the other Julian was right beside me. As I drew closer, I saw without a doubt that it was him. He was dead, drowned, and frozen. I spun around, looking for the Julian who had just been speaking to me. He was gone.

“See you soon,” his voice whispered.

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A.J. Morgenstern is an aspiring writer of sorts. He mainly supports creative types through freelance work with graphics, emotional support, and the occasional story. He is a big fan of video games, football, and nature.

A survivor of self-harm, he aspires to support and bring awareness to male trauma, childhood bullying, and the ever-growing presence of mental illness. A.J. is passionate about listening and being there for those who cry out for help.

Besides his work advocating, he hopes to one day skydive, own a ranch in the middle of nowhere, raise a family, and maybe find buried treasure once he owns a sailboat. A.J. lives in Kansas, lurking in a dark office where he pens his stories in secret.

Find him online at <https://www.facebook.com/blankman007/>



# Brenda Lee by Dawn DeBraal



I thought I'd gotten rid of Brenda Lee Sweeny. She was my high school sweetheart until I found out she was also dating Jimmy Decker at the same time. No one accused me, but Jimmy, well, they blamed him for Brenda's death. Poor sap. I know he didn't do it, but the evidence I planted on him, the murder weapon, gave the cops an open and shut case. I'd gotten away with it.

Yes, I felt guilt when Jimmy hung himself in prison. A life sentence is hard, living every day behind bars. But for me, that door closed. I had gotten Brenda Lee and Jimmy out of my life. They were dead and in my past.

That is, until last week. My youngest child, Eva, said she woke to find a woman standing in her bedroom. I assured her it was only a nightmare.

"Oh no, Daddy, she told me she knows you. She says her name is Brenda Lee."

My blood ran cold, was my past visiting my present? Why had she come after all these years?

I put my arm around my daughter and told her I'd sit next to her bed until she went back to sleep. I sat in a chair, and soon the ticking of my daughter's bedroom clock lulled me to sleep.

"Jeff."

I jumped at the calling of my name. There before me, as I awakened, stood Brenda Lee wearing the bloodied dress from that fateful day.

"Brenda. What are you doing here?" I whispered, not believing the sight before me.

"I've come to take you with me."

I snorted. How ridiculous was that? Her taking me? I would have to be dead, wouldn't I?



"I want you to leave my house," I told Brenda Lee in no uncertain terms. Brenda, or the vision of her, disappeared instantly, and I relaxed in my chair. I had handled the situation.

In the weeks following the encounter, every time I opened a closet door or came into an empty room, there stood Brenda shimmering in the dark. Whenever I told her to leave, she disappeared, but I have to admit, I was becoming unhinged.

I took off from work, asking for a leave of absence, telling my boss I was sick. I was having a nervous breakdown. If my daughter, Eva, hadn't seen Brenda, I would think I was going crazy.

But Eva chatted away, telling me how Brenda Lee and I went to prom and told me the exact dress she wore. I forbid my daughter from talking about Brenda Lee again, knowing that would not stop the woman from reappearing in my house, but I couldn't stand it any longer.

Night after night, I sat in the chair by Eva's bed, waiting for Brenda Lee to appear. What was I to do with her? How could I get her to leave my house?

"Jeff." She'd awakened me again.

"Brenda, go. Please leave us be."

"Not until I take from you what you've taken from me."

My mouth hung open as she touched my baby girl and awakened her from her sleep.

"Eva, come with me," Brenda Lee said sweetly. My daughter rose from the bed and walked to the door, Brenda behind her with a knife in her hand. The same knife I used to kill Brenda years ago.

"No," I cried, racing ahead of the vision to stop her from killing my daughter, forgetting the flight of steps.

I felt each step going down. When I reached the bottom, I felt nothing, for I'd broken my neck.

"Daddy!" Eva screamed from the top of the stairs, my wife grabbed her, turning her away from the landing, shielding Eva's view of me.

Brenda Lee ripped my soul from my body. "Come," Brenda Lee said, guiding me away from my home and family.

"Brenda, I will go with you. Please, leave my family alone." We stood near a gaping hole in the ground, one that swirled, while screams of lost souls cried for help from the vortex.

"This is Hell; I deserve this. I am sorry for what I did to you," I sobbed, looking at the remains of wretched humanity, knowing I was going to be one of them very soon. It couldn't get worse.

"I'll be back with your family," Brenda Lee said, walking into the shadows. I moved to stop her, but my feet held fast to the ground as though glued. Helpless, I screamed after her, begging her to leave my family alone.

And then, looking down, I realized Jimmy Decker gripped my ankle.

"Jimmy, let me go. I need to save my family."

Jimmy squeezed my ankle even tighter, his rotting face laughed at me. "I'm in Hell; because of you, I took my life, and now, I'll take your soul." Jimmy pulled me into the depths of Hell screaming and kicking.

I never regretted killing Brenda Lee in a fit of jealousy, but I do now.

---

Dawn DeBraal lives in rural Wisconsin with her husband, Red, two rescue dogs, and a stray cat. She has published over 500 drabbles, short stories and poems in online ezines and anthologies such as Black Hare Press, Black Ink Fiction, Blood Song Books, Zimbel House Publishing, Terror House Magazine, CafeLit UK, Potato Soup Journal, Impspired Magazine, Commuter Lit, The World of Myth, Setu Magazine and more. She co-wrote a novel under the pen name of Garrison McKnight, nominated for the 2019 Pushcart Award by the Falling Star Magazine.



Find Dawn online at:

<https://linktr.ee/dawndebraal>





# Poems of Ed Blundell

## SUNFALL

The sunset lays a golden road  
To the horizon through the sea,  
Shimmering as the sun sinks down,  
A shifting path to Xanadu.  
There brazen towers blaze bright fire  
And glittering domes, aglow with gold,  
Glint in the dying rays of day  
As silver stars shine in the sky.  
Slowly the pathway disappears  
Fading into the navy sea,  
Closing a burning, blood red door,  
Leaving me on the darkening shore.

~

## SHORT SHIFT

Sliding through infinity,  
Starting late, ending early,  
Flashing in eternity's pan,  
A window of humanity,  
A brief bright spark in darkest night,  
A bud, a bloom, a fading flower  
In the endless stretch of time.  
A sun that shines a little while,  
A world spins for a few short years  
And for a moment there was man.

~

## ACTAEON

The hunter heard her singing,  
Sweeter than any bird,  
In fact it was the sweetest sound  
That he had ever heard.

He walked into the forest,  
The dark depths of the wood,  
He wandered where they never went,  
Where they said no one should.

He was drawn ever onward,  
By that sweet silver song,  
What cared he it was sacred ground,  
That what he did was wrong?

Then in a clearing, a woman,  
Naked, her body bright,  
Shining beautiful and fair,  
Bathed in a golden light.

He gasped, she heard and turned her head,  
Her face was ashen grey.  
"I am the goddess of the hunt  
Now, you shall be my prey."

He fled fast through the forest,  
Her hounds close at his heels.  
He ran in terror, knowing then



How hunted creatures feel.

~

It was close to the forest edge  
Her hounds caught up with him.  
She watched with satisfaction as

They tore him limb from limb.

~

### STARRY EYED

Sometimes the stars seem close enough  
To touch, to pluck out of the sky.  
A shining dust across the night,  
A million slight, bright winking eyes,  
They hang in velvet, empty space  
Slivers of distant silver light.

I stare into infinity,  
Into a deep and dark abyss,  
A speck upon a tiny world,

Caught in the twisting turn of time.

### ATLANTIS

A perfect place, a perfect storm,  
Disaster in Utopia,  
When the tsunami struck its shores.  
Sunk in a single day and night,  
Its people scattered to the winds  
With nothing but their memories.  
Those memories, the ghosts of dreams,  
Flitted like shadows down the years,  
Told by old men around the fire,  
Stories their fathers told to them.  
Much later, seen through mists of time,  
The golden glow of history,  
Poets and dreamers sang again  
Of the legend of Atlantis.

~



Ed Blundell worked as a teacher of English, a  
school inspector and as Director of Education for  
the town of Stockport.

He has been widely published in the UK and US  
and tries to write poetry that people can  
understand and enjoy.

He gave up searching for the meaning of life after discovering there wasn't one.





# The Artist By Kate Seger



Ilya stands with her wrist arched, a paintbrush poised in the long thin fingers of her left hand. They are artist's fingers, pianist's fingers, the dexterous, steady fingers of a surgeon. Not even the faintest tremor is evident as she contemplates the work before her, so perfectly still she seems to be chiseled from stone, a work of art herself, not a living creature. Her long dark hair falls waist-length down her back in a torrent of curls. A surgical mask is strapped across her face; the faint contraction of the mesh with each intake of breath is the only indication of life.

The whole cold, sterile, harshly lit atelier has a lifeless ambiance. Not dead like a cadaver, but rather like the morgue itself. Everything is sleek, shiny, and hard. The ground floor of a building that was once one of those industrial factory types long ago converted into artists' lofts and studio apartments. Now, it has been transformed once again into—something else entirely? Perhaps not. Ilya still thinks of what she does as art, even though no one else would understand that.

The sound of footsteps echoes in the corridor, like every sound here does, ricocheting and magnifying off the concrete and the steel. Ilya's hand twitches at the sound. A droplet of scarlet paint weaves a thin watery trail down the brush handle onto her knuckle. She frowns with irritation and turns her eyes to the door, rubbing at the smudge of paint with her thumb.

"You know those masks don't do anything, right? If you weren't immune, you'd have caught it by now. You touch them every day."



The man standing in the doorway is tall with dark hair and two-day stubble that gives him a rugged appearance despite his fine attire. What looks to be a vintage Italian suit from back in the days when there was still a country called Italy.

He is missing his left eye, and his face is marked from the pox—reminders of the plague. Ilya could fix that. She offered once, thinking it might earn her a favor, but he'd only looked at her with revulsion and declined. What is good for the goose is apparently not for the gander.

"Force of habit. There was a time when I was not so sure I was immune. And it makes me feel more like a doctor. Less like a butcher piecing together freaks."

Her tone is sharp, but Frank doesn't seem to notice. Or perhaps he just doesn't care.

"More bins are coming up... are you ready for them?"

He knows she hasn't finished yet.

The body is still on the table.

He's early, but there's nothing she can do about it.

Frank is in charge, not her. He doesn't understand the artistic effort she puts in. He doesn't grasp that they matter.

So Ilya says, "I was just putting on the finishing touches on the last one." She lowers her hand, makes one quick sweep with the crimson-stained brush, and then swirls it in a cup of water. She gazes at her creation, a bit wistful, also disgusted, but still full of pride. A flawless human body. Perfect in every way. A young girl in her 20s with rosebud red lips.

That was the finishing touch. The scarlet-stained lips.

Ilya glances around the room, taking stock. Fifteen. Fifteen of these works of art, these inanimate bodies. Before, they were only dismembered limbs. Chunks of preserved, clay-like flesh waiting to be molded and crafted. Now they were complete. But for the spark of life.

The ghost of a smile touches her lips. She has made each one beautiful in its own way. Each one is unique now, as they were in life.

Frank catches that fleeting pride on her face and clucks his tongue. "Now, now. Don't get too attached to them. Time to say goodbye."

Ilya releases a shaky breath and nods, setting the paintbrush down on her palette. She strides across the room and pulls a large steel lever inset into the wall. There is a sharp hiss as of air releasing, the squeal of gears grinding, and fifteen chasms open up in the floor. The concrete lowers, and the metal tables upon which each meticulously crafted humanoid form lay slowly sink, disappearing into the blackness.

A moment later, another noise – the nails-on-a-chalkboard scrape of metal on metal, as the tables return. Only this time, there are more of them.

Upon each table is a large bin marked RECYCLING in bold letters; inside each bin... parts. All the parts you need to put a human body back together again: arms and

legs, coils of hair, tiny thumbnails to glue to pink fingertips, sharp white teeth to inset in restructured jaws.

These were all people once. People who died from the Red Plague were preserved elsewhere and will be reassembled by Ilya. People who Frank will reanimate in the hopes of discovering a cure. They may die five, ten, fifteen times... only to be recycled and put back together again.

So many lifetimes, all too short.

“We need 50 new bodies ready for animation this time. I know you’re up to it.”

Frank pats Ilya on the arm and gives her a mocking salute as he turns and leaves. His footsteps echo down the corridor.

A single tear makes it past the confines of Ilya’s surgical mask, slides down her cheek, and lands warm and salty on the lips of the new body on the table.

Expressionless. Colorless.

A blank canvas.

She wipes her cheek, retrieves her paintbrush, and dips it in the paint.

---

Kate's writing interweaves fantasy and mythology unto unique tapestries. An introvert, dog mom, and freelance editor, when she's not searching for fairy circles in hopes of being transported to an enchanted kingdom, Kate is immersed in the chaos of her writing process.

She lives with her husband and her rescue dog Gracie on the banks of the Hudson in Westchester County, NY, where, alas, she has found few portals to magical Realms.

Find Kate online at:

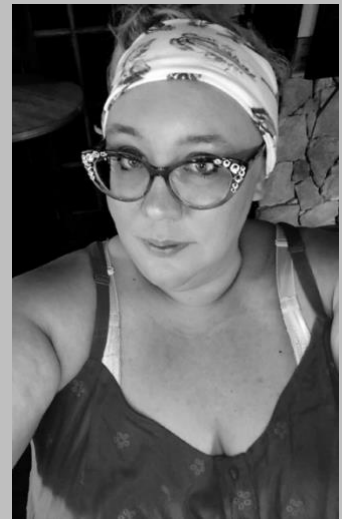
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# Interview With the Cover Artist: El Huther

*Let's start at the beginning: When did you start drawing? What were your first subjects?*

I've loved drawing and painting since I was a little kid. In my earliest memories, my favorite subjects were tigers and horses. But as a young teen, what motivated me to actually practice drawing and attempt to increase my skill was the desire to draw my favorite anime and manga characters. You (Abigail) are partially responsible: it was you who first introduced me to manga. I think we were maybe eleven or twelve years old.



*Did you take classes? Did you find them helpful or distracting from your own style?*

I didn't have the opportunity for any formal art classes until I reached college, but once I did, I found them very helpful! On one hand, I'm glad I had lots of time to just experiment and "learn-by-doing", so to speak. But honestly I wish I'd had access to formal art education a bit sooner. There are some techniques and tricks that you just don't self-discover, and blind spots in your own method that you can't know how to fix until someone more experienced watches you struggle with a project.

*How would you describe your style or aesthetic?*

If I had to describe it in a single word, I think it'd be "vulnerable". My technique is unrefined, but sincere. The subjects I depict range from rainbows and unicorns, to macabre fusions, to representations of causes close to my heart. In both execution and content, I think my art is very open. Raw. Vulnerable.

*What is your favorite medium to create in? Do you use certain mediums for certain projects?*

Graphite and watercolor are probably my favorites, but I also love acrylic and charcoal. I also love re-purposing thrift store jewelry by cutting it apart and using it to bedazzle literally anything, but that might be less "fine art" than what you're asking about!



Generally, I don't have specific mediums for specific projects. Mostly it depends on the feel I want the piece to have, or if it's a commission, what the client is looking for.



*Art is hard enough.  
Can you speak to the  
obstacles you face?  
(can you define Lupus  
and Raynaud's for our  
readers who might not  
know?)*

Lupus is a chronic autoimmune disease that causes many symptoms including (but not limited to) joint pain, fatigue, sensitivity to extreme temperatures, UV sensitivity, and cognitive issues that affect focus and memory. Raynaud's Phenomenon, or Raynaud's Syndrome, is another autoimmune condition that is very common with lupus—but you can have the two conditions separate from one another as well. Raynaud's is a circulatory disorder that constricts the blood vessels in one's

extremities, causing cold, painful and/or numb hands and feet, and can even cause extreme tissue damage. For most sufferers, including myself, Raynaud's symptoms are most severe in the winter.

I also have Fibromyalgia (yet another autoimmune disorder; they tend to come in fun variety packs), which causes (among other things) muscle and nerve pain.

I'm sure one can imagine how chronic fatigue, pain, and frequently-numb fingers might affect an artist. It absolutely slows my production, and has slowed my progress in improving my technique. Not only are my hands simply too sore to work at times, but also my extreme fatigue has prevented me from taking more art classes on a regular basis. Needless to say, this can be very frustrating and discouraging.

All of that means, though, that every piece I make is a labor of love and passion, of strength and resilience. And that makes them all the more special to me.

*How do you express your illness in your art/do you? Is it important to your art?*

I have a few times referenced my illness directly in art pieces, and there are more I plan to make that are fairly direct, but most often I think it shows up in my artwork sort of “between the lines”. By that I mean: living with chronic illness for the last 14 years has so affected my life and shaped the person I am today that I think most of the thoughts or “insights” expressed in my art are at least somewhat informed by that experience.

My disability is also often expressed in my art whether or not I want it to be: my hands are often unsteady, resulting in shaky lines and uneven shading. Sometimes I can go back and fix these things; sometimes not.

I do think my disability is important to my art. It’s a big part of my story, and all of my story is important to my art. Authenticity is a big thing for me, in art as well as in the rest of my life. So being honest about my experiences and how they’ve shaped me is important to me.

*Do you see yourself defined by the obstacles you face?*

No, I would not say I’m defined by the obstacles I face. They have definitely influenced the person I’ve become, but as important as experiences can be, a person is more than the sum of their experiences.



*Let’s get back to the art: do you feel it is important to communicate through images?*

Definitely! I think visual art engages its audience in unique ways, as well as giving people the opportunity to capture feelings they may not be able to articulate in words—or a way to process those feelings more fully. Visual representations can be as powerful as communication through words, I think, and both are vital and beautiful arts.

*Do you feel paintings, drawings, and others can be read, like a book? How do you read an image?*



I suppose it depends on the piece! There are many narrative-style paintings from classic art. For example, in the painting “The Birth of Venus” by Sandro Botticelli, the viewer literally reads the story of the painting from left to right: the winds blowing Venus to the island of Cyprus, where she meets a young woman. Some more contemporary works have text in them, whether incidental or more intentional, and those have a “reading” aspect as well. I think to “read” an image in the way one would need to in order to derive meaning from it, one would have to consider its full context. What is the subject? Or is it abstract? Are there colors? Are they warm or cool? Are the values sharp or diffuse? Does the image appear to be the depiction of a scene or an action, or does it appear to be more meant to evoke a certain emotion? I’m no expert on art interpretation, but every viewer is an expert on what a piece evokes in them. Look at how the piece of art is made and ask yourself what makes you think or feel things.



*You are very fearless in your work, often speaking out against body shaming, demanding people look at the world with a critical eye. Do you see art as a tool in a fight against all kinds of hate?*

I don’t think I’ve thought of it like that exactly, though I’d like to think it could be used that way. With a lot of my pieces, the reason I made them and put them out there was two-fold: 1, I feel this way and I have to process it. 2, If anyone else feels this way, you’re not alone. I have had a couple of pieces that could be described as more directly calling out hate in the world (or at least attempting to). But I also draw dogs and cats and stuff.

I think part of the thing is that compassion, acceptance, and radical inclusion are all values that I hold close in my daily life, so they just naturally come out in my art as I’m trying—like I mentioned above—to maintain authenticity and just to make art about things I care about and think about a lot.

That said, I feel like art is one of the few small things I have to contribute to my sphere of influence, and if I can use it to make a difference there, combatting bigotry and fostering connection, that would mean an awful lot to me.

*Besides using art for a message, what else do you see in your art? Are there other values?*

Art is like therapy for me. Well, not quite like therapy; actual therapy is like therapy



for me. But art is very therapeutic. Firstly, it allows me to process thoughts and emotions that I either can't describe in words or that I'm tired of describing in words, but am clearly still not done dealing with yet. Secondly, I find it—acrylic painting especially—a wonderful sensory mindful meditation practice.

With all media, I just love to watch projects take shape before my eyes! Structure building, shadows and color blooming, finally putting on finishing touches, and having a piece of art where before there was just blank paper or canvas...it's a meaningful experience to me that I would continue creating for myself regardless of whether anyone saw any of my pieces with messages or anything like that.

What else do I see in my art? I see opportunities to just be.

*Any parting messages for our audience or future artists?*

I appreciate you taking the time to get to know me a bit! Be brave, be vulnerable; they're the same thing!

Thanks so much to Elise for sitting down for this interview. You can reach Elise Huther and view her art at:

<https://www.instagram.com/elsonador90/>

<https://www.facebook.com/EliseHutherArt/>

<https://elisehutherart.com>





# A Gray Matter by Jasiah Witkofsky



Accessing the mind – brain interplay had become increasingly accelerated now that the organic melded with the artificial lipids linked with log-ins. The infinitude of the everchanging pathways of the human mindscape, the most complex device in the known universe, had yet to be fully mapped out. Still, the general layout of broad categorizations lit up consistently on the EEG machines. The specific branches of pleasure, sorrow, calculation, the fear/erogenous zones... all holding ubiquitous within their regional placements throughout decades of study. Although a detailed and fully fleshed-out story could not be drawn from the spatial blips on a 3-D screen, a blending of various academic disciplines, including psychological analysis, pharmaceutical neurological research, and surgical removals alongside artificial implantations escalated the field of study by leagues, and every day within the laboratory brought startling new revelations.

One of the most advantageous byproducts of the plethora of findings for the AmeraMercs corporation was the conversion of victims of trauma into well-honed soldiers of vengeance. Simple tweaks to the key routes of the lightning-fast transmissions between dendrites altered the elusive interior realms of imagery, emotions, and narratives. A nerve block there, an enhancer to this lobe, and the tendency for fright becomes an overwhelming urge to fight.

The evolution of the process of all cognitive extractions led to the facilities of AmeraMercs to utilize the foundation's findings to create a variety of super-soldiers. Cybernetics, stimulants, and hi-tech weaponry were an obvious factor in military preparations, but the mental state of the combatant was the most pivotal denominator regarding warfare. To be able to tamp down the emotions, control the spikes of adrenaline and testosterone, as well as repress the pangs of morality and conscience



were ideals most every warrior strived for. The ability to allow higher-ups upon the chain of command to control underlings through dogged loyalty, or the outright takeover and control of an individual's hard-drive – both organic and synthetic - all projects AmeraMercs pumped billions into to provide corporate security, law enforcement, and international mercenaries.

#

Mitchel's nightmares continued into adulthood... if he went seven days with only one night terror, that was considered a good week. Most grownups typically outgrew such terrifying nightscapes, or even the ability to remember their REM periods. Mitchel Ritterbarr's tortured youth came back to haunt his sleep nearly every session of unconscious rest, making him an outlier for his age category.

Most of his prepubescent years were spent on the outskirts of a war zone, constantly propagandized, and sheltered inside a state of fear and meekness – a victimized innocent, helpless within a hellscape of the terrors of prolonged warfare. The strife between the European powers and the Eastern allied realms of Greater Russia had been battling long before he came into existence, hence, he was born upon the borderlands of a shattered and depleted battlefield, powerless to avoid the atrocities associated with mankind's most destructive elements.

Schooling provided a one-sided history of the war-effort with heavy overtones of nationalism. His father's paranoia left the man ragged with embittered agitation as his mother constantly fussed and fretted over her only child. This environment of fear and devastation left a scar upon the youth's mind, the traces of which would remain forevermore.

The day finally came when the battlefield bled into the home front. Mitchel's father became the first casualty when a battalion of enemy combatants bowled through the family's household to mow down the patriarch with a barrage of semi-automatic shells before a word could be uttered. Realizing the residence was further occupied with woman and child, the invaders shifted tactics.

Saving their bullets, the aggressive forces committed unspeakable acts upon the two survivors before continuing onward in their march of terror and regime expansion. When an after-battle rescue patrol finally made their way into the house of the Ritterbarr disaster, the mother had expired from the savage treatment waged upon her body and psyche. Mitchel was rendered a huddled, shattered mass of moans and haunted wails, his young mind completely realigned by trauma and torment.

During wartime, orphanages and safehouses were typically filled to capacity as widows and children without parents were shipped in from around the county. Mitchel Ritterbarr was one such transplant removed from the edges of battle and delivered to a facility to recover physically and receive psychological treatment. Wounds of the body heal with time, but the mind's suffering may transcend chronology, and Mitchel spent his teenage years without uttering a single word.

During such tragic and despondent times, offloading children to donors, relatives, and agencies became an issue that often slid under the books by an overburdened charity service willing to make room for the next batch of disinherited youngsters. Not all of these institutions were of a virtuous inclination, and many of these unfortunates became test subjects for science, trafficked as sex slaves, or sold for parts.

AmeraMercs, being a multinational organization, took great interest in the various wars enacted across the globe, and several facilities were set up near the sites to sell their super soldiers and extract what wealth and resources they could from the devastation. Employees for the guerilla corporation were sent to the foster homes to scout for future recruits. Studying the personal bios and write-ups of the juvenile denizens, one such agent procured five of these young men at a specific halfway home, Mitchel Ritterbarr being one of them.

#

After years of rehabilitation and reeducation, Mitchel Ritterbarr was deemed ready to be sent to the battlelines – trained, modified, and bolstered. Outfitted and armed, the small cadre of enhanced soldiers were helicoptered to the edge of the prolonged, proxy war.

Radio brought groundcover for the propellered offload as the fresh recruits dropped into formation amidst the protection provided by grounded troopers. The hair-spinning rise of the copter departed for another headquarter return, a vehicle for a back and forward exchange of expendable fodder. Scurrying to reconvene at a patch of uncontested territory, the contingent was made aware by a terse debriefing of the next advance into enemy held regions.

With the mission plan relayed, the troops split into three flanks to engage separate endeavors for the greater overall effort towards supremacy. Mitchel was sent to the frontlines to test his mettle. Enthusiastic to become involved, adrenal glands spiked with an injectopatch to sustain a flow-state, Officer Ritterbarr reveled in the irregularity of his heartbeat. Upon his other shoulder, he slapped on a meth-up release and jumped into motion, the weight of his heavy equipment now light as air.

Enemy bullets began to torrent almost immediately, forcing the regiment to take cover behind upturned pavement and gutted automobiles. When the inevitable pause in the deadly volley came, return fire unleashed upon the initiators, providing enough clearance for a hasty advance. Staggering their onrush, the platoon worked their way ever closer to their targets, dealing fatalities and forcing the defenders into a retreat.

Mitchel, the most gung-ho of the squad, kicked down the door of a makeshift bunker and lay down a suppressing arc of automatic hollow-tips throughout the building. With his olfactory sense neurochemically spiked, Mitchel became instantly alerted by the pheromones of the Slavic haplotype reeking throughout the chamber. Of Germanic and Ashkenazi descent, his previous fear of the Rus presence became an exaltation as he reigned bloody vengeance upon the subjects of his hatred.

Two of the resistance opposition were instantaneously mowed down, their vitae splattering the wall behind their peppered corpses lying crumpled on the floor. A female soldier tried to pick her wounded body from a prone position as an uninjured assailant sprung from another room to engage the invader.

Shots rang out, but combat ensued in the form of a hand-to-hand melee. As his opponent drew a large tactical knife, Mitchel furiously whipped the butt of his rifle across the man's cheekbone. The larger blade-wielder maintained hold of his weapon, but the amplifications to perceptions and the nervous system forged his rival into a formidable powerhouse, and Mitchel dove at the man, driving him to the ground.

Both sought submission of the other, but it was the modified AmeraMerc who managed to wrestle the serrated blade from his enemy's grasp. Clutching the handle firmly in a death grip, Private Ritterbarr plunged the point into the boneless underjaw of the skull, the palm of his offhand wedged the pommel to force steel into his victim's brain.

Leaving the weapon sheathed inside the corpse's head, he turned to the sole survivor, bleeding in the corner. Amidst the explosions, death throes, and plethora of gunshots raining outside, Mitchel unfastened his gun belt, glaring down at the cowering form at his feet. As his comrades in arms spread terror and bloodshed further along the outpost, the enhanced mercenary reenacted every violation his mother, and himself suffered a decade previous.

#

Mitchel Ritterbarr was recalled from his deployment quickly thereafter – more an experiment than an agent of a combat mission. His helmet's optical recording device was reviewed by a board of directors and the project was considered a grand success. Any war crimes committed were found negligible by the corporation, who owned the major media platforms and chains around the necks of the politicians. The general populace was so ill-informed that all travesties could be manipulated to point blame at the opposing faction. The psyche department of AmeraMercs received a tripling to their funding and more altered battalions were made a priority by the purveyors of war.

Meanwhile, Mitchel was disappointed to be removed from the center of conflict, but he had never been so proud or displayed such prowess throughout his young life. He knew his services would be called upon once again and sought the discipline to restrain his impatience for rejoining the war effort. But tonight, he would sleep like a babe. His dreams would be wondrous, thrilling in the acts of chaos and slaughter.

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the majestic Sierra Nevadas of Northern California. His works can be found on both hemispheres of the globe, three continents, from several anthology companies.

Find him at: [www.facebook.com/jasiahwitkofskyauthorpage](http://www.facebook.com/jasiahwitkofskyauthorpage)



# Entombed by Frederick Pangbourne



"Well, lad. Here we are. Ever been inside a crypt before?" asked Victor as he pulled a heavy key ring from his belt.

The younger man shook his head nervously.

"You have the same key ring on-" Victor saw that his junior's attention was diverted elsewhere. His head turned over his shoulder, his eyes darting about the vast lawn to the back of the manor. Victor gave him a light slap on his arm. "Pay attention. What's your name again?"

"Erwin, sir. Erwin Myles," the man replied, turning his observations back to Victor.

"Well, Mr. Erwin Myles, I suggest you pay attention because in a few moments you'll be in here by yourself."

Erwin nodded vigorously.

"Alright then," Victor continued, "You have a similar ring as mine. There are only two keys on it. One to the outer gate here and one to the room itself." He showed the designated keys to Erwin. When he was satisfied that he had made his point, he inserted one key into the lock of the wrought iron gated door to the vault's entrance.

"How long have you been working for Lord Remington, sir?" asked Erwin as he again looked behind him uneasily.

"I've been employed by Lord Remington for over forty years now. Started when I was about your age," Victor said, not looking up from the lock as he worked the key.

"So, there's just the two of us, eh?"

"Just the two of us. Twelve hours a day, from six in the evening to six in the morning. Sunset to sunrise." The key finally twisted within the lock and the heavy gate slowly swung back. The metal hinges squealed in protest. The sound carried throughout the dusk air.

Beyond the gate was the portal to the crypt itself. A thick, reinforced door of dark wood fastened securely into the granite structure. The door contained no visible lock and Victor, with some effort, pushed it inward. "Use your key to lock the gate behind us. I'll open it on my way out," instructed Victor as he passed through the door and waited at the top of a narrow stone staircase beyond.

"Is it true what they say in town? About the crypt?" inquired Erwin as he locked the gate behind them.

"And just what do they say? About the crypt that is," Victor asked as he lit a lantern set just inside the doorway.

"Well, sir, some say that the lord's wife is buried in this crypt and that she isn't quite..." His voice trailed off as he rethought his next words.

The flame within the lantern ignited, and the dank stairwell illuminated in its glowing light. Victor held the lantern up and turned to Erwin. "What exactly did they tell you when you were hired?"



“I was told that they needed a caretaker to watch over the crypt. That I would live in the servant’s house and would work with another man. Not much else. Oh, and that the pay was fifty pounds a week.” Erwin thought for a moment, then nodded when he could think of no more.

Victor squinted in the lantern’s light at the man’s face, his brow furrowed. He then turned and proceeded down the stone steps. “Mind the steps. They are narrow and can be treacherous.”

As the two slowly made their way deeper into the crypt’s bowels, Victor spoke again. “Mrs. Remington passed away back in 1793 after a long bout with the fever finally took her. Beautiful woman she was. If you ever enter the manor, you will see a portrait of her over the mantel. Anyway, the poor young lord was grief stricken, as would be any man. She was only twenty-one when the fever took her. The loss of his young wife drove Remington to the brink of insanity. His refusal to accept her death was beyond reason. He turned to spiritualists and occultists when Christian faith faltered in comforting his tormented soul. In desperation, it’s said he eventually called upon the black arts in an attempt to guide her spirit back to her physical body. Mind you, this was all before my time and is merely hearsay.”

“Blimey, and you believe that?” Erwin exclaimed from behind.

“It doesn’t matter much what I believe. All I know is the lord pays me well for simply sitting in this crypt half the day and takes care of my needs. He feeds me and allows me to live here on the grounds for free. You will not find a job as simple as this anywhere in England for the pay or benefits.” Victor snorted as he stepped off the final stair and into a small chamber.

Setting the lantern on a wooden table, Victor proceeded to light another which sat upon it. Soon, with the radiance of both lanterns, the dark room was cast in an illuminating light. With the room now lit, Erwin took in its meager furnishings. A cot sat against the wall to his left and a simple wooden table and chair to his right. Several books were stacked on the table. Nothing more, say a similar door to the one entering the vault at the opposite end of the room. Erwin could see that this door, however, contained a locking mechanism.

“They performed a ritual of the blackest magic one night,” Victor continued, “and, again, this is just rumor, but it’s said that it withdrew the young Vivian Remington from the realm of the dead and resurrected her that night.”

Erwin turned his attention from the door and to the older man as he lifted one of the lanterns from the table.

“They said that when she came back from the dead, she wasn’t quite the same. That it was not her soul that returned to her body, but something black and vile from the netherworld that had stolen into her dead flesh. She had awakened as a murderous vessel. A crazed maniac is what I was told. It took several of the servants to hold her down.”

“And she’s down here in this crypt?” inquired Erwin in a shaken voice. His eyes darted back to the door.

“Aye. The lord had her confined to a sacred coffin after she murdered three servants in her wanton cruelty. The thought of destroying her body was not an option to Remington despite her murderous condition, so a special coffin was constructed, and they sealed her within it and placed it in this specially made crypt. Sealed away for all eternity yet still alive inside her tomb, or so the story goes.”



Erwin gradually turned his gaze from the door and back to the man. "Are ya bloody serious?" His face was a worrisome mask that almost appeared to be on the verge of tears. Victor chuckled as his own face took on a pleasant demeanor.

"Relax, lad. It's just a tale passed down to the new workers. Long ago, when I took this position, it was told to me. A rite of passage, you might say." He let out another chuckle and slapped Erwin's arm. "All I can say for certain is that the late Vivian Remington is buried on the other side of that door." He swung the lantern toward the door.

"Everything else is just tittle-tattle, lad. No one knows the reason why he pays us to sit down here all night and mind the crypt. The stories are only made up to frighten you while you sit down here alone."

"Well, you bloody well succeeded doing that! Blimey!"

Victor laughed again as he made his way toward the stairs. "I'll be back to fetch you in the morning for breakfast. There are some books there if you feel like reading." He swung the lantern to the stack of books on the table, then to the cot. "There's extra blankets there if you get cold."

"So, what am I supposed to do exactly? Besides just sitting here."

"Nothing, lad. Absolutely nothing. And whatever you do, don't be going into the burial chamber. No reason to be snooping around in there. Understood?"

Erwin nodded. The worrisome look still masked his face.

Victor patted his shoulder and smiled. "The first few nights are a bit scary but you'll get used to it. Think of those poor buggers out there digging ditches and breaking their backs for the coin you're making sitting down here on your bum." And with that, Victor began shuffling up the stone stairs. "See you in the morning," he called over his shoulder and soon, Victor and the light of his lantern slowly faded upward into the dark. The sound of his shoes scuffing the stone were the last to fade, leaving Erwin alone and in silence.

Erwin sighed as he looked about his tiny confines. He pulled his pocket watch from the inside of his jacket.

6:23.

Sighing again, he took a seat at the table and looked through the books. Though his reading skills weren't particularly good, he pulled a book of Charles Dickens stories from the batch, avoiding a copy of *Frankenstein*.

He could not say exactly when he had fallen asleep but something had awakened him, and he lifted his head from the open book and wearily looked about. He yawned loudly and stretched in his chair before checking his watch again.

12:44.

Erwin rubbed his face and sleepily scanned the room's shadowy interior. He smiled at the site of a bedpan under the cot that had escaped his gaze earlier. It was then he heard the noise that had initially awakened him, and his smile dwindled.

It sounded almost as if someone were knocking on a door. A rapping, if you may. He stood silently in the tiny chamber and listened intently. It came again. A faint, distant knocking. Slowly he turned his head in the sound's direction, which repeated irregularly. His head ended up facing the door to the burial chamber. Erwin's heart froze in his chest when the rapping came once more. Three sharp knocks.

His eyes drifted to the door in front of him and to the key ring at his belt, then back to the door. The story of Remington's wife being sealed alive in the casket vividly retold itself in his mind. He swallowed hard and with much difficulty.

Without conscious knowledge, Erwin found his fingers playing at the keys attached to his belt. The three obscured knocks sounded again, and the key ring was now off his belt, the key to the burial room now being selected and sliding into the door's lock. His movements were being conducted as if he were merely some helpless marionette being controlled by some unseen puppeteer. The locked door unsecured itself as the key twisted inside the locking mechanism. Before he realized his actions, the door was being pulled open. Unlike the portals above, the door opened without a sound.

The room beyond the door was a void of blackness and upon realizing he could see nothing, Erwin's trance-like state broke, and he reached for the oil lantern on the table. The knocks came again and with the door now open, they came louder and more distinct than before. He pivoted at the sound and cautiously stepped into the burial room.

Holding the lantern at eye level, he stepped into the room, casting a piercing illumination into the darkened chamber. The room was not much larger than the one he had stepped from. Lacking the quaint furnishings he had left behind, the only items here were a lone casket and the black bier it rested upon.

The casket was a polished mahogany. Embedded within the dark wood were symbols of a silver metal; symbols unknown to Erwin's understanding, with the exception of the occasional crucifix which appeared in the cluster of characters. As his eyes wandered over the elegant sarcophagus, the knocks came again, startling him and causing the lantern to almost slip from his hand.

"Hello?" The words spilled from Erwin's trembling lips.

Only a deathly silence answered his inquiry. It was as if he had startled the maker of the noise with his own voice, the originator unaware that another was nearby.

He inched closer to the casket until he stood directly over it. Still, no sound came. Reaching out with his free hand, he gently caressed the smooth polished surface of its lid. The lid itself contained the same silver metallic symbols that decorated the rest of the coffin.

"Who's there?" a voice suddenly spoke from within the casket. A female voice, eager and questioning.

Erwin pulled his hand away from the coffin as if it were aflame. He froze, his lips sealed tight against the unnerving question. His eyes transfixed on the casket before him,

"Who's there? I can hear you. Answer me," it called out again.

"How can-?" Erwin's voice broke.

He looked over his shoulder back into the sitting room expecting to see Victor standing there amused by the trickery that was unfolding, but there was no one. He turned his gaze back to the casket.

"I can hear you breathing. Who's there?" the voice called out.

"Er-Erwin," he stuttered, not believing what he was hearing. "W-who are y-you, ma'am?"

"Thank the stars. Open the lid, please? I can't breathe," the voice pleaded.

"I-I..."

"Please! I haven't much longer!"

He found himself placing the lantern at his feet, his hands reaching for the casket. His fingertips rested on the lid. "I-I don't understand. Who are you? What are you doing in -"

"There's no time to explain now. Please! Open the lid. The air is thinning."

Once more the sensation of not being in control of his actions overwhelmed him, like the will of another had filled his being. He watched as his fingers pushed into the tight spacing between the lid and the casket itself. Inside the sarcophagus, a voice greedily whispered the word 'Yes' over and over.

Erwin's fingers had now wedged themselves into the crack and the lid slowly opened. In the far recesses of his mind, a voice screamed to stop but the voice held no sway in his physical actions as the lid was pushed open even wider. It was not until the lid was fully opened and rested on its hinges in the lifted position that Erwin was able to look down into the casket. His eyes bulged from his skull in horror, and he screamed long and loud.

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Victor stopped and put the lit match to his pipe. He gave a few puffs until the rich smell of the smoke billowed up into the early morning air. There was nothing better in his world than the morning pipe. He pulled the collar of his coat tight around his neck and glanced out at the vast expanse of dew glistening lawn that stretched from the back of the manor. Despite the drifting gray clouds that were scattered across the sky, the sun was rising and making its way to the distant treetops. He nodded in approval and continued his stroll across the grass to the crypt at the outlying portion of the property.

With the pipe clenched between his teeth, Victor fished the keyring from his belt underneath his tweed coat and unlocked the gated entrance to the crypt. The cold metal hinges squealed out, announcing his entrance into the granite vault. As per the stated protocol, he locked the gate behind him prior to descending the narrow stone stairs with the lit lantern in hand.

"Wake up, laddie! Quitting time!" Victor called down the twisting passage as he carefully made his way lower. He was eager to hear of the young man's first night below ground. He recalled how the initial night had been the last for other new hires. He chuckled to himself. The story had always infected the imaginations of those sitting alone in the crypt on their initial night and caused them to run from the premises the following morning, never to return. Rants of strange noises and whispered voices coming from beyond the burial door during the night had sent them running like scared rabbits. He chuckled again. Oh, how he loved spinning that tale to the new hires.

"Where ya at, lad?" Victor called out once more as he stepped off the final stair and into the small room. He opened his mouth to repeat his calling, but his voice fell silent as he saw the room was empty.

Even though the room was compact, he still swept the lantern's light over it twice before accepting the man was no longer present. It was when his eyes fell upon the burial door agape that he felt a twinge of uneasiness seep into his bones.

"Lad?" Victor said weakly.

From inside the burial chamber, a weak light emanated from somewhere unseen. He made his way slowly to the door and pulled it open further. It had been years since he had opened this door and peered inside the chamber. His pipe, a book, and flask of the hard stuff usually accompanied his nights below. The coffin sat perched upon its bier, alone in the lantern's light. The second lantern sat on the floor near the casket. Its oil nearly depleted, its flame low.

Victor turned and looked behind him as a chill ran up his spine. Still, there was no sign of the young man named Erwin Myles. Had he abandoned the vault entirely, failing his obligation to stay until morning? It would not be the first time someone could not

commit to the full twelve hours and abandoned their post. Victor turned his attention back to the casket and stepped into the room.

Something seemed out of place with the coffin, and it took him a moment to realize that the lid was not fully closed. Something was in the middle of the casket and the lid, leaving a small gap between the two. His brow furrowed, and he squinted against the lighting as he moved closer, trying to detect what was there. He stopped just in front of the casket and turned again, casting the light behind him. The feeling that he was not alone was immense, causing the hairs on his neck to become erect, even though he was alone. When he saw no one, he turned back to the casket. Holding the lantern up high in one hand, he used the other to lift the lid despite the act being nothing short of forbidden.

When the lid fell open, Victor stepped back aghast, the pipe falling from his mouth, clattering to the floor. The fingers of Erwin Myles clutched the rim of the casket, preventing it from fully closing. His mangled body rested inside the coffin's confines. His clothing torn into strips and the flesh beneath rent into a bloodied mess. Across his face were the defined claw marks of four talons which had run from his forehead down to his chin. The flesh was cut so deeply that it revealed part of the skull beneath. His left eye was in the path of one claw mark, popping the orb and slicing his lips in two. A veil of profuse terror frozen onto his pale face. His mouth hung open in a silent scream.

Victor felt bile churning his stomach and his hand clasped over his mouth to prevent his own scream. His brain misfired and sputtered, trying to take in and accept what he was looking upon. It was as if he had stumbled into some nightmare where reality was obscured and surreal. It was then he heard the door to the burial chamber close behind him. His body stiffened in a petrifying rigidity as a loathsome scent of decomposition filled his nostrils. A scant laugh came from over his shoulder. The voice of a female.

"I'm afraid, poor sir, that the sight before you is not the worst that is to come. Murder is the only cure," the voice said, taking on a deeper, more sinister tone before it completed the sentence.

Against his better judgment, Victor slowly turned around in tiny steps. His mouth fell open and eyes widened as the unspeakable monstrosity lunged at him.

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Frederick Pangbourne is a horror author with five of his own anthologies in publication. He has numerous stories featured in magazines and other anthologies. A Marine Corps veteran and retired law enforcement officer, he now resides in Florida where he continues to write and relax.

# Poems of Dean Schreck

## DOWN UNDER

Down under—  
words are spoken  
in empty chambers—  
stark, grey,  
    lifeless walls  
encompass  
the meaning.

Down under—  
words are broken  
on cold stone floors  
that  
underlie the thought.

Words  
are dripping  
from  
jagged cracks  
    along  
the ceiling  
that overshadows  
the emotion  
    of words  
collected in puddles  
at the bottom  
of empty chambers...

Lying stagnant  
in the airless dark.  
    Kept  
firmly under lock and key.

Uttered only  
in empty chambers—

down under...  
where no one will hear!

~

## THE SEMBLANCE

The rusty door hinge creaks,  
another semblance of life  
    crosses my threshold--  
a weary guest, uninvited,  
leaving luggage in the hall.

Sunlight...  
creeps liquid soft  
through the pattern of glass  
    above the door--  
drifting like an ocean mist  
across the walls  
and settling in a haze  
upon the wilted leaves  
of the potted plant  
that dies a desperate death  
    on dust and shattered tile.

Sitting,  
like an ashen ghost  
in the half-light beside the door  
arms again outstretched  
as if to embrace the semblance  
    of life.

The rusty door hinge creaks—  
another weary guest.

~



## DARK PLACES

Feeling together  
in Places Dark—  
groping for answers  
beneath the tired eaves.  
Stoking the furnace  
with shovelfuls  
of Dead Things  
fallen from us  
unctuous and  
unmentioned

in the vacant years...  
Through the streets  
flow rivers of face  
and form:  
so many names,  
yet nameless—  
Feeling together  
in their own Dark Places.

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Dean Schreck is a retired and relocated New York Transit Driver. Writing since the age of fourteen...his work has appeared in a fair number of literary and speculative magazines. Dean attended Woodstock and has been a life-long fan of SF/Horror/Speculative literature and film. He is also a habitual student of the paranormal--relating to the nature of consciousness and its expansion, both human and otherwise? More recently, Dean's publication credits include: Penumbric Magazine, Space and Time, Literary Hatchet, New Myths, Littoral, and Trembling with Fear.

# X-O By D.L. Shirey



Lena Blum didn't make eye contact even though she was working around Marcel's eyes. A tiny dot of red light showed the placement for the next contact point.

"Supraorbital foramen," she said to herself, absently reciting the underlying skull anatomy.

"Sounds like a spaceship," said Marcel.

"What?" Lena raised up slightly, meeting Marcel's eyes.

"Supraorbital. Spaceship," he said.

Lena's eyebrows arched and then flatlined. "Sorry. Thinking out loud. I'm such a talker. My husband says I only shut up when — T.M.I. Sorry. Are you comfortable so far?"

As she asked the question, Lena moved her hands away from the wires. Marcel Guideon knew this was standard procedure because the participant might nod and accidentally detach one of the electrodes. He knew better than to nod, stretching a feeble grin instead, as if to say, "It is what it is."

"Just a couple more," Lena said. "I've seen you here before, but this is my first time prepping you. Do you have a regular attendant?"

"Yes. Bonnie."

"She's on vacation," Lena said. "One of those ritzy couples resorts in the Caribbean. She's a fun girl. We went shopping for bathing suits."

"Yeah, she's great," said Marcel. "How long have you been doing this?"

She stood up straight and raked her fingers through the mess of brunette bangs that covered her forehead. "Almost two years now. How about you? How long have you been volunteering, I mean?"

"A little longer than that. I try to do it once a month. Makes me feel like I'm giving something back to the world."

"I admire people who give up their free time for a good cause. Wish I could." Lena bent and affixed electrode 43 to the exact center of Marcel's brow ridge.



"What part of the skull is that one?" he asked.

"You're funny. It's called Glabella." Lena tapped a manicured nail on the tiny copper disc. "No vacay for me this year. It's all about the kids and their summer stuff. Day camps, soccer practice. So much going on I can barely keep up. Work, housework, playdates, shopping, meals, and I try to exercise every day. With all that, there's hardly time to sleep..."

A baritone voice in Marcel's head said, "Your betas are spiking. If Lena's incessant jabbering is annoying you, I'll tell her to back off."

No, it's fine, Marcel responded in thought. She's done with the front and will want me to flip over soon.

Almost every time he volunteered, Marcel wished he could take the voiceless communication part of the technology back home with him. City life would be a little less noisy if people didn't have to talk.

"Flip over, now," Lena said. "Don't you worry about the wires getting tangled, I'll rotate the rig as you turn. Just ease your face into the face cradle." She giggled. "Like what else goes into a face cradle, but your face? Good. That's it."

"Tell Lena that twelve has come loose," said the baritone voice.

"Sam says check number twelve," Marcel said.

"That's your right masseter, by the way." Lena wedged her fingers inside the padded cradle, below Marcel's right ear and pressed the electrode tight against his jaw.

Lena continued placing electrodes. "It's so nice you're one of those shaved-head-type guys. I don't mind the way bald men look, and I know there must be a bit of vanity involved. But on you it looks good. Plus, it makes my job easier."

"Sam wants you to hurry and finish up. An increase in theta waves, he says."

From inside Marcel's head came a rumbling laugh. Sam never said such a thing. "Good one. Guess you've done this enough to know what will get her moving," he said. "And by the way, you're right. Your thetas are trending up."

Pretty sure I'm getting drowsy. It's like my body has been programmed to anticipate X-O, knowing I'm going to get a nice, long sleep.

Marcel would never admit it to anyone, but sleep was the real reason he volunteered. Housing the homeless was a good cause and all, but once X-O took control, Marcel wouldn't remember any of it. His muscles would ache from the labor for a few days afterward; the physical exhaustion made him sleep better too, for a couple of nights anyway. X-O wasn't a cure for his insomnia, more of a respite from it. From the city, too. All the noise and filth and worrying about violence and crime, no wonder Marcel couldn't sleep.

"All finished," Lena said.

Marcel wasn't aware he had closed his eyes, but he opened them when Lena spoke. Within the oval outline of the face cradle, he could see the messily tailored cuffs of Lena's navy-blue scrubs and her perfectly pedicured toes poking out from a pair of clunky platform sandals.

Sam answered the question that crossed Marcel's mind, "Yes, attendants are allowed to wear open-toed shoes."

"It was nice to meet you." The feet stepped away. "You just lie still and breathe normally until you're X-Oed, okay?"

Marcel exhaled slowly.

"Syncing in five, four, three," Sam's voice was joined by one more mechanized tone. Both finished the countdown together, then the mech soloed, "Control assumed."

Marcel felt the silken fabric of the exolock drape the backside of his legs and torso. It conformed around his skin, and with a pleasant tickle, rigidified. He dreamed more than felt being lifted off the padded exam table and rotated. Another tickle came from the anterior exolock, followed by a warm hug of compression when the halves conjoined. He neither felt nor dreamed the spaghetti of electrode wires slither into the headpiece or the sleeve sheaths complete the hermetic skinfit.

The mech spoke, but not for its host's benefit; Marcel could still hear, but his mind was elsewhere. The audio was for Sam at master control.

"Gamma obtained," it said, referencing the brainwaves responsible for the host's concentration and problem solving.

"At plus 35 hertz," Sam acknowledged. "Consciousness rerouting to the preprogrammed activity."

"Beta wave activity now at 12 to 35 hertz. Alphas coming online."

"Passive attention and memory engaged."

"Alphas are 8 to 12," the mech said. "Thetas unneeded at this time, and I am engaging the host's deltas. Amplifying."

"Verify REM Sleep."

"Host is fixed at 4 hertz. Safe-word test at your discretion, Sam."

"Wakey-wakey."

Marcel heard the voice in his head and woke with a start. He opened his eyes and panicked at the blue opacity that obstructed his sight. An involuntary reaction to being encased, Marcel's breaths came in gasps as he hyperventilated and pulled at his skinfit.

"Remember where you are," said Sam. "I was testing the safeword. Remember? It brings you out of the program in case there's a problem."

Marcel didn't reply. He slowed his breathing, filling his lungs with long drafts, feeling the cool whisper of air circulating around his skin. Marcel wasn't sure if it was the temperature control or waking in panic, but he felt chilled.

"Can you make me a touch warmer?"

In an instant, X-O complied.

"We will be standing you upright, now," Sam said. "Rotate your arms, please. Check for any binding or pinching."

There was no discomfort to report. The rest of the movement exercises reminded Marcel of slow, methodical Tai Chi exercises. He gave a thumbs up at the end to let Sam know everything checked out.

"Last thing is your verbal acknowledgement that you are fully aware of the contents in the release form you signed, and that you freely relinquish control of your body to X-O."

"Yes. Good to go."

"Thank you," said Sam. "All that's left is for me to say nighty-night."

Marcel slumped like a marionette gone slack, but only for a microsecond. The shiny blue skinfit braced and balanced the body as X-O worked the host's brain to operate the musculature.

The prep bay door opened, letting in the harsh light of the California summer. Mojave, high desert.

X-O walked Marcel outside.

The shimmer of heat distortion warped the shape of structures that stretched toward the horizon, but they were facsimiles of those in the current building site: shipping containers on foundations of slab concrete, perfectly spaced, six meters apart. Dozens of blue skinfits were busy on the foreground units, painting them beige, installing solar power modules and waste disposal units. Marcel's body shoveled decorative stone into precise geometric patterns to define a dwelling's yard.

As physical intensity increased and outside temperature rose above 115, X-O cooled Marcel's skinfit accordingly. At dusk, a transcutaneous meal of nutrients and electrolytes was served.

And so went construction. Building materials were replenished by a seemingly endless queue of autonomous trucks and trailers. Further in the distance, a line of air-conditioned boxcars waited to deliver the others soon to be housed in their new neighborhood.

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D.L. Shirey writes from Portland, Oregon, where it's usually raining. So he's usually writing. His short stories and non-fiction appear in 70 publications, with those flavored by sci-fi featured in Riggwelter, Theme of Absence, ZeroFlash and 365 Tomorrows. You can find more of his writing at [www.dlshirey.com](http://www.dlshirey.com) and @dlshirey on Twitter.

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## Taste of Fear by K.N. Nguyen



Cort adjusted her comm piece as she flattened her body against the alley wall. Ahead, a reaper passed by, its claws dragging on the concrete, causing the street to crack. The

scraping reminded Cort of rocks hitting each other, the staccato clacking keeping time with the creature's movements. She held her breath as the creature stopped a few yards from her and lifted its muzzle into the air. Saliva dropped from its maw as it sniffed deeply. Cort's heart stopped in her chest as the creature turned its sightless eyes toward her hiding spot.

*Shit!*

Gripping her plasma blade tightly, Cort took a slow, steady breath. The reaper flicked out its tongue, tasting the air. Cort closed her eyes and forced herself to think of Satchel, her small tabby cat with one eye. The rhythmic rumbling of his purr soothed and calmed her nerves. Unable to detect any fear, the reaper looked forward once more and continued down the street.

She breathed a sigh of relief, wiping the cold sweat off her brow. Looking at her comm once more, she felt her body relax as the face of the device lit up, signaling to her that a message was coming through.

"Bout damn time," she muttered. "Eli, what are the coordinates? Reaper's are swarming out here."

Muffled static sounded out of the device on her wrist. "We lost the signal. It'll take time to get it back."

"Dammit, Eli, I can't wait that long," she hissed. "If I can't find the stash or shelter, I'm turning back. It's certain death if I stay out much longer."



“H- hold up,” Eli’s voice crackled as it broke.

“Damn weak signal,” she grouched as she tapped on the screen in annoyance.

“Great time to break up.”

“We’re... something over here... North Miller Stree... 4598 Hawthorne Ave... iant warehou...”

Cort’s chest tightened. North Miller Street was overrun with reapers. “4598 Hawthorne Avenue, just off North Miller, huh?” she asked quietly.

“Y-yes.”

She paused, collecting her thoughts. The last food runner left three days ago. They didn’t make it back. Cort and her people were running low on supplies. If she didn’t succeed, their situation would become dire. “All right,” she replied. “If things go bad, keep Jamie and Maddie safe. And tell them I love them.”

Static greeted her.

“You’ll be fine. No one is faster or quieter than you. Keep your—” Eli’s voice cut off as her comms device lost signal.

Cort took a deep, steadying breath. It was now or never. She readjusted her hold on the grip and tentatively inched her head towards the opening of the alley. The heavy breathing of the reapers did not sound close. Maybe she’d have a chance. As her head started to peek around the corner, she quickly pulled it back, a cold sweat running down her back and her heart pounding in her chest.

What am I doing? This is suicide. Her legs gave way, causing Cort to slump to the ground in a shivering heap. I can’t do this. Maybe I should just run; let them think I died. No. A group is my best chance for survival. But –

Looking around, Cort tried to think of a way to cross the two blocks to get to North Miller. In the distance, a glint caught her eye. Quickly checking her surroundings, Cort crawled over to the shiny object and snatched it up before hiding behind a trash can that was disregarded decades ago. Her heart raced as she examined her find. She held a shard of glass in her hand, similar to the reflective kind they used to make signals with any group that happened to be traveling by.

A minor. No, a mirror. I’ve found a piece of a mirror.

Holding her breath, Cort slowly held out her hand with the shard sticking out. She twisted it side-to-side, testing to see if anything was in the alley with her. The dank

street reflected in the glass. Relieved, she started to get up when she caught movement at the top of her shard. Cort's heart jumped as she began hyperventilating. Forcing herself to think of her cat, she closed her eyes and imagined that she was stroking him. She remembered how soft he was, despite the matts along his side. Opening her eyes, Cort gripped her dagger as she watched her mirror intently.

Whatever was moving did so quickly. Cort furrowed her brow. Reapers didn't move quickly. Extending her arm out further, she saw a scruffy dog, its fur covered in mud, glance around before moving into the open. In its mouth, it carried a dead bird. It darted up to the side of the alley and squeezed through a grate, disappearing from sight.

With a grateful sigh, she quietly got up and returned to her original position near the mouth of the alley. She waited for her heart rate to slow before repeating the process. Once she stopped shaking, she managed to sneak out of her hiding spot and dart across the street without being seen. Over the course of an hour, Cort used her new trick successfully to cross the two blocks on North Miller and slink into the warehouse on Hawthorne without being seen.

I made it, she marveled as she slipped her new tool into her back pocket.

Holding her breath, Cort listened intently for any noise as she crouched underneath a boarded-up window in a darkened room. She couldn't hear anything except for the occasional thump and heavy breathing of a reaper as it walked by. The sound of their claws scraping on the street gave her chills.

Thank the One, I've made it this far somehow.

Time passed painstakingly slowly as she strained her ears. Her body was covered in a cold sweat and she was shaking all over. Satisfied that there was nothing nearby, Cort quickly exited the room in a crouched run before straightening up.

Eli said they're at the back of the warehouse against the wall. Seeing a door up ahead, she reasoned, must be in here.

Holding her breath once more, Cort crept to the door and pressed her back against the frame, placing her ear as close to the entrance as possible. Her heart pounded in her chest and her legs quivered as she listened.

Silence.

Breathing a sigh, Cort shook out her arms to relieve the tension that had built up in her body, giving herself an outlet to let it all go. As she waited for her heart rate to

return to normal, she scanned her surroundings. A broken wooden chair lay crumpled in the corner and papers littered the floor. A fine layer of dust covered everything.

“Nothing’s been here for a while,” she murmured. “I wonder if there’s even anything here.”

Cort ventured deeper into the abandoned building, hoping that whatever supplies might be inside wouldn’t be too far from the exit.

Sunlight streamed through a few broken rafters, illuminating the warehouse with a dusty glow. She walked through a couple rooms before finding a door that lead to a larger storage area. Row upon row of shelves greeted her. Most were covered with rotting cardboard boxes, but a few gaps appeared in between. Cort walked down the aisles, shaking the boxes in hopes of finding something to grab.

She finally found a few boxes towards the back filled with crackers and nuts. Stuffing the boxes into her bag, she continued on. A row later, she found a few bottles of medicine. As Cort placed the last bottle into her bag, she heard a sound that made her blood run cold. Instinctively, she crouched down and crept towards the end of the aisle. Reaching into her pouch, she pulled out the shard and held it out at an angle. Holding her breath, she tilted the glass a bit. Another raspy breath almost made her pull her hand back, but she forced herself to think of Satchel and keep her hand steady.

A reaper slowly walked through the warehouse, looking down every aisle. The creature was full grown, its sleek body standing at just over six feet tall. Its elongated maw opened slightly, exposing thin fangs, let out a shuddering breath. Three-inch-long claws scraped on the concrete floor. Cort’s heart raced as it neared. Swiveling her head around frantically, she sought another exit. A wave of fear flooded her as she realized there was none.

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Satchel’s image left her mind. In an instant, the reaper’s head shot to the back of the building, smelling her fear. It let out a bone-chilling shriek as it headed towards her aisle. Cort’s head swam as, in the distance, the call was returned. Two, possibly three others.

Shit! Her heart pounded so hard in her chest she could swear that the reaper would hear it. I need to get out now. Move! How much time before they’re here? Run! But where? Go! Anywhere! Move!

The reaper's heavy breathing sounded closer. Standing up while still hunched over, she saw the creature two aisles away. Pulling out her plasma dagger, she brought her trembling hand to her breast. The monster hugged the entryway of each aisle. If she ran, maybe she could make it.

Guide me, great One, she prayed.

Stashing the glass into her pouch, she took a deep breath and straightened up. The reaper was looking down the aisle right next to her. It was now or never.

With a bolt of adrenaline, Cort darted out of her aisle, startling the creature. It let out a guttural grunt as it stopped in its tracks, blocking the majority of the walking space. Using that moment, Cort slid between the creature's legs, running the edge of her blade against where its calf muscle would be. The smooth concrete tore her pants as she cleared the monster. Pushing herself up, she ran out of the room. The reaper howled in anger.

Cort flew through the building until she reached the entrance. Forcing herself to think of her cat, she looked through the boards for any nearby reapers. She couldn't see any, but she knew they were near. Their screeches echoing down the street. Behind her, she heard the injured reaper's heavy footsteps on the floor. She gasped for breath. She tried to ignore a stitch in her side as sweat poured down her face.

No time. Satchel. Go now! Run!

With a deep breath, Cort slipped out the door and took off down the street. They were eerily empty. Reaper shrieks tore through the air from all directions.

I'm surrounded. Despair consumed her as the sound of her footsteps echoed. Am I gonna die?

With a crackle of static, her comms device lit up and Eli's voice came through. "Cort, can you hear me? Cort?"

Hope welled in her chest as a smile managed to crack her terrified face. "Talk to me!" she panted.

"Stay off North Miller. It's swarming with reapers all heading your way."

Cort staggered to a stop at the corner of North Miller. Breast heaving, she gasped, "Where do I go?"

Static.



A sudden, ear-splitting scream came from her right, followed by one behind her. Less than half a block away, a reaper lurched towards her while the one from the warehouse approached from behind. A deep, purple liquid dripped from the wound on its leg.

"Eli!"

"Stay on Hawthorne and take the next left. Someone's coming to you."

Cort tried to run, but her legs were jelly. Tears streamed down her face as she mentally screamed at her body to move.

"Come on," she begged. "Please."

The reaper to her right raised its clawed hand to take a swing at her. Closing her eyes, Cort let out a cry of desperation. She felt a gust of wind by her face and a slight burning on her cheek as she managed to start running again. Opening her eyes, she found she put some distance between herself and the reaper.

The beep of a horn caught her attention. To her left sat a Jeep, engine running.

"Hurry!" the man inside yelled.

Pushing herself the last few yards, Cort threw herself into the vehicle. The tires screeched as the man burned rubber making a U-turn down the street. As the reapers slowly disappeared into the distance, Cort felt a wave of emotions was over her.

I'm coming home, Satchel.

Placing her head in her hands between her knees, she vomited on the floor.

"Dammit!" her companion swore.

Cort wiped the tears from her eyes as she lifted her head up. News from the capital played softly over the radio. Touching her cheek, Cort saw blood on her hand.

The pair rode in silence.

"Did you get anything?" the man asked.

Cort nodded. "Medicine and some food."

"Good. Bad news from the capital. Reapers overran the city. Killed the One and most of his forces. Rest fled. Sorry, kid. We won't be getting any help for a while."

The radio crackled as the program went on.

"Remaining troops under our vanquished leader are looking for anyone to help storm the reapers' hive. We must strike before they multiply again."

Cort thought of her brother and sister. And Satchel, dear Satchel. She had to protect them.

"It's up to us now. How many are left?"

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K.N. Nguyen is a fantasy author and the founder of DragonScript, a group that offers an outlet for new writers. Growing up, she often found herself immersed in some imaginary world, conquering enemy nations, and saving the day. As time went on, her love for horrible puns and nerd culture pulled her out of these worlds and brought her back to reality.

It wasn't until she started working at her office job that she felt the itch to begin writing. Her high fantasy series, the Fallen series, draws on her love of ancient Mediterranean mythology and epic fantasy. The first novel, King's Blood, was released in 2018.

A native of Sacramento, California, K.N. Nguyen spends her time singing karaoke, playing taiko, enjoying rhythm dancing games, and traveling with her friends and family when she isn't writing.

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# Hi! by Andre Schuck



There's no way around it.

You turned the page and have found us.

Or would it be the other way around?

There's nothing good here, at least not for you.

Closing the book won't help, neither will trying to forget what you've read.

We are like an inevitable disaster. The feeling of not having any more time. The moment when you realize too late that you're going to crash the car, you step on the brakes and know that you're going to crash, regardless. The blink of an eye between not wanting to die and the accident.

You will be like that for the rest of your life. Trapped in this implacable moment of fear. Of the unexplained noise in the dark, of the strongest wind, of the smell of a storm, of the maintenance that was left undone, of the lack of medicine, of the tide that drags you to the bottom, of suffocation, of the cold sweat, of the food stuck in your throat, of the feeling of being chased, of the punch, of the silent and cold knife stab, of the wrong person in your way, of neglect, of the taste of gas left on, of the phone that rings Tuesday afternoon, of the medicine taken by mistake.

You won't know from where it will come. This is love. As if .... Idiot! This is our sick game. Love, sickness, love, curse, love, it's all the same, isn't it?

You were born in a time when all you have to do is push a button and everything around you lights up. The darkness has lost space, and you have stopped believing. Do not be fooled, even if you get up now and turn the lights on around the house, turn on the television, it won't make us go away. We are already here.

If you take your eyes off the book and quickly turn your head back, you might get a glimpse of what we are like. Wanna bet? Turn! Go ahead, turn!

Coward.

Looking back when you're afraid is tough, isn't it? But, at some point you'll have to do it. And I guarantee you, you'll wish you hadn't.



Maybe tomorrow, when you're driving, look in the rearview mirror and see us sitting in the back seat or in the bus, when someone brushes against your back, you'll turn without thinking and there we will be. Smiling.

Don't fool yourself. It's a smile full of malice. Just an involuntary reflex of the pleasure we feel when our eyes meet for the first time. Of knowing that now you have the understanding that you can never be happy again.

Happy? What made you happy? That's right. Past.

Reading a book, that was on the list, after all you have one in your hands and have spent some time from your life making money to be able to buy it. It was a gift? Then someone spent some time from their life. And where has that led to? Us.

The decay is advancing through your body. Rotting. Smashing. Destroying. Believe it. It's inebriating. Can you feel your arms tightening, the skin heating up, the back of your neck weighing down?

We want to open our mouths, let the saliva drip and bite your neck. To feel the oily skin tearing, to reach the juicy meat, rip the veins open, letting the blood flow and to hear your screams while life rapidly ends.

We won't do it. We'd rather suffer a long time. We still have our moments of frenzy where we go out slaughtering without any planning. Beasts crazed for the killing. But, you're special, a little star full of hope irradiating kindness, destined to a glorious purpose of love, peace, and prosperity.

Stop being an idiot. When you die, it won't make the slightest difference in the world. None. And don't even start with those moronic phrases that if I've made a difference to someone, I'll have done my part. Again, stop being an idiot. You are born, reproduce, and, come on it's not that hard ... you die.

And now you're thinking, I'll die, but I'll get rid of you. I'll be in a better place. I'll be able to rest.

You are wrong. Very wrong.

You are coming with us.

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20 years in the advertising market, Andre has edited thousands of tv ads for major brands in Brazil. Nowadays he also works as a Post Production Director and Coordinator attending accounts which are the biggest ones in South America. He is the Associate Producer and Editor of the North American documentary "Making Light in Terezin" and the Editor of the feature film "Attachments". Two



Oscar nominees are in the production. He is Scene Director and Screenwriter of many short films. His last two shorts, Red and Sadness, was finalists in several international film festivals.

His first novel, Vingança (Revenge) was published in 2014 in Brazil and translated to be released in Portugal, where received great critics and was distributed all over the country. He, with James McSill, is the author of the book Cinema - Roteiro (Cinema - Screenplay), which is recommended by several universities. In 2019, wrote the revolutionary artistic and awarded book O Inferno é Aqui.

Andre is passionate about stories in all formats. Please feel free to contact him to exchange experiences and talk about good stories.

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# Blood Feast by LaVern Spencer McCarthy



It was only mid-morning, but Lucretia had already collected thirty pints of blood. She had them stored in three coolers, filled with crushed ice, in her car. So far, she had only had trouble with one old geezer when she demanded entrance to his home in order to fulfill the mandate of the mayor. Mayor Bill had issued an order that every resident of Looneyville must give blood to the local blood bank.

The recalcitrant senior who had given her so much trouble was lying on his living room floor, having been hog-tied and forced to give blood. There were several strong-armed men walking around town, itching to evoke compliance. Children were exempt from the blood drive, but everyone else was expected to cooperate.

The reason people no longer volunteered at the monthly blood drive was because when they did agree to give blood, too much was taken, leaving them weak and trembling. Word got out that the workers at the bank were too greedy and had become dangerous. It took time to restore lost blood, but no one in the blood business seemed to care.

Several people were in hiding, not wanting to give their precious blood, but the workers had uncanny ways of finding them. No one was safe from the drain. People were leaving town in droves, but there were still plenty who had no place to go, thus assuring a good supply.

Mr. Timms, the owner of Corpuscle Blood Bank, briskly rubbed his hands together in anticipation of the great event that happened once a year. The blood being collected was not for any unforeseen emergencies such as car accidents, shootings, stabbings, etc. but for the yearly Feast of Halloween, also in honor of Fagan, the oldest vampire who ever lived.

Vampires from several towns were invited. Every hotel in Looneyville was already booked solid, with vampires arriving in droves. At night, of course. No one wanted the horrible burns that would occur if they showed up in the day.

A huge, ornate punch bowl the size of a barrel stood in a side-room of the blood bank. Every blood worker had contributed to its contents. Mixed together, it was bound to give the drinkers quite a buzz. Mr. Timms hoped so. Last year's ritual was rather dull. The vampires were forced to rely on volunteer donations for the event. There was not enough refreshment to go around due to the stinginess of the community.





When someone discovered what was really going on, the supply had dwindled even more. It was embarrassing when Fagan himself showed up unexpectedly. Mr. Timms was forced to give him the dregs of the barrel. Fagan accepted Mr. Timm's apologies but seemed disappointed with such meager offerings. He was a huge vampire and needed his nourishment.

Mr. Timms and Mayor Bill had decided that this year was going to be better. Even though they were not vampires, they had nothing against them. Thus, the city-wide mandate was established. If the citizens did not like it, that was tough. Several willing non-vampires had been put to work collecting blood. They were to be paid from the town's coffers.

The workers were told not to take blood from one man, an ornery seventy-year-old, a real curmudgeon who lived at the edge of town. No reason was given, but it was impressed upon them that under no circumstances should they draw blood from this man. Word failed to get out to a new worker, and he approached Moe's shack with confidence.

Moe saw him coming and sicked his hounds on him. The employee sprayed them with Mace, and they ran, howling, underneath the front porch. The worker bounded upon the steps and knocked. Two beady eyes peered at him from a crack in the door.

"Whadda ya want?" he inquired. The worker pulled his needle from a pocket.

"I want your blood."

"Oh yeah? People in hell want ice water." The worker shifted from one foot to the other.

"Come on, let me in. I haven't got all day."

"Ye'll git in over my dead body!" the old man retorted.

"If that's the way you want it," replied the worker. He kicked the door. It flew open, knocking Moe across the room. He landed on the sofa, looking dazed. It took the worker five minutes of wrestling and shouting to get Moe's compliance. He finally got his vial of blood and departed, with a torrent of blistering curses following him.

"Ye'll be sorry!" Moe screamed. "Jest wait, I'll fix you!" The worker sneered and disappeared.

The night of the feast arrived. The community center was jammed with vampires. They wore their best Halloween costumes. Low, eerie music came from speakers set high on the walls. Live bats hung from the ceiling.

The vampires mingled and drank. Servers were kept busy filling glasses from the barrel. If any blood was spilled, a vampire would fall to the floor and lap it up. Many toasts were made to Fagan. He was not not there but was revered and remembered with many ribald tales from the celebrants.

Vampire Mac was at the micro-phone speaking when he suddenly clutched his throat and fell to the floor. All conversation stopped as two male vampires rushed to give him aid. He writhed and screamed in agony. His eyes bulged, and he began to convulse. Before anything could be done, he was dead, something almost unheard of regarding vampires.

Shock rippled through the room. How could this be? Five minutes later, a female collapsed. She died in the same manner as Mac had. One by one, vampires choked and died. Some vomited the blood they had drunk at the feast. Others lingered in pain for a little while, but soon most were dead, sprawled here and there in various strange positions. When they were discovered, the citizens of the town had no choice but to bury

them. They were put into a mass grave in the country. Most of the town people knew the dead had been vampires and were puzzled that they had perished, as humans do.

Word of the catastrophe reached the ears of Fagan, who promptly began an investigation. He sent samples of the blood barrel used at the feast to a first-class lab used specifically for vampires. Test results came back two weeks later. The many strains of human blood were studied against samples taken from protesting citizens.

It was discovered that even though most humans carried a variant that could possibly make vampires sick, there was one that was deadly. It only took a small amount of it to kill a vampire, and it came from Moe, the grumpy old codger who lived at the edge of town. Not only was his blood not to be taken, but the worker who drew it had not been informed that Moe's blood was super lethal with Mortality. Thus, it had killed over two-hundred-fifty, and the Kingdom of the Vampires was never the same.

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Dorothy LaVern Spencer McCarthy's work has appeared in Writers and Readers Magazine, Meadowlark Reader, Agape Review, Fenechty Publications Anthologies Of Short Stories, From The Shadows, An Anthology Of Short Stories, Visions International, and others. She is a life member of The Poetry Society Of Texas and National Federation of State Poetry Societies, Inc.

She resides in Blair Oklahoma where she is currently writing her fifth book of short stories.



# Fury by Douglas Schwarz



Vivian finds her savior sitting alone in a quiet corner of an unpretentious bar in SoHo. The lighting is muted, the music soft jazz.

She had no idea what kind of person to expect. (What does a serial killer look like?) She had not imagined a woman, and certainly not this elegant lady, with her tightly coiled black ringlets.

The woman glances up. A light shimmers in her dark eyes—though surely that must be a reflection.

“Excuse me,” Vivian stammers. “I just... I wanted to thank you.”

The dark woman cocks her head like a serpent, focusing its hypnotic gaze upon potential prey. “Do I know you?” she asks.

“I’m Vivian Parker.”

“Ah.” The woman gestures to an empty chair. “Call me Erin.”

Vivian sits. Erin gazes at her; she never seems to blink. Vivian knows she is being judged, and that her life may depend upon that judgment .

“How did you find me?” Erin asks.

“I am...” Vivian winces and corrects herself. “I was a crime reporter. Before he made me quit. I had to know who killed him. I talked to friends on the force and learned this wasn’t an isolated case. A serial killer, but the cops had no idea who. So I asked my less savory contacts. Suppose I wanted someone not just killed, but terrorized? The rumors led me here.”

Erin nods.

“How did you know?” Vivian leans forward, daring to meet those baleful eyes. “He kept me so isolated. Cut off from family, friends, colleagues. Maybe some of them suspected. Did someone guess I was in trouble and send you to...”

“No one sends me!” It is the first sign of emotion Erin has shown. “Not in these days. I discern evil myself.”

“I don’t understand,” says Vivian.

Erin nods again, her anger subsiding.

“And what you did to him!” Vivian shudders, but there is pleasure in it. “Not just the torture, but...”

“The Harrowing.”

“Exactly! What a great word. Stalking him. Sending pictures of what was going to happen. Letting him know there was no escape. In the end, he was terrified. If you hadn’t killed him, he might have died of fright.”

“This pleases you.”

Vivian hesitates, but only for a moment. “Yes. That monster deserved it. He deserved to be frightened and tortured and killed. You saved me. Saved my sanity and probably my life.”

“I did not do it to save you,” says Erin, “but to punish him. To mete out vengeance. That is my nature.”

“Listen.” Vivian has been speaking softly, but she lowers her voice and leans closer still. “There must be hundreds, thousands of men like him in this city. You can’t do this alone. How can I help?”

“You cannot help me.”

“Sure I can. My contacts, my experience. I found you. I can find them. I want to help other women like you helped me. Hell, I want to be you.”

“You do not wish to be me. Behold.”

Erin rises as her black ringlets come alive, rearing up tiny heads, forked tongues flickering. Her skin goes scaly, and the pupils of her eyes elongate, becoming slits of shadow. Ragged wings unfold behind her, and her fingernails become sharp claws—talons made to flay the flesh from human bones.

“I am Erinys,” she hisses, “last of the Furies, sprung from the blood of Uranus, older than the vanished gods.”

Vivian leaps to her feet, knocking over her chair. She glances wildly around the bar. Some of the other patrons are looking at her curiously, but none seem to see the apparition standing before her.

“It was the gods who gave us our purpose, to punish evil among men. Great Zeus sent us forth, and rumors of our coming struck terror into mortal hearts.

“But those days are ended, the gods are long gone. The Erinys wandered without purpose, with none to direct our righteous wrath. My sisters perished one by one. But I remain, and I have decided: I shall have purpose once again. As there are no gods to guide me, I have learned to discern evil and to judge for myself when vengeance is requisite.”

Vivian’s shock at Erin’s transformation has abated somewhat. The creature before her looks monstrous, but she is well aware appearances can be deceiving. She has known a true monster who looked attractively human. And she believes in vengeance.

She meets Erinys’ reptilian eyes. “I still want to help. I’m not sprung from the blood of whoever, but I would be like you if I could.”

Erinys cocks her head again, and even the snakes on her head gaze intently at Vivian.

“In all the millennia...” says the Fury. “Only you.”

Vivian’s heart beats faster as Erinys glides toward her. The scaly arms embrace her—and the serpents strike, two of the heads lashing out to bury their fangs in her carotids.

The venom is galvanic, flowing through her body like an electric shock. Vivian cries out as she begins to change. She feels the first stirrings of her hair.

When at last the Fury releases her, the wounds on her neck are nearly healed.

“Now,” says Erinys. “Look. What do you see?”

Vivian gazes around the bar with unblinking eyes. The patrons, she realizes, have seen nothing unusual, just two women embracing. But in a far corner that should be too dark

for her to see into, she notices a man. Something about him is wrong. He feels... sick. He is drinking, but despite the drink, he looks nervous, almost desperately afraid. He is sweating, and his gaze darts around as if he is watching for something which terrifies him.

“That one,” says Vivian.

“He is called Rodriguez,” says Erinys. “He is Harrowed. He is ready. I will let him see us now.”

Erinys gestures. The man screams and bolts for the door.

Exit Rodriguez, pursued by the Furies.

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Douglas Schwarz is a lifelong sci-fi/fantasy fan who began writing during the pandemic. He has published two flash stories with *Altered Reality*. His novella “Le Sorcier de Lascaux” appears in the Sept/Oct 2022 issue of *Fantasy & Science Fiction*.



# The Orangeness by Sheila Kirk



“Piece of crap truck,” Jack bellowed to no one.

His delivery truck sputtered and jerked just making it to the side of the road before the final cough of the failing engine. The truck was a constant source of frustration for Jack. If the company would invest in a new truck, he could be a more productive employee.

He called the dispatcher to report the breakdown and resolved himself to the long wait for a tow. Leaning against the grill, Jack glanced around at his surroundings. A suburban area of cookie-cutter houses dotted the hillside, featuring a community park over the hill and expansive farmlands on both sides of the road.

Then something unfamiliar drew Jack’s attention to a vacant field nearby. A foamy dew resembling spit rested on the grass alongside the road. His eyes settled on the curious orange mass, which spewed over an area about the size of his trailer. The lumpy mound was not a bright, sunny orange like the fruit or a fall pumpkin. Instead, it was a sickening hue of Seventies-era burnt orange, mixed with hidden swirls of blackness.

Jack’s face distorted as he squinted for a closer look. The revolting heap that spread on the grass reminded him of vomit, and he couldn’t help but wonder how it had found its way into the pristine green field. Something toxic perhaps that spilled from a passing truck.

He approached it, and out of the corner of his eye... was it pulsating? He shook his head and blinked.

It was still.

Chalk it up to an overactive imagination and too many Stephen King novels.

Jack picked up a fallen branch and gently poked the orange mound, dubbing the unknown mass “the Orangeness.” The Orangeness felt firm at the end of his stick, like a





shell of some sort. He stabbed harder until the stick penetrated the pile, becoming lodged inside. He pulled, but the Orangeness held tight.

He leaned in for a closer look.

There was a quick pop, and the pile hissed, releasing a noxious steam that wafted into his face.

Jack staggered backward at the vile stench and covered his nose and mouth with his arm. Instinctively, he turned and ran, stumbling and gagging back to his truck. He wiped at his face, but the odious spittle made him nauseous, and he leaned against the driver's door and vomited. His eyes and throat burned, and his stomach wrenched.

After the wave of putrescence passed, he wiped his mouth on his sleeve. The rancid taste lingered in his mouth. Whatever the Orangeness was, there was a good chance it was unnatural, and perhaps toxic.

Random and disjointed thoughts tossed through Jack's mind. What should I do? Part of him wanted to call the authorities—but who? They'd probably fine me for disturbing it.

The sound of a tow truck coming down the road reached his ears. He straightened and tried to gather his thoughts as the driver pulled up. A big guy with a sleeve of tattoos and a long beard stepped from the vehicle and approached.

"You okay, man?" The tow truck driver leaned toward Jack, smirking as his eyes skimmed over the puke. "One too many?"

"I'm alright now," Jack replied.

"Why don't you go sit in my cab?" the tow truck driver offered. "The AC is crankin'. Rest up. It'll take me a few minutes to hitch you up."

Jack's ears struggled to understand the man. That damn stench still filled his nostrils. His head throbbed, but he nodded and slipped into the truck where his consciousness swirled into an uneasy darkness.

\*\*\*

Morning came, and an intense itch on his left calf woke Jack. His head still ached from the day before, and he grunted. His hand reached to scratch his leg, and his eyes widened. His fingers ran over a hard lump that had formed, not unlike the orange lump from yesterday.

Fully awake now, he flung the covers off with such force he knocked over the bed side lamp, sending it crashing to the floor. He groped in the dark for the lamp and finding it, he flicked the switch. The sudden burst of light illuminated his leg.

Jack's blood went cold.

The Orangeness covered most of his lower leg. It resembled coral, with tendrils tightening around his calf. It pulsed as if it were breathing. Jack shook his head, hoping to wake himself from this nightmare, but his fear had been confirmed. It was no nightmare.

Jack's mind raced in panic. He was afraid to touch it, but he needed help. The thought of calling an ambulance rushed through his thoughts, but he knew that would take too long. He decided to drive himself to the emergency room.

\*\*\*

"There's something growing on my leg!" Jack cried as he limped toward an intake nurse.

She glanced at his leg and gasped, unable to conceal her horror. "Sit down here," she managed, as she leapt from behind her station and turned a wheelchair in his direction.

Jack listened and nearly fell into the chair.

A white-haired doctor, hearing the commotion, entered the curtained area. His gaze fell to the Orangeness, and Jack noticed, fleetingly, the man forgot to introduce himself.

"Let's take a look," the doctor said instead, with a poor attempt at feigning calmness.

The doctor pulled a light closer to examine Jack's leg as a look of confusion crossed his face. His gloved hand examined the growth. "I've never seen anything like this before," he muttered to himself.

"Just remove it," Jack begged in a tremulous voice.

The doctor avoided making eye contact. "You need a... specialist," the doctor mumbled. "I'll give you a few prescriptions. The nurse will give you the referral. Good luck." He fled the exam room like he couldn't get away quick enough.

“Doc?” Jack stammered as the man disappeared down the hall. “Nurse?” Jack noticed the nurse’s gaze still affixed to his leg. “What do I do? Where do I go? You can’t help me?”

The nurse straightened and stepped back. “I’ll get you the scripts as the doctor ordered,” she said as she turned to leave. “Stay here.”

Caught somewhere between rage and panic, Jack stormed out of the hospital. Sitting in his truck, he fumbled for his cell and dialed the dermatologist’s number the nurse had handed to him. A shrill woman answered and too pleasantly informed him that there were no openings until next week.

“But it’s an emergency,” Jack tried to convey, “I’m leaving the ER now.”

The woman was unmoved and repeated her spiel.

Jack hung up and tossed his cell in frustration. “Damn it!” He pounded the dashboard. The desperate thought of cutting the Orangeness off himself fumbled through his mind, but he remembered the stench when he poked it in the field.

Defeated, he drove to the pharmacy and filled the prescriptions and drove back to his apartment, where he applied the prescription creams with a paper towel, refusing to touch the Orangeness with his bare hand.

He staggered into his kitchen and pulled a fifth of Jack Daniels from the cupboard. With an angry slap, the lid spun from the neck of the bottle, and he took two deep swigs. Disappearing into the living room, he continued to drink, sip and after sip until the bottle emptied. His eyes grew heavy, and the room spun until it went black.

\*\*\*

Jack stirred, waking from his stupor when gunshots from the television caught him off guard. He rubbed his eyes and glanced at his watch. It was just after midnight, and he was caught somewhere between sleep and intoxication. His face was numb, and he leaned from his recliner to his feet, seized by a sudden stab of pain on his groin. He stumbled to the bathroom to urinate and investigate the pain.

When he lowered his boxers to relieve himself, horror broke through his drunken fog, sobering him instantly. The Orangeness had snaked up his thigh and coiled around his penis, squeezing his testicles.

Jack shrieked. Desperation coursed through his veins, and his clouded thoughts settled on an uneasy and uncertain plan. He knew what he had to do. He had to get to his uncle's cabin in the woods.

He stumbled through his house, pain searing through him with each step. With a swipe of his hand, he grabbed his keys and drove with reckless abandon, weaving across the dividing lines. When he arrived at the cabin, he went straight to the stone fireplace. Above it rested his uncle's hunting rifle.

Jack took the rifle down and sat on the sofa to load it. Sweat dripped into his eyes and when he reached up to wipe his brow, his fingers brushed over new bumps of Orangeness that dotted his forehead in pulsating clumps.

He threw his head back and laughed, the sound echoing like a lunatic barking at the moon. He realized that the Orangeness would soon consume him. He left the cabin with the rifle and staggered to the top of a hill where the light from the cabin's open door spilled out into his surroundings.

Jack stopped and noticed the deciduous trees were starting to change colors. Autumn. Bright yellow and red, And orange. Orange.

A single shot fired in the forest before hunting season opened.

\*\*\*

On the first day of hunting season, Carl headed out before dawn. As the sun came up, he had walked along the stream and started up the hillside when his boot hit something hard. He looked down at a mound with an odd orange hue blanketing the ground.

"Strange," he said aloud to himself. He hadn't seen anything like this in the wood before—ever.

Carl peered more closely at the shape, which was as large as a human body.

"Hmm." Carl kicked it with the heel of his boot. The orange shell cracked open, and a plume of noxious steam hissed out.

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Making up stories to scare her elementary school classmates is where her love of horror began. Scooby Doo & the gang get some credit too.

After homeschooling her three children, she had more time to create chilling tales.

Originally from Erie ,Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh has been home for the past 30 years.

# Note from the Magazine

Hello all!

This is Abi, the hand that formatted this first issue of Altered Reality Magazine. I wanted to personally thank you for reading this magazine and enjoying our authors. To those who submitted stories, thank you!

We know things are new and different here at AR Mag, especially for those who have been with the magazine for several years. We hope you will find our new ideas and projects fun and engaging. We are determined to work hard to lift indie authors like ourselves up and make a place where a little of everything can be discovered. I have a lot of plans for the magazine moving forward and hope you will all join me.

This first issue was done quickly and with passion. We wanted to show the world a small taste of what we have in mind. We hope this has piqued your interest and that you'll be back to read more of what we have to offer.

Have something to submit? We will be accepting submissions for our winter issue soon! And will be accepting submissions in many genres for posting regularly on our website that do not have to follow any theme. Please follow us online to stay up to date on all things Altered Reality. If you have any questions, please reach out to me here:

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