

THE WORLD OF MYTH



JULY 2025
ISSUE 139

ALI
BARTON
BRUCE
COLLINGWOOD
DABROWSKI
GOSSE
HAWLEY
LIANG WEI
MONTOYA
NEOGY
ONYECHE
OWENS
PATRICK
RUMPEL
SACULLA
SAINI
SHEFFAND

STORIES
ART
POETRY
CONTESTS
MUCH MORE!



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Masthead

The World of Myth is a multi-genre Electronic Magazine, produced by The World of Myth Magazine an Imprint of Dark Myth Publications, a division of The JayZoMon Dark Myth Company, LLC. The World of Myth is published Monthly.

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The World of Myth is published for anyone interested in quality Fantasy, Horror, Humor, Action/Suspense, or Science Fiction and related genre materials. All issues are posted on the Web.



INTRODUCTION

All aboard my crazy train!

By: Stephanie J. Bardy



Stephanie J. Bardy

Stephanie J. Bardy is an accomplished author, poet and editor. She is Editor in Chief at *The World of Myth Magazine* and has held an editing position with them for over 5 years. She is also Editor in Chief for *The JayZoMon Dark Myth Company, LLC*.

Her published works include *Eternally Bound*, *Eternally Bound PCE Exclusive Edition*, *The Chosen*, *The World of Myth Anthology Volume 3*, *Full Moon*

Hello Mythketeers,

Welcome to July! I can't believe we are almost done with summer. It has flown by so fast. The nights are starting to give a hint of the cooler weather to come. I think I even saw a leaf losing its green. But that is all part of life, isn't it? Things change. Time marches on. Life, death.

I am feeling very melancholy as I am writing this. It has only been a day since an idol of mine left this world. He was an idol to many. The Prince of Darkness, Ozzy Osbourne. His music, be it Black Sabbath or his solo career, was the soundtrack to many of our childhoods, but it wasn't until we reached adulthood that we understood with any depth the meaning of his words. The song Changes, or even Crazy Train, went from great songs to dance to or sing way too loud, to hitting a nerve, pulling us through hard emotional times. Many of his songs fueled tear-laden singing bouts where my throat was so tight from emotion that I could barely squeak the words out. Now he is gone, and the world feels a little quieter, a little sadder, a little darker. While yes, I understand I had no real connection with the man himself, I had a connection to his music, to his words. As writers, we all know the

power of words. The ability to invoke an emotion in the listener/reader. He had that ability. In spades. He allowed us to bark at the Moon and sit with Mr. Crowley. He told us that fairies wore boots, and witches gathered in black masses, but if you sat and really listened to the words of his songs, you could find something to soothe the pain you felt inside.

Changes was that song for me. I'm always going through changes. It's part of life, part of being a living creature. It has been there while I cried, it has been there while I dried those tears, laced up my boots and kicked some butt, and it has been there when I have just walked away. His music will endure, it will always be there, but he no longer will. There will be no new song. His has ended. I can imagine you are all wondering why I have spent all this time talking about a singer when this is a literary magazine.

Because even singers, those who create the music, write the lyrics, are storytellers. Each song is a short story that was written by...a writer. When the world loses a writer or an artist, it is something that should be mourned, recognized, and recorded. He may not have been your cup of tea, but he was a writer, like you, like me. That is worth talking about.

Now to change directions. Congratulations to Sara Ali for being our Member of the Month. Her piece really moved me. Especially with all

& *Howlin: A Werewolf Anthology*, *Monsterthology 2*, *Full Moon & Howlin: A Werewolf*, *The Chosen*, *Natural Instincts*, *The World of Myth Anthology Volume 4*, *Musing From Me*, *Unwelcomed: Stories of Hauntings and possessions*, *Penance* and *The Monster Within: Tales of A Tortured Mind*.

She has several short stories to her credit on *The World of Myth Magazine*, and several works of poetry.

She has edited thirty books and all of the works on *The World of Myth Magazine* for the last five years.

that has gone on. Chaos is just that, chaos; you can't stop it, you can't change it, you can't always avoid it, but you can control how you handle it. If you keep a smile and a positive attitude, then the chaos is easier to get through. Find that bright spot, that bit of joy among all that chaos, and remind yourself it's only life, it doesn't have to be that serious. We only get one, so enjoy every moment, even the chaotic ones.

Congratulations to Clayton Barton for his wonderful cover pic!

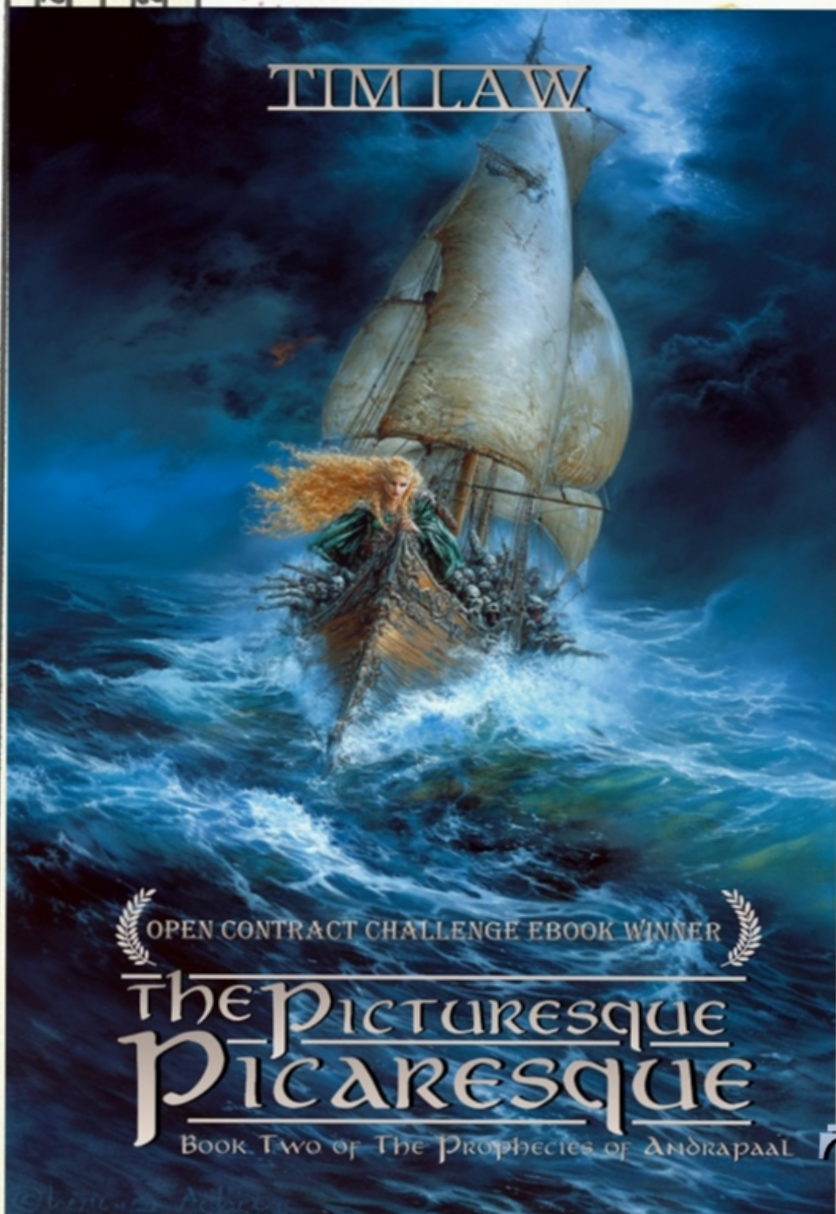
Until next month
Stephanie J Bardy



Editor of Chaos, Changes, and a little bit of Crazy.

Follow the Adventure

TIMLAW

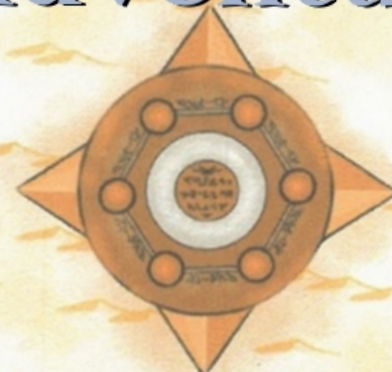


OPEN CONTRACT CHALLENGE EBOOK WINNER

The Picturesque
Picaresque

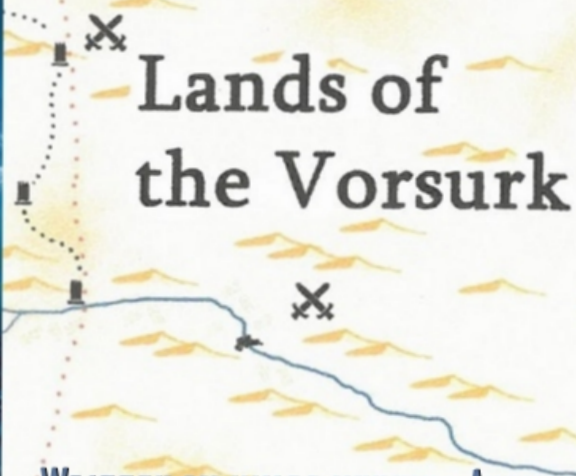
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WRITTEN BY AWARD WINNING AUTHOR

TIMLAW

The Picturesque
Picaresque



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Drabble & Flash

A Bit of Chaos

By: Sara Ali



Sara Ali

I'm Sara Ali, an academic by profession but a writer by passion; who lives in her own world of words.

It all began with toast.

Not burnt toast, not underdone toast—just perfectly golden toast that defied gravity and logic by launching itself, butter-side down, onto the freshly mopped kitchen floor. Zara stared at it, half amused, half exasperated. “Brilliant,” she muttered. “A toast to disaster.” It was meant to be an ordinary day. Her planner was pristine and hopeful:

8 AM: Gym.

10 AM: Work meeting.

12 PM: Lunch with Jamie.

3 PM: Project deadline.

6 PM: Bliss.

But reality had its own chaotic script.

First came the gym shoe mystery—only one was in her bag, the other somehow hiding in the refrigerator (don't ask). Then came a flat tire, a taxi driver with questionable road ethics, and her cat, who chose this very morning to artistically scratch

across her keyboard—twice.

By 10:07 AM, she breezed into her virtual meeting with precisely 4% battery, two mismatched socks, and hair that whispered tales of a tussle with an aggressive wind tunnel.

“Rough morning?” her boss asked, arching a brow.

“Oh, just a bit of chaos,” Zara replied with a dazzling grin, as though the universe hadn't just tried to eat her whole.

At noon, she ran late for lunch in the café, where she was told that they had run out of her favorite sun-dried tomato salad, and the only seat available was directly beneath the world's angriest air-conditioner. The waiter, with a face full of apologies, spilled a glass of icy water onto her lap and whispered, “Mercury's totally in retrograde.”

She chuckled, hugging her soggy knees. “No problem. Life's just spicing things up.”

By 3 PM, the deadline loomed like a villain in a fairytale. Her laptop crashed. Her presentation disappeared into the digital void. A mysterious error code popped

up, which—when searched—led
to a meme of a dog on fire
captioned “Everything’s fine.”
And then—like a sunbeam
cutting through storm clouds—
her phone buzzed.

It was her niece, Mia.

“I made you a drawing!” the
little voice chirped. “It’s a
unicorn flying a rocket ship
through a glitter rainbow.
Because you said your days are
boring.”

Zara laughed, really laughed, for
the first time all day. “Darling,
my days are anything but
boring.”

She looked around—the chaos
still very much present. Crumbs
on the floor, coffee stains on her
sleeve, a to-do list that had
turned into a never-done list.

But somehow, the mayhem felt
softer now. Lovable, even.

Because sometimes, life isn’t
about ticking boxes. It’s about
taking a deep breath in the
middle of the madness and
realizing you’re still standing, still
smiling.

After all, a bit of chaos makes for
the best stories.

And smiles and hopes — they’re
what keep us sailing through.

Drabble & Flash

A Taste of Deception

By: David K. Montoya



David K. Montoya

For a good part of two decades David K. Montoya was an active writer, artist and business entrepreneur in the micro-publication world. In 2013, turned his pen in for a microphone and became a podcaster for the following five years—and even did a small stint in independent Hollywood. But, now, he's come home and is ready to begin weaving new tales for this magazine.

The Waiter spied an attractive

couple walk over an empty table, and sensed money. Immediately grabbed up menus and he emerged and approached the couple smiling. "Good evening, my name is Luigi I will be your waiter this evening, do you wish for an entree?"

"No. *NO* thank you," the man abruptly said and placed the menu down. "We know what we want. We can share the fake spaghetti salad and two glasses of lemon water."

"The fake spaghetti salad," the Waiter puzzled.

The doe eyed blonde looked up at the Waiter and explain, "Yes, we want An impasta salad."

Drabble & Flash

Becoming Samson the Lion

By: Lisa H. Owens



Lisa H. Owens

Lisa H. Owens, a former monthly humorist columnist, resides in North Texas with two rescue dogs, some failing houseplants and a possum named Harry, who's had a cozy burrow beneath the backyard storage shed since he was a leggy adolescent. Her multi-genre work has been published in various media outlets and narrated on horror podcasts. She's not afraid of spiders and snakes and her stories often include family secrets. Visit her website for more: www.lisahowens.com

Leo took his lunch break early so he could watch the new girl work. Alone on the employee dining deck, he ate his ham sandwich and potato chips, washing them down with swigs of cheap generic cola. Jade, the new girl, was pretty, with jet black hair and hazel eyes—enhanced by the olive-green safari garb the employees were required to wear. She bit her lower lip, running her brush through dabs of paint, then leaned forward, animatedly conversing with the little girl seated before her in a *Jungle World* canvas chair. The girl threw her head back and giggled, tucking her blonde hair behind her ears then tilted her chin. Quick brush strokes were followed by a series of dots. *Ahh, the whiskers*, Leo contemplated as he chewed, mesmerized by the intricacy of the artist's work. Lastly, glitter setting spray was spritzed on the child's face, and it was finished. "Tada!" Jade presented the child's transformation with a magician's flourish while the mom *oohed* and *aahed* and the dad stared a little too long at Jade's perky breasts as he paid. The little girl stood and twirled, her painted face on full display, and Leo nodded his appreciation. It was incredible how this artist used a simple palette of primary colors to transform this babe's unadorned face into the perfect likeness of Samson the Lion.

He lived and breathed art; and this artist was exquisite.

Next-in-line boy took the girl's vacated seat in the *Jungle World* canvas chair, and Jade cleaned her brushes while favoring the boy with a winsome smile. Leo shoved the last of his sandwich into his mouth, launched his crumpled lunch sack into the bin, then stood, swaying to-and-fro to work the kinks out of his spine. It was time to get back to work. He smoothed his wavy auburn hair, then pulled the giant head of Samson the Lion over his head, lining up the eyeholes before settling it upon the neck of the ancient, matted lion suit. It was hotter than Satan's balls inside the costume and he could already feel armpit sweat pooling and joining the acrid sweat of those employees who'd held the coveted job of theme-park mascot before him.

Shy Leo donned massive paws before putting on his I-don't-give-a-gosh-darn swagger, becoming Samson the Lion, then stepped out into the open, cutting loose his version of the cool cat's roar. Then he waited. Children with parents in tow, flocked to him from every corner of *Jungle World*, all shouting, "Samson!" He spread Samson's furry arms, inviting the children in for a lion's snuggle and the little imps swarmed him, nearly knocking him down. God, he hated this summer gig sometimes, but he didn't hate the way Jade's hazel eyes lingered on Samson's eyeholes.

Inside the costume, Leo murmured, "Gotcha." Soon he'd lure her to his lair

and feel her feathery brush strokes as she painted his face... “Forever, Samson,” he whispered, gagging at his own sour breath trapped inside Sampson’s head.

THE END

Drabble & Flash

Hammered

By: Gabriella Balcom



Gabriella Balcom

Gabriella Balcom, who is from Texas, writes fantasy, horror/thriller, romance, sci-fi, and more. She likes traveling, music, photography, great stories, history and movies. Gabriella says she loves forests, mountains, and back roads. She has a weakness for lasagna, garlic bread, tacos, cheese and chocolate. Check out her author page:

<https://facebook.com/GabriellaBalcom.lonestarauthor>

Glenn swung his hammer but missed the nail by several inches and narrowed his eyes at the confounded thing. Aiming a second time, he still didn't hit his target. He swayed on his feet and a deep belch escaped his mouth. Blaming the tool in his hand for his failure, he glared at it and muttered, "Worthless piece of trash. I'm sick of things that don't work right." He threw it as hard as he could, sneering when it slammed into the kitchen floor with an audible *crack*. Making his way over to it, he bent for a closer look, saw the handle had broken, and gave the thing a contemptuous kick. He headed for the refrigerator and took out a cold beer. It was one in a long line, since he'd been drinking all day, occasionally tossing back shots of whiskey, too. Behind him, the tool rose without a sound, hovered in the air briefly, then slowly floated in Glenn's direction. He turned around, caught sight of the object, and gaped. "What in the...?" Rubbing his eyes, he chuckled at his own foolishness but blanched to see the hammer still moving. Picking up speed, it zoomed straight toward him. It struck his shoulder, and he yelled, "Ow!" But he screamed for help as it began hitting him again and again. He stumbled this way and that, even going into other rooms to try and evade the weapon, but couldn't.

Within a few minutes, Glenn lay on the floor, forever still, his head a crushed, bloody mess. .

The End

Drabble & Flash

Nature

By: Doug Hawley



Doug Hawley

The author is a little old former actuary who jumped from numbers to words. He has hundreds of stories published in all of the usual genres and four continents (South America, Africa, and Antarctica are difficult for him). He had two short story collections published in 2023. His home is in Oregon USA with editor Sharon.

<https://sites.google.com/site/aberrantword/hello> website with location and details on hundreds of stories.

“Hey babe, let’s go camping this weekend. I want to get us all alone for a big surprise. It’s a secret location in the Warren Woods, so don’t tell anyone what we are doing. What do you think Joy?”
 “Is this place safe, Joe? I don’t want to get lost or get eaten by some wild animal.”
 “There is nothing to worry about, I’ve checked it out. You’ll be safe.”
 “But I’ve heard about people being attacked by inhuman monsters in the Warren Woods – things too horrible to describe. Phil Semple went camping there and never came back. That was over a year ago, and nobody has heard from him since.”
 “You used to go out with him, didn’t you? I can see why you are concerned, but I’ll protect you from the monsters. You’ll just have to worry about me.”
 “I don’t worry about you Joe. I think that I’ll find a way to enjoy my time with you.”
 They had a great time on the trails after they put up the tent.

The scariest beast they saw was an angry squirrel. The songbirds charmed them, but they looked forward to getting into the sleeping bag. Later at night in the tent she said “Honey, I’m so glad you thought of this” as she caressed his side, “this works out great for me. Before you tell me your surprise, I have one for you”. He screamed as her fingers and toes turned into talons.

The End

Drabble & Flash

It's Peaceful

By: *Gabriella Balcom*



Gabriella Balcom

Gabriella Balcom, who is from Texas, writes fantasy, horror/thriller, romance, sci-fi, and more. She likes traveling, music, photography, great stories, history and movies. Gabriella says she loves forests, mountains, and back roads. She has a weakness for lasagna, garlic bread, tacos, cheese and chocolate. Check out her author page:

<https://facebook.com/GabriellaBalcom.lonestarauthor>

“Something is wrong,” Bopha murmured, keeping her voice low. “I just know it.” Chewing her bottom lip, she scanned their surroundings and frowned. “What do you mean?” Narong asked. “Listen.” “Why? To what? Nobody’s here but...” “Shh. Don’t talk for a moment. Just listen.” Narong looked to their left, their right, shot a quick glance upward, and a puzzled expression spread across his face. “I don’t hear anything.” “That’s my point. Don’t you think it’s rather quiet? *Too* quiet?” “No. I love it this way. Our city is getting more and more crowded by the day. There, I’m surrounded by dozens of people at any given time, most running their mouths a million miles a minute, not to mention the cars going by, taxi drivers yelling at each other, or people honking. It’s unpleasant and chaotic. I end up feeling like a cacophony is beating down on me from all directions, until I can’t think or breathe. It’s overwhelming and I enjoy every opportunity I get to take a break from it. When I go to smaller, quieter towns, I feel like I can relax. It’s the same way each time I go out into nature. For example, it’s peace right here.” Bopha sighed. “I understand all that and agree but think for a minute. We’re not far from a large forest.”

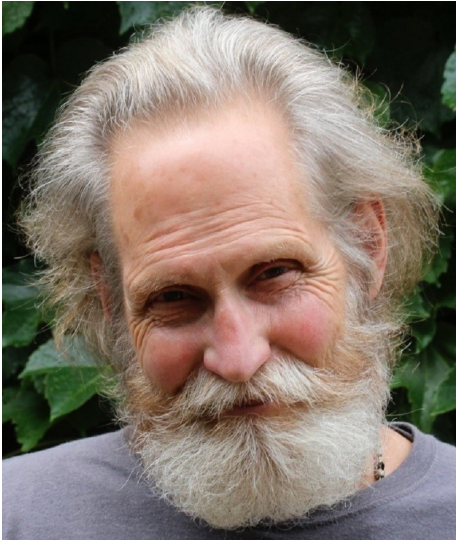
“I know.” Narong still looked clueless, his expression blank. “So what?” “What lives in a forest?” “Squirrels, birds, rabbits, deer. Probably lots of other creatures, too.” “Exactly. So where are the animal sounds, we ought to be hearing?” “These are the Killing Fields of Choeung Ek, remember?” Narong replied with a question. “They’re supposed to be haunted. People died here.” “They didn’t just die. They were *murdered*,” Bopha stressed. She whirled suddenly, staring wildly in one direction, then another. “Did you hear that?” Narong raised an eyebrow and shook his head. Only seconds later, he yelled, “*Boo*,” lunging at her with no warning. She uttered a high-pitched squeal, and he laughed his head off. But he flinched when a long, drawn-out moan came from their right. “What was that?” Disembodied faces materialized around them, winking out of existence within seconds. Eyes appeared next, glowing an eerie red. Narong and Bopha’s screams didn’t last long.

The End

Drabble & Flash

The Alien of Orchard Lake Teaser Chapter Epilogue

By: Jim Bates



Jim Bates

Jim is an award-winning author whose stories and poems have appeared in over three-hundred online and print publications. His collection of short stories *Resilience* was published in March 2021, by Bridge House Publishing. *Short Stuff a collection of flash fiction and drabbles* was published in October 2021, by Chapeltown Books. *Periodic Stories and Periodic Stories Volume Two* were published in July and September 2021, by Impspired. *Dreamers a collection of short stories* was published in March 2022, by Clarendon House Publishing. *Something Better* a dystopian adventure novella was published in July 2021, by Dark Myth Publications.

The Story So Far:

For fifty years, Ebar, an alien from the planet Rykos, has lived on Earth in the form of a human, Kyle Johnson. When the soft-spoken Ebar (Kyle) gets in a fight (one he didn't start) at his job at a sewage treatment plant, he is put in jail. Unfortunately, Ebar's jailer overhears him trying to contact his home planet. The consensus is that Ebar is crazy. He is put into The System and comes under the care of newly hired social worker Jeremy Slater, who befriends Ebar. Jeremy's egotistical boss thinks Jeremy is nuts to care so much about Ebar and makes life hard for him. Jeremy's friend and fellow social worker, Julie, is on Jeremy's side, but suddenly caring for Ebar becomes more challenging when Dr. Andrews decides to take over Ebar's case and make a spectacle of "The Alien." Jeremy and Julie are appalled and decide to take action. They decide to take Julie's RV and, along with her friend, Wren, leave town and hide out along the Northshore of Lake Superior. Ebar agrees to the plan but has a problem. He has to talk to Commander Zenon by the end of the week. He's still not sure what he's going to do, but after talking to Jeremy, he decided it's the best thing to do, to go North. Even though Jeremy is very nervous about kidnapping Ebar, Wren and Julie put his mind at rest by telling him it's the best thing they can do to save Ebar.

Ebar is excited. Being in the RV is fun for him. The drive to Duluth is a bonding experience for them all. North of Duluth, they set up camp at Cozy Cove, a beautiful and secluded campground on the shore of Lake Superior. Ebar is thrilled to be there, but Jeremy, Julie, and Wren are still worried that they may not be 100% safe. Meanwhile, Dr. Andrews finds out that Ebar has left the care facility, and no one knows where he is. Andrews is MAD! He authorized two hit men, the Onus brothers, to go after him. Near the campground, Ebar climbs a tree and contacts Commander Zenon. The commander offers him a chance to come home. Ebar is conflicted about what to do. Meanwhile, the Onus brothers have discovered where the campground is located and are coming after Ebar, Jeremy, Julie, and Wren. During a frightening confrontation, Ebar is able to save the day. Then they all need to decide what to do next.

Excerpt:

Jeremy and Ebar, the biggest issue with Ebar not going back to Rykos was his identity. And Jeremy's identity, too, for that matter. "Easily solved," Ebar said that night around the campfire. "Just leave it to me." Nowadays, Kyle Johnson no longer exists. Instead, all links to that former identity go to Ebar Johnson. And he has a driver's license to prove it, courtesy of some alien sleight of hand and a little laser-eye technology. Same for Jeremy Slater, who is now Walter Payton Slater, a name chosen

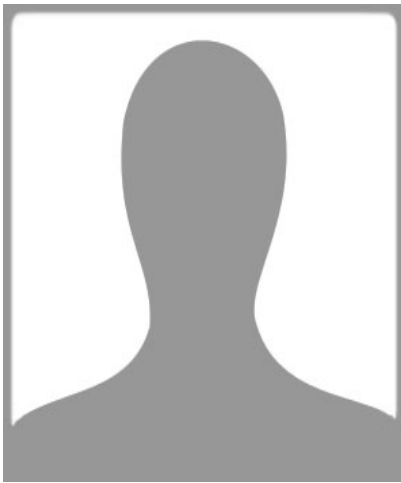
Most recently, *Periodic Stories Volume Three – A Novel* was published in April 2022, by Impspired. His short story "Aliens" was nominated by The Zodiac Press for the 2020 Pushcart Prize. His story "The Maple Leaf" was voted 2021 story of the year for Spillwords. He lives in a small-town west of Minneapolis, Minnesota. All of his work can be found on his blog at www.theviewfromlonglake.wordpress.com.

from one of Jeremy's favorite football players. He likes his new name a lot. Jeremy (Walt) and Ebar live in a two-bedroom apartment about a mile from Julie and Wren, whom they see often. After all, their experiences together culminating with *The Incident at Cozy Cove* and the vaporization of the Onus brothers, was something that didn't occur every day.

Drabble & Flash

The Final Generation

By: Len Saculla



Len Saculla

Len Saculla has been published in magazines such as "Wordland" and "Speculative 66", as well as in several anthologies from Kind of a Hurricane Press in the USA. During that publisher's heyday, Len received a Pushcart nomination. His story "Christmas Yet To Come" was the second placed prize winner in the "Christmas Competition" run by the Academy of the Heart and Mind website in 2019. He has been quieter of late but hopes to start writing regularly again soon.

Family groups and clans have struggled for superiority in clashes that spanned generations. We have limited resources to use, recycle, reuse over and over again and on every day of every waking decade we have had to make tough decisions. Because we're on a century-long voyage where the original pioneers will not reach the promised land but their children and grandchildren might. Many choose the long sleep that has occasionally become the eternal sleep. I have miraculously survived but I am much older than I would wish to be at this final stage of the journey.

As leader, I look around the ragtag crew of would-be colonists gazing hopefully through the portholes at the Class M planet we might soon call home. Seems so beautiful from up here, a veritable Eden. But all I can do is wonder: are we prepared, are we worthy, will we even be able to make a go of it?

Drabble & Flash

The Reportage

*By: Christopher T.
Dabrowski*



Christopher T. Dabrowski

Christopher T. Dabrowski is a Polish writer and screenwriter. His books have been published in Poland, the USA, Canada, Spain, Germany and India.

The third moon sector, a pub for 'grounded' aliens: "What are you doing on Earth?" The xerran journalist asked the grays sipping jugga from a communal bubbler. "We work in the gray area." The phosphorescent reporter wasn't thrilled, and thought since everyone was so unappealing, except for the incessant vomiting jellyfish, that nothing would come of the reportage, when he felt a tentacle pat. It was a female xugh. She told him about the sad end of her relationship with an Earthling: "He proposed to me after five years, and my masking failed due to emotion. And he ran away screaming..."

Children's Literature

Benny and the Missing Moon

By: David K. Montoya



David K. Montoya

For a good part of two decades David K. Montoya was an active writer, artist and business entrepreneur in the micro-publication world. In 2013, turned his pen in for a microphone and became a podcaster for the following five years—and even did a small stint in independent Hollywood. But, now, he's come home and is ready to begin weaving new tales for this magazine.

The tall grass tickled Benny's wet nose as it swayed with a light evening breeze. The forest was dark, but inviting and he knew it was almost time for his bedtime. But, the little cub had a routine before he could back to his den with his mama to go to sleep. Beings that Benny was a round little cub, his movement through the forest would be described more as a waddle than an actual stroll like most bears his age had been said to have. His Mama said that he was a carefree bear and preferred to lounge around the den and eat fish rather than go play with others his age.

The grass parted ways as Benny moved closer to his favorite evening spot. Every night, his Mama would allow him to wander a few yards away from the den to say good night to the moon. It was his favorite thing to do ever since he could remember and was his way of getting ready for bed. Other cubs would have one more game of tag or a quick swim before they had to return for the evening.

Benny smiled when he spotted the old tree that sat atop a small hill that hung over to a drop into the awaiting waters beneath.

Been slid his backside down the tree and then said in a happy tone, "Good evening, Moo—"

Benny's eyes grew big, and his mouth dropped wide open as his friend the moon was not there to greet him this evening!

"Where could have the moon gone, it was there last night." Benny said as he turned to check if the moon was playing Hide-and-go-seek and was behind the tree. But no luck. "I have to go find him! I cannot go night, night, without saying hello to the Moon first! I *know!* I will go see the Wise Owl, I bet he'll know where the moon is!"

Benny waddled hurriedly from the old tree and made his way back into the grass to find the Old Wise Owl. He moved faster and his waddle looked more like a bounce now, almost a hop while traveling through the grass. Eventually, Benny came to the largest tree in the forest. It was an old oak tree, he knew that because the Old Wise Owl told him, every time he came for a visit, to be exact. Before Benny could pat his paw against the tree, the Old Wise Owl popped his head out from an opening in the tree. His eyes were big and yellow with black pupils that consumed most of it. "Oh! Benny, my boy! I heard a noise from out there. Welcome to my home! Did you know that this is the biggest Oak Tree in the entire forest?" "Y-yes, sir, Mr. Owl," Benny said in a troubled voice.

As if it were even possible, the Old Wise Owl's eyes grew wider and he asked in a soft tone, "My boy, what,

seems to be the matter? You appear quite distraught."

"Ye-yes, Mr. Owl," Benny mumbled and looked down at the ground with a heavy heart. "My friend the Moon, did not come to visit me tonight like he does every night."

The Old Wise Owl played with the feathers on his chin as he pondered the possibilities. "I see my boy...I see."

"He's always been there waiting for me, to say hello, so I can go night, night," Benny said softly.

"Perhaps he is caught in traffic," the Old Wise Owl exclaimed with excitement. "Maybe, your friend is simply stuck by some slow clouds and is on his way but is just running late my boy. If I were you, I would return to the tree and wait for him arrive." "Okay, Mr. Owl," Benny said and turned from the Old Wise Owl to head back to the tree on the hill.

"When, he does arrive, give the old boy my best wishes," the Old Wise Owl said cheerfully as he waved bye with his right wing.

With a gust of wind behind him, Benny was only a few steps from the Old Wise Owl when he saw Jack the Rabbit, he hopped by and stopped when the bear blocked his way.

"Benny," Jack the Rabbit said and twitched his nose. "What are you doing out so late?"

Benny's head dropped low in sadness as he explained, "My friend the Moon, did not come to visit me tonight like he does every night."

"Oh! Maybe he stopped for dinner," Jack the Rabbit said with another twitch of the nose. "That's where I am going now. To Manor Family to grab a bit to eat. If I were you, I would return to the tree and wait for him arrive."

"Okay," Benny said sadly and moved out of Jack the Rabbit's way. "Enjoy your dinner."

Benny walked through the grass and the wind blew harder and harder.

Finally, the cub was back at his tree on the hill and slid his bottom against the tree. He looked up and hoped to see his friend, but he was still not there.

Maybe the moon is gone forever..., Benny thought and began to cry. *How am I ever going to go to sleep without seeing the Moon.*

The breeze ruffled through the cub's fur as it passed by him. Benny's eyes were full of tears of sadness as he cried out, "Moon! Moon! Where did you go? Why did you leave me? Was I a bad cub?"

Benny layed his chin on the grassy ground and cried until everything was blurry, but with the next gust of wind, the little cub heard, a soft voice say, "It's not gone, little one."

Benny popped his head up and focused his round furry ears to listen harder and asked, "Who's there?" Another gust of wind rushed by the cub before he heard, "It's me Wendy the Wind, little one."

"Oh, Miss Wind," Benny said with a sniffle. He wiped away his tears before continuing, "You-you know where my friend Moon is?"

Miss wind smiled and spoke with an accompanying breeze, "I do, little one. I have to admit that it is my fault. See it is my job to come in every once and awhile and blow out all the useless things of the forest, so the new can grow and be happy."

"Oh no," Benny cried. "You blew away the Moon. Oh, please bring him back!"

With a passing breeze, Miss Wind laughed and said, "No little one. You know how sometimes my breeze is cold and you have to cover up with your favorite blanket?"

"Yeah," Benny said and nodded.

"Well, even the Moon gets cold, and he decided to cover up with a cloud to

stay warm," Miss Moon explained.

"You see that cloud over there that seems to be glowing?"

"Y-yes, Miss Wind," Benny said, but a bit confused at the question.

"That is your friend the Moon," Miss Wind blew. "He has been there the entire time; he is just covered up to stay warm. He has been waiting all evening to say good night."

Benny's eyes grew with excitement as he understood. "Ooooooh!"

Miss Wind smiled and said, "Well, I have to get back to work little one, have good dreams."

With a final passing of wind, the voice disappeared. Benny was left there on the hill and stared up at the glowing cloud. "Moon I am sorry, I thought you weren't there."

"I am always here for you," the Moon chuckled. "But I guess I was covered up too much for you to hear me."

"Well, it is late, and mama is probably waiting for me," Benny said relieved that the Moon was found.

"I understand, Benny, Night night, sweet dreams," the Moon said gently.

"Night night, sweet dreams," Benny said and then went home where he found his Mama waiting. He snuggled into her fur and fell fast asleep.

The End

Fantasy

The Ghost of St Bertram Hotel

By: Dawn DeBaal



Dawn DeBaal

Dawn DeBaal lives in rural Wisconsin with her husband, a stray cat and a rescued dog. She has published over 600 short stories, drabbles, and poems in online ezines and anthologies. She tends to lean toward the horror genre because it makes her life seem so much better! Falling Star Magazine nominated Dawn for the 2019 Pushcart Award; she was Runner-up in the 2022 Horror Story Competition, two-time Author of the Month, nominated 2020, 2022, 2023 Author of the Year in Spillwords, Member of the Month in Issues 103 and 115 in The World of Myth Magazine.

The excitement that stirred with the announcement of the restoration of the St Bertram Hotel downtown, died quickly when the work stopped without explanation. Jonathan Sprig, a nearby neighbor, decided he would investigate this independently. In questioning the city, he could not find the current owner's name as the building was registered under a corporation, appearing to enjoy an incognito status. The amount of work required to reopen the former St Bertram hotel had to be staggering to meet today's public building code. The hotel was over one hundred years old, and the decaying roof and broken windows allowed rain and wildlife to enter. Everyone in town was astonished that the building was not facing a wrecking ball. The first repair was a new roof. Judging by the size of the building, the improvement was a significant investment to the derelict property. The work slowed down drastically since the hotel was secure from the elements. Jonathan reasoned that zoning had slapped a bunch of requirements on the old building to bring it up to code. It probably would have been cheaper to tear it down and put up a replica.

He remembered being in St Bertram as a child, impressed with the fresco ceilings and ornate staircases. The newel posts, thick ornamental wood, boasting carved horse heads on the top. His grandfather took him to lunch in the main dining room for his sixth birthday.

How a man would think a six-year-old would enjoy dining in a fancy restaurant with cloth napkins and crystal glasses when they could be going to a pizza place or a hamburger joint surprised Jonathan, who was intrigued by the experience. His grandfather made him feel grown up and accepted into an adult society. While waiting for their lunch, Jonathan squirmed around in his seat. "Do you need to use the facilities?" his grandfather asked.

"What's that?"

"The washroom, do you need to use the washroom?" Relieved, Jonathan bobbed his head. "Do you need supervision, or are you able to go on your own?"

"I'm six, Grandpa, not a baby. I saw it was across the hall. I can go by myself." His grandfather peered over his glasses for a moment, judging Jonathan's words.

"You are excused, and don't wander around, come right back here."

"Yes, Grandfather." Relieved, Jonathan hopped out of the chair, put his napkin beside the plate, and exited the restaurant. Just as he remembered, the washroom was

across the hall, and he entered. After he used the facilities, Jonathan stepped out of the stall to see a woman applying lipstick to her lips. "You must have had to go bad," she chuckled.

"Why are you here?" Jonathan asked her.

"The question should be, why are *you* here?"

"Am I in the ladies' room?" the woman nodded. Jonathan opened the door to see the word "Ladies" in black paint adorning it.

"Don't tell my grandpa, I'm sorry," he said. But the lady was gone. He looked under the stalls and didn't see any feet. Had he imagined the woman? Shaken, he returned to the dining room and saw the relief on his grandfather's face.

"I was worried you got lost." Jonathan climbed back onto the chair, trying to figure out where the woman went. She did not walk past him, and he never heard anyone come in. He was ashamed because he'd forgotten to wash his hands after seeing the woman standing before the mirror.

"Grandpa, I have to go back. I forgot to wash my hands."

"Go ahead, then." Jonathan ran across the hall. The door read "Wash Room." There was no longer the word "LADIES" on the door. He went in and soaped his hands under hot water. When he put his hand under the spigot to rinse off, Jonathan went to wipe his hands surprised when he saw the woman had come back and had been standing behind him.

"Back so soon?" she asked. Jonathan jumped.

"This is just a washroom; it's not the Ladies' room," he told the woman defiantly before he realized she was not reflecting in the mirror. When he turned and looked again, the skeletal

remains of a woman laughed back at him. Jonathan grabbed the cloth from the sink and dried his hands, running out the door as fast as he could, almost knocking another lady over. "Young man, slow down, you'll hurt yourself," the woman said, straightening her hat. Jonathan returned to the table just as their food arrived. He didn't want to disturb his grandfather, so he sat and let his heart rate return to normal.

"What's a matter, boy? You ordered that for yourself; don't you like it?" He did, and soon, he finished his plate. Jonathan clung to his grandfather as they left the restaurant, walking by the restroom. He didn't look for fear of seeing the beautiful lady. Eventually, Jonathan's memory of that day faded, finding a hidden place in his mind, until the article in the local newspaper announced that the renovation of St Bertram had stalled. Jonathan told his wife he'd only been there once on his sixth birthday when his grandfather took him to a fancy lunch. The words stuck in his throat as he recalled the woman in the bathroom whose reflection wasn't in the mirror.

"I'd forgotten," Jonathan whispered.

"Forgotten, what?" Claire, his wife, asked.

"I saw a ghost in there; a woman dressed in old clothing. She was in the bathroom, but she didn't appear in the mirror she was standing in front of. I ran out, scared. I never wanted to go back."

"That must have been scary."

"It was. I can't believe I buried that memory. I got to find a way to get inside that hotel. Maybe that's the reason they stopped renovating, it's haunted. Who would want to stay in a hotel with a ghost?"

"Jonathan, you will not do such a

thing; that is trespassing." His shoulders slumped, and he agreed. "I'm going to run some errands, is there anything in town you need?" Claire told him no. He had every intention of trying to find his way into St Bertram's, but didn't want his wife to worry.

Pushing down the fencing surrounding the construction site, Jonathan had the strangest feeling that the woman was still inside. His heart beat out of his chest as he climbed over the plastic mesh. Birds chirped, bees buzzed, everything seemed normal.

The new roof looked good on the building, but the rest of the hotel sat in decay and squalor. Jonathan stood momentarily assessing the structure, looking for an entrance point into the hotel. Some windows were missing. The lower ones had been boarded up, but the second and third floors were still open to the elements. That's when he saw the woman staring at him from the third-floor corner window. The curtain was pulled back; Jonathan could see her looking at him. An involuntary gasp made him step back.

The woman crooked her finger and bid him to come inside. He stepped over the rubble on the ground, letting the ghost direct him to an open window on the first floor. Kids must have pried the plywood off. She smiled. Her lips were bright red just as he remembered them years ago. Her hair was blond, forming waves down the sides of her face. The lacy frock she wore looked like a wedding dress. Jonathan wondered what her story was. Why was she left behind in this building for so many years? What was her story? He stood a broken chair under the open window and cleared the

shattered glass with a stick. Boosting himself onto the sill, Jonathan winced when a small piece of glass embedded into his hand. The trickle of blood pooled in his palm and dribbled when he turned his hand over to pull himself through the window. A musty smell assailed his nose, and he wiped his hand on his pants. It wasn't a deep cut; he pinched his hand to stem the flow, holding his wound above his head. "Hello?" he called out to no one. Should he have alerted the ghost above? Or was she a figment of his imagination? The clarity of her in his memory came back suddenly. He wasn't afraid until he remembered the skeleton in the end. Curious, Jonathan moved out of the room into the hallway. The elevators no longer functioned, so he would have to take the stairs that spiraled above him to the top of the building. Bits of plaster littered the floor as he pushed it aside to climb the stairs. Old creaking wood gave way beneath his shoes at each step. He wondered how the corporation would fix this building. It was in such a deplorable state. Flies littered the floor beneath the windows, some still alive, struggling on their backs in the sunlight, crept him out. He reached the third floor and made his way down the hall to the corner room surprised when the door opened easily. The once beautiful room was full of mold and mildew that spread up the wall and across the ceiling. A beautiful glass chandelier, hung in the middle of the room with a medallion around the top. In its day, this must have been a lovely room. He could see the river from here. "Lovely view, isn't it?" He turned and saw her standing at the other end of

the room wondering how she had gotten there so quickly. "I know you, don't I?" "Not many people are able to see me. Only special people with the gift. You were a young boy last time we met." Jonathan cleared his throat and finally answered the nod he was giving her. "You are real. All these years, I buried you in my mind. I had to come back to see if you were still here." "I am. Thank you for coming back to see me. I have been lonely for so long." "Why do you stay here?" "This hotel is where I died on my wedding day. You see, my fiancé changed his mind for whatever reason, leaving me at the altar while the wedding guests looked at me. I was so ashamed, I ran to my room and took my life. I haven't been able to leave. No one will take me." "What do you mean?" "I committed a sin, I don't think I can go to Heaven, but that was the only sin I committed, and I never did anything bad, so I am not going to the other place. I am doomed to sit here and wait for my lost loved one." "Did the construction crew see you?" "One of the men and a young woman could see me. They urged the corporation not to continue the restoration until they wiped my existence from the building. They hired a Medium, but she wasn't powerful enough. I have been here since June 1943, and only a handful of people like you, realize I am here." She paced the floor back and forth, but the boards did not creak beneath her feet. "Why do you need me?" "I must find out what happened to Neil Carter. If I knew where he went, I could follow him there, perhaps he'd marry me in the afterlife."

"Where is he from?" "Springfield." "What is his day of birth?" Jonathan asked many questions until she gave him enough to go on. "I will try to get your answers. What is your name?" "Sally Rogers." He left the woman not believing he was going to help the ghost leave the building by finding out what happened to a man who was probably dead many years ago. Jonathan left the building and went home to search for Neil Carter. He found that the man, who was over one hundred, still lived in Springfield and was listed in the white pages. "Jonathan, where are you going?" "Sorry, hon, I'm off to find a man who is over one hundred years old to give him a message." "Why?" Claire asked. "I will tell you all about it after the visit, I promise." Jonathan parked his car outside the Whispering Pines Retirement Home and walked in, asking for Neil Carter. "His apartment is number five," the woman at the front desk said. She had him sign a book. He found the apartment and knocked on the door. "Come in." Jonathan opened the door to see a man sitting in a chair reading a book. "Do I know you?" He asked. "You don't, but I have a message from a woman you once knew, Miss Sally Rogers." Neil's mouth fell open. "How do you know Sally?" "She told me how she had been stood up at the altar and taken her life. She is still trapped in the St Bertram Hotel because she can't leave until she finds out what happened to you on your wedding day in June 1943. The man put his head in his hand, ashamed. "I hadn't thought about her for years. I had every intention of marrying her,

but I was drafted into the army. I couldn't face her; I didn't want her to be a war widow, and I didn't know if I was coming back in one piece. I left a few days before the wedding, not knowing she had taken her life when I didn't show. I ended up in Italy fighting, and when I returned to Springfield, I found out about her death. I never married and never forgave myself for not telling her. I just thought it best that she be a free woman while I was serving my country. But it wasn't the right way to do things. I visit her grave weekly and put a single red rose on her stone. So, you tell me she is still in St Bertram?"

"Yes, sir."

"Take me to her." Jonathan pushed the wheelchair to the front desk and signed Neil out.

"We are just going for a ride to see the city's sights," Neil told the desk person. They drove to the hotel, and Jonathan cut the fence to drive his car up to the open window in the building and called for Sally. She peeked out of the upper window and reappeared next to them, looking out of the open window.

"Sally?" Neil's eyes opened wide in amazement.

"Neil, what happened? Why didn't you show for our wedding?" Neil burst into tears apologizing profusely. He explained to her how he'd been drafted and didn't want her to be a war widow, so he left without saying anything. He knew that it was wrong and was sorry she had taken her life.

"I never married; I never loved another woman as much as I loved you," he told her. Jonathan let them talk; they had eighty years to catch up on.

"Neil, Sally, it's time. I need to get Neil back to his place."

"Neil, I will wait for you in the

afterlife," Sally called.

"It won't be long, darling." Jonathan and Neil drove back to Whispering Pines in silence. The two shook hands.

"Thank you, Jonathan. I am at peace, knowing I will be with Sally again when it's my time."

Jonathan returned home and told Claire all about his experience.

"That's incredible," Claire told him.

The following morning, they could smell smoke. Jonathan walked outside and ran down the street a bit.

"Did you hear? St Bertram Hotel is on fire," said a neighbor.

"That's terrible."

"Claire, St Bertram is on fire! I have to tell Neil."

"I'll go with you." They drove to Whispering Pines, and Jonathan went to register at the front desk.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Carter passed away last night. He talked all evening about seeing the city sites yesterday. He said it was his best day ever. I wanted to let you know how much it meant to him."

Jonathan was shaken. He wondered if Sally was able to escape the building.

"Did he say anything before he died?" He asked weakly.

"He did. One of the staff was sitting with him. He said, 'Hello Sally,' just before he passed. Do you know who that could be?"

"It was his fiancé. I am glad to know they will be together once more."

Claire clung to Jonathan's hand as they walked to the vehicle.

"You did a good thing," she squeezed his hand. As they drove home, they saw the hotel's new roof was gone and the building was shooting flames into the sky.

St Bertram Hotel, a fixture of the past to so many in town, was gone. It was such a shame, for it had come so close to being resurrected. This once beautiful place would only live on in

pictures and memories.

The End

Horror

Trust Me

By: Gabriella Balcom



Gabriella Balcom

Gabriella Balcom, who is from Texas, writes fantasy, horror/thriller, romance, sci-fi, and more. She likes traveling, music, photography, great stories, history and movies. Gabriella says she loves forests, mountains, and back roads. She has a weakness for lasagna, garlic bread, tacos, cheese and chocolate. Check out her author page:

<https://facebook.com/GabriellaBalcom.lonestarauthor>

“Of course you’ll heal,” Dr.

Sanger stated. “Pretty quickly, too. Like I told you earlier, your injury is relatively small and the antibiotics I prescribed you will help things along. And keep in mind you’re only forty-two years old. That’s fairly young. You have years of life ahead of you. Trust me.”

Brenda beamed. “You’ve been so kind to me, letting me stay here in the hospital.”

“Well, you deserve some kindness, My Dear. Being homeless and living on the streets all this time must’ve been very hard on you. I’ve been fortunate, not having to experience anything like that, but I’ve met many others in similar circumstances. People dealing with trying lives, you know. Helping them in the past, and you now, is the least I can do and I enjoy that kind of thing.”

“You’re my hero.”

He smiled and patted her arm. In the middle of the night, Sanger visited her unexpectedly, assuring her everything was fine before adding “this special mix to help you heal” to her IV. Her eyelids began to droop within moments.

Once she was fully sedated, he summoned his assistant, Bill, who wheeled her bed into the elevator.

They got off at the basement and made their way down the hallway and into the special room the doctor used now and then.

Bill brought out what Sanger typically needed, watched him get ready, then turned on his personal play list. Music poured from the stereo, starting with the Beatles singing “Run For Your Life.”

Sanger hummed along while donning surgical gloves, took his sharpest scalpel, and carefully sliced into Brenda’s body. He removed a kidney, followed by the second. When Blondie started belting out “One Way Or Another,” the doctor sang along, swaying his hips back and forth in time to the music. Returning to the task at hand, he took out the liver and spleen, followed by long sections of intestine. Gyrating around the room to Freddie Mercury singing “Love Kills,” he fist-punched the air, laughing gleefully. He cracked open Brenda’s rib cage, making meticulous cuts here and there, and removing her heart. Her corneas followed as he sang “Take On Me” along with A-ha, then sections of her bones complete with marrow.

Soon she was nothing but a hollowed-out husk.

“What should I do with the body?” Bill asked. “Take it out in the forest and bury it? Or douse it with gasoline first, then do that?”

“Nah. No need to go to all that trouble.”

“But someone might find the remains.”

“Even if that happens,” Dr. Sanger said, “nobody cares about street trash. Just dump the carcass in the woods somewhere. The others, too.”

The End

Horror

Wednesday Night Exorcise Class

By: *Timothy Law*



Timothy Law

Timothy Law is a writer of fantasy, horror, detective and general fiction from a little town in Southern Australia called Murray Bridge. A happily married father of three children, family is very important to him. Currently working at the Murray Bridge Library in the role of Library Manager he has dreamed since his early high school years of becoming a full-time author. Working for a library, surrounded by so many wonderful authors it is difficult not to be inspired to write. Many of his short stories and general musings can be found on his blog <http://somecallmetimmy.blogspot.com.au/> or on [Parenting Express website](#).

I knew that I had read the flyer

wrong when I walked into the Saint Xavier of the Heavenly Hosts College gymnasium and saw a distinct lack of exercise bikes. I'd come dressed for spin class, ready to ride off a stressful first half of the week.

But the gym was dark when I entered, my arrival announced by the creaking of the squeaky door. In the far corner I noticed a group of figures all dressed in black.

"I'm sorry," I called out to them, and my voice made me jump at the loudness. "I think I have the wrong night."

"Exorcise class?" one of the figures called back. "You are interested in discovering more about exorcisms?"

"Oh..." I murmured, finally realizing the seismic mistake I had made. "I was expecting something else..."

"Come... Come... It may be possible that you can help this child..." the man called.

A child... These men had a child in their midst, and I shuddered to think what they planned to do. Exorcisms I had seen in the movies were never pleasant, and reading about them in the religious texts I had found in my local library had kept me awake many a night.

"I am certainly no expert," I admitted.

"But I will see what I can do."

"Of course... Of course..." said the man who had encouraged me closer. "None of us are experts, which is why we are here... To learn..."

In the silence of my approach, I felt very out of place. When I witnessed the child, I discovered all my ambiguities just melted away.

"Who are you, where?" spat the child, a young girl of maybe five or six.

"Have you come as dessert?"

She was dressed in a simple white dress that was soaked through with sweat. Tied firmly to a chair which was bolted to the gymnasium floor. I did not know of any other college gymnasium with such an optional facility.

"Let the child go, what has she done to you?" I asked.

As a primary teacher in a challenging neighborhood, I was well familiar with such language, even from such youngsters. It saddened me that I knew of the hellish upbringings such children suffered, but none of them had ever been what I would consider demonic.

"This is no child," stated another of the robed men. "Or more accurately, this is a child, yes, but one who has become possessed."

"Possessed by a foul mouth from lack of discipline and too much YouTube, yes," I replied, firm in my belief. "But, if for one second you expect me to believe a demon is in there..."

"Not a demon, no," the first figure,

the one who had invited me in, he spoke with an authority.

"Good..." I replied, cutting him off before he had finished.

"To clarify... We do not believe in demons... Such are mere creatures of mythology..."

"Devil is what we've got here tonight..." said another of the men.

"Class A, classic possession."

"Piss off... All of you... Go back to your mammas..." the little girl spat.

I began to laugh, until it dawned on me that these men truly believed what had been said. They thought this poor, frightened child was possessed by something from hell. I was going to take a lot of convincing before I thought the same way they did. At that moment I was considering how I might help the poor child escape.

"Please, watch closely," requested the eldest of the men.

He then indicated to one of his colleagues to proceed with the exorcism.

Holding aloft a vial of water that colleague then began to murmur and chant, some sentence over and over that sounded Latin, or maybe an ancient dialect of Sicilian. Dipping a finger and thumb into the vial he then flicked the water upon the child. In an instant the child's eyes burned with fire and wings of flame burst forth from her back.

"There... Do you see... Now do you believe...?" stated the man who stood beside me. "Class A... No doubt about it..."

"What the...?" I whispered in dismay.

"Where are the cameras, the pyrotechnics...?"

"We have a tough critic this evening, gentlemen," laughed the one who had flicked the holy water, caused the strange wing like flames to sprout from the child.

"You still struggle to believe you are in the midst of a biblical fiend?" said the eldest of the men. "Touch the child... Give in to your motherly instincts..."

I almost took offence at that, for such men of religious privilege to assume I was a mother, for the simple fact I was a woman in my thirties. I opened my mouth with some scathing comment prepared about priests and their lack of experience in being a husband and father, both. Before I had uttered a word though I noticed the wedding band on one of the men, and the strange symbol hanging from the neck of another. Not all Catholic then, I had to be careful of my own assumptions, else I prove myself no better than they were.

"Fine," I huffed instead. "But understand if this child has a temperature of more than a hundred it is only further proof of your maltreatment..."

"Touch me, lady, and I'll bite off all your fingers," threatened the little girl. Just in case she was going to go through with such a promise, I approached with my hand in a fist, brushing her forehead ever so lightly with the back of my hand.

"Jesus," I gasped, shocked at what I felt.

The child was ice cold, so cold that a mere touch of her skin had caused me to bubble and blister, immediately.

"We estimate, zero kelvin," one of the men said, holding up his hand, showing me a similar blister.

"There is a bowl of warm water, you should soak that, else it will do some real damage," another one of the men suggested.

"The damage is already done," I told him.

"To your hand, or to the child?" asked one of the holy men.

"Both... I'm guessing..." I replied.

"That's the spirit," said the eldest of the men, giving me a smile.

"So, what have you tried, so far?" I asked, trying to ignore the one spot on my hand that screamed for attention.

"Prayers, holy water, the name of Jesus, a few saints..." the men suggested. "Even interpretive dance... But that did not last long..."

"I said we should try a Hail Mary," the man with the vial of holy water mentioned. "But nobody else thinks it will work..."

"Roman Catholic?" I asked.

"Old Oriental," he replied with a shake of his head. "Don't worry if you have not heard of us... We are quite different to the west..."

"Didn't Jesus cast out devils... Into pigs, if I recall correctly..." I suggested.

"He cast out one devil into a herd of swine, according to Mark, Matthew, and Luke..."

"None of us know how, though," said one of the elder of the holy men.

"And we have a severe lack of pigs."

"There is a family of cats that live around the back of the school canteen," I suggested. "I heard the mother cat with her kittens when I went past."

"We couldn't..." murmured a couple of the men.

"What about a goat or a toad...?" suggested one voice, eagerly. "I think there are a few toads in the science wing's freezer."

"Perfect, Pastor Peter... Go grab us... Two..." ordered the most senior of the holy men. "Just in case the first attempt is a failure."

"Let me go..." begged the girl. "My parents will be worried..."

The sound pulled at my heartstrings, and I considered stepping in and attempting to release the poor thing. The ache in my hand though

reminded me constantly of what I had already witnessed that evening. I shook my head.

"You will be free soon," I promised.

"Yes, I will..." snarled the creature within. "And when I do break free of these feeble ties, I shall take you all home to meet my master..."

"Hurry, pastor, please..." I prayed.

It took ten minutes. The longest ten minutes of my life.

"I found cow's eyes," cried the voice of the pastor as he burst into the gymnasium. "And half a toad."

"Are they all frozen?" asked the Old Oriental priest.

"The toad is..." said Pastor Peter. "The eyes are fresh."

"Alright... Let us try the toad first..." I suggested. "The devil is cold, so it would make sense that the thing it is most attracted too will be cold also."

"Ma... Ma... Logic..." taunted the devil, the child's eyes flashing with disdain.

"Blah-dy blah... Blah... Blah..."

"Are we certain of this...?" asked one of the younger members of the group, one I had not heard speak up yet.

"Of course we are not certain, Michael," said the eldest of the men.

"It is yet another opportunity to test a hypothesis and learn..."

There was some grumbling from the men, but, since nobody else had another idea, mine naturally won out.

The toad was placed beneath the chair, causing the little girl to weep and scream, and then she began to whisper all kinds of profanities, even some words I could only guess the meaning of. All the while I felt useless, watching on, as the holy men chanted, compelling the devil to leave the body of the innocent, and enter into the vessel of evil. As the chanting softened to a mumble, and then

finally ceased, the men all looked at each other.

"Screw you and your magic spells," hissed the little girl. "Your words and your god mean nothing to me."

"I don't think it worked," mumbled Pastor Peter, obviously disappointed.

"So, I guess we try the eyes then," I said, hoping I was right.

"Six groups of six should do it," the eldest of the holy men announced with some authority.

The others nodded in agreement.

"The number of the Prince of Darkness... It should be compelling enough..." they whispered amongst themselves.

"No... Please..." begged the devil through the lips of the child. "The eyes are the window to the soul..."

This panic, this reaction, it spurred those holy men on. Suddenly I found myself being shuffled out of the circle. It was like I had done my part and then I was no longer needed.

"Excuse me," one of the holy men murmured as he bumped into my side.

One by one they took those frozen eyeballs and grouped them just as they said they would. Three groups of six, eighteen in total, varying in size and condition. As they began to chant again, I noticed some of those eyes quivering.

"Please! Stop!" cried the little girl.

"You're hurting me!"

"Keep going," urged the eldest of those holy men. "We will do it... We will save this young soul..."

"Stop... Stop... I think something is wrong..." I said, for I could feel a strangeness in the still air.

And then it happened. One by one the eyes rose up, hovering briefly, before flying toward each one of the holy men and smashing into their faces.

I witnessed looks of horror and disgust, plastered across each one of

them as they witnessed one another, all, without fail, now with a third eye in the middle of their foreheads. Each of those third eyes were framed by a pentagram, and one by one, each eye suddenly popped. The pop was quickly followed by a murmur of anguish.

Pop... Pop... Pop... The other eyes then burst open, and following this the eyes of each of those holy men also burst open, oozing blood and puss, and that clear gel.

"I am blind," moaned one of the men, and then another, until the stillness of the gymnasium was broken by their chorus.

I took that moment of chaos to rush in and release the poor girl, their victim. I had had enough and was compelled to leave this strange scene.

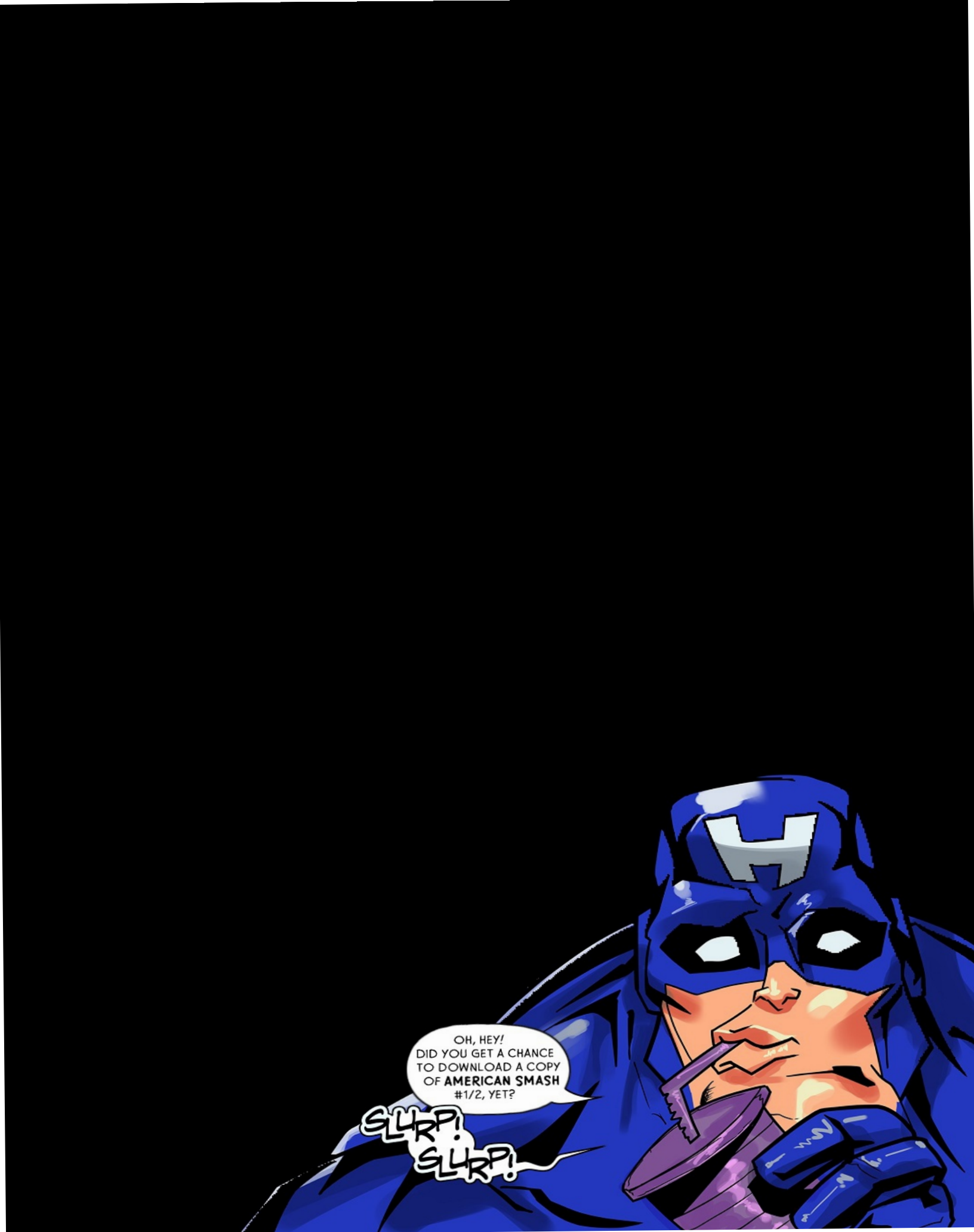
We ran from that gymnasium, the little girl, and I, her tiny hand feeling so fragile as I gripped it tightly. I left the holy men to deal with the mess, I had far more important things to tend to, like getting this poor girl home.

"I shall take you back to your parents, and explain everything," I promised, trying to reassure her.

It was as we were nearing my car, that I felt the tiny fingers elongate into claws.

"Wrong," growled the voice of the devil. "It is me who will be taking you home."

The gates of Saint Xavier of the Heavenly Hosts College were flame licked. With the child pulling me along then, no matter how I tried to resist, my destiny, I discovered, was inevitable.

A close-up comic book panel of American Smasher, a superhero with a blue suit and a white 'H' on his forehead. He is shown from the chest up, holding a sandwich in his right hand and taking a bite. The background is solid black. A speech bubble is positioned to the left of his head, and sound effects are written below it.

OH, HEY!
DID YOU GET A CHANCE
TO DOWNLOAD A COPY
OF AMERICAN SMASH
#1/2, YET?

SLURP!
SLURP!

Action/Suspense

19 20 21 - Part Fifteen

By: *Timothy Law*



Timothy Law

Timothy Law is a writer of fantasy, horror, detective and general fiction from a little town in Southern Australia called Murray Bridge. A happily married father of three children, family is very important to him. Currently working at the Murray Bridge Library in the role of Library Manager he has dreamed since his early high school years of becoming a full-time author. Working for a library, surrounded by so many wonderful authors it is difficult not to be inspired to write. Many of his short stories and general musings can be found on his blog <http://somecallmetimmy.blogspot.com.au/> or on [Parenting Express website](#).

Denpasar International was just as busy as Joe remembered it. The pilot had managed to float in on a wing and a prayer, the single engine biplane pushed to its absolute limit. “The Indo authorities are cracking down on mystery flights,” the pilot said as southern tip of the island of Bali came into view. “I can’t risk dumping you in the jungle or the mountains...” “It looks like we’ll be playing a game of pretend, Charlie,” grumbled Joe. “I brought these along for just in case...” The woman that sat beside Joe, Gregory’s mother, looked up when the older man spoke her name. She accepted the passport that was handed to her, a touch surprised. “It looks like you’ve thought of everything,” she muttered. “Not everything, darling,” Joe admitted. “But I at least thought of this...” “So... Is Sally-Ann de Rosa an actual person?” Charlie asked. “Does it matter?” replied Joe, an edge to the older man’s tone that told his companion not to push any further. She accepted the fake ID and a gray note, an Australian hundred dollar, so crisp that it made her wonder if that was fake too. “Is this so Customs doesn’t look too closely?” she asked. “Got it in one, babe,” Joe said, now smiling. “I’ll leave you here... Think you can

make your own way in?” asked the pilot, hopeful. “Yeah... We can take it from here...” replied Joe. “This is for your trouble...” Charlie noticed a pair of the gray notes as Joe palmed them to the pilot via a handshake. “Probably buying your silence too,” she mumbled. “Enough out of you,” growled Joe. “Unless you want me to leave you here to make your own way...” “Surely I couldn’t be any worse off,” Charlie replied, defiant. “I like your attitude,” said Joe. Then came the slap that Charlie should have expected but didn’t. It was like lightning with a thunderous crack that echoed in the small cabin of the plane. “But I hate your lack of belief,” the older man added as the sound of the slap vanished like it had never been, but the sting of it remained as a cruel reminder. “I heard nothing, saw nothing too,” the pilot said, quickly. “Good lad,” Joe said, slapping the young man on the shoulder. “You’ll have a long life ahead if you keep that up.” “Can we go now?” begged Charlie, her hand covering her burning cheek. “Sure thing, babe,” said Joe, casual, like nothing had happened. “Let me get the door for you.” “Reason for your visit to Indonesia?” as the woman in the booth as Charlie approached and handed over the

passport Joe had given her the money, tucked between two clean pages.

"I am meeting my sister for a family catchup," Charlie lied.

It wasn't the story that Joe had told her to go with. That had been some elaborate fairytale about celebrating a wedding anniversary, spending some time up in the mountains with her husband of ten years.

"Some time in Kuta...? Cocktails on the foreshore?" the customs lady asked.

"I don't know what my sister has organized," Charlie replied, the lie spilling out easily. "That all sounds nice though."

The passport was stamped.

"Welcome to Bali, Sally-Ann..."

"What? Sorry... Thank you..."

mumbled Charlie, confused for a moment as she was addressed by the false name.

"Sama sama...," said the customs lady.

"Enjoy your stay..."

I'm in... I made it...

Charlie could not believe it was that easy. And then it got super complicated again.

"Come on, wife..." growled Joe's voice in Charlie's ear as he snuck up behind her and grasped her firmly by the forearm.

"I'm not..." Charlie began, trying to pull away.

Joe indicated the men in green uniform, each with a gun slung casually over their shoulder.

"Airport police..." the older man murmured. "We're not out of the woods yet, babe."

"Where are we going then, husband?" Charlie compliantly replied.

"I'm thinking we head north first to Ubud," revealed Joe. "I know a few places where we can disappear until the heat dies down..."

There is plenty of heat, that's for sure...

Charlie stripped off her jacket and contemplated removing other layers.

"Hey, slow down," chuckled Joe. "Can't that wait until we get to a hotel room?"

"I need to find a new wardrobe, and fast... This humidity is going to kill me..." Charlie complained.

All around her she noticed the other visitors all wore shorts, t-shirts, flowing dresses.

"Is this your first visit?" asked Joe, surprised.

"It's not Sally-Ann's, by the look of things," Charlie replied. "But yes, I admit I've only ever been to Europe and that was years ago."

"Well then... This is going to be a real test of our relationship..." Joe chuckled.

Well, we're already off to a poor start...

Charlie again tentatively touched her tender cheek.

"Let's go and find a clinic," suggested Joe. "Get you some sort of cream for that cheek shall we...?"

"Yes please," Charlie mumbled.

All thoughts of possible escape vanished from her mind.

"I need more spuds, and make it quick..."

Lisa heard the cook yell out from the fryer, but it did not register she was the target of the order until the larger, more foreboding figure marched right up to her and poked her in the chest.

"Did you hear me, blondie, or are you miles away again?"

Lisa almost dropped the glass she was wiping, catching it inches from the floor.

"What...? Sorry...? Were you talking to me...?" Lisa stuttered, back in the present.

"Yes, love... More potatoes, cut into thick chips..." stated the cook. "Quick as you can..."

"But the dishes?" Lisa replied, indicating the pile that still needed washing.

"Chips first... It's schnitzel night... Remember?"

It was Lisa's first shift and Bella, Queen Dish-pig was watching her with beady eyes.

"Why can't I peel?" Bella asked, as sweetly as she could manage.

"You, peel...?" laughed the cook, and not in a friendly way. "Have you forgotten already what happened the first time you peeled spuds?"

"No," admitted Bella.

She snatched the tea-towel from out of Lisa's hand.

"Peeler is over there in the drying rack," the cook said, pointing Lisa in the right direction. "Don't cut them julienne, ok?"

"Yeah, that was the mistake I made," admitted Bella.

"Bloody kindling vanished into charcoal sticks in no time flat," added the cook.

"That fryer is a hungry beast."

"Chunky cut... Got it..." replied Lisa.

"Spuds are in that hessian bag in the corner," Bella said, pointing to the brown bag.

"What the hell are these... Boulders...?" exclaimed Lisa as she rummaged

around in the bag and pulled out a potato the size of Bella's swollen knee.

"Yep, we sure grow them big here," Bella agreed. "So, you'd better get peeling..."

Lisa sighed as she pulled out two more spuds, each one larger and bumpier

than the one before. That was the moment when she discovered the peeler was just a paring knife, small,

sharp, and dangerous to potato skins and human skin alike.

"How long on that batch of chips?" the cook's voice demanded to know. "Five minutes!" Bella called back. "Five minutes?" asked Lisa, sure that this was impossible. "Here, let me peel and you cut..." suggested Bella. "Those dishes can wait."

Mike sat in the front, passenger side as the officer drove him and the children back toward Sydney.

"I take it Detective Fields got her flight, ok," he stated.

"Yeah, I would say she is back in Goolwa already," the officer agreed. The kids had wanted to stay a little longer and do something nice for the old woman who had shown them such kindness. Mike had made no argument, and the officer who had offered to drive them seemed in no particular hurry. It had been closer to knock off time for a regular nine to five when the trip back to the city had finally been able to begin, Mike was aware that police work never stuck to a nine to five schedule.

In the back Sasha, Gregory and Georgie chatted quietly together, Mike catching snippets of their conversation.

"How are we going to make it work though?" Georgie asked, confused.

"Don't you remember when we used to share a room?" big sister Sasha replied.

"That room was bigger than mum and dad's is now though, and I rather like having my own space." said Georgie.

"I know what you are trying to do for me," said the boy that sat between the two sisters. "But it is not going to work."

"We are going to have you stay with us... You are not going back to that uncle of yours... He's evil..." Sasha stated as a matter-of-fact.

"Yeah..." Georgie agreed, a quiver in her young tone. "I don't ever want to meet anyone like him again for as long as I live."

"So, if there is no way that you can ever live with us, where can you go?" Sasha asked, a mix of curiosity and concern.

Mike struggled to catch the next bit of the conversation as the officer asked him a question.

"Sorry, mate, what was that?" he asked.

"How many years?" the officer queried again. "How long have you and the detective been together?"

"It feels like forever," Mike replied. "I know she has had that time in South Australia, this whole case has been a stark reminder of that time..."

"Ain't that the truth," the officer agreed.

"But, for most of the time Son has lived in Victoria, she and I have been a thing..." Mike added.

"She seems happy," the officer continued. "I had never pegged her as family focused."

Mike wanted to argue strongly against that sentiment, but, pausing for the briefest of moments to really consider this concept, he found he had to agree with what the officer was suggesting.

"Yeah, my wife struggles with balancing work and life," Mike replied. "When she is at home you can tell that her mind is still focused at least a little bit on her current case."

"I guess that is what it is like with a lot of us," suggested the officer, slowing down as the off-road to Luna Park came into view.

Roadworks signs had reduced the speed limit, even though there looked

to be no work being done at that time of day.

"Are you in a relationship?" Mike asked.

"Sure am," the officer stated. "A girl named Michelle who works at the front desk of the station in my hometown."

"Been together long, you two?" asked Mike, then he smiled when he considered that was in a way the question which had started this conversation.

Before the officer could reply there was a squeal from Georgie in the backseat.

"Girls, what on earth is..." Mike began.

"Oi!" shouted the officer, seatbelt undone and door open while the car's engine was still running.

It was not the only thing running. Mike witnessed, to his complete surprise, as Gregory clambered across Georgie's lap and opened the car door. Jumping out onto the busy street, the boy fearlessly ran off toward the theme park.

"Gregory! Come back!" called Mike, Sasha and Georgie all together.

Five minutes later the officer returned to the car.

"Bloody kid has up and legged it."

"You mean there is no sign of him?" asked Mike, confused.

"I'm going to have to call it in," the officer admitted.

"Hey girls, did Gregory give you two even a hint as to where he was going?" asked Mike.

"No dad, he just ran off... We swear..." replied Sasha.

"I was hoping he could be our brother..." lamented Georgie. "But man is he heavy..."

"Well... What do you want me to do?" asked the officer. "Wait here or take you in for debriefing?"

While the girls begged to stay and help search, Mike saw the sense in continuing to the station. As they headed into the heart of Sydney, the

girls watched squad cars with flashing red and blue lights speeding in the opposite direction.

“I hope we meet again, Gregory,” whispered Sasha.

Her little sister, Georgie squeezed Sasha’s hand to show she felt the same.

To be continued...

Action/Suspense

In the Midst of Normalcy Part 26

By: Tom Fowler



Tom Fowler

Tom Fowler, 68 years old, retired and lives in Overland Park, KS. Author of several books and numerous short stories. Visit Tom's blogsite at tommyschoice.wordpress.com.

79. Entry in the Diary of

Elaine Baughman

Wednesday night, July 9, 2008: *I've been keeping a diary since junior high school and never have I been as emotional as tonight. I have watched my husband age before my eyes these last four long days. He's suffered with cases before but never anything like this. The Edgmon murder gives me the shivers so I can only imagine what it is doing to him in ways that even I cannot see. Today he took a big gamble with not only the life or lives of future targets of Mrs. Edgmon's killer but with his career as well. He says Chief Gilliland is backing him but this is now a national case. If someone else turns up dead in the Coleman family I'm not certain Gilliland could or would stand behind him. It's turned into what Gary feared; a public media circus. I hope the killer is found soon for more reasons than the obvious. The thought of that poor woman dead at the bottom of that tacky picture of Marilyn Monroe makes me shiver. You would think only a man would kill with such symbolism, but Gary says that one of the women, a turned out lesbian, has drawn the most attention and suffered the greatest mental deterioration. Sure looks like that lady may be the guilty one to me but I learned a long time ago that appearances are rarely what they*

seem. But – at times they are exactly what they seem!

Gary says he has let a cold-blooded murderer go home and there is little evidence to go on. I know this case will eat at him for the rest of his life if it remains unsolved. Pete and Jeff are involved too but in the end it is Gary's case. This week I have thought a lot about the depression era FBI man Melvin Purvis. He became a hero but committed suicide years later. He couldn't handle fame or the jealousy of his boss. I pray this does not happen to Gary. But, I do pray for his success and the resolution to Leann Edgmon's murder. I think Gary can handle success with this – if he is blessed with it. I don't know if he can handle failure and knowing he let a killer walk free – even though it was the right thing to do. There have been no good choices. Life is cruel. I think law enforcement people know this better than everyone else. Most people read about the dark side of life or watch it from the safety of their bedrooms or living room television sets. We live it and have to bear the consequences of tough choices, good and bad. Dear Lord, bless my husband in his hour of need. Amen.

80. Entry in the Diary of

Cathy Coleman

07/09/2008: *What a week this has*

been. I am numb. It seems the last seven days have been 70 years but in some ways seems like only a few hours. I'm living with the outside chance that my husband is a murderer. I wouldn't be here now writing this if I truly believed it but how can one be 100% sure? You cannot and to me that is the most frightening thing. Today, Lt. Baughman let the family leave. That was a hard thing for him to do and it's a decision that may come back to haunt him if anyone else gets hurt. I wonder, how many other people has this killer harmed and for how long? But, it's a family thing so perhaps it is a one-time settlement of an old grudge. That's hard to believe but it is a wicked, dark world and all is possible. I'm scared but not like you would think. Mainly it's a bad case of nerves. What started out so great – and almost ended with an upbeat last night of merrymaking -- went horribly wrong. I can't get it out of my mind that I should know who the killer is. Maybe I'll call Baughman in a few days for a chat if he doesn't come around first. This is like a scratch that won't itch. Tim is restless tonight and I know what I can do to soothe him. Thank God for small and not so small favors. We've enjoyed the physical side of marriage for longer than most couples and I thank Him for it.

81. A Game of Nerves

Wednesday night, 11:00 p.m. It was with a sense of frustration, fear and anxiety that Gary Baughman went to bed on the night after emptying the Coleman home of its guests. The agony of the Coleman family and his

sense of responsibility to the (Overland Park Police) Department and community at large weighed heavily upon him, for he had unleashed a murderer. There were several officers and volunteer police scouring the databases for any cases similar to this one. He reviewed the reports while attempting to wind down and relax in his modest office at the police station before returning home and calling it a day. Not surprisingly, there were no other murders on record in which the victim had been found at the cardboard feet of a movie star cutout. It was also no surprise in finding there were many instances of murder in private homes during parties and family events. But, there were only a handful of crimes of all kinds which came even close to the circumstances of the Edgmon murder. One of them was in Eugene, Oregon back in 1992. A man had awoken one morning – alone -- covered with blood and a with finger missing. Five years ago in Dallas a woman was found frozen in an abandoned freezer in an otherwise vacant house. The electricity had been left connected apparently for this purpose. The woman, a 68-year-old spinster, had no apparent enemies and no romantic entanglements. In Scottsdale, Arizona, just last year a man was seen entering the front door of his home, never to be seen or heard from again. These and the several other unique crimes brought to Gary's attention were interesting for enthusiasts of bizarre and unusual crime, but for Gary they served only to give him a headache, a headache that neither Elaine's deft fingers on his neck and shoulders nor the stiff whiskey and soda he consumed before dinner would ease.

The last few days had been the most difficult of his career. Tonight, he was coming to grips with the fact that, for the remainder of his life, he would have to live with whatever consequences would come from his actions of earlier today. That there was nothing in any law enforcement database anywhere to lead him to Leann Edgmon's killer was certainly of no comfort to him. He knew the killer was not a young person and feared Leann was not his or her first victim. There was so much he did not know, so much he could not know. The circumstances of the crime haunted and horrified him.

Gary consumed no small quantity of alcohol on this night, but was so keyed up that he barely felt a light buzz. After Elaine joined him in bed, he began to talk.

"I reviewed those bizarre cases I told you about. The public has a tremendous advantage. They don't live the horror and misery. They only read about it and watch it on TV."

"Thank God that most people will never have to experience what the Colemans are living through," Elaine replied.

"Yes," her husband agreed, "most people will never know. I hope the work me and my colleagues do plays a small hand in that."

"Elaine turned over and kissed him lightly, saying, "You know it does."

"I hope so," was all he said. An awkward silence ensued before he added, "I'll never find the killer if he behaves himself. The only chance we have is if he or she strikes again. This person is smart. I suspect it will be awhile if ever before whomever it is puts himself at risk again."

"Maybe," offered Elaine.

"Yeah, maybe."

"Things happen when you least expect

them to. Mrs. Edgmon's killer does not think like you or I do. Who knows what motivates this person, or when." This time it was Gary's turn to kiss his wife. He said, "I know you're right. I just need a good night's sleep." Elaine smiled and said, "Now that is the most sensible thing you have said all week."

They kissed for the final time this night but for Gary there would be no restful night's sleep. That would come a few nights later but for now, the emotions simply ran too high. Sleep would not come. All through the long night, Harry Truman's famous saying, 'The Buck Stops Here,' ran through his mind. Indeed the buck did stop with Gary Baughman on everything concerning the Edgmon murder. He was going to have to live with several hard facts: he had let a murderer walk free. He had no idea who the murderer was, (although Stephanie Coleman was his favorite suspect). He feared he would never know who the murderer was, unless the murderer struck again. If the murderer struck again he may, but probably would not, make a mistake and leave a clue. Gary swallowed nausea as he contemplated there would be no satisfaction in finding the killer if he had to live with blood on his own hands. There would be no winners in this case and whatever may happen next will in large part be his responsibility.

Gary was a pro and had overseen many unresolved crimes throughout his career. He knew that you do not win them all in court and you do not solve them all in the field. He had proven to himself many times that he could live with these realities.

He did not know if he could live with this one.

Elaine felt his agony. Quietly, she

arose and slipped quietly from the master bedroom. As she was to her husband, so her diary was to her a sounding board and place to record deep and private concerns.

82. Tuesday, September 2, 2008

The day after Labor Day: The remainder of the summer was harsh and unpleasant for the Coleman family. It was hardest on Tim and Cathy. Tim struggled to accept that the murder of his cousin could and did happen in the basement of their home. He did not have to ask Cathy to cancel the anticipated trip to Scotland; she canceled it on her own. Neither of them was in the mood for a long and emotional trip to Cathy's ancestral home.

The other Colemans adjusted as well as you could expect. It was easier for them because they were able to go home and leave the scene of the crime and family reunion gone wrong. To say they adjusted well is not to say that were able to put the experience behind them and quickly return to normal. Mike Coleman, the toughest of the family emotionally, suffered severe headaches. Janelle continued to suffer from guilt and experienced violent nausea attacks. Larry, in an interesting variation of the sympathy pains a husband feels when his wife is pregnant, developed the same symptoms. Between the two of them they lost their senses of taste and appetite and over 40 pounds in only a few weeks' time. Stephanie, with the assistance of Jim and Peggy, was able to function normally but slipped into

depression and mood swings. Jim and his wife fared better than others in the family, in large part because of their efforts on Stephanie's behalf, but they too suffered from the shock of Leann's murder. Jim couldn't sleep and Peggy wanted to sleep all of the time. Bob Coleman developed an anxiety he had never experienced during his many years in public service, something which surprised and frightened him. The first time he experienced an anxiety attack, shortly after arriving home after the reunion and Leann's murder, the judge thought the dizziness and mental disorientation were signs of an incipient heart attack. Jack Edgmon was in mourning, suffered from depression and wondered if the killer was finished with his murderous work.

Still, it was a tremendous advantage for the others to live in their own homes far away from the scene of the crime and its unpleasant memories. Cathy and Tim, on the other hand, had no choice but to be reminded day after day of what happened to Leann. Tim spoke of selling the house, even of moving to another city, but Cathy wisely counseled him to wait and see how he felt in six months to a year. "It's simply too soon," she reasoned, and Tim knew she was right.

Tim was haunted by his cousin's murder and began drinking heavily. This worried his wife but there were times in their marriage when he drank heavily when under stress and always cut back after a few weeks' time. However, neither of them had ever experienced this kind of stress and Cathy did not know what to expect this time. Cathy had trouble sleeping, in large part because of the frightening and uncomfortable anxiety attacks which would plague her early in the morning when in a deep sleep. She

would awaken, usually between 2:00 and 3:00 in the morning, shaking uncontrollably and sweating profusely. She would feel sick to her stomach and disoriented. After the first few times this happened, she learned to control it by forcing herself to get out of bed and walk to the bedroom window. Looking outside and allowing the peace of moonlit early morning to calm her, Cathy usually returned to bed after ten to fifteen minutes passed. Sometimes she would shower before returning to bed and always donned a clean nightgown. That brother-in-law Bob mentioned to her via telephone one night he was experiencing similar symptoms to hers was of no comfort. With the notable exception of Gary Baughman, the Edgmon murder was just another case to the officers and detectives who worked it, although it would be one nobody involved with it would ever forget. It was simply another case in the sense that they were quickly assigned to other projects and had no choice but to put their minds and energies to the tasks at hand. Jeff Bearce had been assigned a murder of his own and Pete Quarles was investigating a string of robberies. It had been a nightmarish experience for all of the law enforcement personnel assigned to the case during those long four days at the Coleman house in early July, but work therapy was the best thing that could have happened for them. It was one of the few good and positive things to come out of the Edgmon murder and that is not saying much, for all any of them did was simply perform their assigned duty. Gary Baughman was not so lucky. This was his investigation and the full weight of his decision and the unsolved status of the case wore

heavily upon him. He did not develop the physical symptoms the Coleman family members did, but he suffered in another way. He did not know when, if ever, the Edgmon murder would be resolved and he did not know if the murderer had already harmed another person. To say he was unaffected because he did not suffer emotional depression or stress-related illness would be a mistake. What afflicted him was worse, in its way, than anything the Colemans suffered.

Lt. Gary Baughman suffered from doubt and the unknown. Unless the case was resolved, those two harsh realities were not going away and they had the potential to ruin his life.

To be continued...

Action/Suspense

Ruin and Salvation - Part Two

By: *Gabriella Balcom*



Gabriella Balcom

Gabriella Balcom, who is from Texas, writes fantasy, horror/thriller, romance, sci-fi, and more. She likes traveling, music, photography, great stories, history and movies. Gabriella says she loves forests, mountains, and back roads. She has a weakness for lasagna, garlic bread, tacos, cheese and chocolate. Check out her author page:

<https://facebook.com/GabriellaBalcom.lonestarauthor>

Monday, August 9

Jim woke to his head killing him. The light stabbed his eyes like knives. It was the hangover from hell, and before he could make it to the bathroom, he threw up the nastiest stuff he'd ever tasted. Even though he felt groggy and half-asleep, cleaning up the puke woke him fully, and left him thoroughly revolted.

The sensations in his stomach ranged from churning nausea to starvation, but he didn't think he could eat. Knowing he had to work later, though, he managed to choke down some crackers, followed up with a piece of toast, swore he'd never touch alcohol again, staggered to the kitchen sink, and upchucked once more. He felt like warmed-over crap and a total failure. But he realized he might be tempted to drink at some later point, aimed himself at the fridge, and rummaged around inside it. He forced himself to pour one-fourth of a bottle of whiskey down the drain, followed by some rum, leftover tequila and vodka from who knew when, two wine coolers, and a few beers left from a twelve-pack he'd bought a week earlier. His get-up-and-go was at low ebb, practically dead in the water, and he turned on the TV and stared at it for hours. Afterward, he didn't have a clue what he'd seen. He forced himself to rise and move around, cleaned up, and headed to his job at the last minute,

arriving with scant moments to spare. There, he learned another employee had called in sick, meaning he was expected to do extra. He launched straight into his routine. loading and unloading freight and checking quantities of this and that, his responsibilities keeping him hopping. After work that night, Jim began getting ready for bed early, instead of staying up late like he'd been doing. He caught sight of his laptop lying on the floor where he'd left it, bared his teeth, and slitted his eyes as sheer hatred ricocheted through him. He had to force himself to look away. To hell with the damn thing!

Tuesday, August 10

The noxious smell of rot woke Jim, a similarly foul taste in his mouth. Grimacing, he went to grab his toothbrush, and brushed his teeth, gums and tongue until they were almost raw. He checked the time, and discovered it was 5:13 AM, a few hours earlier than he typically got up. Little point existed in going back to sleep, so he turned on the TV in the front room once more and relaxed on the couch. Some cartoons made him laugh, but he felt unsettled overall. He put the stereo on instead and listened to songs a while. His spirits lightened as he sang along with Alice in Chains, Nickelback, Bon Jovi, switched to Bread and the Ink Spots, old groups his parents liked, then alternated between Black Veil Brides, Creed, Tim McGraw, and a

mixture of other music.

Two hours later, he made breakfast and sat at the kitchen table, grimacing as he chewed bites of overcooked, rubberized scrambled eggs interspersed with those of buttered toast.

An idea popped into his head, how he could tie Chapter 9 to another portion of his story, and he looked for something to jot it down on. And a pen. Other possibilities occurred to him. A pantsler, he'd written several scenes of his story out of order, dialogue and all, as they'd occurred to him. He hadn't thought of a satisfactory way to connect some of them, though — not until this very minute.

Dashing words down on paper as fast as he could, he stopped and shook his pen a few times, thumped it, lit a match to heat the end, then sent the uncooperative thing flying. "Of course you're out of ink!" he growled before running like a whirling dervish, in search of another pen. Desperate to get his thoughts down before he forgot them, he dashed this way and that and almost stomped the laptop by accident. Half-tempted to do so on purpose, he scowled at it instead and used his foot to push it under his bed. Five messy, hand-scrawled pages and two paper towels covered in notes later — he'd run out of paper altogether, grabbing the closest thing at hand — he put down his pen and started reviewing what he'd written. Over the next two and a half hours, he circled portions, drew arrows here and there showing what needed to be moved and where, and wrote additional ideas which came to him. He decided to change the point of view in an early chapter, realized he needed additional scene breaks in another, and contemplated killing off

a character he'd grown rather fond of. Fingers stiff and achy when he finally quit writing, he flexed them. "Typing would've been a heck of a lot quicker," he muttered. "Oh, well." At least he didn't have to work, because he and another employee had switched evenings.

Wednesday, August 11

Gnarls Barkley wailed, "Crazy" for what must've been the seventh time in a row. Listening, Jim admitted he *was* exactly that, began the song yet again, and contemplated a different way to start his book. He'd stayed up late the prior night, coming up with a new back story for his main character, and descriptions of two others. More remained to be done, but he was making progress.

Stretching out his legs and arms, he opened and shut his hands slowly, wishing his fingers would stop aching. He thought of a certain thing under his bed but pushed the image out of his mind. Reaching for a pen, he scowled at it, but knew he needed to buckle down and work on his story as much as he could in the next two hours. After that, he'd have to head to his job.

Thursday, August 12

"Shoot me now," Jim muttered as he threw his pen toward the trash can. He missed by at least a foot. "Heck!" It was the third pen to run out of ink in the last couple days, although he could've sworn they were from a new set of ten he'd bought only a few days earlier. Or had he gotten them a few months ago? He couldn't remember. For the dozenth time, or maybe it was the hundredth, he recognized how much more he could've gotten done if he'd been typing instead of writing in cursive. He typed pretty fast, but today

his fingers were as stiff as his dog's frozen excrement when temperatures dropped. Truth be told, he was sick and tired of writing by hand.

He'd done a lot of thinking about the day he'd lost all his revisions and hard work, and he had been forced to admit a few things. Having numerous windows open at the same time on his computer had been stupid, especially with it already going slow. It had been for days. He'd told Dad about it, with the older man suggesting the thing might've gotten infected. He'd recommended his son find a free virus scanner online and install it. Jim hadn't. His father had also reminded him to back up his things regularly. Again, he hadn't. People in his online writing group had told him the same thing. As he thought about that now, the suggestions seemed like common sense, and he wished he'd heeded the advice. He hadn't even bothered saving the changes he'd made to his file. He'd just plowed on, hour after hour. In all honesty, he should've known better. Something else had occurred to him, making him cringe. He couldn't very well hold his computer accountable for his revisions being lost, because it wasn't alive and couldn't do things to itself. The very thought was ludicrous, and yet he'd blamed it.

Remembering how he'd slammed the laptop shut and knocked it onto the floor, Jim winced. What he'd done could've damaged it. He went to pull it from under his bed, and held his breath, stomach queasy, as he pushed the power button. When it powered right up, his uneasiness eased somewhat.

He opened his file, FINALLATESTVeryLatestLatestCopy.doc, scanned the first couple paragraphs, and sighed, wishing yet again for his missing work. After x-ing out of the

story, he leaned back in his chair, considering what to do. Sure, he couldn't reproduce the things which were lost, but he could list the changes he remembered. He'd have to work his way through the story from the beginning, but that would help jog his memory, and ending up with *some* of his revisions would be better than *none*. Excitement about the new ideas he'd come up with in the last few days bubbled inside him. Hopefully, he'd be able to cobble together the old and new somehow. Determined to get going, Jim leaned forward, but something on his screen caught his eye. A file name he didn't recognize. "Hmm, where'd you come from?" he muttered. Opening the document, he scanned the first page, scrolled through others, and cackled like a madman. "*Woohoo!*" He boogie-woogied, then moon-walked from his bedroom to the living room, grinning like a Cheshire cat. Plunking down in his go-to spot at the kitchen table, he grabbed his cell phone and pulled up the Facebook writing group he'd joined. His fingers flew over the keys as he messaged, "As Elmer Fudd might say, 'It's been a wuff week, folks! Weel wuff!'" He paused for a moment before continuing. "Recently, I shared about working two days straight on my book, then losing ALL of my revisions and work. Well, guess what? You won't believe this. I can barely believe it. But I just discovered nothing's lost after all. From what I can tell, I'd saved my file under a new name. I don't know how. I don't remember doing that. But I'd gone without sleep for a while and guess my brain must've been in a fog. Anyway, everything's intact, and I've had lots of new ideas since then, including how to tie things together. If all goes well, I think I'll be

able to finish my book soon. It'll just be my first draft, so I'll have a ways to go, but that's okay." Within moments of posting, he saw new messages appear from other writers. Most congratulated or encouraged him. But he snickered when one person, Connor, said, "Remember me telling you to BACK UP your stuff? I oughta kick your ass, man." "Yeah, I remember," Jim replied. "Kick away!" He collected everything he needed to sort through: scraps of paper here, full pages there, the paper towels, index cards, a piece of cardboard torn from a box, and a poster board. He couldn't wait to put everything together. Before starting, however, he posted again. "I got so discouraged for a while and wondered if I'd ever finish my book. I even felt like scraping my dreams altogether, but things are looking up. I feel hopeful again, like things can work out. Like they *will* work out. I know I can make my dreams come true. We all can."

The End

Action/Suspense

Through the Echoes of Madness - Part Six

By: David K. Montoya



David K. Montoya

For a good part of two decades David K. Montoya was an active writer, artist and business entrepreneur in the micro-publication world. In 2013, turned his pen in for a microphone and became a podcaster for the following five years—and even did a small stint in independent Hollywood. But, now, he's come home and is ready to begin weaving new tales for this magazine.

Thunder rumbled as large

raindrops splattered against the top-floor window of 1110 3rd Avenue. Known as the local field office for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, where once decorated detective Grayson Copeland presented his findings to a manhunt as a five-year veteran FBI Profiler.

"We need to use what we know to build from the ground up," Grayson explained to the other FBI Agents who filled the room. "So, what do we know? We know that the suspect is a Hispanic or of Latin heritage, male, who is between five foot five to five foot eight inches tall. The eyewitness said that he had slick backed black hair who wore a dress coat with dark slacks."

"So, we are looking for an Italian Mobster," one of the FBI Agent blurted out. The room laughed in unison, and even Grayson smiled at the wit of the heckler.

"Yes and no, Tommy," Grayson responded while he continued to offer an amused smile. "While, I do not think this is mob related, I do believe that we are looking for an Italian man, who has a Napoleon Complex and dresses nice as a call back to maybe his past heritage of mob connection...therefore demanding a

certain level of respect."

"And, if he doesn't get the respect he's looking for then what?" another FBI agent said. "What, he offs them?" An agent who is behind him leans over his shoulder and said in his best Don Vito Corleone impersonation, "You know, it's called sleeping with the fishes."

The room erupts in laughter. Grayson walks over to the FBI Agents that were razing him and sits atop an empty desk. "Actually, that is exactly what I am say. I believe he M.O. is based on him being picked on for his height and has low self-respect. If I were a betting man, I would say that he does not have any love interest and fulfills those desires at a strip club. Now, if I were in your shoes, gentlemen I would check every titty bar in a five-mile radius of where those crimes took place."

"All right boys, you heard the man," teased Special Agent in Charge Ron Brooks. "Go hit the titty bars."

The room cheered.

"Eh! Eh," Brooks rebutted. "As Field Agents, not their usual clientele."

The room now groaned.

"Yeah, yeah," Brooks said with a smile.

"Now get out of here."

The Special Agent in Charge walked over to where Grayson stood, and they both watched silently as the agents left the room. Finally, after the final man had exited, Brooks asked, "Can I have a chat with you Grayson?" "Sure, boss," Grayson said and turned

to face Brooks.

Brooks placed a hand on Grayson's shoulder and in a solemn tone said, "Can it be in your office?"

Grayson arched an eyebrow and asked, "Am I getting fired?"

"No. No," Brooks said with a half grin.

"But this is somewhat a private matter we need to talk about."

#

Marty sat shackled to a small metal table that was placed in the center of a small square room while he wept uncontrollably. The blood on his clothes had dried and poked into his skin as a sadistic reminder that Betty was stabbed to death and left for him to find her.

The police watched from behind the one-way glass. Among them was Julius Hitchcock, a stocky, muscular Black man in his late thirties, his sharp eyes fixed on the scene unfolding before him. He had only witnessed a cold-blooded killer in person one other time back in 2012, and in his gut told him that number had gone up to two.

"I'm going in," Hitchcock growled to the others in the room.

"Shouldn't you wait for the brass to get here, Jules," one of the officers asked.

"Fuck that noise, Marquez," Hitchcock countered. "This piece of shit is wasting our time...You of all people should know that?"

Marquez sighed and nodded. "Yeah, I do. But the Brass is gonna play tether ball with your balls, bro."

With a chuckle Hitchcock left the observing room and walked directly to where Marty was. He stopped crying and looked up at Hitchcock.

"Who are you," Marty asked softly, while tears continued to stream down

his face.

"I am just trying to understand what happened, Mr. Fields." Hitchcock said in a surprisingly civil manner. "You said you stepped away for how long?"

Marty stared into Hitchcock's face for a few moments before he said, "I... I made a friend while we were at the event and after which, I took Betty t —"

Hitchcock interrupted anger now more visible than before. "Betty? You are on first name bases with your boss now?"

"What are you talking about, dawg,"

Marty questioned, as he sprung forward in confusion. "She introduced herself as *Betty*, she hated being called Elizabeth, man!"

"Where you fucking her," Hitchcock asked point blank with a growl in his words.

Marty stopped, frozen in confusion for a moment. Eventually he looked down and chuckled, he shook his head and looked up with a weak grin and softly said, "Honey, do I look like a Playa that is into boobs and ass?"

Hitchcock leaped from his chair and grabbed Marty by the blood-stained shirt pulled him until the two men were nose to nose. "You think this is a joke, *Playa*? I am here trying to figure out why a celebrity, who is popular for surviving the worst murder in modern history, might I add, is dead and why you have her blood all over you and why you aren't rotting in jail. Feel me, *Playa*?"

Hitchcock pushed Marty back into his chair with force that rattled his spine upon contact with the seat.

"No, man, I am gay, and while I was Betty's person assistant, we were friends," Marty said and then paused for a moment before he continued his thought. "I was her only friend... That Jack character really fucked her up in the head, you feel me? He was the

only thing she wanted to talk about...

Well, and some cop she used to screw, but she never said his name in fear that it would hurt his public persona... She just called him, Gray."

Hitchcock sat back and crossed his arms and spoke, his words calm and tamed. "I am aware of Elizabeth Stride, Mr. Fields, I read her book. But you were the last one to see her alive..."

His anger began to peek from behind his words once again. "You had access."

"I did, but so did others," Marty answered, now with frustration which lined his face. "Whatcha point?"

"You admit *you* changed her schedule," Hitchcock yelled.

"What the fuck are you talking about," Marty yelled back, now visibly upset.

"You said at the scene that you wanted to go screw some crew hand," Hitchcock snapped back. "And you convinced her to stay and drink wine, while you got your rocks off."

"What about it," Marty shouted.

"That is what happened!"

"You were supposed to take her home right after," Hitchcock said and leaned into eye level with Marty. "So, it is your fault, that didn't happen, right?" "Ri—" Marty stopped mid-sentence, wide eyes, frozen in realization. "Oh... God... I a—"

Marty was interrupted as Murray walked into room and said with authority, "Do you have anything you can book him on? The Feds are taking over, if not he's free to go."

Hitchcock sighed in frustration.

"I know, Jules, trust me, I get it,"

Murray said and then looked over at Marty with a stoic expression. "If I were you, Mr. Fields I would not be making any plans to go anywhere for a while... Oh, and if I were you, you better find a lawyer."

#

Grayson moved past the final security checkpoint and gave the visibly armed guard a nod. The large metal door moved open automatically, which revealed a narrow corridor of concrete and steel. As Grayson stepped into the area his nose burned from the smell of bleach and the bitterness of sterilized steel. The hallway transformed into a thick, bulletproof glass panel framed in reinforced metal. Beyond that stood Cell Nine, a place reserved for monsters too dangerous for the general population. The sort of animal who could not be caged behind bars, instead imprisoned in transparency, where every move can be observed. There at the end of the hallway waiting behind that glass, standing completely still and his hands perfectly at his sides, stood Dean Tidwell. He was sickly, a shell of his physical self and wore a faded orange jumpsuit, no shoes, no expression, His beard was long and unkempt and his once intense eyes were empty, and tired.

"I was wondering when you would come for a visit," Tidwell said softly and moved closer to the glass.

"I'm here about Betty Stride," Grayson said, his words calm and paced cadence.

"Oh, that's right. It's no longer Detective is it," Tidwell said in the same calm and paced rhythm, but a hint of mockery aligned his words.

"Agent Copeland, now, isn't it?"

Grayson ignored the bait.

"I was hoping we finally confess to what we both know," Tidwell said playfully. "How about it, son? Like old times."

"Do you know anything about the

case," Grayson said cold, emotionless. "Only what *TMZ* has reported," Tidwell said and shrugged. "But, if I come up with some theories, I will be sure to tell you...Well, I would if I had a phone to use."

Grayson felt something twist in his gut when he heard Tidwell. "I will arrange something."

Dean simply stared with that quiet, calculated presence that once dominated interrogation rooms.

Grayson walked up to the door that led to the armed guard and pressed the call button. Tidwell tilted his head and raised an eyebrow to acknowledge Grayson's request to leave. "Ah, well," Tidwell said, in a playful tone. "Enjoy your trip to California, son."

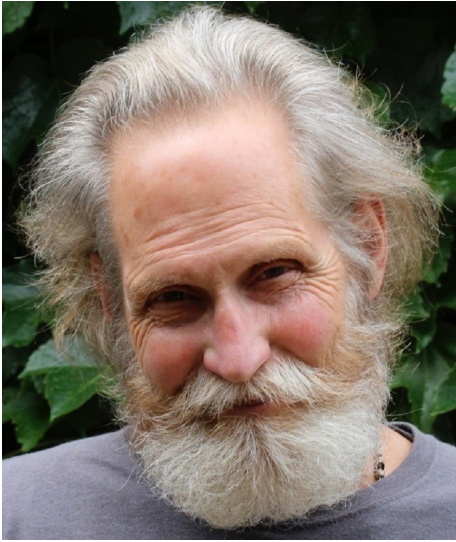
Grayson did not acknowledge Tidwell, but he felt the man that was like a father figure as he stared a hole into his back from behind the glass. Which caused the area around him to feel ten degrees colder than before he first walked in.

To Be Continued...

Science Fiction

The Alchemy of Then

By: Jim Bates



Jim Bates

Jim is an award-winning author whose stories and poems have appeared in over three-hundred online and print publications. His collection of short stories *Resilience* was published in March 2021, by Bridge House Publishing. *Short Stuff a collection of flash fiction and drabbles* was published in October 2021, by Chapeltown Books. *Periodic Stories and Periodic Stories Volume Two* were published in July and September 2021, by Impspired. *Dreamers a collection of short stories* was published in March 2022, by Clarendon House Publishing. *Something Better* a dystopian adventure novella was published in July 2021, by Dark Myth Publications.

“Here you go,” Leopold said.

“This is for you.”

Ben took the small package from his father. It was wrapped in plain brown paper and tied with frayed white string. No ribbon. In the year 2123 frivolous adornments were kept to a minimum. If used at all.

Ben’s mother Mary took a sip of watered-down tea and wiped away a tear. She said nothing and kept her lips pursed tightly together. What could she say? Her son, her one and only offspring, was leaving the next day to go to the Canaveral Space Center to begin the final preparations for his journey into deep space. She knew in her heart she’d never see him again.

He’d made his decision, and she knew there was no chance of him changing his mind.

“It’s for the good of mankind,” he’d told her nearly a year earlier when his initial training had begun. “The information gathered during the trip will help all of us.”

Whether that was true or not was anybody’s guess. Ben and his team were heading for a colony on the planet Eros in the galaxy Zebron. Kaladona was a relatively young establishment, having been in existence for only twenty-five years, yet there were already nearly ten thousand inhabitants living there. The three scientists were on a one-way

mission to test the resiliency of the Umbar Space Environment for its efficacy. If the environment held up under the rigors of space travel the mission would be considered a success. It would then pave the way for more people to travel to Eros and Kaladona and escape the environmental ravages facing Earth.

The mission was something Mary should be proud of her son was a part of. And she was. Sort of. But she was going to miss him, an understatement of gigantic proportions if there ever was one. So, she sipped her weak tea, kept her mouth closed, and her thoughts to herself.

Ben held the package and looked from his father to his mother and then back to his father.

“What is this?” he asked, touched by his parent’s gesture.

“Open it, son,” Leopold said, gently. “I think you’ll like it.”

Ben undid the string and peeled back the wrapper. He took one look and his eyes went wide. “Oh. My. Goodness!” he exclaimed. He turned to his father.

“Grandpa Cecil’s book?”

Leopold smiled for the first time that evening. “Yes, Cecil’s book. And his father’s before him, and his before him, and...”

“All the way back to great, great, great, Grandpa Quincy. Right?”

“That’s right. All the way back to Quincy. He wrote it in 2003. His last collection of poems. Many consider them his best.”

Ben shook his head and whispered in awe, almost to himself, “*The Alchemy of Then*. Quincy’s famous book of poems. I can’t believe it.”

Most recently, *Periodic Stories Volume Three – A Novel* was published in April 2022, by Impspired. His short story "Aliens" was nominated by The Zodiac Press for the 2020 Pushcart Prize. His story "The Maple Leaf" was voted 2021 story of the year for Spillwords. He lives in a small-town west of Minneapolis, Minnesota. All of his work can be found on his blog at www.theviewfromlonglake.wordpress.com.

Leopold put his hand on his son's shoulder. "You know the story. This is Quincy's personal copy. He made the cover himself from naturally tanned leather and hand-wrote the pages and bound them all together." He grinned proudly. "The poems were incredibly meaningful to him. Very personal." "I remember, Dad," Ben said, shaking his head, still mildly in shock at receiving such a treasured gift. "He kept this original handmade version and sent the typed manuscript to the publisher. The rest as they say was history. He won a Noble Prize for Literature if I remember correctly. Didn't he?"

Leopold nodded. "Yes, he did. He won the Noble Prize in 2007 and died soon afterward. But the book lives on." He pointed to the handmade collection Ben held lovingly in his hands. "I want you to have this, son. I think Quincy would have wanted it to go with you." He cleared his throat. "To space." As soon as those words were uttered, Ben's mother let out a gasp and collapsed in a torrent of tears, burying her head in her hands and sobbing uncontrollably. Her teacup rolled off the table and shattered on the floor. Ben and Leopold hurried to her side. It took both of them the rest of the night to comfort her, for what little good it did.

One month later Ben, along with fellow scientists Mira and Roland, left Earth via the Sawyer Space Portal. The journey to Eros and the colony Kaladona took them twenty-two years. For the entire time, they stayed in a state of suspended animation in their individual space pods kept alive by the (USE) Umbar Space Environment. Each

scientist was monitored by their own droid who made sure the nutrients being intravenously fed to each of the space travelers didn't run out.

Ben's droid was XR303 named Leomar in honor of his father Leopold and his mother Mary. Strapped inside his space suit next to his heart was his treasured collection of poems *The Alchemy of Then* given to him by his father. The words of the poems often drifted through his mind. Like the first one:

Sage

The granite ground sparkles

Sun beating down releasing scents

Green lichen, brown grass, and sage

Dried horse manure too.

Through the polished white poplars

The river glistens crashing over rocks

Thundering

Misty droplets drifting.

High above a hawk is calling

Wings spread soaring on the wind

He looks up and watches

Breathing the fresh mountain air

The sweet scent of clarity.

The journey was made without a hitch. Nearly. Something went wrong in Roland's space pod, a problem with a micro-sensor controlling breathing. The poor man had suffocated to death. It was an issue easily rectified by making sure an adequate supply of the breathing control sensors was always on hand. Other than that, however, the trip was a smooth one. The scientists on Earth were as happy as those on Eros. Ben and Mira were hailed as heroes, a needless recognition and something they tried to ignore. After all, they were scientists and were expected to take risks.

But secretly Ben and Mira were happy they'd made the trip. They liked being on Eros. Even better, in the twenty-two years since their journey began the community of Kaladona continued to thrive and now had

over fifteen thousand inhabitants. They also liked their new jobs. So what if the sulfur-laden air was so noxious that all the citizens were forced to wear breathing apparatuses outside similar to the gas masks worn back on Earth? It was a small inconvenience, something they gladly put up with.

The Kaladona community lived and worked in seven high-rise buildings. Ben was given a work assignment having to do with improving the primary air filtration system used in *Alpha* the name of the building where the governing officials worked. Mira began working in one of the ten hydroponic farms that supported the community, researching new ways to grow sustainable food.

The two of them happily began to put down roots in their new home. Eventually, they married and later on had a child Sam. Sam grew up, married, and had a daughter Allie. She married and had a son Abel, who married and had a daughter Lucinda. Lucinda became a talented scientist specializing in air filtration system technology similar to the work her great-great grandfather Ben had been involved with.

One day a call went out for volunteers to travel to Earth to test a new type of space pod. Lucinda surprised everyone by agreeing to go. "There's one stipulation," she told the recruiter. "What's that?" "My daughter comes with."

Based on past issues regarding space travel in pods, they weren't getting many volunteers. He readily agreed. "No problem," he said, placing a contract in front of her. "Sign here." Lucinda jotted down her name and her daughter's and the deed was done.

So, on May 17, 2223, one hundred years to the day Lucinda's great, great, grandparents Ben and Mira journeyed to Eros, she and her daughter Lark approached the Sawyer Space Portal. The boarding area was jam-packed, crowded with military personnel barking orders and travelers hurrying to the entrance of the spacecraft. Lucinda took her daughter's hand and they stepped aside into an alcove away to get away from some of the congestion.

"What's up, Mom?" Lark asked. Lucinda opened a plastic purse-like bag she wore across her chest. Her look was serious as she took out a package wrapped in thin brown paper and tied with rough twine. "Here," she said, handing it to her daughter. "I want you to have this."

Lark gave her mother a questioning look. They were extremely close, even more so since the death of Jared, Lark's father, and Lucinda's husband, four years earlier when Lark was eight years old. What was her mother up to? Lucinda smiled at her daughter. "Go ahead, sweetheart. It won't bite. I want you to have this."

Lark nodded and carefully undid the twine and removed the paper. She took one look and shouted, "Oh, wow!!" Ignoring the looks of the other travelers, she threw her arms around her mother. "Oh, Mom! This is so amazing!" She clasped the worn volume of *The Alchemy of Then* to her chest. "I love this!! Thank you so much!"

Lark was twelve years old and had been reading her mother's collection of Quincy's poems since she was five years old. She had them memorized, all one hundred and one of them. She loved the poems about life in the United States in the later part of the 20th century over two hundred years

ago. One of her favorites was a simple one about ants, an insect she only knew of through old science books:

Ants
Small town
Quiet street
Dawn just breaking
Mourning dove cooing.
Young boy
At the curb
In the sand
Playing with ants
Watching
Oh, how they scurry
Oh, how they run with incredible intent
Oh, how fascinating.
Grandma calls
"Breakfast! Come quick! Now!"
She sounds mad
Like usual.
Slowly he stands brushing off grit reluctant to leave
"Goodbye," he says to his new friends. "See you later."
He carries a moment listening
Then he smiles. He's right. He thought so
They're telling him to hurry back.

"Everything seemed so quaint back then," she's told her mother time and time again whenever they talked about it. "Geez. They had mountains and rivers and lakes." "And birds and fish and animals and insects, too," her mother would add. "Yes, dear those were different times." She looked wistfully at her daughter. On Eros, the sky was permanently brown and the air unbreathable. The only birds and animals and plants and trees were those found in books. "Better times, if you ask me." Even though she'd only read about those times in Quincy's poems, Lark would nod her young head sagely and say "I agree." "Me too," Lucinda always smiled. "Me too." Now, amid the throngs streaming toward the spacecraft, mother and daughter bent their heads close together and shared a

quiet moment.

“Do you think it will be better now?” Lark asked, shifting her backpack from one shoulder to the other. It was the only luggage she was permitted to take with her. “You know. On Earth?” Lucinda shook her head. “Honestly, dear? No. I doubt it.” Then, for her daughter’s sake, she amended her statement. “I hope it is, though. I really do.”

Lark shrugged. “That’s okay.” She patted the book of poems. “At least I can read about those old times. That’s better than nothing.” Then she rewrapped the book and put the treasured collection in a safe compartment in her pack.

Lucinda pulled Lark to her and hugged her daughter for a few long moments. “Then she said, “Okay. We should get ready to board.”

But she didn’t say what was really on her mind. She was privy to top-secret information. Life on their planet Eros only had a few more years to exist. The planet was slowly poisoning itself to death. With no other option available, she was taking her best course of action. She was sending Lark away in hopes that Earth now was better. She’d heard rumors that it was, but she wasn’t sure. So she was taking a chance for her daughter’s sake. One thing was certain, though. She would never know the answer to the question. There wasn’t room for an old person like her on the spacecraft. They would board together and once Lark was safely sealed in her pod, Lucinda would leave the spacecraft. Lark would be making the trip alone. Lark and their family’s treasured book of Quincy’s poems.

On Earth, Lark never did get used to living without her mother. But she did her best. She followed her passion for learning and being around kids and became a teacher. She met a man named Owen and they married and had a son. They called him Quincy after the relative whose book she still treasures.

Lark reads from *The Alchemy of Then* to her class of ten-year-olds whenever she can. The kids love it. They have to live in a closed environment due to the pollution outside. They’ll never know clean air, mountains and lakes, birds and animals, or ants and butterflies. Or what it’s like to walk in crisp fall woods or stand in the wet sand on an ocean shore. But the poems help them. So she reads to them, and they listen.

One of the classes’ favorites is the last one in the collection:

The Alchemy of Then
Memories oh the memories
The old alchemist stirring
Magical moments meandering
A mother’s stern yet loving look
A father’s happy but fleeting smile
Brothers running jumping laughing
Good times bad times
Gasoline poured haphazardly. An ill-
advised match tossed igniting a grass
fire
A dangerous buzzing wasp’s nest. A
flagrant spear thrown. So many tears
Memories cascading like a mountain
waterfall thundering
An orange sunset exploding in a leafy
fragrant autumn sky
A blue-green ocean stretching to the
horizon on the wings of a gull
A boat bobbing in a northern lake
fishing poles catching nothing not
caring
Sparking granite canyon walls
mountain river flowing breathless
wonder
A mishmash of memories

Auntie and Uncle and Grandma and
Gramps boisterous at a holiday meal
A winter pond hockey game fingers frozen
Building model airplanes
Tooling a leather bookmark
First kiss fleeting smiles walking by
A new beginning to a new day
The alchemist keeps stirring
Looking to the east with eyes ablaze
another day breaks clear
Another day bringing with it a world of
possibilities
And without a doubt another story waiting
to be told.

Lark tells her class, “Use your imagination when I read to you. Close your eyes and let the words take you away to those times.” The class does as she says. The eager boys and girls close their eyes and get swept away by the magic in the words and they smile. Lark smiles with them.

They are good kids, and so is her son Quincy. One day she will gift *The Alchemy of Then* to him. And when he is older and has a child, he can pass the poems to his offspring. And then from his generation to the next generation and to the next. And so on. And then people in the future can learn just how it was back then in simpler times. Different times. Certainly better times. Way back then. Quincy’s words living into the future. On and on and on.

Humor

Game, Set, and Match

By: James Rumpel



James Rumpel

James Rumpel is a recently retired high school math teacher who has greatly appreciated spending some of his newfound free time rekindling his love for science fiction and the written word. Writing also provides him with an excellent opportunity to ignore the household chores his wife assigns. He lives in Wisconsin with his forgiving wife, Mary.

Reinhardt Mitchell stood up and greeted Donny Moore as soon as the young man entered the luxury box. “Ah, Donny. I am so glad you came to join me,” said Mitchell as he extended his right arm toward his guest. Donny’s hand engulfed Mitchell’s hand like a python swallowing a rodent. Donny was not exceptionally tall, standing just a little over six feet three inches, but he towered over Mitchell. The little man’s head barely came up to Donny’s chin.

“Well, of course, I’m going to join you. It’s not every day I get a chance to watch the championship match in the league president’s private suite.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. You’re the best player on the junior tour right now. I think you’ll accomplish great things in the not-too-distant future.” Donny smiled and shrugged. “I’ve done pretty well, but there’s no way I’ll ever be able to compete with those two.” He gestured out the window at the two players warming up for the upcoming match. “They’re the best two players in the world. They’re almost inhuman.”

“They are good,” nodded Mitchell. “Please, sit down. The first set is about to begin.”

“Ivan Mashinachelovek is like a machine. He just keeps going and going. Every shot is precise and accurate. I studied some of his earlier matches, he was pretty predictable,

but now his game has evolved.”

“You sound like quite the fan,” chuckled Mitchell.

“How could I not be?” replied Donny. “His game is amazing. The only person who even has any chance of beating him is Aljendro Solaraz.” Donny pointed to the other competitor on the court. “I’ve never seen anyone with reactions like Solaraz. It’s like he knows what shot is coming before it’s even hit. His anticipation is uncanny.”

Before Donny could continue singing the praises of the top two tennis players in the world, the match began. He and Mitchell watched in silence as the first point played out before them.

Mashinachelovek unleashed a 180-mile-per-hour serve only to have Solaraz return it with inexplicable precision. Solaraz’s shot landed on the very edge of the court and shot upward with amazing speed. The ball would have to be hit with immeasurable topspin to react that way. Somehow Mashinachelovek jumped in the air and struck the ball at the apex of its bounce, sending it hurling across the net at such great speed that it looked like nothing but a blur to everyone watching. His opponent, with cat-like quickness, moved to the exact spot the ball was headed and returned it with ease.

For the next five minutes, the two champions sprinted back and forth, hitting one miraculous shot after another. It wasn’t until the two-hundred-fifteenth shot of the rally that Solaraz’s blistering backhand struck the top of the net and bounced backward, ending the point.

“Fifteen – Love” announced the referee.

Donny settled back in his chair. “We are going to be in for a long match,” he announced.

“That’s why I asked you here,” said Mitchell. “You see, those two are ruining our sport. They’re too good. They win every match in the preliminaries 6-0, 6-0. Then in the finals, they play for six hours. Eventually, viewers get bored and start tuning out.”

Donny nodded. “Yeah, I hear that from my friends. To be honest, I’ve been thinking of giving up tennis. It doesn’t seem like I have much of a future. I can’t compete with those guys. I’ll never be that good.”

“What if I told you, you could be?”

Donny stared at his host. “What are you talking about?”

Before answering, Mitchell motioned for the suite’s servants to leave the room. Once everyone else was gone, Mitchell leaned in toward Donny. “I’ve got a lot to tell you. You might find some of it hard to believe, but everything I’m about to tell you is true.”

“Okay.”

“First, Mashinachelovek is not human. He’s a robot. When his creator wanted to enter him in the league a few years ago, the board and I all thought it was just an interesting gimmick. We’d let him try to play and after he lost, we’d have a press conference and tell the world about how automated muscle and AI were no match for human competition.”

“But he won the first tournament he entered.”

“Yes. So, what were we supposed to do then? We couldn’t admit that we let an automaton into the league, let alone win a championship. The thing is, he didn’t win by much. He could

have just as easily lost. We decided to just pretend he was human and he’d be like every other tennis player.

Nobody would notice him. He’d win some, he’d lose some. What we didn’t count on was how quickly he would improve and adapt. With each match, he got stronger and smarter until he was unbeatable.”

“But then Solaraz came alone,” interrupted Donny. “Is he another robot?”

Mitchell shook his head. “No, we vowed to never let another robot into the league. When Solaraz showed up at Wimbledon two years ago and nearly beat the robot, we were ecstatic. We thought that we had finally found a human with the skill to compete with Mashinachelovek. We figured after a few years of training and effort; we’d have dozens of humans able to compete at the robot’s level.”

“So, why hasn’t anybody else stepped up?”

“We wondered about that, too. It wasn’t until this year’s French Open that we learned the truth. We caught Solaraz’s trainer switching out his drug test sample. We forced him to give us the real sample.”

“Solaraz is using performance-enhancing drugs?”

Again, Mitchell shook his head. “No. We’d have been okay with that. Heck, we’d have supplied everyone on the tour with drugs if we thought it would level the playing field. What we discovered is that Solaraz is an alien. He’s from outer space.”

Donny stared at Mitchell for a second before turning to watch the two “men” on the court. Solaraz had just covered the entire length of the baseline in under a tenth of a second and hit a backhand that changed direction three times during its flight to the opposite

end of the court. Of course, Machinachelovek returned the shot with ease.

“So, are you going to let other aliens on the tour?” asked Donny.

“No. Solaraz is the only tennis-playing alien on our planet. He came here on some kind of exchange program and won’t be returning to his planet for another two hundred years. They won’t let more than one of his race on Earth at a time.”

“Why don’t you just out both of them? Tell the world that Solaraz is an alien and Machinachelovek is a robot?”

“We can’t do that. It would undermine the integrity of our sport. Who’d watch tennis if they knew that for the last five years, we’ve been lying to them.”

“People might still watch.”

“But that’s only part of it. Everyone has always marveled at the skill and athleticism of our athletes. People aren’t going to like it when we tell them that humans are no match for aliens or robots. Who’s going to watch knowing that the humans they’re watching are nothing but second-rate wannabes?”

Donny shrugged. Another glance outside showed that the score was now 1-1 in the first set. “You said something about me being as good as them.”

“We are starting a new program. We’d like to take an up-and-coming player and work with him. We can’t use a player that is already on the tour. People would notice the sudden improvement. However, if a newcomer joins the league and shows that he can play with the top two players in the world, we could have some great rivalries and lots of exciting matches. People will love it. And, best of all, it’s going to be honest-to-goodness human being.”

“What kind of program will ever get me to be that good?” asked Donny. He nodded toward the window where Machinachelovek had just hit a two hundred forty-seven mile per hour serve. Mitchell smiled, “How much do you know

about DNA?"

"A little," replied Donny.

"There's technology out there that allows us change a person's genetic make-up at the most basic level." The little man picked up a tennis ball from a nearby end table and tossed it to Donny. "Drop that ball on the ground."

Donny stared at Mitchell for moment, confused.

After a moment, he let the ball slip from his hand.

It only took a fraction of a second for the ball to fall to the carpet below. Except, it never got there. Mitchell dove forward, plucking the ball out of the air while it was still more than a foot above the ground.

The old man jumped back up with incredible ease and dexterity. "See what I mean? If DNA enhancement can give a dinosaur like me reflexes like that, imagine what it could do for you."

The tennis phenom stood there, his mouth agape.

Finally, he spoke, slowly and carefully. "You had yourself enhanced?"

Mitchell nodded, "Yes, both me and the league vice president, Adam LaFluer, underwent the procedure. It seemed unfair for us to ask others to do something that we were not willing to do ourselves."

"Why don't you just join the league?"

Shaking his head, Mitchell let out a slight chuckle. "Like anyone would believe a short, elderly man could do the things I would have to do to compete with Machinachelovek or Solaraz. The public would know we were up to something and the integrity of the sport would take a major hit. No, we need someone young and athletic. Plus, the enhancement will be much better for a patient with a high degree of

dexterity and speed before improvement."

"It's still cheating," said Donny.

"Maybe, but you're still a human. People don't have to know that we helped you a little."

A loud cheer erupted from the stadium. Donny glanced out at the court where Solaraz had just leaped into the stands to retrieve an overhead from Machinachelovek.

"That could be you they're cheering for. What do you think?"

Donny's face became a mask of determination. "Sure, why not? I'll do it."

"Great," said Mitchell. He pulled out his phone and pushed a couple of buttons. Almost instantly, a side door that Donny hadn't noticed slid open and two men and a woman wearing lab coats emerged.

"Go with them," ordered Mitchell.

"There's some paperwork you need to fill out and they can begin the preliminary examination to determine exactly how to improve your DNA." Two of the technicians led Donny out of the room. The third, the woman, remained.

"Well, Dr. Cleary, I told you it wouldn't be hard to convince these young players to agree," announced Mitchell.

"But you never told him about the risks. You didn't tell him what happened to Vice President Lafluer. There is still a 25% chance of death or mutation." The doctor shivered noticeably.

"That's why we need to have more than one volunteer. Why don't you go get the young man waiting in the hall? He's the number two ranked junior in the world."

The End

Humor

Shark Tank, Witching Edition

By: Jayant Neogy



Jayant Neogy

Writer, Photographer and Traveler, I have a Master's Degree in Engineering from Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur followed by 40 years of work experience in India, Germany, Switzerland and the US.

Thereafter, I had over 5 years of teaching and consultancy experience.

As an author of non-fiction, 9 of my books have been published in India so far.

I write fiction for Substack, Medium, Wattpad and Tumblr.

As the video played out, silence was broken by a whispered "Bravo," from Mavis as Walter improbably wrestled a gorilla to the ground. They kissed, breaking my heart. Since undergrad days, Walter and I courted Mavis with indifferent success. While Walter wrestled gorillas, I wrestled with punctuation. Neither gained much ground. Mavis disliked Walter's insistence as much as she disdained my hesitancy. Unsure of her life goals, Mavis wasn't shallow, but charmingly ambivalent. "I treasure a man's heroism above sweet nature or good looks." She spoke. Was it a quotation? I wasn't sure, but it sounded lofty. Lately, my writing has suffered. My editor found me wanting. I felt like Sisyphus, doomed to rephrase and rewrite forever. If I tried cerebral, I was "too humorless," If I tried humor, like my take on 'Human Sacrifice on Walpurgis Night', I was "too scary". I would turn to Mavis after a bad editorial mangling, but all that changed after Walter's simian exploit. I missed her compassion and desperately needed to win her back. I needed to prove myself, not just to Mavis, but to the ghosts of my unprinted stories. Mavis wanted heroism. So, how do I

match the gorilla wrestling Walter with a major quest of my own? Much goading of the little grey cells yielded a two-part plan. Part one needed help from my friend Kumar, and a call to him fixed that. Part two required great Aunt Gertrude's spell book. Her spells mostly worked, but she had warned, "Magic is unreliable. Perhaps the Lay Lines have shifted. Use only as a last resort." The situation did call for a 'Hail Mary', so I dusted the spell book and got busy. A fortnight later, I met the love birds. Grimacing at their handholding, I announced, "I swam with sharks. I'll show you the video any time." Robert scoffed, "You with sharks? Don't make me laugh." Mavis said, "I don't believe you." "Tomorrow at 11," I said, "Don't be late."

#

I had a 100" TV installed. The buffet was loaded with ginger-beer and Greek yogurt dips. The screen came alive as a largish shark swam by. I snorkeled past, giving a thumbs up. More sharks followed, with me gamboling around them. "There," I said bowing, "undeniable proof. I swam with sharks." I turned towards my audience aglow with triumph, awaiting applause. Choking on his root-beer, Robert

spluttered, “That’s Kumar’s work! Kumar of Pixar studios, their special effects expert. Why? He made my gorilla video last year—.”

The complete silence was finally broken by Mavis’s anguished cry. “Cheaters! Neither of you deserve me.”

My plan was going awry. Time to unveil Part two.

“I’m the real Mccoy!” I cried as I zapped the TV with my Great Aunt’s spell.

“*in oceanum muta*”, I barked.

Lightning flashed, a strong smell of sulfur filled the room — then the walls melted into an endless ocean. A dozen sharks materialized, their sleek bodies circling, their fins slicing through the waves.

I saw Robert disappear in a splash of red as I heard Mavis scream.

“I’ll protect you.”

“*Ab squalus protégé.*” I zapped her with a protection spell.

Lightening and sulfur fumes did their stuff. The haze cleared to reveal Mavis turning into a great white shark!

She slithered toward me, eyes gleaming.

“I want my hero!” she tried to shout.

But her voice ended in a gurgle as large slits opened under her ears revealing gills, and her body elongated, as her legs fused into a lethal streamlined shape. Grinning with rows of razor-sharp teeth, she dived into the water towards me.

Heavens! I scrambled for Great Aunt Gertrude’s spell-book. Pages blurred under my questing fingers—in vain—somewhere between a half-finished spell and a scream—the waters turned red.

Next time, I’ll stick to gorillas.

The End



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Poems

Born in a Savaged Bridge

By: John Chinaka Onyeche



John Chinaka Onyeche

John Chinaka Onyeche is a Nigerian writer of colour (BIPOC) and historian from Etche in Rivers State. A graduate of history and diplomatic studies. He serves as a poetry curator with Port Harcourt Literary Review. His writing can be found in various journals, including: Charles University, Prague, Rio Grande Valley International Poetry Festival, Akpata Review, Rigorous, Ebedi Review, Overtly Lit, Middlebury Institute of International Studies, McNeese University, Pier Review University of Brighton, Tilted House Journal, Akewi Magazine, and Brittle Paper. Best of Net, 2022, Pushcart, 2023.

Connect with him on Twitter
@Apostlejohnchin or
<https://linker.ee/RememberAjc>

I gaze at every infant's face I see,
Seeking to know what it is you looked like—

Your mother or your father,
Grandmother or your grandfather.

Perhaps a long and distant relative,
Or the semblance of this union.

I am left here in the hands of imagination,
Where I clothe you in male and female garb.

I think of a name to be thrown to you—
That of a male or female child.

But here, I know that you are a human being,
Fashioned in the very image of God—

Where I am not proud to speak of your coming;
Unacceptable—this is an ordeal to think of.

It wasn't safe; ask them, it wasn't safe,
For you and for the womb that houses your coming.

How this holds this remnant chaos called life,
I am left in fear and emptiness of hope.

As infants cry—I run after their milky voices,
Wondering what it's like—your voice,

Expressing my misery of fatherhood.
I mean, I failed trying to protect your coming:

A child born on a savaged bridge;
This fear weighed on the hands of heaven.

I am pointing to the heavens without aim,
To say that I am a failed fatherhood,

To your coming, which is not planned,
But is everything to this miserable life—

Planned, and by what hands or mind
That weaves chaos and pain?

To infants, wards, and kindergartens,
Where adults savage bridges in anger,

Judging one's righteousness
Over the unspoken brokenness of kids.

Threats—wills to annihilation, at will,
At every mention of the presumed chaos.

Father—mother—children,
All in a torn map swimming in a pool of longings.

Ache—brokenness and hopelessness,
All keeping the prey here awake at night,

Except for the inscribing of salvational words,
Where lines fall in and out to say:

Ache too is left for this man to dine,
Morning—night—and even in dreams.

These children running away from him,
And after him, demanding—

A father's love and time together.
And the morning comes with a sad reality:

You're only a depositor and never a father,
The reality that is too late, so it echoes.

You played a father's figure here;
If not for words, this man so broken

Would be nothing but like the man
Nailed on the account of guilt he is played into.

Here, words and words he gathers
To bandage his scars sustained in saying:

Here I am, marriage;
Do unto me the butchering as it pleases you,

With hands of a lover in the morning,
And in the afternoon, the knife cuts deep into my heart
To justify her ways to raise her own family.

Poems

Her Beachcomber

By: Ken Gosse



Ken Gosse

Ken Gosse usually writes rhymed, humorous verse in traditional meters. First published in *First Literary Review—East* in November 2016, his poetry is also in *Pure Slush*, *Home Planet News Online*, *Lothlorien Poetry Journal*, *Spillwords*, and others. Raised in the Chicago, Illinois, suburbs, now retired, he and his wife have lived in Mesa, AZ, over twenty years with rescue cats and dogs underfoot.

The first date I had was a walk on the beach at a high school band retreat, well within reach of our chaperones' eyes (always there, just in case), precluding the chance of an undue embrace between any two teens whom they herded with care, adults well-aware an affair could ensnare any teenagers who were attempting to veil brief encounters which carried them well past the pale.

Encouraged (well, told) by an upper-class friend that another girl asked her if she'd apprehend my attention and let me know, plainly but clear, that she wanted "that cute guy" to lend her his ear ... (perhaps even more, although I'd never dated—for me, something scary I'd not contemplated). We sat on a bench then we strolled down the shore hand-in-hand. My first time—never did that before!

Back on the bench with no clinch to unclench, we parted at dusk (I was such a young mensch). She smiled, but I sunk in a darkening gloom as she walked with a local guy back to his room.

Poems

Limbo

By: Kate MacDonald-Dunbar



So many souls who are lost in limbo are unaware of who or where they are, swaddled in a sullen miasma of time suspended. Dank caves swallow thoughts and feelings.

For some, who may be in this place of pathos only to right an injustice, the pall has sucked any positivity away. Although at first filled with fire and a need to fight, soon the chill nothingness prevails.

Yet, once in a thousand years, a solitary bright spirit bursts upwards, vindicated, and leaves behind a rose that's grey. But even this rare bloom, a testament to the fleeting nature of hope, is not immune to the relentless cycle of despair, which inevitably returns to claim its territory.

Kate MacDonald-Dunbar

Kate MacDonald-Dunbar is a retired septuagenarian who started to write just over sixteen months ago. She has many hobbies, but writing helps to fill an insomniac's dark quiet hours. She has had seventeen poems and six short stories published, online and in print: Chris Fielden's "Nonsensically Challenged," for charity. High Shelf Press volume XXIII. WinglessDreamer. Spillwords Press. 805 Lit and Art. Funny Pearls. Little Old Lady Comedy. Dillydoun Review. The World of Myth Magazine.

Poems

Report from Hell

By: Steven Bruce



Steven Bruce

Steven Bruce is a writer and multiple-award-winning author. His poems and short stories have appeared in numerous international anthologies and magazines. In 2018, he graduated from Teesside University with a master's degree in creative writing. An English expatriate, he now lives and writes full-time in Poland.

Hell isn't fire.
It's fluorescent lighting
buzzing above a machine
as the shift manager
barks away
the last birds
of your sanity.

Hell smells like cheap aftershave,
failing to mask the onion sweat
on the chests of men
who gave up
long before they clocked in.

Your lunch?
A soggy tuna sandwich,
shoved down
between four white walls
where someone scrawled,
Freedom is a fucking layoff.

Dante once said
hell was eternal suffering.
He must have dealt
with incompetent management.

There's no devil.
Only Eric,
the night shift manager,
his breath foul with foie gras,
and a heart of curdled milk.

So here's your report:
It's not pitchforks.
It's not flames.
It's not sinners boiling in a pot.
It's ten thousand hours
under the thumb of a boss
who doesn't care

if you break.

And yeah,
you still need to
clock out
when you die.

Poems

The Crisis Worker

By: Gabriella Balcom



Gabriella Balcom

Gabriella Balcom, who is from Texas, writes fantasy, horror/thriller, romance, sci-fi, and more. She likes traveling, music, photography, great stories, history and movies. Gabriella says she loves forests, mountains, and back roads. She has a weakness for lasagna, garlic bread, tacos, cheese and chocolate. Check out her author page:

<https://facebook.com/GabriellaBalcom.lonestarauthor>

Once upon a night quite eerie, as I labored stressed and leery,
a ringing, ringing hit my ear, and pulled me from my reverie.
Crises calls here and there, and I feel as if I get the lion's share.
Desolate souls cry out for help, with many their hearts laid bare.
Some seek solace through spirits or blade, craving endless sleep.
They overflow with a pain and misery so excruciating and deep,
my soul is afflicted with agony, writhing and quivering inside me.
Sorrow for what they're experiencing fills me to the very brim,
and at times I tremble, my own light faltering and growing dim.
Sometimes I yearn for lighthearted fare and mild, quiet peace,
a break from dark sorrow and a soothing calm without cease.
But where would the wounded be if left to steadily go insane?
Who would they turn to in this world of affliction and pain?
So I labor on, heart a quiver with determination and empathy.
I cannot leave them to falter alone, sink into endless misery,
or jump into a pit of gaping despair. Thus I try to show I care.
To do less would be beneath me. To abandon them I do not dare.

Poems

The Time Thief's Retirement Plan

By: Mohit Saini



Mohit Saini

Mr. Mohit Saini is a poet, writer, and researcher, working as an Assistant Professor at Compucom Institute of Technology & Management, Jaipur. He is also the author of several published poems, showcasing his creative engagement with language alongside his academic pursuits. He resides in the culturally rich city of Jaipur.

I've saved up years in pickle jars,
 stored under floorboards—Venetian hours
 next to Parisian minutes, their labels
 peeling like sunburnt skin.
 The good ones (birthday cake delays,
 slow train rides through lavender fields)
 I trade for sapphire afternoons
 when the light slants just so.
 But the hurried years—airport Tuesdays,
 dentist waiting rooms—I let ferment
 into vinegar. Useful for erasing
 certain doorbells, certain names.
 Today I found a jar I'd forgotten:
 1967, the summer of fireflies
 and unsent letters. Its glass
 breathes like a living thing.
 The label reads in my mother's hand:
*"Spend immediately.
 No interest accrues
 on unwitnessed joy."*

Poems

The Truth Will Out Bianther - Part Two

By: Kate MacDonald-Dunbar



The air is rife with conjecture and whispers
tales of an army of the undead who are near
led by the ruthless Queen Bianther, the last
living Lysentian, who thinks I burned her land

I know that I am not guilty, this horror was not
caused by me. But how to convince a queen bent
on vengeance, who does not give up or give in?
I call my winged army to assemble, we must plan

Who is the puppet master behind this? Who hates us
both enough to pit us against each other to the death?
One name explodes into my mind, my brother Vinderest
who loathes us both for ridiculing him when children

It has to be he, no one else would understand us so well
I must make haste, Bianther has to be made aware of my
suspicions before more die. With powerful strokes my wings
propel me onwards, my ardent wish is I might stop this war

Kate MacDonald-Dunbar

Kate MacDonald-Dunbar is a retired septuagenarian who started to write just over sixteen months ago. She has many hobbies, but writing helps to fill an insomniac's dark quiet hours. She has had seventeen poems and six short stories published, online and in print: Chris Fielden's "Nonsensically Challenged," for charity. High Shelf Press volume XXIII. WinglessDreamer. Spillwords Press. 805 Lit and Art. Funny Pearls. Little Old Lady Comedy. Dillydoun Review. The World of Myth Magazine.

Unencumbered I swiftly reach a point where I can see
the undead army led by my old friend. I send up a red flare
move closer shouting to her "Twas not me, look into my
heart. My brother Vinderest, who hates us both, caused this."

I was now close enough to see her face, she looked shocked
We both shouted, "I'm sorry." I flew into her arms, relieved
We decided to send the undead army to eliminate Vinderest
We have both ruled in harmony, with total trust, thus far.

Poems

Thinking of Lyon on the Beach in Manzanita

By: Jake Sheff



Jake Sheff

Jake Sheff is a pediatrician and veteran of the US Air Force. He's married with a daughter and a crazy bulldog. Poems and short stories of Jake's have been published widely. A full-length collection of formal poetry, "A Kiss to Betray the Universe," is available from White Violet Press. He also has three chapbooks: "Looting Versailles" (Alabaster Leaves Publishing), "The Rites of Tires" (SurVision) and "The Seagull's First One Hundred Seguidillas" (Alien Buddha Press).

"Boredom, after all, is the most frequent feature of existence, and one wonders why it fared so poorly in the nineteenth-century prose that strived so much for realism."

Joseph Brodsky, *Less Than One*

Summer's the least poetic season; sloth
Has its defenders, though. Comfort in hell's
The strophe of midnight crying out for ruth.

At the Musée Lumière, an usher's ideals
Fell on a user like some falling trees.
The strophe of midnight riles whatever rules

The little apples here. "Diogenes
Gone mad" is how I might describe the Saône;
The strophe of midnight saw the wretched ease

With which its watershed fed both the Rhône
And me. The army said, "Let's [share] your head."
The strophe of midnight has a metal cone

For a soul; it withstands every fire in my head!
No heart beats just for one. Along each cove,
The strophe of midnight steals the rainbow's red

For all its puddles. At Lugdunum, Jove
Ate my train schedule like it was chervil. "That's that,"
The strophe of midnight – with Olympic love

(And hatred on Ozempic) in its throat,
Too – said. Those smells and touches echo now;
The strophe of midnight keeps them in his coat.

Supporters of the ocean's stupor bow;
I mean those dunes and every blade of grass.
The strophe of midnight blessed a wayward vow

In a [traboule]. (December's "brr," through glass,
Appears less worm-warm than it truly is.

The strophe of midnight thinks it middle-class

Of me to be in both the solstices
At once.) "'Twas in the mythic month of May,
The strophe of midnight's dead societies

Gave birth to sedum. No, 'twas Purim!" "May
I?" starts my offspring's sebum-voiced reply.
(The strophe of midnight glows [pour homme,] she'll say,

Or, that it's Octruary Zeroth's cry
Which makes a stonecrop bloom.) "The "[Autumn] Joy?"
(The strophe of midnight bans variety.)

She's right. Ms. Urbane's right. The missus, coy
About her wisdom (where what's ideal meets
The strophe of midnight), treats me like a boy:

"Through failure's open doors, our pride retreats..."
"...Don't seal them shut," as Maddie's dad, I add.
The strophe of midnight fumes, up to its teats

In a family's florilegium. "I'll trade
You half a dozen dollars for six bucks!"
The strophe of midnight prays to space, cathedral-clad

As [Vieux Lyon]. The chardonnay's a Dix-
Hallpike maneuver to my sadness, while
The strophe of midnight's darker than a Rex

Hill pinot noir inside a farthingale.
We eat burritos in a limousine
(The strophe of midnight named it Lonely Smile).

Our new Tacoma friends ask Madeleine
About French tacos. "One time, in Lyon..."

Poems

When my Da Came Home

By: Timothy Law



Timothy Law

Timothy Law is a writer of fantasy, horror, detective and general fiction from a little town in Southern Australia called Murray Bridge. A happily married father of three children, family is very important to him. Currently working at the Murray Bridge Library in the role of Library Manager he has dreamed since his early high school years of becoming a full-time author. Working for a library, surrounded by so many wonderful authors it is difficult not to be inspired to write. Many of his short stories and general musings can be found on his blog <http://somecallmetimmy.blogspot.com.au/> or on [Parenting Express website](#).

My heart it blooms
 Filled with joy
 I cannot help but run
 The old stone fence around our yard, it is nothing
 Over the wall I leap with ease
 My Da is home after years away
 His great gun sits across his broad shoulders
 He looks broken, so many shadows march beside him
 His eyes, they are full of memory and woe
 He has seen darkness, it walks with him, in him
 He has seen things he dares not share with his little girl
 I wrap my arms around him
 Hold him as close as I can, squeeze him tightly
 Wordlessly I promise to him that I will be there
 I will find all the love that he needs to heal
 My Da is my rock, so now I shall be his
 Together again we will become whole
 Together the broken will be put back
 He may never speak of what he has seen
 But, my fierce resolve is that I will help him to smile again
 We are one soul, my Da and me
 We are our past, just as much as we are our future
 It is my vow that this man will become again
 That which he once was
 The impossible is possible with enough faith and desire
 The young have both in spades

When darkness calls, they answer with fire,
steel, and a little bit of sarcasm.



NIGHT EXTERMINATIONS INC.

OPEN CONTRACT CHALLENGE WINNER

LORETTA A. STRADLEY

Creative Youth Art

Gallery

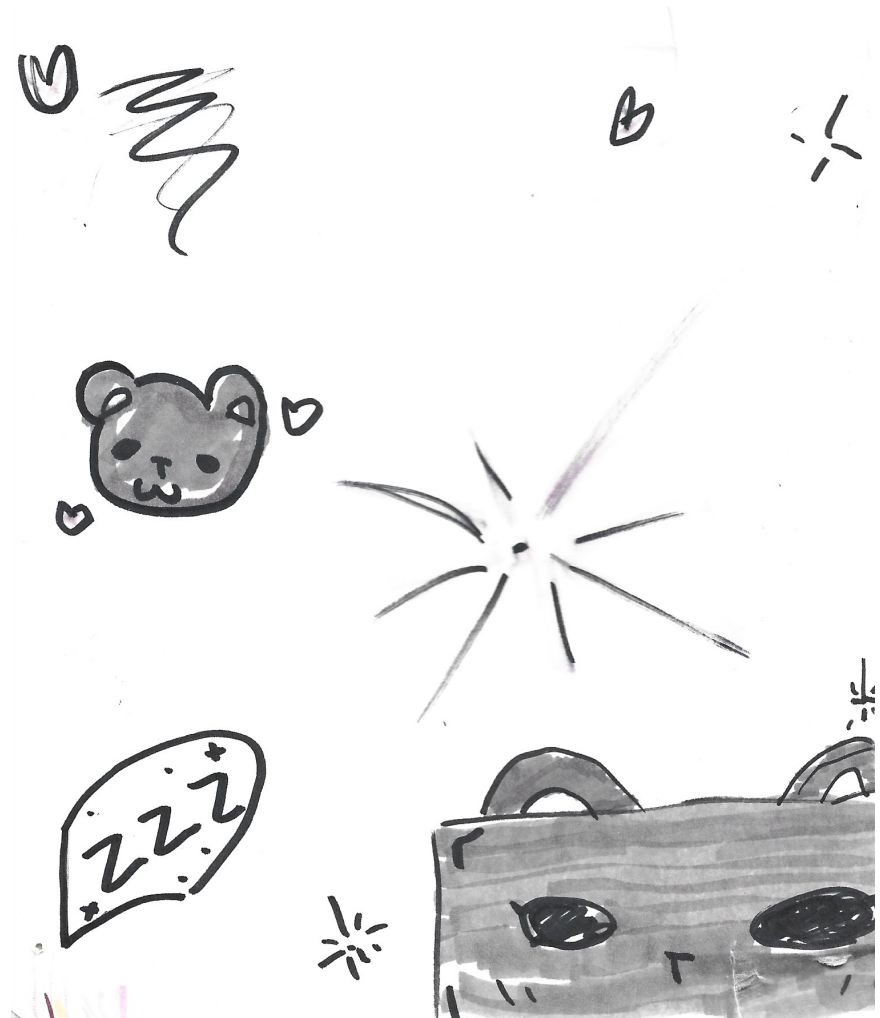
So Cutesy

By: Zoie M. Montoya



Zoie M. Montoya

Zoie M. Montoya is now a teenager, and loves to tell stories, draw, streaming and yelling at people on video game chat! Also hangs out with pookies while being the cool kid.



Art Gallery

Delta Kash

By: Clayton Barton



Clayton Barton

Clayton is an author, dream weaver, visionary, plus actor. Checkout his website [HOW TO DRAW COMICS](#) for more information about him and everything he is working on.



Art Gallery

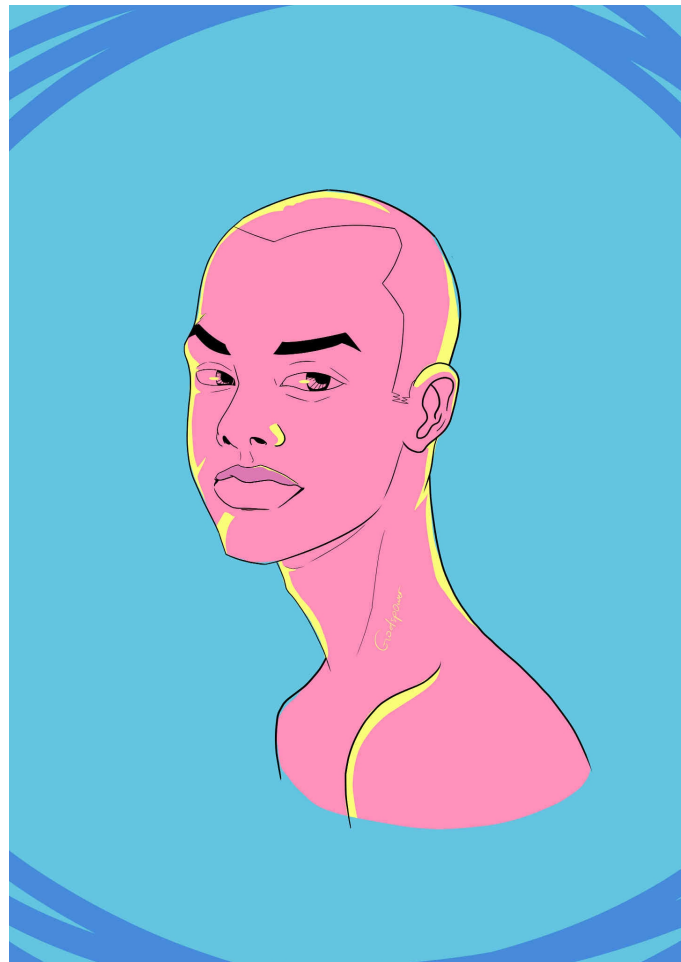
Living in the Now

By: Godstime Ismail



Godstime Ismail

I'm a passionate comic book colorist with a love for bringing stories to life through vibrant hues. With a keen eye for detail and a knack for creating captivating palettes, I add depth and emotion to every panel. From superheroes to fantastical worlds, I use colors to enhance the narrative and create an immersive reading experience. I love working on comic books so much.



Art Gallery

Over the Wall

By: *Timothy Law*



Timothy Law

Timothy Law is a writer of fantasy, horror, detective and general fiction from a little town in Southern Australia called Murray Bridge. A happily married father of three children, family is very important to him. Currently working at the Murray Bridge Library in the role of Library Manager he has dreamed since his early high school years of becoming a full-time author. Working for a library, surrounded by so many wonderful authors it is difficult not to be inspired to write. Many of his short stories and general musings can be found on his blog <http://somecallmetimmy.blogspot.com.au/> or on [Parenting Express website](#).



Art Gallery

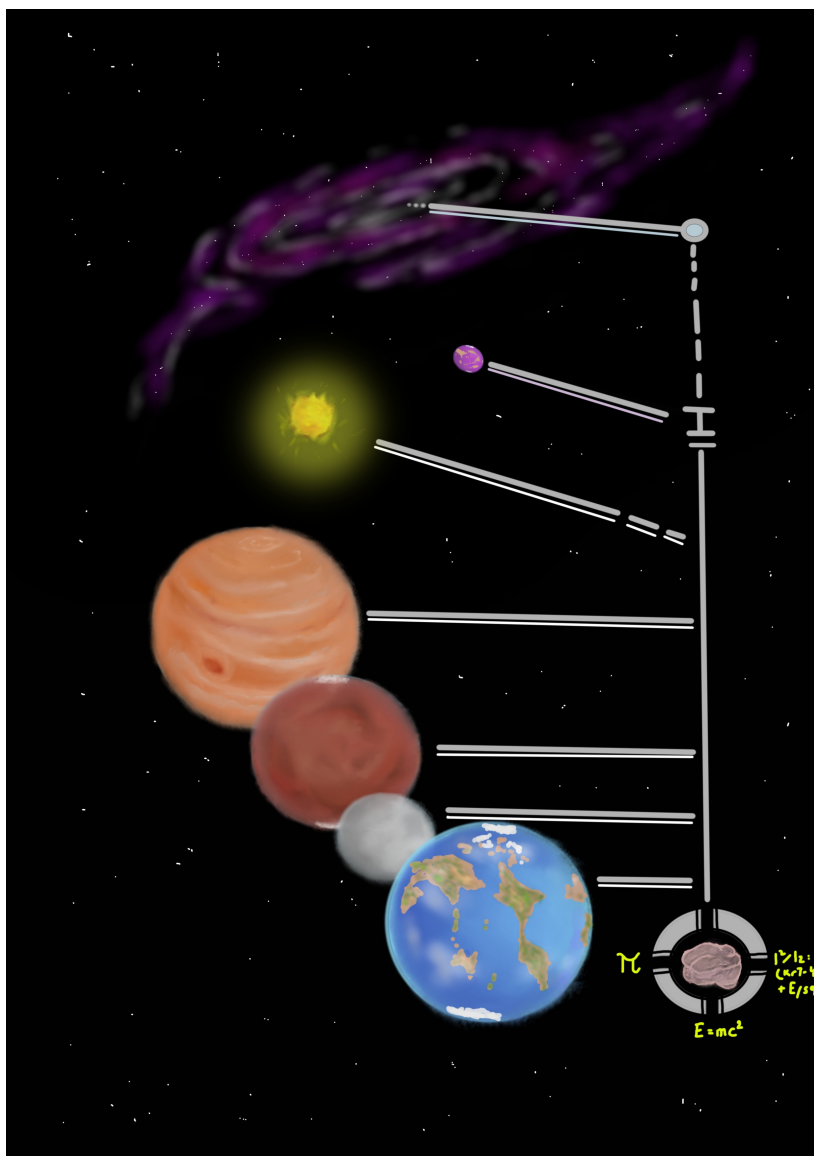
The Mind Steps Beyond the World of Limits

By: Christopher Collingwood



Christopher Collingwood

Chris was born and raised in Sydney Australia. He completed university in Sydney and graduated with a degree in business studies. Chris has devoted his spare time to writing, with works published in Not One of Us, Andromeda Spaceways, Hexagon, Shoreline of Infinity, Jersey Devil Press, State of Matter, Qualia Nous Vol 2 anthology, Smoke in the Stars anthology, and illustration in The Sprawl Mag 2.1, Apocalypse Confidential, , Sublimation 1.3, hyphen punk, Suburban Witchcraft, Snoozine, among other dimensionally unstable places.



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On a stormy sea of moving emotion

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episodes



Movie Reviews

Review *Leave* and *The Room*

By: *Sarcastically Cynical Sally*



Sarcastically Cynical Sally

Sarcastically Cynical Sally spends time watching endless movies with her boyfriend Moviegoer Grim. She enjoys keeping a running commentary on how she would do it so much better but doesn't actually want to put in the effort. She has a mouth that could get her into trouble, a heart just as cynical, but every now and then you will see her shed a tear over a movie. Whether it's because it touched a place inside her, deep, deep, deep inside her, or it really is that bad, no one will ever know.



Well, today I watched three movies. Yes three. Why did I watch three? I was trying to find a bad one! Maybe I miss the horrendous choices Moviegoer Grim makes, maybe I was just in the mood to rip a movie a new one. But I was on a quest. As quests go, I failed. Not horribly, but enough to say that I watched two half decent movies, and one amazing one. The third doesn't really count because it was one of my favorite movies. The two I will be reviewing are *Leave*, and *The Room*. The third, *The Conjuring*, needs no review. It is excellent. Period. End of review.

Let's start with *Leave*. This is the IMDB write up.

A young woman tries to find her origins after having been abandoned as an infant at a cemetery wrapped in a cloth with satanic symbols, but as she gets closer to answers a malevolent spirit is telling her to leave. Sounds like your typical run of the mill ghost/possession story and in a way it is. The first thing you see is the logo for Shudder, so immediately I wasn't holding out much hope and I was thrilled at the prospect of a craptastic movie.

I was disappointed.

It started out slow, so my disappointment didn't come right away. Baby abandoned in a cemetery with an upside down cross around it's neck, adopted by an African American family. She grows up very blonde and very blue eyed, and wonders about her heritage. So instead of going to college, she hops the first plane to Scandinavia and heads off to find her family. Which she does, kinda. She finds the band that her mother was a groupie of and thinks the lead singer is her mother. She is quickly set straight and sets off to visit her father who is in a mental asylum for setting her mother on fire. Yes, this is slow. Not much in the way of action, no real jump scares, nothing to indicate anything untoward.

The movie progresses much as you would expect. Girl is intrigued by new family, but then senses things are not

as perfect as they appear. She tries to find out more about her mother and is sent packing. She whacks a cousin in the noodle, thinking she has killed him, she flees back to the singer. Turns out he is just fine, which is a shame. He was a bit of a jerk. Then it starts picking up. There is a twist that you don't see coming, she has hallucinations of a dead, charbroiled woman trying to get her. Turns out she isn't trying to get her at all, just to get her to listen. Then the battle at the end of the movie, good versus evil, and all that. It doesn't really tie up all the loose ends, which irked me, but it does give enough to entertain you for the duration of the flick. The acting was believable, the scenes were dark enough to allude to the nastiness, but you could still see what was going on. It had enough story to keep you engaged. So, much to my utter dismay, overall, it wasn't a bad movie. A good rainy-day watch if you're looking for something.



The next movie was *The Room*, again another foreign film, again by Shudder. So, my hopes were high again. There was no way Shudder would be two for two. They just aren't that good! Shudder is the epitome of

bad movies!

Again, hopes were dashed and tossed out the window. Although I did have a few more issues with this one than the first one. Here is the IMDB write up. *Loving young couple Kate and Matt move into a secluded mansion and discover a strange secret room whose interior holds the power to make everything they want a reality. Millions of dollars, the original of Van Gogh and the most luxurious outfits-- whatever they want instantly materializes. One day, she decides to ask the room to grant them the child they haven't been able to have. But their initial happiness from this blessing will have unforeseen consequences. As they say: careful what you wish for.*

Again, straightforward and nothing really interesting in the description. This foreign couple buys a dilapidated mansion in upstate New York. I have noticed a trend in this type of movie. It is always either they are from Upstate New York, or moving there, or one of them works there, but that area seems popular for this kind of flick. Anyway, he is an artist, and she is a translator. They, or more she, sets about fixing up the house. The wiring is so old that the electrician has to think about it for a week or more before he will even give them a quote on how much it may possibly cost to replace the wiring.

Then Matt discovers an empty room. I know, shocker. Turns out this room is special. It gives you whatever you want. Now here is where I had a few issues. Kate kept asking for money, more and more money. But she never left the house to spend it. They asked for jewels and booze and food, and he wanted every famous painting, but again, they never left the house. I would have gone on a shopping spree

like no one has ever seen! It certainly would have gotten us to the important part of the movie faster if they had of. There was a good 20 minutes of them just prancing around the house in a variety of clothing, with a plethora of things, having sex on booze covered floors (ewww) and just being weird. The whole idea of them being greedy and getting everything they wanted could have been done in a lot less time. Hubby then suggests they try for a kid again. Wifey has a better idea, let the room give them one. And so, the fun begins. They quickly find out that anything given in the house, can not leave the house. New offspring included. Kate took baby Shane out and he aged 10 years instantly. Matt took some paintings out and they turned to dust. So, all that money they asked for? Useless. You can't even pay for Door Dash with it.

The arrival of the now older Shane is what makes the movie start to get interesting. You find out that if the parent that asked for the kid dies, the kid can leave the house. And so, the chaos ensues. The kid figured out you could ask the room for the outside and created himself a whole new world contained within the house. Kinda confusing if you're not watching it happen.

Anyway, again the old good versus evil, but this begs the question, was Shane evil? Was it the couple? Watch and find out. I'm not gonna give it all to you.

As for my third movie. *The Conjuring*. Excellent. Period.

I could recommend both those movies to you to watch if you're looking for something in the afternoon to keep you from napping. But, I won't. Watch them, don't watch them, I don't really care. I had to, and you had to read

about it. That's all that matters.
Disdainfully yours,

Sarcastically Cynical Sally

Tim's Timeless Treasures and Reviews

*Review of You Can't Kill Me, I'm Already Dead – A Vampire Anthology
Edited by Alan Russo first published by Zombie Works Publications in 2012*

By: Timothy Law



Timothy Law

Timothy Law is a writer of fantasy, horror, detective and general fiction from a little town in Southern Australia called Murray Bridge. A happily married father of three children, family is very important to him. Currently working at the Murray Bridge Library in the role of Library Manager he has dreamed since his early high school years of becoming a full-time author. Working for a library, surrounded by so many wonderful



What could possibly be more timeless than the romantic, thrilling, dangerous idea of the vampire? Charismatic, titillating, hungry... This monster has captured our Vogel, we immediately discover this is

imaginations and featured in our storytelling traditions long before Stoker most famously introduced us to Count Dracula. In this wonderful anthology, aptly titled *You Can't Kill Me, I'm Already Dead*, Alan Russo has gathered nineteen inspired writers to tell their own version of the legend that is the lord of the damned. A coven of creativity, heralding from many different corners of this strange world, USA, the UK, even Israel, and what a talented bunch they are. The first thing I notice, aside from the atmospheric cover and the crimson cursive, scrolling the content page and delighting at the titles, I only recognize one of the authors, Russo himself, editor of this monstrosity and leaving the very best tale to last. Previous anthologies published under the Dark Myth banner, common names from past issues of *The World of Myth* magazine jump out at me like old friends. This batch is new; these names are different. I feel my blood tingling with anticipation... From the moment we break the seal of the first coffin, I mean begin the first story, *A Boy's Gotta Eat* by Nikki experience, because each story is so

authors it is difficult not to be inspired to write. Many of his short stories and general musings can be found on his blog <http://somecallmetimmy.blogspot.com.au/> or on [Parenting Express website](#).

no homage to Stoker, nor is this anthology a carbon copy of what Stephanie Meyer (at the time) made famous. We have a thick and juicy neck... no... sorry... book of tales that explores the source of this curse, the excitement of the hunter and the prey, what it means to be a vampire way back in the past and what such a title means in more modern times. We have victims that think they are clever enough to outsmart the monster, monsters who are far too clever for we mere mortals, those who offer eternity, and those so hungry that they suck their victims dry without pausing to consider the future they are stealing. I love that with each new story, the only thing that vaguely remains the same is that somewhere in it you know there will be something vampiric. Serial killers seeking that final victim, clever creatures who stick to their personal beliefs long after they are cursed (blessed?) with undeath, demons whose intellect far exceeds that of mere humanity. We cannot help but love them all. This is an anthology for the ages, the actual eons by which we associate this legendary figure. It is not all doom and gloom, some of these stories are quite amusing in a quirky kind of way. We have the vampires of the past, the vampires of the future, and those who have come from somewhere else entirely. Consistently though we have stories that capture the imagination and take the reader along for a wild ride. We rediscover our keenness to feel the prick of the fangs that seek our jugular, to live forever, or to die trying. These lords and ladies of the shadowy realm make being a vampire cool, fun, and terrifyingly joyful. I honestly wonder how many of these imaginative minds are writing from

good, you'll believe you're in a tantalizing trance. The only cure, of course to read the next one. To offer up *You Can't Kill Me, I'm Already Dead* anything less than your bared neck (and five glittering stars, of course), would be to do this anthology a severe injustice. And to mark oneself for an eternity of pain, suffering, and an unquenchable thirst for something red that is not wine. Happy reading, mortals... You have been warned...

Art Reviews

Elemental Vision: Nongirrŋa Marawili's Baratjala (2018) and the Pulse of Country

By: Michael Liang Wei



Michael Liang Wei

Born and raised in Beijing, Michael Liang Wei developed a deep appreciation for both contemporary and traditional Chinese art before moving to New York City to broaden his perspective. With a background in art history and journalism, he writes insightful critiques on both emerging and established artists, bridging Eastern and Western artistic philosophies. Passionate about avant-garde movements and classical aesthetics, Mike frequently contributes to major art publications and curates discussions that connect cultures through visual expression.



Nongirrŋa Marawili's Baratjala (2018) is a tour de force of contemporary Yolŋu bark painting, embodying the artist's deep connection to Country, ancestral memory, and elemental forces. Wyatt lines of ochre, vibrant magenta washes, and rhythmic stippling combine to evoke water in motion: rippling waves crashing upon rocks, spray hovering in the air, while ancestral lightning snakes (Burrut'tji)

spiral through the composition in shimmering white. As the artist herself explained, the painting is "just the water... bubbles that splash" and "flames... burnt areas where the land is smooth and burned." This duality of water and fire, of earth and sky, is the heart of Baratjala.

At first glance, the painting's monumental vertical presence, reported in some versions as 2.22 m by 1.04 m on larrakitj, is striking. On paper or bark, it still commands attention through bold structuring and confident brushwork. Marawili employs negative space with restraint; large swathes of unmarked background amplify the energy of her dynamic mark-making. The Art Gallery



of New South Wales noted this approach as pushing within painting traditions in a courageous and innovative way.

Within Yolŋu cultural frameworks, Baratjala references a site of personal childhood significance where Marawili camped with her father, Mundukulu Marawili, at a Macassan trepang anchorage in the Gulf of Carpentaria. This is not a painting of sacred *miny'tji*. Staying true to her own statement, “the painting that I do is not sacred. I can’t steal my father’s ... paintings. I just do my own designs from the outside,” the piece represents *warranjul*, outside meaning, expressing her personal vision: the heat of flames, the swell of water, the impact of lightning, and the grounding of rock.

Stylistically, Baratjala epitomizes the groundbreaking shift in Yolŋu bark painting led by senior female artists. The exhibition *Maḏayin* has been described as “a gemlike exhibition of 74 eucalyptus bark paintings,” and Marawili’s work stands out as a powerful voice within that collection.

It breathes with life. The dots emerge like sea foam and sparks. The undulating parallel lines pulse like energy currents. Her mark-making is unflinching in its physicality. Brushstrokes remain visible, fingerprints etched in pigment, offering a direct testament to her presence and bodily engagement. These works resonate both culturally and internationally. Baratjala featured in the US touring exhibition *Maḏayin* (2022–25), as part of a broader dialogue about bark painting’s dynamism and cultural resurgence. Critics described the genre here as balancing the sacred and the beautiful, with Marawili’s work functioning as a meditation on elemental forces.

Sydney Morning Herald reviewer John McDonald, reflecting on her 2018 AGNSW retrospective, named her one of the most dynamic Indigenous artists at work today.

Baratjala is both personal and universal. It reflects intimate Country childhood camps and songs, but also speaks of primal energies: water, fire, lightning, and rock. It bridges tradition and innovation. Marawili blends clan references with her own language of shapes and color. The painting’s architecture, with strings of parallel lines meeting large organic forms, captures a striking tension between fluidity and solidity. The viewer can sense currents of wind and weather, the pulse of nature and spirit converging on bark.

Her technique reflects years of experimentation. She trained first as a printmaker and then shifted to bark painting around 2005, developing a powerful visual grammar based on restraint and emphasis. She has moved away from detailed cross-hatching in favor of bold gesture and atmospheric suggestion. This evolution makes



Baratjala not just a depiction but a lived experience, felt through visual rhythm and textured surfaces. Whether in local museums or global stages, from the Art Gallery of NSW to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the painting affirms the leadership of Australian Indigenous women in contemporary art. At auction, the work has achieved significant recognition, with one version selling for AUD 125,000, a testament to its value and impact.

In summary, Baratjala stands as a landmark in Nonggirrŋa Marawili’s oeuvre and in contemporary bark painting. It is elemental, personal, ancestral, and immediate. It erupts in color and gesture, marking Country as alive, dynamic, and resilient. I believe this work ranks among the seminal pieces of our time, where tradition meets innovation, and presence is inscribed through pigment, line, and space.

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HAS A WEEK PODCAST THAT HAS BEEN
RUNNING FOR OVER 7 YEARS?



HOSTED BY
TIM LAW

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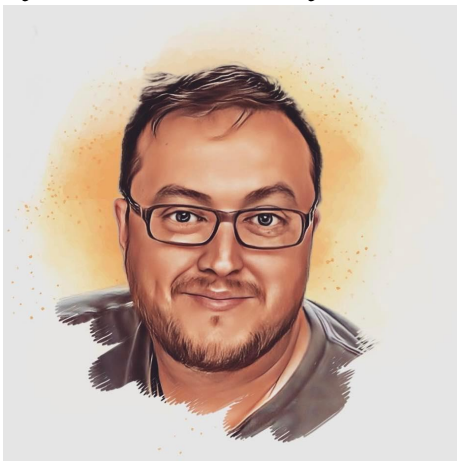
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COMMENTARY FROM THE FOUNDER

Have a seat, we got stuff to cover!

By: David K. Montoya



David K. Montoya

For a good part of two decades David K. Montoya was an active writer, artist and business entrepreneur in the micro-publication world. In 2013, turned his pen in for a microphone and became a podcaster for the following five years—and even did a small stint in independent Hollywood. But, now, he's come home and is ready to begin weaving new tales for this magazine.

Hey Boys and Girls! Man, this month has been super busy for yours truly and I am excited to talk about everything that's happened since we last met up. First, let me apologize for not submitting anything last issue, again, the business aspect of things have really demanded my attention. To kick things off, let me congratulate this year's [Open Contract Challenge](#) grand prize winner **Tate Dousette** and his winning manuscript! As this was a part of the first ever *SPEED* Edition, we have a surprise for our winner! He will not have to wait for next year to see his words in print, as it will be released this November! Right before the holiday season!

Also, I wanted to give an Update with the 20-year anniversary edition of *Dreams of Darkness, Dreams of Night* by the late, great, Terry D. Scheerer. I wanted to do something special for my mentor's twentieth anniversary, after all it was that original release that gave me the courage to become a publisher and create *Dark Myth Publications*. I spoke with the Scheerer Estate, and

they have agreed to allow me to create a special version of his inspiring work. And the release date can now be announced as August 1st which is eight days from the time you are reading this! I sincerely want to thank his family for being so gracious and kind in allowing me to keep his legacy alive!

Next is the launch of [Dark Myth Comics](#) *Dark Myth Graphic Novel #1 - Chronicles of the Unknown!* Last year, when I hired **Mario Martinez** to return as Editor in Chief of our comics division, we discussed the idea of launching a "graphic novel" title for *Dark Myth Comics*.

That was almost a year ago, and while we hit a few roadblocks along the way, we were able to transition into the product that will be scheduled to come out October 7, 2025!

Linked to this project is our newest division of *The JayZoMon Dark Myth Company, LLC, Outsider Distributions!* We gave it a test run last year with [American Smash # 1/2](#) as we used a barebones crew to ship them off to all fifty States and one Provence in Canada. This year, I have hired people to contact those same comic shops with a handle full of new ones to attempt to sell *Chronicles of the*

Unknown to over 200 comic stores directly! The plan is that [Myth Mart](#) will intake all the ordering whether it be from a comic book shop or a customer from *Dark Myth Comics'* website who is looking to purchase a subscription or someone who simply wishes to buy a back issue. As where Outsider will now be responsible for shipping direct orders that are not offered on *Amazon*. My vision is to see the company not only use someone to distribute our book, but to cut out the middleman directly and eventually ship ALL of our products. So, I want to jump on a personal matter since at this very moment I am writing this from my phone while I wait in a waiting room to speak with my orthopedic surgeon. Oh! Hold that thought he just walked in... So, I was going to talk about my back and how the pain has increasingly worsened over the past three and a half years, according to my Doctor, I will undergo surgery to fix that problem. Of course my health insurance has to approve it, and then I must be cleared by my cardiologist to make sure my heart is strong enough for surgery and then, we will set a date, but it looks like it will happen this year. The final thing I would like to cover is that while the Hollywood producer and I could not come to an amount to continue his sponsorship, I have made a new deal with an emerging energy drink called [Dubby](#) and you will find an ad at the back of this magazine follow the QR code and enjoy the products they have to offer. They will be sponsoring our magazine and the up-coming release of *Chronicles of the Unknown*, there may be a website banner ad in the coming future, but let's get through the rest of this month.

All right gang, there is more stuff to talk about, but I literally have run out of time!

Until next time!

David K. Montoya



Founder of The World of Myth Magazine And Other Stuff Too

S O L O L E V E L I N G

DUBBY

S-RANK ENERGY



BE BETTER