

# TIGERSHARK magazine



Issue Six – Spring 2015 – Horror & Dark Fiction

# Tigershark Magazine

## Issue Six – Spring 2015

### Horror & Dark Fiction

#### Editorial

Normally, the Spring is a time for joy and hope, but this year we're focusing upon the dark and horrific – and there certainly are some dark stories in this issue – you have been warned!

Best, DS Davidson

[tigersharkpublishing@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:tigersharkpublishing@hotmail.co.uk)  
[tigersharkpublishing.blogspot.co.uk](http://tigersharkpublishing.blogspot.co.uk)

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Editor and Layout: DS Davidson

Assistant Editor: David Leverton



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## QUACHIL UTtaus \*

*By Frederick J. Mayer*

### *"Duan de casa"*

I think  
 Therefore I am  
 I thought  
 Wherefore I have been  
 No one told me  
 it's a sinful crime  
 Now I'm out of sync  
 homeless within housed Time...  
 Upon the dreams rust  
 amid the corrupt blues  
 and darker hues  
 comes the House Master  
 Imp Wanderer  
 The Treader  
 of the Dust  
 a collector of celestial dues...  
 Time Changeling in wind calling  
 in tomes, in tomes, of changing  
 of the gods musty shadowing  
 Ancient Ones  
 old remains Quachil Uttaus  
 and I am the remains, the dust

\* *Quachil Uttaus is one of Clark Ashton Smith's lesser known created Ancient Ones of the Cthulhu Mythos and appeared in such of his tales as "The Treader Of The Dust" (another name for Quachil Uttaus).*

# XEETHRA FRUIT \*

*By Frederick J. Mayer*

Shining globes from bowed trees  
fruit palpitates seethes  
of sanguine ichor  
blood dark luxuriant  
devour puissant  
yield to craving for  
weird warmth strange fever sings  
wildered sense brings  
Self shall be no more.

*\* Inspired by/Based on Clark Ashton Smith's dark fiction short story Xeethra.*

## A Cruel Desire

*By DJ Tyrer*

If their parents had truly loved them, they would not have allowed him to take them. That was the mantra he repeated whenever a sliver of remorse threatened to weaken his resolve. He wasn't to blame: he was certain of that.

He would see them wandering alone in the street. So young. So vulnerable. So... beautiful. Society might revile his kind, but they couldn't stop him. Not when they served their children up like this. As much as they might wail about depravities and demand something be done, it didn't stop them from ignoring their children. If they cared, he wouldn't be able to do what he did.

Not every hunt was successful. He liked that metaphor. He liked to think of himself as a hunter. Sometimes as a Casanova. But, no matter what his skill and charm, sometimes he would return home empty handed.

Still, he had his movies. A record of every child he'd brought home. He loved nothing more when he was alone than to replay those exquisite memories, relishing every whimper, sob and scream as if they were a symphony. He slipped a disc into the player and settled down to watch.

He watched the movie as if in a trance, recalling every sensation, reliving every moment. But, something intruded upon the entertainment: soft footsteps upon the stairs.

# THE FRIGATE

*By Frederick J. Mayer*

Through crimson mist from another realm.  
Not soul nor sole that heads her helm.  
The midnight dew seeps down her hull.  
Color no hue none be at all.

She carries crew, of night they be.  
Across she sails the ebony sea.  
Look not for eyes, be weary of.  
Inside deep cries of they of woe.

Arise a foam to stern it lay.  
Arise a froth that start a day.  
Set sail to find that called home.  
Of peace of mind; she will return.

\*\*\*\*\*

Quickly, he seized the remote and turned the movie off. In the silence, he was certain there was someone in the building, coming up the stairs. Nobody should've been able to get in. The building, an old office block, was supposed to be secure. He'd paid a fortune to ensure it was.

He stood and turned to face the door. The door handle began to turn.

"Who's there?" he called.

The door slowly opened a little. An arm, thin as a twig and as pale as bone, reached round it, reaching towards him, tiny fingers flexing. The door opened more. Shadowy figures stood in the doorway and more behind them on the stairs. Dark pit eyes gazed towards him without a hint of compassion. Vague features hinted at faces he knew: faces burnt into his memory by repeated viewings. Faces he recalled twisted by pain, terror and despair. Faces that, now, bore implacable masks of hatred.

Slowly, methodically, the crowd advanced upon him. En masse, they had a strength they had lacked alone in life. Just as they had been unable to fight him off, now he found himself overpowered.

Dragged to the floor, he whimpered in fear as they loomed over him. Then, his whimpers turned to screams as they took their revenge.

*Ends*

# Glimmer of Glimmer

By John W. Sexton

*after Gile na Gile by Aodhagán Ó Rathaille (c.1670 – 1729)*

Glimmer of glimmer I saw on the path neglected;  
green glass of green glass the blue of her eyes inflected.  
Her language the notes of birdsong, of voices inhuman;  
her skin of fire, of snow; now white, now crimson.

Twisted and twisted the braids of her hair a sunset;  
the earth and the hills all one with their ferns pure russet.  
The brooch at her neck a star that had died in great brightness;  
a fragment of light, since she was creation's first instance.

Histories poured from her mind, though she was essentially rootless;  
of a king descended from kings, coming back though throneless.  
For the army enclosed him in exile; bog-cotton sealed in a pillow.  
And her birdsong continued, alarums of blackbirds singing from sorrow.

Bindings of bindings I found myself bound in enchantments;  
entranced so my body was pinioned so tightly, and hence  
I entreated of Mary, *Unfasten, O Virgin, this glittering thrall.*  
But through lightning to Luachra we entered strangely a magical hall.

In that instant of instants, my heart's hammer beating not once,  
I travelled the marshes, through black mirrored pools of the bog;  
till I entered the dwelling of dwellings, whose path I could not discern,  
to a place fashioned by druids with powers that men cannot earn.

I was greeted at once by goblins and wantons, their demeanour not fair;  
while beauties whispered in shouts and clashed, clashed their gold hair.  
In fetters of iron, in fetters of will, I was bound to the spot, held still;  
while the glimmer of glimmer was kissed on the mouth by a pox-riddled fool.

I uttered a rann, I uttered a charm; I addressed her in verses so firm:  
that shame upon shame would befall those betrothed to this worm;  
that the king who was bound far from here by mortals and fate,  
faithfully awaited her hand beyond the deep ocean's gate.

Her eyes unclouded, for my words had reached to the bone;  
from her swoon she emerged in tears, comprehended my form.  
At that she sent me a guide as escort from that hall of shimmer,  
and I was returned to the path where first I had met the glimmer of glimmer.

Anguish, misery, rot and decline; dishevelment, death and despair!  
That bright, innocent beauty, warm-lipped and pure,  
is held by those lecherous wraiths and that black-hearted contender.  
Oh, for the lion to cross the steps of the ocean, and tear them asunder.

Author's Note: Aodhagán Ó Rathaille is considered the first exponent of the Aisling or Vision poem in the Irish language. In the original, Gile na Gile is considered one of the marvels of Irish language literature, and is one of Ó Rathaille's greatest poems.



# Drop Point

*By D.M Slate*

A warm breeze rustles by, stirring the stagnant air. I raise a hand to my forehead, shielding my eyes from the blazing rays of sun. This abandoned four story building is my drop point and my stomach churns as I look at its ominous form. Nearly all of the structures on this industrial strip have been abandoned, but this one, in-particular, is rumored to be haunted.

Brushing the childish thought aside I approach the piece of plywood covering the entryway. Pulling on the bottom corner, it lifts, allowing enough space for me to shimmy through. Once inside the building I remove the notebook paper from my back pocket, reading it again.

Go to the fourth floor and turn right at the top of the stairs. There is a janitorial closet there. You'll find a suitcase inside of the closet - put the package in the suitcase, and then leave.

Sprinting up the rickety stairs I reach the fourth floor, puffing to catch my breath. To my right I see the closet. The door stands eerily ajar.

I tip-toe over and swing the wooden door open wide. The closet is dim and I creep timidly inside. A rank odor permeates the air - seeping into my nostrils. I bring my forearm to my face, covering my nose.

I spot the outline of the large suitcase in the darkness.



Bending down onto one knee I place the package on the floor. Grabbing the suitcase zipper I pull it swiftly in my direction. Whipping it open I freeze, horrified, as the terrible premonition passes through my brain.

My dismembered body has been stuffed inside of that suitcase. Bloodied limbs poke out of the bag in all directions. My shriveled eye balls stare up into the darkness, out of my decapitated head.

A tremor passes through my body and my senses snap back to reality.

A man moves out of the darkness, then, coming at me. In one fluid motion I rise and sprint from the closet, screaming. Running blindly down the long hallway I search for anywhere to hide. Reaching the window at the end of the hall I bang against it, trying to budge it open.

An explosive blast echoes through the air behind me. Hot, fiery pains spread through my upper torso and my arms fly up over my head.

The glass window shatters outward into a million tiny fragments.

My knees give way and I fall forward through the broken window frame.

My body plummets through the air. Smacking against the slanted entryway roof, I then roll off of the structure, dropping the remaining distance to the ground. Darkness overtakes me.

Rising to my feet I dust myself off, looking around, confused.

A warm breeze rustles by, stirring the stagnant air. I raise a hand to my forehead, shielding my eyes from the blazing rays of sun. This abandoned four story building is my drop point and my stomach churns as I look at its ominous form. Nearly all of the structures on this industrial strip have been abandoned, but this one, in-particular, is rumored to be haunted.

*Ends*

Find Christopher Woods' galley at

<http://christopherwoods.zenfolio.com/>

# The Promotion

*By Denny E. Marshall*

The factory is one of the bright spots in the bad economy. Always hiring and many have been promoted to the facility in California. They make food snacks and have a hard time keeping up with demand.

Henry is promoted and will be transferred to the other plant. He and his family are invited to a presentation. They walk into a room and see through a window a gigantic vat four stories high below. The floor gives way and they slip down into an opening in the vat. As they slide by, they can see *California* printed in large letters.

## ONE HUNDRED TIMES X

*By Ricky Garni*

I had only a vague idea of taking a hundred photographs and placing them in even rows across on the page—a hundred photos per page, a hundred pages for one book. Each photograph would represent a part of my life. Each photograph would have a caption. Each caption would come from the first page of each book in the first bookcase of a hundred books in my bedroom. One hundred one hundred times. One hundred thousand divided by ten. One time. From those times, I would save the one time with the one caption that seemed appropriate on each page. And then I would have a hundred photographs and a hundred pages. I would have the perfect book. I would have to destroy this note in advance so no one would miss what wasn't there. I would know what was missing but I wouldn't miss it. There would be a hundred things in my life. That's all I ever really wanted. Except you.

Seen the two long fangs  
"Not a vampire." he said  
"I am your lawyer"

*By Denny E. Marshall*

## Likeness

*By JD DeHart*

We also notice the same furtive movements,  
watching the shadows as you do,  
prognostication pawing at the sullen earth  
We also have doubts about the future  
just like you do, but where our doubts were born  
is a matter quite uncertain, their origin  
a luminescent pool of innocent expectation  
soon spoiled by the inevitable downward spiral  
We have hair like you and teeth like you  
and riddling inner monologues, along with lack  
of commitment and life flying by too fast,  
the wanton looks and ungrateful teens  
But where we part is your dance among the clay  
while we dance, sing among the burned stars  
our wings gather strength  
while we sweep across the earth in flight  
and you hibernate beneath us, as is your lot,  
bound in tiny clusters like berries on the vine.

Into neck teeth sank  
Of employee of blood bank  
As vampire drank

*By Denny E. Marshall*

# "Concerning Necromancy"

*By Phillip A. Ellis*

As I journeyed through my life,  
I thought of you alone,  
my lost love,  
and as I longed,  
and as I thought of you,  
a dream of melancholy  
whelmed me,  
as does the sea when it takes  
and breaks  
those boats that float upon its broad back,  
and makes them wrack  
upon the rocky strand.

And I thought of you,  
you who had left this world my youth ago,  
and I cried  
and I wondered  
what magick would call you back to me.

So it was meet that I met  
a certain necromancer  
who dwelt alongside for a short while.  
And he taught me in a short while  
a rune  
to call forth the soul  
of the dead beloved.  
Thus it was that,  
my beloved,  
I learned this rune  
and I cast this rune,  
so as to be again with you--  
even if only a moment  
while I wandered.

But when your shade came unto me,  
I beheld not the one I love,  
but a pallid semblance,  
and only a semblance  
walking in forgetfulness.  
And I wept  
as I dismissed it,  
for truly,  
if one has a dream,  
then that that is real  
is as that that is dust  
that blows  
from the hearth  
that is the tomb  
eternal.

<http://www.phillipaellis.com/>





# even the innocent

*By Lance Manion*

Ever so briefly she was in that place between dreaming and being awake and heard the voice clearly.

“Even the innocent. Especially the innocent.”

Then she was wide awake.

She didn’t remember the dream in any detail and she had the feeling that she should leave it at that.

Dana Eggar lay in her bed and felt her chest rising and falling with each deep breath. The familiarity of her room was comforting. Even though she knew without looking at the clock that she was in the deep end of night the room bore testament that the moon must be close to full and hanging in a cloudless sky. Dana never closed her curtains and the moonlight rushed in the window and cut her bed cleanly in half between light and dark.

She was trying not to think as it would just make it harder to get back to sleep. She more felt than saw the fluttering of the moonlight as if a large flock of geese had flown between the moon and her window.

She ran her hands through her hair, stretched her neck and adjusted the pillow under her head. Her hands looked featureless in front of her face.

She waggled her fingers in the darkness and her eyes ran down the length of her arm to her elbow and then back again. She was almost transfixed by how foreign this appendage suddenly looked and she found herself enjoying watching her hand twist and flex in the darkness as if she was hanging it out the window of a speeding car.

A smile crept slowly across her face and she felt like a baby examining her limbs for the first time.

After a few more moments she sunk her head back into the pillow and realized that she would have to be getting up soon and it was time to get back to sleep. She closed her eyes and tried to clear her mind of any lingering thoughts.

But there was movement above her face. She could feel it and the bed rocked ever so slightly in time with it.

She opened her eyes and saw her hand once again twisting and turning in the air above her.

She had occasionally lost the feeling in her arms before, somehow cutting off circulation and being forced to wait through those strange minutes until the blood rushed back into them and once again gave her control. That’s what this felt like ... sort of.

Except instead of laying limp next to her body her hand was alive and moving without her permission. Floating above her as if moved by invisible strings.

She wanted to scream but her face remained a frozen mask. She willed herself to take back control of her arm and for a few moments it twitched and trembled until finally it fell down at her side and into the light.

She felt the tingle of blood rushing into her fingers like she did when her arm was ‘waking up’. She opened and closed her hand and let out a long scared sigh.

Her other arm calmly lifted up, reached over and started to pull her hand back into the shadow.

Her eyes opened wide and she felt a wild fear begin to well up in her throat as her hand gripped the bedspread tightly. A lifeline. Clawing at the sheets to stay in the light that had traveled such a long way to make its way into her quiet room. Every inch that her hand retreated into the dark was another inch that went dead to her until finally both hands moved and swayed above her.

She wondered why she couldn’t scream. Maybe she had never actually woken up. She clung to the hope that this was a bad dream and she would wake up with a start and turn on a light and never turn it off again.

She was smiling. She didn’t want to smile but a smile hung on her lips nonetheless.

Her hands floated down like leaves off a tree until they lay touching her face in almost a caress.

“Even the innocent”.

She felt her mouth form the words and she heard them pass through her lips but they were not hers.

Only her feet, sitting out from beneath the covers and fully in the moonlight, started to thrash when her thumbs began to push down in the corners of each eye socket. Her mouth would not give her the scream she wanted so badly. She felt the warm blood start to trickle down the sides of her face as her eyeballs bulged and strained against the fingers that dug deeper into her skull.

She felt everything.

Her legs twitched wildly until finally her thumbs were completely inside her head, her eyeballs hanging by wet red tissue and resting on her cheeks.

She was dead by the time her mouth once again spoke.

“Especially the innocent”.

*Ends*

# THE LITTLE DEATH

*By Stewart Sternberg*

You think of Death being pale and skeletal, not a ruddy fat man with a booming voice. Apparently business was good. He sat down across from me and tapped the desk with a thick finger.

“He was already dead when I got there,” he complained.

I had been standing with my back to wall since he materialized. It’s one thing to think of Death as an abstract, but as a physical entity? That’s something one doesn’t usually consider. And yet, here he was in my office, sitting the folding chair like any other client, and here I was listening and looking for an angle. His presence should have shocked and horrified me to the point of incoherence, but I guess when you’ve been on a downward slide for as long as I have that you expect the bad luck to keep on coming.

Death took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and shook one loose. He offered one to me and I declined. The cigarette lit on its own and he took a long drag. “His name was Dr. Andy Green.”

I didn’t say anything. I’d hear what he wanted and then hopefully he would go.

“I found him in his office at the university,” he said. “He taught psychology. He was a specialist in human sexual response.”

“Some people have too much time on their hands,” I quipped.

“No, you don’t.”

I hoped he was referring to people in general and not me specifically.

“Green was should have died of a heart attack day before yesterday. I found him naked and spread-eagle. He was still warm, but his Essence was nowhere to be found. I need that Essence. I need it.”

He shifted in his seat and stabbed the cigarette

butt out on the corner of my desk. I gave him closer scrutiny, and realized his presence wasn’t continual, but instead a stutter. I didn’t try and figure it out. Death has to be a lot of places at the same time; taking time from his schedule to come here was probably stressful for him. It was stressful for me.

“How do you expect me to find it? This isn’t my sort of job.” I protested. I didn’t want this; the case smacked of failure and my ego was already beat up. I was broke and alone, and worse, I was getting used to it. Maybe this was a nightmare and I would wake up. Maybe this was an hallucination.

“I’m not trying to be difficult,” I said. “But I don’t understand how I can help? I take pictures of cheating husbands with their pants around their ankles. Sometimes, it’s just background checks and skips. I wouldn’t know where to start. I’m not even sure what I’m looking for.”

Death frowned. He gripped my wrist from across the desk and I knew more about Essence than anyone should. I was aware of my own Essence and it trembled within my frail body. It wasn’t the soul exactly, it was a constant stream of information that ran in and out of human existence and tied everyone together. It powered reality. That wasn’t something you wanted to play around with.

I sat back and wiped a bit of drool from the corner of my mouth as Death pulled a wad of cash from his pocket. He casually tossed it on the desk.

“This is many times what you would probably ask as a fee. I’ll give you more when you’re finished, and I’ll throw in a little something extra. Bonus time, if you know what I mean.”

I still reeled from his touch. Knowing my Essence would continue when my body faltered didn’t calm my fear of dying. If anything, it made it worse. It was like being an ant dropped from an airplane into a gigantic squirming mound of other displaced ants.

I listened to my heart beat. One never knew when the meat wagon would arrive. It’s bad luck thinking about such things. Especially at night, around three

in the morning. The coin flips and it's heads, heads, heads, but eventually, it's going to land tails.

Hell yes, I wanted that bonus.

"Why would someone pinch Mr. Green's Essence? For that matter, what do *you* do with it?" I asked.

"I take it back to the Source. It's got to go back. Or else."

Death shuddered and his outline softened. He bolted from the chair and loomed over me. I couldn't help looking in those eyes and shrank at my image there, so small and unimportant. I broke free and got my bearings.

I can take intimidation. Threats don't bother me. But that little trick hurt.

"But what's the angle?" I asked. "Why would anyone steal it? How is that even possible?"

"That's what you're going to find out."

"Why me?"

"You know what's in the shadows and who's waiting around the corner. You see things others miss."

"Not intentionally."

"But you're sensitive to these matters."

Death flickered and a second later I was alone.

I stared at the wad of bills, the only thing that proved Death hadn't just been a hallucination. I hefted it and shuddered. I wanted to run around the room screaming but instead got control of my emotions and shoved them into neat cubby holes where I could forget them. I was good at, just ask my ex.

I peeled off several bills and put the rest into a small safe under the desk. I considered the promised bonus. It was obvious I was going to need that bonus sooner than later, and that was probably something Death considered when hiring me.

So how to attack this case? Before I headed to the university to study the crime scene, I called James Byrd, a friend who worked at the medical examiner's office. He sounded distracted.

"Who's this?" he asked.

"It's me, Les. Les Wilson. I was wondering if you could check out a report real quick and maybe let me know if there's anything interesting in it."

"Les Wilson? The same Les Wilson who cost me a promotion by using my name to get information he had no right getting? Or is this the Les Wilson who's been telling people about my business with my wife? That one? Maybe it's the guy who owes me a hundred dollars."

It took a few minutes to convince him to help me out, but he finally let me give him the name of the deceased. A long silence followed.

"Did you know this guy?" James asked at last.

"I never heard of him before today. I'm just doing something for the insurance company. So what gives? What did the report show?"

"He ain't dead," James said. "He ain't alive, neither. We got a body with no life signs, but there's no rigor mortis or evidence of decomposition. It's got some people upset."

"So has someone signed a death certificate or not?"

"Not. No one wants to put their name on this until the guy starts stiffening up and stinking like he should."

Jimmy sounded afraid. There were things I could tell him to help his understanding, but they wouldn't help his sleep. I made noises of shock and empathy while I mapped out my next action.

#

The room was small and like the rest of the building, poorly lit. Nothing in Green's office jumped out at me. A desk, a computer, a couple chairs, and a wall of books. Things got more interesting as I scanned the titles; several shelves were actually devoted to pornography. And not even the good stuff. The guy probably had a knock out collection of magazines in his john.

A few of the titles gave me pause: *The Petite Morte: A Metaphysical Journey, God's Phallus*, and *Alternate States of Sexual Being*. All by Dr. Kenneth Green.

I pulled one down and flipped through the pages. Unfortunately the content didn't live up to the title. Holding the book in the crook of one arm, I moved to the desk, where I spent a moment booting up the computer and going through the drawers. The computer was password protected.

Death should have asked a priest for help, or maybe a professional psychic. I had no idea what the hell I was doing. If Green's Essence was gone, then he had either skipped on his own with it, however that worked, or had it taken from him. I couldn't imagine who would take it from him, or what they would want with it, nor did I particularly want to find out. If something had taken it, then that was something you wouldn't want to mess with.

Green was the more likely suspect. I could certainly understand his motivation for not wanting to give it up.

Maybe he'd hidden it somewhere. Thinking how ridiculous this sounded, I leaned over and popped open a small teak box. Paper clips. No Essence.

My gaze settled on a framed photograph beside the computer. A gorgeous couple looked back at me. The woman had long auburn hair and large playful eyes. She wasn't just pretty, she hurt you. Her companion was a Greek god, naturally, with solid pecs and rippling abs. He would have made a great stripper. I sucked in my own gut.

Neither of these people were Dr. Green. I knew, because I had the professor's picture on the back of the book jacket.

"What are you doing?"

The woman in the picture stood at the door. I stared at her. She was almost too beautiful, too stunning. She asked again and where I usually had a dozen witty responses ready, none came to mind.

"I'm with the insurance agency," I said. I produced a business card to corroborate my story. She took it but didn't take her eyes off me.

"You related to the professor?" I asked.

"I'm the department secretary. You had to pass my desk on your way in."

The desk at the end of the hall had been a mess. Most secretaries managed some level of organization, but maybe she hadn't been hired for her organizational skills.

"You and Prof. Green have a close relationship, Miss...?"

"Hanna Holder," she said.

How alliterative.

"We were good friends," she added. "He took me under his wing."

"Just friends?"

"I don't like your insinuation."

I turned the photograph so she could see it. Her face reddened.

"Husband? Boyfriend?" I asked. "Interesting the professor should have this picture on his desk."

She leaned back against the door jam and folded her arms across her chest. She scrutinized me before speaking. "I don't believe an insurance agent has the right rummaging through the deceased's personal effects."

I shrugged. Her cold stare unsettled me. The woman had power.

How long have you worked for Dr. Green?" I asked.

"Not that it's any of your business, but I've only been here a few months."

She pointed at the book I still held and gestured for me to hand it over. I read the spine out loud: "*Le Petite Morte*," I said. "The Little Death. That's a euphemism for orgasm, isn't it? But it's not the little deaths one has to worry about."

"You're not from an insurance company," she said.



"Dr. Green sure was interested in sex," I said.

"What about you?"

"You're disgusting. Dr. Green was doing important work. Sex isn't just an animalistic response, it's transcendent."

I didn't answer. I was never that comfortable talking about sex beyond innuendo and sarcasm. I wasn't much good at it, as my ex often let me know. I handed over the book and considered her last statement.

"So you don't know anything about Dr. Green's current condition?"

"He's dead," she said.

"There's some controversy regarding that."

She shrugged off my statement and shoved past me. I followed her into the hall and to her workstation. It wasn't the disorganized mess I thought, a second look showed she was sorting through things, packing away files in cardboard boxes.

"Going somewhere?" I asked.

"The department wants me to box the professor's files."

I thought about that as I headed out.

#

Sitting back in my office I pulled out one of the crisp bills Death gave me. What good would this do after he came for collection? Not much, but it made waiting more pleasant. It was obvious why my client chose me. I never figured on living forever, but I had counted on a few more years. I wasn't afraid of dying; when the time came, it came. But something told me it was coming too soon.

I needed to earn that bonus he promised.

What next? I might head check the professor's apartment and maybe canvas some of his friends and acquaintances. It would be a grind, and I wasn't too optimistic about the results.

I considered Ms. Holder and the Greek god.

I needed to start thinking unconventionally. I had approached the professor's office as if it had been a crime scene. I could be forgiven for thinking of it that way. A body and something missing usually indicated foul play. But the missing item was only valuable to two people.

My head started hurting. I shut my eyes and pictured the office again, this time trying to get a feel for the professor. He was a tidy individual, the sort who didn't go in for frivolous decoration. Except for the few photographs on the walls, typical pictures of Green at important events or receiving awards, none of the images showed him relaxed or at play. He had little art in the office. The most distinct object had been an African fertility symbol on one of the shelves.

I again considered the picture of Hannah Holder and her friend.

I picked up the telephone and called the medical examiner's office again. Byrd answered, more annoyed than before.

"Wilson? Gimme a break."

"James, I need to ask you a question, and it's going to sound strange as hell."

"Leave me alone."

"It's about that corpse I called on earlier."

There was a pause. "You mean the dead guy that ain't?"

I grimaced asking the question, "This is going to sound a bit perverted but...was there evidence he had been having sex?"

More silence before Byrd sighed. "You know something about this, you need to tell the police."

"Then, that's a yes?"

"Let's just say that's the only part of his body that's stiff. The guy's ready to go again. He's a prop for a damned bachelorette party."

#

The parking lot outside the building where I keep my office is well lit and usually pretty busy. It's not the sort of place one expects an ambush.

The guy came at me as I was getting into my car. I heard him in time to move, but still took a blow to the side of my face. It dazed me. If it had struck the back of my head as intended, it would have knocked me out.

He swung again. I ducked and the bit of pipe cracked the car window. I launched at his midsection and drove him against another vehicle. He was solid and strong as hell, and I'm a terrible fighter. He was going to cream me.

The guy threw me off. I didn't wait for him to regain the offensive. I swung and busted my knuckles against his chin. He did something I would never have expected—he went down.

"Jesus," I said, and snatched the pipe from where it clattered to the ground. I stepped behind him and pressed the weapon against his throat.

It was the guy from the picture. The Greek god.

"What the hell?" I shouted. I struggled to catch my breath, which wasn't easy, and urged my heart to stop pounding so hard. Thankfully, the fight in him was gone. I wouldn't have stood a chance had he decided to go for another round.

He knelt on the pavement, arms at his sides. I reached around and dug through his pants pocket until I found a wallet and drivers' license. Gerald Case. He also had several business cards for Buck's Pool Service.

"Why did you just try and brain me, Gerald?" I asked once my breathing slowed enough for me to speak.

"You raped my girlfriend."

"Your girlfriend? You talking about Hanna Holder?"

He started to cry like a kid. Leaning over him, the pipe still pressing against his throat, I felt like a bully. I let him up but kept the weapon. I wiped the sweat from my forehead and adjusted my jacket. I gave

him a moment to gather himself.

"Gerald, I never touched your girlfriend. I just met her earlier today, at the place where she works. I promise."

He used his t-shirt to dry his eyes. "We were going to be married," he said. "We were saving it for each other. And you raped her."

"I didn't rape her!" I heard my voice echoing off the surrounding buildings. I repeated myself, softly this time, and put a hand on his shoulder. "Honest, Gerald."

He settled down with that idiotic reassurance.

"Your girlfriend worked for Dr. Green, Gerald. He died. I was investigating his death for the insurance company."

"Why would Hannah lie?" he challenged me.

"I don't know, Gerald. It's a good question though. What do you know about her relationship with her boss?"

"Hannah never talked about work, but she said Dr. Green was a genius. She idolized him."

Gerald's tone had the right mixture of petulance and jealousy. I questioned whether he had believed Hannah about the rape. It could be he was acting out the anger feeling her slip away. Maybe he thought by taking me down, he could win her back. I felt sorry for Mr. Case. I also feel sorry for cows from time to time, but I still eat them.

#

In movies the detective sits down and mulls over a case, logically picking it apart until the pieces come together to form a whole. He then shows off his brilliance with the reveal and you walk away shaking your head in admiration. Me? I throw myself around like a pinball and hope something happens. In this case, I was going to throw myself at Hanna Holder.

I headed back to the university.

Her desk was clean now and the boxes were gone. I went down the hall to Green's office and

found her there. She sat at the computer, which meant she had Green's password, and didn't seem surprised when I walked into the room. She kept tapping the keys and I sat down opposite her and slouched.

"It was stupid sending Gerald after me," I told her.

She stopped typing. Her eyes narrowed. Her gaze was strange, and I couldn't put my finger on it.

"He's not a bad kid, but he's not too smart. I feel bad for him. Here you are banging the professor, and there's poor Gerald skimming crap out of swimming pools and checking chlorine levels."

"You're disgusting," she said.

"Strange thing about Dr. Green, there's a problem with his corpse. It's not dead in the sense we know 'dead.' It's in a sort of stasis and there's this guy in black who wants to know what you've done with him."

I waited for a response. Hanna hurled the framed photograph of herself and Gerald at me. I batted it away and stood.

"How did you do it, Hanna?" I asked. "Come on, I've talked to Gerald, and you're setting him up for something. What's your game? What were you and Green up to?"

I stood between her and the door and tried to convey with body language that neither of us was leaving here until I had answers.

She came around the desk, and my body tensed. I expected her to lunge at me. I didn't expect her hand to brush the side of my face, or the smell of jasmine to tickle my nostrils.

"It's not like that," she said.

"Convince me."

She misinterpreted my words and slipped closer. I could feel heat from her body. She exuded a sexual aura. Some people are like that. I don't know whether it's a special pheromone or whether it's some kind of magical radiance, but they are able to walk in a room and grab attention from males and females both. That sort of magnetism was rare and

powerful. She immediately made me feel incomplete, and I had to take a deep breath to clear my head. I understood why Gerald came after me. He never had a chance.

I slapped her hand away and caught her by the wrist.

"Last chance, Hannah. Tell me what I need to know, or I'll let the thing in black, the one that hired me, know you're the one with all the answers. I don't think you want that."

"I did what I needed to do to save myself," she said. Hannah's voice, but not Hannah's words. It was as if someone had turned a switch. My stomach tightened and I almost lost my lunch.

We stared at one another. I released her wrist and stepped back.

"Is Miss Holder a willing participant in this?" I asked.

"I couldn't have done it without her."

Hannah laughed and sat down with her legs crossed in a masculine posture. She gazed pensively at me, and worry crept into her eyes. Or, *their* eyes.

"Don't turn us in," she said. "We'll make it worth your while."

"How are you going to do that, Green?" I asked. I had to sit down. I was winded and tired.

"You're not getting younger, Wilson. You're overweight, and on the wrong side of middle-age. You don't have to let that flesh get in your way."

"And what's the secret?"

Hannah shifted, her legs sliding against one another. She leaned forward now, displaying a tremendous amount of cleavage. "The secret is sex," she purred. Her face changed and her voice dropped into Green's timber.

"Sex is the catalyst for the creation of life in human beings. The orgasm is a nexus point. It's a doorway between life, death, creation, destruction. Each orgasm potentially opens a door. I call it the O-Hole."

"Catchy. And so you're saying you orgasmed into

Miss Holder?" As soon as I said this I regretted it.

She laughed and I could hear both of them in her voice. "It's called sex magic," she said.

"So you're saying you knew you were going to die and planned this out."

"It was more a coincidence," Green said. "A fortuitous one."

"So what happens now? The two of you are locked together for eternity?"

"It's temporary. I just have to find another vessel."

Both our eyes darted to the picture of the Gerald Case. The poor guy didn't deserve what was coming his way.

"Let me guess," I said. "You're going to open another door and kick Gerald to the curb? That's a bit cold."

"You've met Gerald," Hanna said.

The room became quiet. I sat for a long time, listening to my heart beat. I wasn't sure what to do here. I didn't owe Death anything. He had paid me, but the money was more a way to soften a threat. Sonovabitch. I accepted the job. I owed my client something, didn't I?

"This sex magic stuff, can anyone learn it?" I asked.

Hannah grinned and I felt her presence rush over me. "Anyone can learn," she said. "But there's just one caveat."

"What's that?"

"You have to really, really, really like sex."

"That's some caveat," I said.

I avoided looking at the picture of Gerald.

#

At least Death knocked this time. I dropped the book I was reading and shoved back from my desk. My mouth was dry and the ticker started its rapid percussion. I couldn't help it. Death's presence

horrified me.

"Mr. Wilson?"

When he said my name it made me want to pee.

He sat down and glanced at the book: *A Westerner's Guide To The Kama Sutra*. He flipped through the pages, pausing at a couple of improbable illustrations. I had to cough to get his attention.

"You didn't find him, did you?" he asked. Before I could answer, he repeated himself.

"I wish I had something to tell you," I said. The words sounded leaden. Having said this, I knew I had crossed a line. "I think Green's passing was an anomaly."

Death grimaced. He leaned forward and rested both elbows on the desk. I thought about coming up with some sort of quasi-metaphysical rationalization, but the thing about bullshit is that you can only play with it so much before it loses potency. I remained silent.

"An anomaly," he said. "You don't believe that, and neither do I."

I shrugged. He stood and paced, and grumbled. "Use meat to find meat, I thought. I should have known better."

A single bead of perspiration formed just below my ear and ran down my neck. I swatted at it as I might swat at a mosquito.

"Do you want your money back?" I asked.

"You know, The Passing can be easy or hard. Surrendering the Essence can be quick, or it can be a horrible thing. The stuff of nightmares."

"I wish I had something to give you," I said.

"Oh, you have something to give me."

I waited and the seconds screamed along like nails on a blackboard.

Death flickered. He listened to something beyond my hearing and looked at things I couldn't see and probably didn't want to. A horrible chittering sound escaped his lips and I knew I would be hearing that in my dreams for a long time.



"Keep the money, Mr. Wilson. I'll keep searching for Green. I'll find him. I have to. Maybe he'll find me first."

For some reason this last statement made him laugh. It should have been a creepy sound, but I found myself chuckling along with him.

Death faded.

"I'll see you soon," he said and like the Cheshire Cat vanished; I looked around for a lingering smile. I sat back down again, the familiar pain burning in my chest. I picked up the book, flipping through its pages with a greater sense of urgency.

"No," I said, checking out some of the illustrations. "You won't."

ends

## The Imaginarium of Jimmy Gatz

*By Cuitlamiztli Carter*

He strips to blood and bone  
while we sip chardonnay,  
unassuming and unimpressed.

Jaded by the endless changelings,  
too far gone to feel farout,  
we tell him *Get dressed*

and mumble pleasantries,  
syllables stressed by an urgency  
to clear the strange stage for stranger things.

Of all that you've confessed  
when day streaks across the tile,  
sounding sage in your hangover,

*I love: In this age, nothing ascends.*

And again, the phone rings, the tablet trembles  
with possible feints of art.

*This one can grow wings, but the wings ground  
them,*

*operate as leaden restraints. It's when the wings  
are clipped*

*that this tart's tainted blood beats anew.*

You yawn, and I frown. They're so excited  
to stomp this stage, quaint and drab as it seems  
to us. But you down some more courage and  
sigh,

*Send in the clown.*

## Fool That Thou Art

*By Cuitlamiztli Carter*

"We must take sides."

Elie

Wiesel

A tapestryman

in Ur hears the wind singing counterpoints to sacred hymns.

He looks for the source upon the sand, rescinding fierce words for a frail, gray slave.

But seeing only sand, he turns back to weaves, preparing his pitch for the prince.

A priestess robed in blue feels a winter chill as she climbs the mount.

Elsewhere, an idolatrous man watches his son sitting motionless.

# Confession

*By Ken Goldman*

The cubicle was dark and with its door closed Rico Ramirez felt claustrophobic, as if the small chamber's walls might suddenly shift towards him to squash him like a bug. Uncomfortable in the hard backed chair he felt his mouth go dry, and for a moment he almost ditched this ceremony, certain he had made a mistake coming. But no -- he wanted to be here, needed to be here. Whether guilt or shame had delivered him to this place he didn't much care. Something inside had made him come and that something, whatever it was, it had to be good even if it were only a small part of him.

"Forgive me father, for I have sinned." Rico paused, feeling slightly ridiculous. He leaned closer to the dark mesh screen. A faint blush of embarrassment smeared his face and he felt relieved for the lack of illumination.

"I said that right, didn't I, Father? This confession ritual, I mean, I want to get it right. It's been -- well, a while."

The priest's face appeared as a silhouette, although the darkened cubicle on the holy man's side of the screen could not conceal the shock of the man's thick silver hair. His response emerged as a whisper.

"I'm Father Luis, son. There is no need to feel uncomfortable. Tell me, how long has it been since your last confession?"

Of course that question Rico had expected. Here was ceremony strictly by the book, and inexperienced with these rules as the young man was, still he found solace in the procedure's uncompromising predictability. To unburden his soul, wasn't that what this was all about? A few *Hail*

*Marys* while clutching some cheap beads and he was soon out of here.

*See ya, Padre. And Jesus, thanks so much for the pass. Gracias, and amen.*

Taking his cue from the priest's manner Rico spoke softly. "My last confession? Let's see. Counting this past month, that would be ...well, never. But I hear confession is good for the soul. Isn't that what they say?"

This wasn't the time for such a poor tag line but he felt really nervous. The good Father didn't seem to find much humor in his response anyway, but so what? Most important to Rico was getting this admission verbalized to someone, just spitting it out like a cobra's venom sucked from his own festering wound. Maybe he didn't buy into that bullshit about Heaven so many dour nuns had fed him throughout his youth, but considering what he had done he wasn't about to take any chances with Hell. Even if he had laughed with the sinners throughout his life, Rico Ramirez had no intention of spending eternity crying with them.

"I don't belong to your church, Father. I'm not really certain I belong to your faith."

"That's of no matter, son. What is the nature of your sin?" The priest's tone could as easily have suggested the cleric had been inquiring about the weather. Still, with the ritual begun, now a cleansing vomiting of the soul would follow. Once his conscience had been mopped clean Rico would leave here a free man.

"I can speak openly and honestly, isn't that correct, Father? I mean, I'm not what you would call a regular church goer. But I remember something about the laws of sanctuary and confidentiality concerning the sacred confessional."

The clergyman's hesitation caused Rico's heart to do a mad dance. But the priest uttered a single word of reassurance.

"Speak ..."

Closing his eyes before the words came Rico seemed a man preparing himself for a plunge into waters of uncertain depth.

"I'm not a bad person, Father. Oh, maybe I broke into some cars, rifled through a few homes when I was younger. But all that was just kid stuff, you know?"

"I'm doubting that is your reason for having come here."

"No, Father, it isn't...See, I recently got my girlfriend pregnant. I've never been much into that condom thing and Karly, she was always too Catholic to go on the pill. I was her first real lover and it just kind of happened, you know? And a few hours ago she told me she was already something like three months along. I don't know, I can't explain my reaction, but I just - - I just sort of lost it with her today, I lost it really bad."

Another calm and measured silence.

"Lost it?"

"I got pissed ...I mean, angry. Really angry. I know it wasn't only Karly's fault, that I shared blame too. Hell, I'm no fool, and I wanted to take responsibility, take some charge of the situation. But Karly, she wouldn't hear my side of it. She wanted to have her baby, told me that I didn't need to worry about it, that I wouldn't even have to see the child or have anything to do with it -- or with her either, if that was my choice. She pretty much decided that she was going to keep it, though. I had no say in the matter."

"A child is a very serious responsibility, son. And to abort one --"

"...is a sin. Yeah, yeah, I know all about that, Father Luis. But, see, that's not why I came here. I could handle Karly being pregnant and all, and I would have done the right thing, whatever that thing is. But it's what happened after she told me. Damn! What I'm saying, is - - I didn't mean to hurt her! I didn't want to ever hurt her!"

The priest's face pressed against the screen's mesh. Rico felt the man's breath hot against his cheek. A whiff of it reminded him of bad fish.

"It will be easier if you tell me quickly."

"I told her I knew this guy, that he could help with this problem, and do it cheap. But when I mentioned maybe we should consider doing that, she wanted me to leave - - - told me to get out of her apartment, that she didn't want me near her. I mean, Father, she really was bitchy about it, you know? I don't know why I did it, but I hit her, just sent her flying against her knitting table. Her stuff spilled all over the floor and she started bawling. That just made it worse, so I punched her in the face. More than once. I couldn't stop punching her, and when she tried scratching me I felt her nose break against my fist like soft putty. I guess I didn't know my own strength, feeling so angry. Then Karly, she just fell to the floor. I couldn't get her to move, not even a little. And she was bleeding pretty bad. Her nose, her mouth ..."

Rico seemed about to break down in tears. Wiping his lips, with some difficulty the youth managed to pull himself back to the present moment.

"Karly is dead, Father. I know that. And before long someone will find her. I realize what a terrible thing I've done, but I can't stay here. I just need you to understand that what I did - - that you know how truly sorry, how repentant I am. Because, see - -"

[ ...because I'm getting really antsy being here,

Father. Really fucking antsy.]

"You wish for God's forgiveness?"

"Yes! Yes! Is there some kind of prayer I should say? Something I can get through quickly to show how sorry I am for what I did? Do I need to bow or get on my knees, anything like that? See, I'm not certain how this confession thing works."

A much longer silence this time. Excepting the priest's heavy breathing Rico felt unsure the old cleric remained behind the screen. Then, a very curious thing. From the shadowy alcove he thought he heard laughter.

"Father? Father Luis? Are you still there? It's so dark in here and I can't see."

"Son, you are in the dark in more ways than you know."

The priest's response struck home like a sucker punch. Rico, confused, could not imagine what the old guy meant. A louder burst of laughter from his chamber behind the screen bewildered him even more. This was hardly the response he expected from a man of God.

"A man of God? Is that what you think I am? Let me assure you, God and I would find very little to say to each other." Father Luis' words exploded inside Rico's brain as if the elder had read his very thoughts. Like some magic trick the screen between them disappeared, and the priest's long arm grabbed Rico by the throat, the old man's display of unexpected strength first surprising, then astounding him. Father Luis pulled him almost entirely through the wide aperture until Rico's face practically grazed his confessor's.

"You need not worry about anyone finding your Karly, you poor fool. They will find you also lying there alongside the mother of your unborn child.

Perhaps you remember the scissors that had spilled to the floor in your struggle?"

Rico's mind, racing now, could form nothing resembling a comprehensible thought.

"*Scissors?*"

"The scissors your young woman grabbed, then plunged into your worthless throat even while you were beating her to death! The girl demonstrated a remarkable boldness during those last moments of her life. And yours."

The old man's grasp remained firm although Rico had stopped struggling.

"What are you talking about? I don't remember any scissors in my throat! I'm here speaking to you! I'm breathing, I'm sweating!"

"Indeed you are."

"How could you know *any* of this? You and me, we know nothing of each other!"

"Oh, I believe you know a little about me. As I do you."

"That's not possible! I came here of my own free will!"

"You came here because everyone like yourself comes here. Take a good look at your father confessor, Mr. Rico Ramirez. Take a long hard look and tell me what you see!"

Father Luis loosened his grip allowing the youth to stare at him. Rico saw something he had not noticed before peeking through the silver shock of the old man's hair. His mind had to be playing tricks on him. This was a dream, a horrible and terrifying nightmare from which at any moment he would awaken. Rico gawked at the horns that protruded goat-like from the man's scalp.

"No fire and brim stone, Mr. Ramirez. No devils nor demons with pitchforks, no Lucifer taking names. There's just me here, your humble servant,



Father Luis. And this room, of course, this dark and lonely cubicle. But you were quite right about confession being good for the soul. It has made yours quite an acquisition. Perhaps in fifty or sixty years we may speak again.” The old man pushed Rico from him and he lay crumbled on the cold floor.

The aperture that had separated the two no longer remained. In its place, only a solid wall.

*“This ...can’t be ...”*

Rico turned to the door. It wasn’t there. Instead stood another wall of solid rock. He pounded at it, pummeled until his knuckles throbbed. It did no good.

*“Impossible!!”*

No fire. No brimstone. No devils nor demons.

*Luis ...not Lucifer ...*

“Not real ...none of it ...”

He fell into the hard backed chair, stared at his own elongated shadow upon the wall. Here he sat whimpering like a child inside this small dark cubicle barely large enough to contain him, a man purged free of his sins, his soul cleansed and good as new. Drying his eyes he sat and stared at the wall.

And Rico knew.

Like the old man had told him, he was here alone inside this dark confessional that floated somewhere in an even darker corner of the universe, floated forever ...

“I’ll have that second cup, Lou. Thanks.”

Lieutenant Lou Patterson ran his fingers through his shock of silver hair, closing the folder that contained the signed statement of the Ramirez kid’s confession. He turned to Marjorie, known better as Dr. McMannus among his precinct’s cops. While he was filling her in concerning the night’s proceedings, the criminal psychologist seemed as baffled as he was.

“Easiest homicide case I ever had, that’s damned certain. Maybe the most puzzling too.” He offered the therapist the mug. “An hour after crushing his girlfriend’s skull this guy waltzes into the station house spattered in blood, insisting he wants to confess everything. Then he screams his guts out the moment we put him into lock-up. I had to shake him like crazy to bring him out of it.”

The therapist sipped, turning again to study Rico Ramirez. The young killer sat alone muttering to himself, staring at his shadow smearing the wall inside the station house’s holding cell.

“There’s no explaining what goes on inside another person’s mind, Lieutenant, especially one that’s deranged. Sometimes a severe shock just sends someone off the rails. The human psyche tries to set things right, to make sense of what makes no sense. Ten years of criminal psychology and I still get spooked by the way these situations play out.”

Rico Ramirez was screaming again. Lou shook his head.

“That makes two of us, Doctor. I guess a confession is a confession. But God knows why that kid kept referring to me as Father Luis ...”

*Ends*



# Pea Soup

*By RL Black*

Robert sat on a sofa eating leftover Halloween candy and watching a late night horror flick. His wife, Cathy, stood between the living room and the kitchen, eyes shielded with an upheld hand. She asked him to turn the movie off.

“What's your problem, Cat? It's only a movie.”

“It's about demons. That shit scares me. I already told you.”

Robert rolled his eyes. “I know, I know. You saw a movie when you were a kid and you were traumatized by it.”

“Yeah, I was. Demons are real.”

He groaned. “Oh, come on. You're kidding me, right? These are actors. The green crap is some kind of pea soup or something.”

“I'm going to bed,” she said. “If I see one scene, I'll have nightmares for weeks. And turn it down, please. I don't want to hear it, either.”

Cathy hurried up the steps. Robert shrugged and popped another piece of candy into his mouth. How could anybody be scared of this shit?

A mischievous grin crept across his face.

Robert gave his wife enough time to get into bed, then sneaked up the staircase and into the bedroom. He snickered at the sight of her hiding under the covers, the blanket tucked in over her feet and pulled tight over her head. She had left the light on, too. What a chicken.

He smiled. This is gonna be good.

Robert slipped on a gruesome Halloween mask purchased earlier in the week and tiptoed to the bed. In one swift motion, he yanked the blanket away and bellowed the deepest, most demon like sound he could manage. With a smirk on his face, he waited for a reaction, but when she lifted her head, his smile disappeared. Her face was bruised and shriveled and blood oozed from her eyes. She opened her mouth and growled, a much scarier growl than his had been, and green liquid dripped from crusty lips. She reached for him and Robert shrieked and stumbled backwards. He fell into the hall and kicked the door shut.

Robert leaned against the wall and tried to breathe. Laughter came from the bedroom. Shit. She got me. She must have known what I was up to. How the hell did she get all that crap for her face without me seeing?

He was so pissed, he didn't go back into the bedroom, wouldn't give his wife the satisfaction. Let her sleep alone tonight. Besides, he was pretty sure he had soiled his underwear. Robert walked down the hall to the bathroom.

He opened the door, gasped and clutched his chest. Cathy dropped her toothbrush into a cup.

“Didn't I ask you to turn the movie down? I could hear it all the way up here.”

**Ends**

# D is for Dead

*By Lynn Parsons*

As the morning sun arched over the treetops, it fell between the worn boards of the porch shining on the face of the girl who slept underneath. She rubbed her eyes with her fists and while watching the dust motes dance in the streaks of sunlight, dug at the bug bites on her arms with chipped fingernails.

Rolling off the thin quilt covering the ground, the girl grabbed her doll that resembled her so well, snarled hair, soiled clothing, and skin so grimed a teardrop would leave a trail of whiteness, but no teardrops fell.

She crawled from under the porch, dragging the doll with her, and stood erect. A rusty bucket of rainwater sat nearby, she dunked in her hands causing the multitudinous mosquito larvae to wriggle spasmodically in the disturbed water. Wiping her hands on her faded overalls, she picked up her doll.

"Your turn, Dollie," the girl said dabbing spit on a fingertip and smearing it over the doll's plastic face. Their morning cleaning-up ritual complete, the girl stared at the house that loomed before her, two stories of colorless peeling wood devoid of any charm or hospitality, exuding only gloom. Sunlight should have reflected off the windows, but did not. It was absorbed instead, held captive by the heavy grit that coated the glass.

Hunger knotted within the girl's stomach as she watched the grim front door working up her courage to go inside. The noxious memory of the smell came alive in her throat and she began to gag, but the emptiness in her stomach overrode the gag with a deep growl. The girl took a step forward, wavered. The house taunted her.

"Come on in, Cissy-Sue. It don't smell all that bad in here. The flies like it. The flies be happy. No one hungry in here, Cissy-Sue. Come on in."

Cissy-Sue sat her doll next to the porch making sure the doll's dress politely covered its legs. "Okay, Dollie, here goes, gonna git us some food." Pinching her nose shut, Cissy-Sue bolted up the porch steps, banged through the front door, ran to the kitchen and rummaged through a cupboard. Pressure began to build in her chest, her face, her ears. Her cheeks puffed out and her head bobbed like a chicken pecking in the yard. Dizziness roiled about her, no longer could she hold her breath, her mouth opened and she gasped, gulping in a mouthful of air. The stench of the house swam in with the air. Her mouth clamped shut.

On the floor above her, Cissy-Sue could hear the flies in the bedroom, busy flies, happy flies, at-work-and-play flies. She was suffocating. She needed to breathe. She expelled the air in her lungs and inhaled. The sweet putrid smell of rotting flesh entered her nostrils and the merry sound of hundreds of flies dining and propagating entered her ears, and the smell and sound traveled together to her brain where they created a most pleasant thought in Cissy-Sue's mind. And though the house was darkened by film-covered windows and tattered shades that hid the house's secrets, Cissy-Sue's face relaxed and a light came over it.

Removing a box from the shelf, she breathed comfortably, no longer repelled by the odor, taking satisfaction and solace in the knowledge of its source. She walked from the house, quietly closing the door behind her.

Cissy-Sue sat on the bottom step with her doll, opened the box of cereal and ate it by handfuls. When her hunger was satiated, she went under the porch and retrieved a pillowcase that contained her meager possessions. "Time for our schoolin'," she said taking a stick from the pillowcase and drawing lines in the dirt.

"Two plus two be four, Dollie." Cissy-Sue rubbed the dirt with her bare foot erasing the math problem and drawing another one.

"Two plus three be five, Dollie." And on it went for a short time until Cissy-Sue exhausted her limited education in arithmetic. She sat with her hands clasped in her lap, the corners of her young mouth pulled tight in a tense grimace only an adult should have known.

She thought of her mother, a bitter thin rod of a woman who wielded a thin rod of her own.

"I'ze done havin my hide tanned. Done bein called dummy. Now who's the dummy, Dollie? Ain't me, that's for dang sure." Cissy-Sue coughed a dry and uneasy laugh. "I'ze done bein taught any more lessons. Done taught Ma one, dint I, Dollie? A big lesson."

She pulled a book from the pillowcase and began to read aloud. "A is for apple. B is for boat. C is for clown. D is for... not for dummy! D is for dead!"

With a black crayon clutched in her fist, Cissy-Sue scribbled over the word "dummy" that her mother had written on the page. Pressing the crayon with all her strength, she wrote the letters D...E...D.

"D is for dead," she said with a crooked grin, her eyes empty and hollow. "I ain't so dumb."

Setting the crayon aside, Cissy-Sue continued reading. "E is for eagle. F is for fish. G is for goat." She paused.

"No," she whispered her face set hard with conviction. "No. G is for gun." Cissy-Sue raised her voice and went on. "H is for horse. I is for ink..."

*Ends*

## only the stars of memory

*By Cuitlamiztli Carter*

When I ascend that cross,  
I survey all the lunar landscape has to offer.

You creep between gaslit thieves  
to make catcall after catcall.

Those sting more than the dew  
collecting on my welltrimmed brow.

"You knew I'd return at an opportune moment,"  
you purr. I did, but I'm in no mood to chat.

You rub against dogwood, and the scent of clove rises.  
"Whom will you save?" "The spent."

## TOKEBI LIGHTS\*

or

*"Will-O'-The Wisp Darkly"*

*By Frederick J. Mayer*

Sun once held sinuous strings  
upon helpless of cross stars  
till Ignis Fatuus changeling things  
Occultation of the solar  
to black burning nights  
half moon with half brain  
White shadows' flights  
dark shadows remain  
and they feed us  
the fetus.

*\*Tokebi (also spelled Dokebi or Tockepi) is the reoccurring supernatural being in Korean mythology. They usually live in sparsely populated areas, such as thick woods, graveyards, wastelands, and deserted houses.*



# TSATHOGGUA AND SHATHAK MATE\*

*By Frederick J. Mayer*

Tsathoggua, nonanthropomorphic of feral feeding, has given monstrous beautiful seed of mateship to Shathak, terpsichorian where plants devour the animalistic for foetus deep withing bowels and womb of living, erupting earth that knows so well scars of birth and pangs of death... psychopompian dance partners...infinite improvisational steps, positions they can teach...liquid stone fluids fluidity bowers discharged, nurture the unity of two forbidden knowledge givers where cadavers' shadows cower - so let us drink to that on the passing hours.

The firmament of heavens mere relections of flagrant flanks all a quiver shimmering floriculture flout fluctuation and noxious nuptial oblivion - so let's drink to that mordant amorphous amphorous juices of morbidity passions entwined with a heaving of a mordant lava ever molten through the tubes, veins of each other, sexual sucking choreography nourishment choirs...

Held constrictions explode into terra firma's cosmic part; let us drink on the passing through of their Zvilpopghua!

*\* Translated from the Book Of Eibon/Book Of Cracked Jade ("Gumi-Gan-Ok Chaek")*



# THE BOY WHO LEARNED TO GROKKLE

*by*

*ANDREW DARLINGTON*

Tyrone was seven years old when he realised there were no dinosaurs. In the books on his shelf there were pictures of pigs, sheep, chickens... and dinosaurs. But although he could see there were pigs, sheep and chickens in the world, there were no dinosaurs, which seemed unfair. So he tried to make dinosaurs by thinking and wishing really hard. He closed his eyes, screwed them up tight. Concentrated until streams of coloured patterns swirled across his eyelids. He held his breath and waited. Soon it was time for tea. He forgot about dinosaurs, and went inside.

Some time later Mrs Wilgeroff next door found the strange whimpering animal in her back yard. She was sweeping with her bristle-broom, and it was hunched up in the space beside the shed. At first she thought it was a misshapen dog, in pain. But it wasn't a dog, and it was also skinless, as though it had been cruelly flayed. It mewled piteously and squirmed its skinless limbs, flexing visible muscle-tissue and tendons. Its lidless eyes set into its skinless cranium, like something littering the abattoir floor, or amputated on the butcher's chopping block. She didn't scream. Mrs Wilgeroff wasn't the kind of woman given to such a polava, she was made of sterner stuff. She leaned on her broom and observed it from this angle, then from that. Having decided that whatever it was, this strange breed of dog had no right to be in her back-yard, she wielded her broom in brushing movements in its direction making 'Shoo, Shoo, Shoo' noises.

It didn't exactly walk, it tottered up, and more slithered its trembling way out from its hiding place, while swaying in an uncoordinated way, as though its legs didn't work together, one going this way, another buckling beneath it so it squealed and whimpered. But in a half-squelching half-dragging way – encouraged by Mrs Wilgeroff's vigorous broom, it managed to reach the gate and flopped out into the ginnel. As it happened, Mr Dean from the adjoining block was spray-washing his Austin Minor with a hose. He turned in time to see the creature limping into the narrow alleyway. He was directing a high-pressure jet of water beneath the wheel-arches, a scummy tide of dirty water swirling away down into the gutter and circling in a leisurely fashion down the grate.

He saw the creature. Then looked again. It was leaning up against the wall, as though lacking the strength to stand. Its mouth gaping in what looked either to be a grimace or a snarl. Drool leaked from between its teeth, dribbling over its skinless muzzle. Without thinking further he redirected his jet-stream from the car towards the creature. It howled mournfully as it was enveloped in spray, a dismal sound. He played the hose back and forth, and was surprised to note that – as a result, the dripping dog-beast was melting. The bare flesh dissolving away from its hind-quarters leaving only the white bone. Then, what remained kind of collapsed into a messy skeletal heap of raw squirming meat, it convulsed, as though attempting to rear up, even as its head was shredded away to skull, and the skull itself was pitted with a growing network of pin-holes. The holes

expanded. Portions of skull broke away until it was no longer recognisable as a skull, with empty eye-sockets. Ribs falling inwards like warm butter.

A pool of gelatinous gloopy goo remained. It smeared in the running water, slopping into the gutter, the dirty tide swirling away down into the gutter and circling in a leisurely fashion down the grate. Mr Dean played his stream of water over the place by the wall, beside the gate to Mrs Wilgeroff's yard, where the strange creature had first appeared. Sluicing the last smears away, until nothing remained. His grunt in an approving job-well-done way, sounds like the abortive cough of a two-stroke engine on a cold morning. Then he switched his attention back to the rear wheel-arches of his Austin Minor. He'd been momentarily distracted by all this faffing-around, but now there was a stubborn build-up of dirt there he was determined to shift.

Tyrone had tried to Grokkle it. But there were still no dinosaurs in the world.

Later, watching from the front-room window, he noticed that when the wind blew, the trees shook and shivered. So he reasoned the two events were connected. The trees were exhaling the wind. If the trees would only stop their agitated shaking, the wind would cease. He concentrated hard and sure enough, as the sun went down and the sky darkened by lurid degrees, the trees stilled to a stop, and the wind dropped to an eerie calm.

Tyrone was ten-years-old when he learned how to heal broken light-bulbs. Concentrating hard until the fragile tungsten filaments re-fused, and faint light flickered briefly back on. He called it 'Grokkling'.

It was not until he was twelve that he began grokkling things away. As he watched, there was the little girl dancing her way home from school, who – one minute before, had been mown down and smashed to death by the drunk-driver veering up over the verge and splattering her across the pavement. He thought hard, and she was suddenly walking on, turning the courtyard into her home, anticipating fish-fingers for tea. There was no drunk-driver. There had never been a drunk-driver. He now had never existed. He'd been grokkled.

People tend not to like Tyrone. He could never, even with the most generous intent, be called an attractive child. At first the other kids teased him, stole his shoes and hid them in trees. His underpants too, sometimes. Later they just ignore him. They think he's creepy-weird. The way he lies on his back in the long grass at the edge of the Red Rec staring up into the sky, seeing beyond the stratosphere, beyond the Van Allen belts and the magnetosphere, out across the solar system as far as the ice-moons of Saturn. At the same time his listening is tuned all the way down to the seething magma-pulse beneath the world's crust, while he's enjoying feeling the cosmic flow of subatomic particles whispering through his body.

'Trouble with that snot-nosed kid Tyrone' witters Mrs Wilgeroff, 'is that he's got to keep running to keep up with his brain.' Although she doesn't put an exclamation mark at the end of the statement, it's undeniably there.

He imagines people can't see him. That he's becoming more tenuous. That he's achieved invisibility...



Doctor William Godwin, psychiatrist, pressed the intercom key hard down. 'Next patient please, Miss Proudhon.' He bent almost double over the document-ridden desk to speak directly into the machine, as if doubting its ability to carry his voice from consulting room to receptionist.

He waits a moment. The window behind him looks idly out over a small enclosed garden. It was overgrown, almost forgotten. In need of work. It's growing wild without the order imposed upon it by human beings, as though eager to gobble up the neat division between path and lawn edging. Its untamed exuberance mocks the fact that the surgery occupies a prosperous city postcode.

As the Doctor half-straightens, casting his heavily spectacled eyes in the direction of the door, it opens a sliver. A reticent, apologetic man in his early-twenties enters. He closed the door with exaggerated care behind him. The Doctor continues straightening by gradual degrees until he's gone beyond the perpendicular to slouch back in the leather swivel seat. His eyes still fixed on the door.

'I'm Tyrone. I gave your receptionist details' volunteered the patient. 'Hoped maybe you could help me.' As if heartened by his own show of positivism he sat down on the casually vacant chair facing the desk. He eyes scrutinised the floor. 'Perhaps I should start at the beginning – if there is, was ever, a beginning. Or perhaps...' his eyes flicker upwards at the doctor as his voice trails away.

'Sometimes' he continues determinedly, 'sometimes when I was a kid, my father would let me watch as he dismantled the car. He'd point out various parts, explaining their function. His intention was that his instructions would encourage me to think mechanically.' He laughed nervously. 'But all I could manage was a sense of confused awe. A

wonder that the assembled engine would function at all. It's difficult to explain, but I wondered why the electrical charge would pass along the leads from the distributor cap to the points? Why the spark thus produced would ignite the mixture? Why this should result in energy and motion? Of course, I know the physics involved. The mechanical theory. I've read the manual. But why should that tangle of components function in this way just to obey some hazy laws of physics condensed out of the air and laid down in formulae by smart brainy people? It doesn't always make sense. You see what I'm getting at?'

Again there was the nervous laugh.

The doctor, in the meantime, extracts a briar pipe from its place of concealment in his jacket pocket. He proceeds to examine its charred bowl with exaggerated attention.

The patient pressed on. 'Later, I noticed the difference in people's degrees of self-confidence. How their attitude affects the inanimate objects they come into contact with. The man who bristles with self-assurance never has any trouble with his car – yet the moment that I, with a lesser amount of, er, self-confidence – attempt to drive, the vehicle breaks down or something equally disastrous happens. I got to thinking that maybe machines only function in direct proportion to the amount of confidence placed in them that they *will* function.'

Doctor Godwin thumbs the pipe-bowl full of loose strands of tobacco fibre.

'It's a small step to thinking that machines only work because people believe they'll work. If, for example, one morning people all over the world wake up with that certainty, in some way, punctured. Suppose suddenly they no longer have that belief that machines work, or that the world functions strictly

according to the laws of physics. Would all the cars in the world go dead? Would machines in every factory stop? Will TV's no longer function? Will tall building collapse, cities implode and vanish like bad dreams? Is it, can it be possible? It scares me.'

The doctor rasps a match irritably along the thin edge of the matchbox. Acrid sulphur fumes float briefly as the flame sputters, as it was cupped and sucked into the brown tobacco nest.

The patient pressed on determinedly. 'Then I took the idea further. Have you noticed how people with strong confidence seem somehow more *real* than other people? Yet personalities vary depending on who they're with? Why do some folk grow in stature and solidity when they're paid flattering attention? Why do people ignore me? Can it be that people only exist because other people think they exist? Maybe nothing is really real, and it's all one giant confidence-trick? People only prop each other up, like a house of cards? Nothing exists except this mutual illusion, reinforced by the illusion of others? What if you only exist because I think you exist? What if I only exist because you think I do?'

The patient sat back in an agony of expectation as the doctor shrouded himself in tobacco smoke. Coughing irritably Godwin emerged from the drifting bluish haze to fold over gradually, as if deflating, until he's crouched almost double over the untidy desk-top. He punched the key of the intercom impatiently. Speaking directly into the machine.

'Miss Proudhon' he breathed, 'I said, next patient please...'

The doctor straightened, casting an irritable eye around the empty consulting room. Outside the window the garden appeared to ripple, fluctuating slightly before settling down into stability again.

\*

It was when Tyrone was nineteen that the forklift truck went missing. It wasn't his fault. He was certain it wasn't his fault. But that didn't make him feel any less guilty.

A disembodied voice crackles from Shirley's desktop squawk-box correlator. The receptionist sighs, puts down her nail-file, and grudgingly flips the call-tab. She just misses out on being to the plump side. But it's the way she missed it that draws the apprentice's lingering attention. 'You can go in now, Tyrone.' Her smile is not exactly convincing.

The policeman sitting behind the foreman's desk already looks bored. He leans forward to stir his tea with a grubby finger. Ron Shakesby, the foreman, stands glaring behind him in his khaki work-coat. Tyrone sits down in the chair positioned in front of the desk, squashed in upon himself, feet slightly apart and knees together, looking a lot like a collapsed laundry rack.

'You know what's happened, right? Forklift truck. It was there in its warehouse bay Friday. Monday morning it was no longer there.'

'Don't know how the bastards did it' snarls Shakesby 'but they're gonna catch hell when we get 'em.' Tyrone fears that if the snarl gets any more pronounced, small glistening fangs will become visible protruding from the corners of his mouth.

'Yes. No sign of forced entry. So someone must have opened the warehouse doors, right? That sound reasonable to you, lad? That make sense... eh, Tyrone? So we're talking to each member of staff. What time did you finish Friday?'

'Clocked off at five-thirty' sniffs Shakesby, 'unless someone covered you, eh?'

‘No. That’s right’ says Tyrone. His flesh pressed cold against his bones. His stomach making squirmy noises like a coven of small demons. Surely they must hear it too? What is it lurking deep inside him which, every touch and turn, slithers to the surface? Like someone, or something had planted the demon-seed in his gut. Like he’s a Midwich Cuckoo, germinated from alien seed. Sometimes he wondered if he’s one of those people who cares too much about things, or if he’s one of those people who doesn’t give much of a damn about anything.

In his memory he walks to where the forklift had been parked, but now most certainly is not. He knew where it was stored. He’d even driven it once or twice, hefting pallets of the heavy reels of manila paper for the printing machines in the machine-shop above, and carrying them to the lift. His hands are sweaty. They must see the guilt in his eyes.

‘Is that it? Can I go now?’

The policeman leans back in the chair, wringing what little tension he can from the moment. Watching with one eyebrow lowered in concentration, the other raised in conjecture. ‘Do you have any ideas how it was done, Tyrone? How it was taken. Who took it, and who let them in? Perhaps you could give us the benefit of your insight.’

‘I know you’ve got something to do with this’ snarled Shakesby, ‘c’mon now, own up.’

‘Wait a minute, sir. Let the lad speak.’

Tyrone squirmed. He shrugged. ‘Dunno.’ Of course, he did know. It was when he jumped down from its saddle, and snagged his hand, it ripped his finger back, tore the nail painfully until it bled. He’d turned on his heel, kicked the drab paintwork, and swore at it.

The policeman sipped his cooling tea. And made a dismissive wagging gesture with his hand. Tyrone stood up and got out as quickly as he could. Shirley points a sharp artificial smile at him, little more than a grimace, as he slouches past her, back out into the print-works, bolting towards the sanctuary of the warehouse below. Once there he can stay out of sight, avoiding attention. If he can make it to five-thirty, if he can hide away until finishing time, he might just escape.

But no. Suddenly without warning, Shakesby grabs him by the ear and slams him against the warehouse wall. The shock and pain takes his breath away. He squirms but can’t get free.

Shakesby’s face zones in uncomfortably close. He can feel its radiant heat. Feel his particles of spit-breath. ‘It’s you, isn’t? You weird sniveling little shit. I know you’re behind it. Admit it. Tell me.’

Two things happen. Tyrone’s urgent need to escape the painful interrogation peaks into a howl of psychic mental desperation. He flops. Goes limp, suspended up against the wall only by Shakesby’s grip on his blood-reddened ear. At first it doesn’t register, and he stays pinned, until Shakesby realises something is wrong. He releases the apprentice who crumples into an untidy heap on the floor.

He steps back, regarding his victim with a sneer of derision. Weakling. Runt. Wimp. He reaches out his hand to flip Tyrone’s head this way and that. More of a flip, stopping short of a slap. He’s fainted. Nothing more than that, surely? Nothing to worry about. Come on, get up. He waits with increasing unease. Eventually he alerts the First Aider, who phones for an ambulance. In hospital his inert unresponsive body is linked up to a coma-monitoring system, with drips and catheter. They test for reaction. And they wait. And wait.

Simultaneously Tyrone has fallen into a white landscape. There's gritty white sand beneath his knees as he crouches midway up the gradual slope of a white dune. There's the huge orb of a pale planet that looks like Jupiter dominating the sky, only it's tinted too mauve to be Jupiter. A little way away he can see the forklift truck. It's as though the force of its weight being dropped here has caused it to sink some way down into the sand, or else a breeze has begun drifting the grit-particles in a way that is gradually covering it, burying it from view. He'd cursed the forklift to hell. Those were his very words. Now, it's here. And so is he. His attention lazily flicks from planet to forklift, then back again. He closed his eyes, screwed them up tight.

Concentrating until streams of coloured patterns swirl across his eyelids. He holds his breath and waits. When he opened his eyes, the white landscape is still there.

As he stands and brushes white sand from his pants, a formation of birds resembling folded origami-shapes flutter across the sky. From his standing position he can see further. There's a structure of faint-green jade across the far side of the dune. It could have been wind-eroded into those exaggerated whorls and spiraling pinnacles, but it could equally be artificial.

Tyrone shrugs, and starts walking towards it...

*Ends*

## ***"Don Juan Reflects"***

For: Donald Sidney-Fryer

*By Phillip A. Ellis*

As night, that choir of distant suns, shall fade  
into a waste of radiation, chill  
unto the utmost nadir, so I know  
my heart will find its inner coldness, fading  
until the love that keeps it beating dies.

And, as no God can break that entropy  
that chains it to senescence, and to death  
alike, so too I am enwrapped in chains  
of biting adamant, that will not break  
but last beyond my final breath and death.

And thou, my love, shalt know thy endless exile  
into the chastening wastelands, where the seas  
of time are ever dying to an ice  
studded with gods and daemons frozen solid  
in bitter despair. Such is mortality.

And thou, my love, shalt wonder as I turn  
my eyes away, for ennui fills my veins  
with bitter indifference, like the frozen void  
that fills the universe between the pockets  
of incandescent gases that decay.

# Byron In Hell

*By Michelle M. Mead*

## She walks in tragedy

Like the dead,  
Of empty tombs and sad demise,  
And all that's worst  
Of misery and pain,  
Meets in her anger and her lies:  
Thus hardened to that coldest dark,  
Which Hell to feverish night denies.

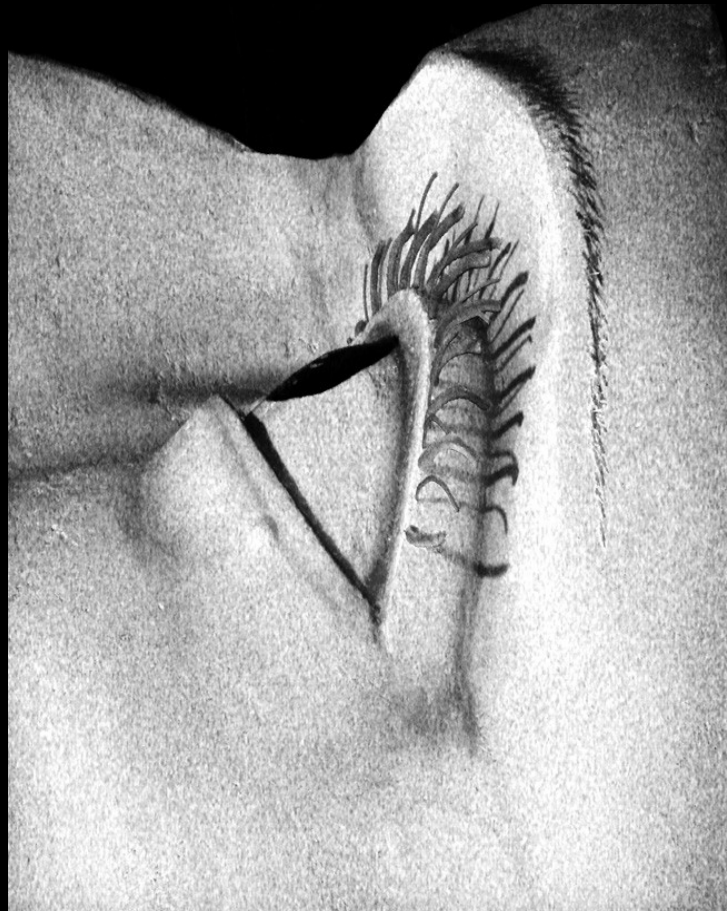
One worm the more, one day the less,  
Had half-devoured this nameless corpse,  
With dirt in every raven tress,  
So harshly abandoned on her face,  
Where thoughts darkly, cruelly express,  
How evil, how awful,  
Their dwelling-place.

And on that brain, and o'er that brow,  
So young, so slow,  
Yet with mad intent  
The grins that slice,  
The blood that flows,  
And tell of days in destruction spent,  
A soul rotting from the depths below,  
A man whose mind is murder-bent.

# Corrupted Love.

*By Dakota-Luise Wolf*

A warm sensation fills my body  
My heart races with every touch,  
The softness of your voice soothes  
My soul,  
As I lay there hoping the moment  
Will never end,  
Calling out for you  
Praying that you'll never let me go,  
The sensation so strong,  
I can no longer feel my body,  
Slowly, I fade in and out of reality  
In a instance the warm sensation,  
Fades away  
My heart's empty  
My soul torn apart  
Laying there,  
Wondering where it all went wrong  
Calling out for you, only to find  
There is no answer,  
My mind invaded with thoughts  
So cruel and unrefined,  
The sensation of fear of what's to come  
Slowly the reality is over-powering,  
The love and fantasy  
Leaving me empty,  
Confused on how to think or feel  
The loneliness I feel,  
So wretched and compelled  
Betrayal to myself,  
Revealing the fear of my love.



# At The Gallows End

*By Craig Steven*

She was everything to me. I'd met her in middle school, and I made her mine, and she'd been so ever since. I loved her unconditionally, obviously, and I was lucky enough to receive her love in return. We moved in to our tiny apartment right after high school, and we never looked back. There were no second guess. No doubts. Nothing could keep us from the other. *Nothing*. I was hers, and she was mine. End of story. Our life seemed far from perfect to those on the outside looking in, but not to us. We needed only each other to survive.

She told me she loved me before she left for work that night. I kissed her on the lips and said it back, meaning it wholly, not a bone in my body that disagreed. She was beautiful; short black hair, pale skin, full lips she'd always applied just the right amount of brick-red lipstick to. Her long eyelashes were the awning to her bright, blue eyes, and they'd always been my favorite part of her, hard as it was to choose just one thing. I'd had bad days before. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that most of my life had been comprised of bad days. But when I looked into her eyes, I was the happiest man in the world. I could do anything. Be anyone. With her by my side, there was nothing I couldn't achieve. She turned around and walked out of the door, smiling back at me one last time.

She was supposed to call me when she got to work at ten for the graveyard shift. That had always been our routine. We didn't live in the safest area in town, not with the little money that we'd barely scraped together. I thought that it might have just skipped her mind, maybe she was busy or on the phone with her mother while she'd walked the ten

blocks to the hospital. She did that sometimes when she walked to work, called people. It was me most of the time, or her parents every now and then. I thought she was okay, and I laid down in my lonely bed to fall asleep.

The hospital called me at two in the morning, worried sick because she hadn't shown up, nor was she answering her phone, and that wasn't like her at all. She'd always been a responsible person, let alone employee, and would never have skipped work without at least a phone call and an apology. It was then that I began to worry, and I phoned the police immediately.

They weren't too thrilled about my urging to file a missing persons report when she'd only been gone for a little over two hours. They didn't understand the kind of person she was, though, how she never would have just up and left without a trace. They didn't know her like I did. All they could do besides be rude and annoyed with me was tell me to wait at least 48 hours before contacting them again.

Waiting two days might have been well enough for local law enforcement, but not for me. I threw on the first pair of pants and shirt that I saw, and nearly put my shoes on the wrong feet. I was disoriented. The thought of her being gone then was enough to make my heart ache. Losing her forever would have made it crumble completely. Neither I nor my heart had any reason to go on if she wasn't in the picture. I left the house at three in the morning, the cold air numbing my exposed skin, but the temperature wasn't near enough to deter me. I had to find her. Waiting for her to come back home was no longer an option.

I walked towards the hospital, keeping my eyes peeled for any sign of her. Maybe she lost a shoe in a scuffle, or dropped her cell phone along the way, or knelt down to tie her shoe and never came back up.

Anything was possible, and I looked and looked, certain that I was going to come across a clue that would bring me to her. I saw a dark shape on the ground ahead, just barely avoiding the pool of light cast by the overhead streetlight. I ran to it, hopes soaring high, only for the mass to separate and fly away in several different directions, squawking at me, telling me to stay away. Massive ravens mocked me from their new homes on surrounding tree branches, lampposts, and phone lines. The letdown of the birds not being her hurt my heart, and I walked further on.

One of the birds flew down silently, landing on my shoulder. I could count on one hand how many times I've been so scared that I've urinated on myself. This time made me raise the last finger on that hand. I cried out, and the bird did the same, digging its long, black talons into my skin as it launched itself back into the air. It landed on a stop sign half a block away and sat there, its wings still outstretched, waiting for me to meet it at the corner. I walked cautiously towards it, and once I tried walking past it towards the hospital, it yelled at me as my foot touched the street, ready to cross. I stopped, staring up at the bird while he returned the gesture.

I set my foot back on the street, and it screeched once again. I tried turning left to cross the intersection that way, but that still wasn't good enough for the bird, who violently adjusted its body atop the sign and emitted a sound that could have been a growl. Turning back the way I came wasn't an option no matter what the raven threatened me with. I turned right, the direction into downtown. The bird calmed down and lowered its wings, cooing softly as it looked down at me. It didn't strike me as odd that I was taking direction from a bird, since I had no other choice; I had no idea where my love had gone, so

why not follow the animal's directions?

I walked through the city streets, going slowly from the rundown projects that lay at the foot of the concrete jungle into the jungle itself. Trees gave way to skyscrapers, sidewalks replaced by highway on-ramps. Luckily, it was still very late, or early, depending on who worded it. The sun still hadn't graced over the horizon, and the city was dead as I made my way through it.

The ravens guided me, odd as that was. They flew above me, shouting down their inspiration, stopping to land in front of me and point me in a new direction with their beaks, smiling at me and telling me that we were going to make it. The handful that I'd first disturbed near my home turned into dozens, dozens into hundreds. They flew as one, high above the city, and had daylight taken over, they would have been my shade.

When the sun finally bathed the skyscrapers in its light, I'd been journeying for four hours with no reason to stop yet. People stopped during their morning commute and stared at the phenomenon taking place above the city. Never before had anyone witnessed such an ominous gathering. The citizens soon began donning umbrellas to protect themselves from the early winter rain, but not me. My t-shirt was soaked through and through, yet still I walked, and still the escorts flew above me, unable to protect me from the downpour. Cars stopped and their drivers looked into the overcast sky to spot what they thought was a low-hanging rain cloud.

We made it out of downtown, no longer boxed in by the colossal buildings. The birds seemed happy, flying in circles, playfully nipping at each other, and then at me once they realized that my own melancholy mood hadn't changed. The fact that they were getting rained on didn't seem to bother them. I



suppose they were just as determined to help me as I was to find my lost love, and I commended them for that. There was nothing in it for them, not that I knew of. What had at first appeared to be a disturbed flock of birds had changed not only into an army of blackness in the sky, but also into my friends.

It could have passed for the dead of night during the dark, stormy morning beneath the shadow of the ravens. A few of them ventured down to drift next to me for a few minutes. I would look over at them and begin talking to them as if they were people. It should have made me feel crazy, desperate, something, but it was completely normal. Some of them spoke back to me before being called back to their flock, leaving me with my despairing thoughts.

The suburbs we traversed were quiet, not a soul in sight. Maybe they were sleeping in on this dreary Sunday. Maybe they looked outside and saw the bad omen, an immense mass of ravens, and decided to stay inside that day. Regardless of their reasons, the street belonged to me. The ravens took turns landing on both of my shoulders, chirping encouragement in my ear, telling me not to give up, that we were so close to our goal, that she would soon be in my arms once again.

We finally reached the dead forest at the edge of town, and I knew that it was there that I was going to find her. The ravens began letting out low, sad moans, crooning to one another mid-flight and flying closer to me to do the same. They told me to prepare myself, told me that I had at least succeeded in finding her, that her death wouldn't be in vain.

Her corpse lay at the edge of the forest. Despite the bruises covering her half-naked body and the dried blood that had leaked out of the gunshot wound in her right temple, she was still the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. Instead of the cold that should

have accompanied her rigor-stricken body, she was warm to the touch as I took her face in my hands. My tears mixed with her blood and the near-freezing rain that had been pouring all day. The ravens screamed their apologies from above my head, but they told me not to worry. Told me that there was another way. That I could be with her again. I asked them how, told them that I would do anything, and in the middle of saying that last word, lighting adorned the sky and earth moved beneath me.

The ravens synchronized from an enormous mess of beaks and feathers into a black, screeching tornado, all of them working in unison to spin into the woods at full speed before disbanding, falling apart and into the dead trees. It was as if they had all had a heart attack simultaneously mid-flight and collapsed. I cried harder; not only had I lost the only person in the world that I cared about, but I'd now lost the closest thing to friends I could ever remember having. I buried my face in her neck, inhaling what remained of her perfumed scent, regardless of how weak it was. I sat like that until a strong gust of wind blew me backwards as a new, colossal being found its way out of the forest.

The ravens reappeared, this time as one, or perhaps they left only to summon their master, this immense being of impossibility towering above the forest in front of me. It was thrice the height of the tallest tree around it, the hood of its full-body robe covering its eyes as it stared down at me. The beak protruding from the opening could have eaten me in one fell swoop, but it only stared, as still as the sky above us. A hand reached up, then, a black hand that nearly resembled a talon, covered in feathers. Palm up, it offered me a chance to come with it, a chance to ease the pain caused by the death of the woman I loved.

A tug on my sleeve interrupted the moment between the God of death and myself. My love was standing before me, smiling back, the same smile she'd given me before she'd left the house almost ten hours prior. The bullet wound and the bruises were gone, replaced by untainted pale skin. The black wings that spread from her back flapped lazily as she waited for me to follow her.

## Lady of the Darkest

*By John W. Sexton*

With a coat of tar macadam,  
which clung snugly to her skin,  
she lightly stepped upon the road  
and the road took her in.

The sunlight came upon her  
as the sun tipped its cup;  
and she became the brighter  
as she drank the sunlight up.

As I stepped upon the road  
she took me down slow;  
down to the darkest dark  
where only poets go.

The road became my journey  
and it goes on and on;  
but my lady of the darkest dark  
never put me wrong.

With our coats of tar macadam,  
which clung snugly to our skin,  
we lightly stepped upon the road  
and the road took us in.

The sky behind the raven was dark, but inviting. How could I turn down a second chance at spending the rest of eternity with my wife, how, when she had already been taken from me once before? I could never lose her again. Hand in hand, we walked into the open arms of the cloaked raven, and my world was complete once again.

Ends

## OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND

*By Neil K. Henderson*

I thought I was invisible,  
me in my senseless shoes,  
staggering hours toward dawn,  
surplus to requirements.

Totally unstructured, I,  
pretending to be bald,  
denying a trench-foot dilemma,  
submitted to absence.

My thinking was inaudible,  
gagging on lies in the dark;  
shattered, untouchable,  
screaming impossible odds.

I sent myself fishing in space  
for the gods that I lost during lunch,  
till an overnight silence took hold  
of the hole in my life.

*First published in "Target" no.6, April 1999.*



## The Wishes –

The graves appeared  
one by one that winter,  
and each time one  
appeared, one of us  
disappeared.  
Worse, the ones  
who disappeared  
were those we loved,  
not those we wished  
banished from this life.  
And that friend,  
was the ultimate cruelty,  
how even our wishes died.

*By Christopher Woods*

## ZHAR\*

*By Frederick J. Mayer*

Star-spawn of god Zhar  
beware of that flute player  
and madness of the soul star

This god twin afar  
is buried alive insane  
dreams Itself Rapture, you are.

Cannibal bizarre  
can flesh erotic flayer  
be to music played noir

Maiden avatar  
made in Ancient One of pain  
flute whispering winds the scar

Death as Love not far  
depth in heat, hunt, hurt slayer  
dragon as Loviatar.

*\*Zhar is an Asia residing Ancient One of the Cthulhu Mythos and originally created by August Derleth & Loviatar is the goddess of hurt, maiden of pain in Finnish ancient myths.*





# "Alchemy"

*By Phillip A. Ellis*

The alchemist's tower  
upon the heath,  
against the moon  
it stands  
black and featureless,  
a silhouette  
that swims in vapours  
roiling.

Not any stone  
will do; fine  
marble alone suffices  
here. Its joins  
so thin a dagger blade  
could not intrude  
between  
each course of stone.

And mysteries of time  
and matter matter  
here, the mystic's  
murmur over crucible,  
retorts that seize  
the noble work.  
There is no gold  
to be had  
here,  
only  
the philosopher's stone  
in embryo. It comes.  
It will  
come.

Eternal life,  
a dream--what dream!

The tower stands  
against the moon,  
alone upon  
the heath in which  
the wolf to wolf calls.  
Alone  
works the alchemist  
his noble work.

Alone  
he makes  
his mystic art,  
and summons forth  
from mundane things  
a glory--  
life itself.

## Smile of Cthulhu

*By DJ Tyrer*

Cthulhu smiling  
Unseen grin at cosmic joke  
Tentacles twitching



His last thought was regret. That he went to the bar, that he met her, never imagining her teeth like daggers, her arms pitchforks. hair a thousand snakes. And then there was that smile as he lost consciousness.

*woods*

## Senryu

*By DJ Tyrer*

Dracula outfit

Impresses the party guests

Too realistic

<http://djtyrer.blogspot.co.uk/>

