

CORNFIELD REVIEW

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CORNFIELD



REVIEW



2018

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Preface

GREETINGS, DEAR READER!

You are holding in your hands the latest issue of *Cornfield Review*. 2018 has proven to be an especially strong year, and we hope you enjoy the contents as you peruse the pages that follow. A carefully curated collection of poems, short stories, photographs, illustrations, and more await you, so I wouldn't blame you if you just stopped reading this right now and jumped right in! (Well, maybe a little...)

Every year, we take a moment to extend a note of thanks to those who helped support this project: the administration of OSU-Marion, led by Dean Greg Rose; the English faculty who encouraged students to submit their work; the writers, photographers, and artists who submitted to us. All of you help make this journal a wonderful cornerstone of our community's literary and artistic scene.

The 2018 Editorial Board worked diligently to assemble this year's issue, selecting submissions, editing, developing design concepts, and multiple other tasks. This year's board is comprised of: Andrew Allen, Dustin Decot, Lilly Grooms, Fantasia Hillman, Patricia McCambridge, Dani Miller, Billy Moodie, Kristen Orewiler, Amy Plough, Daniel Schirtzinger, and Paul Winters. Working with this group has been extremely rewarding, as you'll hopefully see reflected in this fruit of their collective labor.

Cornfield Review is published annually. The Editorial Board is interested in quality poetry, prose, artwork, and photography. Submissions are primarily solicited from students at OSU-Marion and Marion Technical College, although we accept submissions from off-campus writers and artists as well. For more information, please email me at mccorkle.12@osu.edu, or visit us online at cornfieldreview.osu.edu.

—Ben McCorkle, Faculty Adviser

The Cornfield Review Mission Statement:

We strive to represent the literary and artistic voice of Central Ohio by giving area college students (as well as others) an opportunity to see their work published in a professional literary journal. Additionally, we are passionate about achieving a cultural impact that goes beyond local campuses and reaches into the greater community.

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POETRY

The Mirror

“Who are you?” the young girl asked,
and the other answered, “You.”

“You are me? How can that be?”

“Oh dear, I thought you knew.”

“With eyes so sad and smile faded,
How can you be me?”

“I’m sorry that I couldn’t spare you
all the senseless tragedy.”

—*TC Albright*

Letter to the Fragments of Shells by the Sea

A groan
A moan
A sigh
No relief

The sloshing
And swimming
Floating
In air

The beatings
And meetings
The dance of feet
That dance that beat

The cry it was silent
The scream unheard
The tears unnoticed
The fears unrelieved

Ripped from the womb
Was not to be the tomb
Off from the shore
To be evermore

Painful the journey
Pain upon pain
People upon people
Too many to name

Fast forward the journey
When my savior came down
And met me in glory
To hope to abound

My Beauty my Splendor
My Glory my God
My Savior forever
My Lord and my God

—*Victoria Bell*

Someday

Insane is in the eye of the judger; say it isn't so.

But if we go to work day in and day out, insane we all will go.

Repeating the same thing expecting different results, this is how we define
"insane."

Yet we work our lives away and are not supposed to feel mundane.

Life is meant to be lived and not worked away, but today debt has made us all
slaves.

Freedom may be the American dream, but we are judged if we make waves.

There must be more importance to life than money, though it does rule the
planet.

Most people claim we do not need it to be happy, even though we feel better if we
have it.

Let's vow to make each of our lives count. Let's do something that matters.

Let's care about this amazing place we call Earth before our beacon of hope is
forever shattered.

Life on Earth can be demanding—this much is true.

But if we put in the hard work and labor, we can enjoy the view.

Not everyone will agree, and that is still okay.

But hopefully, someday you will care about our planet's future.

Someday.

—Kara Day

Awkward Crush

Perhaps every boy
Has a crush on the
Girl who happens to
Catch him in the
Most compromising
Or embarrassing
Positions as
She's become a
Part of him, and seen
His world, if
Only by accident.

I told my crush
A short, dark haired
Mess of a popular girl
That I would be packing
(Lunch) on Instant Messenger

But she heard
Packing in another light.

I asked her to prom
That same year, hoping
Pity might work in my
Favor –
It did not.

—*Ben Ditmars*

The Derivative of Life

Another day of stress begins,
Putting up with students and tests, it never ends.
Here all day and half the night;
Sucking down coffee as if it's part of my bloodstream,
And a headache strikes me once more.
Middle of class and time has slowly passed.
To continue teaching, you would rather not.
Before you can say another, the student that argues raises their hand;
Complaining on the insides, you fake friendliness and listen.
Everyone stares as you attempt to answer the remark,
Students are students that will never change.
Some irrational, some you don't mind.
Using your personal power rule, you dismiss class and leave it behind.
Walking to your office, a line of students awaits.
"We want good grades! We want bonus points! Give us more! More!"
I can only try to help, but I am not a wizard.
They want good grades,
They wish for bonus points.
We can't just dish it out,
It is of hard work and completion of one's hard work to succeed.
More hot coffee calls out to me;
Becoming a necessity of peace and content.
Grading stacks upon stacks;
Research and three more books to read,
As another day of stress and love for one's job has come and gone.

—*Sal Gable*

For the Love of Rain

It's been raining.
Raining for months now since you left.
To feel empty is to not even feel real.
The most important piece of my life has left,
Left while others enjoy everything about life.
I wake as it continues to rain,
Rain of all my thoughts.
Another day of thinking about what happened,
Who you were and what you were all about.
Maybe it was I who loved too much;
Maybe it was you who showed too much,
But this is a storm that will not pass.
An everlasting shadow;
The anger built up inside,
And the taunting fear.
Everyday the rain gets deeper and more severe,
Stuck in feelings, stuck in tears.
Making my way through everyday,
Finding memories and hopes of life.
I don't want you back;
I just want the happiness you brought,
But it's raining.
Raining inside my heart.

—*Sal Gable*

Holding On

Holding on
Is hard to do
When the one you love
Just isn't true.
He asked you to wait,
He'll be ready someday,
But real love won't wait
Won't force him to stay.
If he does come back though
What's a girl to do?
When he steals her heart
Just by saying I love you.

—*Lilly Grooms*

Domestic Violence

domestic violence is more fear than love.
a hand is more than than gentle touch.
anger is more control than partnership.

life is more walking on eggshells than solid ground
Tears are more plentiful than laughter
Bruises are more your image than soft kisses

Marriage is more possession than sacred vows
broken promises are more real than false
change to you is more a bandaid than permanent

—*Sally Higgins*

The Trashman's Son

I walk in the filth
For it is my bloodline
Dirt packed in crevasses
But nothing will grow
Fish skins and old bones
That's all I've come to know

—*Ruksana Kabealo*

Ellipsis

I should say less
Lay my tongue beneath the deadfall
Try not to stir

That's actually the conclusion I drew the other night
As I watched your focus slip away
Wandering eyes, wondering when I'd stop talking
So you could say something
Anything

I, like every other woman in my life,
have made the tragic mistake of thinking I had something worth saying
I, like every other woman in my life,
have settled
For distracted nods and cheap validation
During commercials and red lights

You are a vacuum of thought
Of parroted late-night monologues and incidents given no context
Anecdotes that only ever begin and memories that aren't yours

You are unreceptive to anything from me that doesn't set up a punchline
But jokes are forgettable when they aren't funny
And it's become harder for me to be funny

You write all of our stories
which all end the same way: the way you intended
Unchanged by verbiage or concision
on my part

I'm a supporting character in our lives
Only here to laugh when desired,
comfort,
and to agree that you're the victim
You feed me lines
And I let you

Until now
I'm done with pretending
that your words are somehow more important than mine
that I'd rather hear you tell it than me
that if I loved you, I'd let it go this time
Consider this me breaking character

—*Ruksana Kabealo*

Kelev

The third worst moment of my life
was when I was seven and I,
scared by this new plot line
and desperate for anything to come between him and I,
wished that my bedroom door had a lock

The second worst moment of my life
was when I realized
that I would be spending the whole rest of my childhood
wishing this.

Or, if not the whole rest of my childhood,
then at least the rest of the time
I was forced to spend calling this house
my home

And this man
my family

The worst moment of my life
was when I realized

Eleven years later

that I wasn't even special in my grief

And that the skinny, easily bruised,
green-eyed wildfire of a boy
who grew up eight miles south,
in a house just off the same loose-gravel road

Spent his whole childhood wishing for the same thing

—*Ruksana Kabealo*

Ohio Revised Code 2907.02

the Lord judges swiftly not,
spares unfailingly
loves unconditionally

the Lord, in his infinite mercy,
tells me to pardon you
tells me to love you
even though i can't
won't
shouldn't

the world of men will understand me for holding my grudges
and if not them, then the world of women will

but still, the Lord looms
urging me to absolve you
the way He has absolved you
the way the rest of my life absolved you
when they picked who to believe

the Lord will not turn his back on me
but He will not welcome me either
not until i follow His lead
and forgive

—*Ruksana Kabealo*

Another Piece of Coffee

(Inspired by Gertrude Stein's "A Piece of Coffee" from her book, Tender Buttons)

Bite dark bitten. Sauce beater. A Cold moon now from when.

Time is in coffee, the greet game gamble shame. Believing, tame, gathering time.

Brown rim lines my insides. Small splatters take no one form. A taste of gasoline,
a singe to keep me awake.

The mud-colored mixture of spirits comes alive with every passing minute.

Baker's slop, sea of mud-burnt wood. With each piece, it darkens inside,
brightens outside. An imbalance and balance of bitter harmony.

*—Victoria Bell, Kylee Gill, Lilly Grooms, Stuart Lishan, Candy Lucas,
Dani Miller, Andrea Scheckelhoff, Daniel Schirtzinger*

Everything Rhymes With Orange

Fireflies flow across the belly of the above,
an ocean of an orange blaze drips slowly
down at their passing, time trickles by.

That honey splayed horizon seeps into
the soil leaving only an echo of it to
mark our memory

Our bones won't forget, though we will.

—*Dathan Lyon*

The Stoplight

High above the rest
we rest.
Forever unmoving
we move the masses.
Keeping order
where chaos is found.
A myriad of colors
rushing by with a sound.
Curses, prayers, and others are made
to us, the ones who hang in this maze.
It is with a capricious blink of an eye
that will let you leave,
will let you go by.
So here we must part,
here we must end.
Until tomorrow,
farewell, my friend.

—*Dathan Lyon*

A Letter to California

Dear Kelly, today I washed socks
and was reminded of the ten
likely still at your house—not
yours—from sleepovers long past.

And then I thought about backpacks
and how, for friendship, they're enough
and about wolves in mediocre artwork:
yours improved but mine
did not.

And I thought about adventures
through the woods where
bears lurk—but probably not—
and deer chase dogs
and none of this could deter us.

I thought about driving
at night—always aimlessly—
and crying
because Everything is choking
at 2 am, the road an inky void
and the world in front of us,
horrifying in headlights.
Nothing has happened
and that's the point.

I'm certain that California is wonderful.
I'm still an hour beyond
the town where I was born and
the town where I was raised:
where friendship formed, remains.
I'll forgive you for leaving us
in the actual cold if you're content,

and I'll repress my recognition that still
nothing has happened
as well as my terror
that forever distance will prevail.

—*Patricia McCambridge*

Musings of the Silent Histrionic

I am driving home in the early morning dark. A man and his dog turn to look at me as Time begins to chime. I am surprised, round a corner and am suddenly again alone.

I reel as his eyes light up with the hope that I put there—my jaws ache, and I am aware that the one who will extinguish it forever will be me alone.

He's kind—a bit loud—and befriends with a smile and chocolate. My eyes begin to burn as he lowers his voice and says that what he fears most is to ever be alone.

A feigned shift in focus before eyes can make full contact. Too late. I'm already designing a white dress and our matching headstones to be together and alone.

He's lovely and brutally wrong, but the curiosity throbs and my skin burns, and I wonder how I can still—in the gaze of this apathetic, beautiful, blue-collar boy—feel lacking and alone.

Four years are gone. The clock's gears are crushing as I assure us both that it was not a waste of time as long as neither of us had to be alone.

It looks easy. It screams of insurmountability. How can I choose when in every happenstance I feel fate and the stars and the promise that no one should be alone?

—*Patricia McCambridge*

Deadline

Writing poetry can be hard,
especially when you don't like to.

There are times where you want to give up,
but know that you can't.

"Writing is easy, anyone can do it."
Then why don't you do it?

"Be an English major," they said.
"You'll do great," they said.

What they don't understand is the amount of time,
and energy that goes into this art

And that's what it is:
An art.

One that must be practiced everyday
in the hopes of making it big.

But why do people write anyways?
Do they not write for themselves anymore?

I am not like an addict with a pen,
I can't just write out a masterpiece.

But I keep on going
hoping one day to prove them wrong

I can write a masterpiece;
I can make myself known.

Even if I am only known to my peers
at least I can say I tried.

—*Dani Miller*

The King and His Queen

Every morning is when it all happens; day after day
I can see his veins spearing out in his arm just thriving for my thirst
He can't go too long without me in his system before going insane
I should know, I've seen him at his worst
He'll turn into a man not even he will recognize
With me or without me he'll be the most miserable he's ever been
I have him right where I want him; he's no longer in control of his own self

I take him on that magic carpet high, we can go anywhere we want
We're a team, but I'm his queen in charge
Day to day life can get rough; he consistently has zilch
I know I'm worth more than gold since I'm his necessity
"You're nothing more than a piece of shit junkie" people will say
He's tougher than most; ignores the words as if unspoken

His smell is something you'll never forget; rotten mixed with failure
He knows his life is limited, although everyone's is I suppose
He's as happy as he's ever been in his own little sad world
Being alone with him brings the comfort he needs; there's no pressure
Where would I be without him? That's the question I'll never find out
I mean everything to him, he will never go without his queen.

—*Kristen Orewiler*

Twins

I am half of a whole.
A copy of myself –
not the original but somehow
unique.

My other half decided that
this world didn't need him
as much as the heavens did
and gave me room to grow.

He never graced
my family with his
presence.

But I had his.

He just stopped answering
halfway through our journey
to a world of noise
and light.

A shadow but void of
darkness clings to my soul
and tells me which direction
I should have taken.

A presence that hovers
over my mind until I can't
tell the difference between
my conscious and
its own independent voice.

I am haunted by the emptiness
that would have once been filled
by my best friend and blood.

—Mickey Pfarr

Majestic Blue Falcons

Battle buddies got my six, like I had theirs.
United under one cause. That is, unless your
Detachment was rear. Unless you were broken,
Disabled, and forced to fall out. Honorably, but
You don't give a damn.
Forget reintegration into civilian life.
United, I remember the cause, but you've forgotten.
Can't turn to anyone. You had my back, with a
Knife. You had my six, but only for four.
Egged me on to just die already when I was
Ready to give up.
Some ate up battle buddy.

—*Amy Plough*

Emergence

In her hands lie the twisting sands,
Floating off into the unknown nether.
Slowly abrading as each grain flies,
Effortlessly avoiding capture,
Snaking forward unto the rapture.
Sliding through the crevices and folds,
Gouging deep trenches and loosening the flesh.
Slipping, and returning to the primordial sea,
Without memory, or mention of me.

Nothing in the grand scheme, but a flake, a grain.
Humbling and sad, for she who wishes to leave a legacy.
She who strives for greatness, significance, achievement.
She who knows, it does not go
With her on her final walk.
It simply returns.
It is placed gently back on the shelf,
For the future generations.
Waiting in vain, for humility of the same.

—*Amy Plough*

Tov

Author's Note: *In memory of Andrew Ault, who so suddenly left us in spring 2017. Andrew was a great and loving man, a son and friend. He loved books and enjoyed many fandoms, he was also a Marion Technical College alumnus and a senior at the Ohio State University in Marion, Ohio. He was all of these things, and so much more. Tov is a Hebrew word meaning 'good.' Andrew used the word when he experienced something great or was having a good time. He must be having a Tov, Tov time. We love you and miss you Andrew; see you on the flip-side.*

What a great time you must be having,
What a joy you must have experienced,
When you found you were going home

We understand, but were surprised
by the sudden call, explaining
you weren't coming back

What a great time you must be having,
Talking to Him and casting your crown at His feet
What joy you must be feeling, in His presence

We were having a great time, too
Though it would be selfish
To wish you were here, and not there

What a great time you must be having,
Remembering how you touched our lives,
And the souls, that you helped along the way

We miss you, though are painfully
aware of the gaping hole on Earth,
Where you once were.

What a great time you must be having,
Passing the time.
Ready to share with us, again,
the love that you always had

We know you are home now,
But cannot help but stop to think of you,
And how you made us feel

What a great time you must be having.
Spending your time in his presence,
And waiting so patiently for us to join you,
after our own time is done

—*Amy Plough*

Wanderer

Perplexed, she perched upon the precipice.
A perceived plateau,

Preceded presently, with drive,
Motivation, and desire.

She gazes down with anticipation
At the daunting feat.

One that she thought she beat
Ages ago.

Only to find a renewed sensation
Of dread, aspiration, and anticipation.

Goaded forward by a clear
Vision of the future, and

An intentional disregard of past
Perturbations.
She endeavors incessantly,

Plodding, struggling, and clawing
Toward a greater meaning or purpose

Striving positively for an
Improved plot,

Prior to the tedious cognizance
Of the eventual termination of
Her abundantly temporal existence.

Advancing perennially toward an
Ancient and everlasting presence,

And accepting her place in eternity.

—*Amy Plough*

Courage

Courage is less subtle than modesty
Less clean than perfection
Less fearful than submission
Less intelligent than common sense

Courage is louder than silence
Much louder than nature's roar
Louder than wars
But more silent than madness

It is grander than wealth
Grander than weakness
And grander than time

Courage is more foolish than strategy
More foolish than reason
More foolish than cowardice
But it is less foolish than nihilism

—*Daniel Schirtzinger*

Flash Drive

Insectoid clicks and clanks
As the head retracts
And expands.
Small plastic shell
Black beetle shell
Tail sticks out from
Nest; a cocoon.
Feeds on sap
Of data.
Chirps when it's
Safe to move away
And reattach to a
New trunk.

—*Daniel Schirtzinger*

Flock of Geese

I saw a flock of
Geese flying
Over head

The fowl honked
Across the river
Where I saw a
Flock of geese
Flying over
Head

Black and white
Feathers. Low
Hanging bodies; I
Saw a flock of
Geese flying
over head

—*Daniel Schirtzinger*

Odin's Court

I sit at the long road of tables,
As fires prance about from
The hearths of stoves.
Mountains of roasted
Meats; piled to the
Ceiling as rivers of ale
Spilled from chalices;
Sparkling of gold and
Glimmering rubies.
The cracking of mugs;
The trill of lutes leaked;
The thunders of laughter.

—*Daniel Schirtzinger*

Laugh

They say that laughter is the best medicine
They say that laughter is contagious
They say that laughter is strength

And so, I laugh

I laugh because my best friend is dancing around
the kitchen for no reason and her “signature move” is ridiculous
I laugh because my mother makes a joke about her failing health
and I don’t want her to know how worried I am

I laugh because I’m the only person I know who can injure themselves
while walking across an empty room
I laugh because I don’t know how else to respond to the searing pain
that courses through my broken and bleeding body

I laugh because it’s fun

I laugh because it hides the pain
I laugh because it brings joy

I laugh because it’s easier than experiencing real emotion
I laugh because I would rather barricade myself away
in a fortress of laughter, than drown in a river of tears

—*Rosa Ubaldo*

Ghost of the Plains

Thunder rolls across the plains,
Even the largest tree shakes.
Not a cloud in the sky,
Yet the ground quakes.

Over the rolling hills
A dark wave descends
Swarming o'er the grass
Round the twists and bends.

The herds of old
Roaming their free land.
Under no one's fire,
Under no one's command.

They live amongst the first
to make their home here
Those nations who behold
Them with great reverence.

These beasts show their love
With their meat and their bones.
Their hides give warmth and
Safety to homes.

For generations, they walk
Side by side through the grass
Neither knowing the horrors
That would soon come to pass
When the soldiers come
They spare no life
They come shooting the gun
And wielding the knife.

They shoot and they kill,
Decimating with haste.
Hide and horn stolen,
Body left to waste

These men have no honor,
They give no thanks.
They attack without warning,
The enemy, they outflank

The tribes fight bravely
to defend their kin,
but their fate is tied
to those creatures with fur skin.

As the herds fall apart,
The tribes are removed,
To ghettos and slums,
All government approved.

But those survivors live on
With strength in their hearts
Fighting to reclaim their land,
As do their animal counterparts.

—*Rosa Ubaldo*

Now and Then

The sun shines;
The stalks are rustling in the wind.
There is only white;
All the color is gone from the land

Time Stops
Lightning Strikes

Flowers bloom;
And grass grows in the forgotten tracks.
A swerve left;
And the meeting of eyes through the glass.

Time Stops
Lightning Strikes

The wounds are gone;
Scars only remain within the mind.
A sudden crunch;
Ringing ears, darkness is all I find

Time Stops
Lightning Strikes

Days go on;
There are things to do, places to be.
Everything halts;
From the wreckage, from the wound, oil bleeds

Time Stops
Lightning Strikes

Images come
Images go
All the same
Oil and Snow

Time Stops
Lightning Strikes

—*Rosa Ubaldo*

It was the day that took my life away.

In loving memory of Jacob Richardson and Mykaela Fellure

It was any other day,
After school and only a ride away.

In the Jeep Cherokee as crisp as can be.
Views along the river, what a joy to see.

Accompanied by my friend's delight,
The thought of danger was out of sight.

With many words yet to speak,
And many dreams yet to seek.

I was an angel awaiting to return home,
Still not wanting to leave my family all alone.

Left to center and to the rail and to the pole,
Lord have mercy on my soul.

It was any other day,
It was the day that took my life away.

—Paul Winters

PROSE

ABC Stories

Editors' Note: The following collection of three short stories are what is known as "ABC stories"—a common creative writing exercise where writers must start each new sentence the next consecutive letter of the alphabet. The goal is to create something seamless, that doesn't draw the reader's attention to the alphabetic arrangement of sentences.

The Snake People

Anthony Fernandez

According to tradition, every boy of the tribe had to complete a rite of passage in order to be considered a man. Before the sun would set, they were to find a venomous snake and bring it back alive. Considering that many of the snakes in the area were fast and had a venom strong enough to kill an elephant, the task was very tricky. During this time, any boy completing this challenge would go through a series of steps to train. Every day, they would practice using either a large rope or a non-venomous snake. For all intents and purposes, whether they were ready or not, it was time.

Great cheers would ring from the tribe as the boys would set out to catch their snakes. How and when they would get them was up to the boys themselves. In the spur of the moment, most of them wouldn't have a set plan. Just as the sun was above the horizon, they would all be scattered about wondering where their quarry could be. Keeping vigilant at all times was necessary or they could meet a deadly surprise. Leaving the area and returning to the village empty-handed was not an option.

"Maybe there is one underneath those rocks?" Needless to say, the boy who thought this turned out to be right. "Oh my goodness, that

is a black mamba," thought the boy. Pulse quickening and sweat streaming down his face, he now had to apply all the training he had done. Quickly, he snatched up a long stick and used it to pin the snake's head to the ground. Random struggles from the snake made the task difficult. Snakes, as you know, do not like being pinned. Therefore, the boy had to work fast to seize the snake's head and put him in his special sack. Until it was safely in the bag, he was in grave danger.

Very soon though, he had it in the bag and returned to the village. Whatever happened next no longer mattered to him. Xylem from the grass and plants smeared across his legs as he trudged along, making the trip back seem almost worse than setting out in the first place. Yet as he entered the village, he was greeted by a crowd of over a hundred people, for he was the only one to return with his snake. Zany is the word most people of the world would have called him for the stunt he had just pulled, but here in his village, he was now a man.

IN THE PRESENT

Patricia McCambridge

As the buzzer sounded, she was torn from her thoughts. Bounding over the conveyor belt and nodding politely as her manager wished her a good morning, she finally reached the time clock. Caught off-guard by an overly loud greeting, she peered around the clock to watch him saunter over to ask how her shift had been. Distraction-ridden was the truth, as she had spent the shift ruminating on her interview from the previous day and praying for the success that would surely—had to—follow, which had caused a dip in her work quality. Envisioning the future that would take her away from here was more pleasant than acknowledging the roar of equipment. Finally, she answered, “It wasn’t too bad.”

Grabbing her coat, smothered in the musty industrial scent that permeated the air, she listened as he explained everything that had sucked about his day, but that it hadn’t been too bad for him either. He smiled at her, though she could sense the strain behind it, as they made their way out of the factory and toward their cars. Icy air pricked her face as they reached the outside, and she finally yielded to the tension as she asked, “Are you okay?”

“Just—I wish you would talk more. Kinda makes me feel unimportant, ya know?”

Listening to him attempt to soften the blow with his repeated assurances that he was not mad—he was never mad—she collected the air that had been kicked out of her and fought the flush rising in her face. Mouth dry and her voice barely acceptable, she said, “I’m sorry.”

Now she tipped her head back to look at the sky—her car and the stars felt far away. Only vaguely hearing him now, she tried to imagine herself beyond this conversation. Picturing the bliss that was right around the corner, she asked herself if this conversation would even matter a year from now.

Quickly, she pulled herself back to reality to refocus on him. Realizing that he had stopped talking in response to her silence, she mustered her energy.

“Seems like the cold is never gonna end,” she said and winced at the simplicity.

“That would suck serious—” he began, then lowered his voice— “No, I hope you’re wrong.”

Upset that she had so affected him, she looked to the ground and said, “Me too.”

Vowing to make things right before he left, she approached her car, opened the door, and turned to him.

“Well, goodnight,” he said, beating her to it and, after brief hesitation, pulling her into a hug.

Xanthic light from headlights were clouded as concealed tears stung her eyes, and she returned the hug.

“You have yourself a nice day,” he said as he pulled away, beaming to melt the ice and her heart.

Zagging into exhaustion, she sank into the driver seat.

Mad Woman

Dani Miller

A simple question hung on her lips.

“Brendon is OK, right?” Mary asked as she pushed her hair from her forehead. Callum Elementary had called to let her know that something was up with her son and the lady on the other end sounded distressed.

Dropping the laundry basket on the floor, Mary rushed out the door and sped to the school, hoping that nothing too terrible had happened. Everything was in a blur as she sped along the streets, melting together to form one color or none. Fearing the worst had happened, she quickly cast aside any scenario that ended with him in the hospital. Granted, she had a very active imagination and all the scenarios turned out to be the worst.

Half a year ago, something like this had happened before. In the beginning of the semester, Brendon had gone missing and no one knew where he was. John, Brendon’s best friend, had told the teacher when questioned that he saw Brendon take off after their gym class, only to return near the end of the school day, not mentioning where he had gone or seeming to care the teachers were mad at him.

Keeping that memory in her mind, she raced through the town until she spotted the little school in the distance. Lights were on in the main building, indicating that there was someone still in the offices, even at this late hour. Mary parked her van and let it idle, trying to calm herself before she faced the music.

No one could understand how panicked she got when Brendon went missing. Once, when they were at an amuse-

ment park, he took off without saying anything to her. Panic raced through her veins as she tried to find the little boy, calling out for him and looking like a mad woman. Quickly and efficiently, the staff of the park had located Brendon, sitting by the heart-shaped pond. Racing to him, Mary swept him into her arms, peppering him with kisses and holding him tightly. Squirming ever so slightly, Brendon worked his way from her arms, not wanting to give the onlookers even more of a show.

The receptionist at Callum must have seen Mary pull into the parking lot, because she was at the door, waving her over. Unable to take the anxiety anymore, Mary exited her vehicle and trudged up the stairs, not wanting to know what happened.

“Very nice of you to come on such short notice,” the receptionist greeted her as the two women walked through the dark halls.

“What’s wrong with Brendon?” Mary asked as soon as she was seated in the principal’s office, not caring if she sounded rude or standoffish.

“Xeroxing your butt is an unacceptable use of school equipment,” the principal said with no preamble as he handed over a folded sheet of paper for Mary to view for herself.

“You can’t be serious,” Mary whispered as relief flooded through her system and she burst into giggles, every bad scenario going out the door in an instant.

Zany was not a word she would use to describe her adopted son because he was always so quiet and withdrawn, but that was the one that popped into her head as she stared at the black and white image of his derriere.

ERILIGH

LILLY GROOMS

HAVE YOU EVER HAD THAT FEELING? The feeling that someone's looking at you, watching you, but when you turn around to look, there's no one there? Your skin begins to crawl, goosebumps form on your arms and legs, and the back of your head tingles as if there are eyes burning into your skull. Of course you have. We've all had that feeling, but usually, it turns out that nobody's watching you, and you convince yourself that it was all in your head, right? Well, the problem is, you're wrong. No one's alone, at least not where I come from. I can feel it right now. They are watching, those terrifying, black creatures, but most people would never notice. Sometimes, I think maybe I am insane; that maybe I am hallucinating or dreaming. I mean, no one else can see shadows, at least not that I know of, so why can I? But in the end I know, I am seeing the truth, and it is everyone else that is dreaming....

* * *

I can feel their eyes now, as the wind whips hair into my face and whistles in my ears. The hairs on my arms and the back of my neck raise, but I can't tell whether it's the Shadows or the wind. It's so loud, that I don't hear Bexley the first time she asks me a question. "What?!" I ask, in a half-shout. She repeats, "You know what I don't understand?!"

"No, what?" I ask. I catch movement in my peripheral vision and my head snaps to the right, towards the other side of the street, but there's nothing there. *Hmm, the Shadows are being quick today. I'd better keep an eye out.*

"Well," she says, oblivious to my brief mental detour, "we're doing this unit in history class about Genetica X experiments, and I just don't get it," Upon finishing her statement, she lifts her arms into the air and then drops them to her sides like limp noodles.

There it is again, a Shadow, stuck in a stealth position on the siding of a house. "Bexley, do you see that?" I ask, pointing to the dark figure.

"Um, no I don't see anything," she says, reaching over to brush away a leaf that has blown onto the front of my navy blue corduroy jacket.

"Are you sure, Bex, because I see something over there," I say, but when I point back towards the house, the Shadow isn't there. "Oops," I say, "Nevermind, it's gone."

“Uh-huh, well maybe you should just relax a little, Eri. You’re getting pretty worked up over something that I can’t even see,” she says, and I fight the urge to tell her that that’s the point! I know she can’t see Shadows!

“Yeah, I guess you’re right, Bex,” I say, but I’m really still looking. Turning to a beige house on the corner, I see the last of the Shadow, as he (or she?) flies around the corner and into the backyard, its two-dimensional body conforming to the landscape. Dang, this one’s fast.

“Eri, I can tell you’re still looking,” she says, sounding worried, “What are you even looking for?” I mentally debate on what to say. I can’t tell her the truth. I tried that one time, and afterwards, she was afraid of me for weeks. I don’t want to lose my only friend. The Shadows have already taken so much...

Finally, I say, “I just thought I saw a cat. On the sidewalk.” I look at her, and her grey eyes are filled with concern. I’m kind of glad that she can’t see Shadows. She’s innocent, and I want her to stay that way.

By the look on her face, I know she doesn’t believe me about the cat, but she just says, “Oh, ok,” and keeps walking. At least she’s willing to drop it.

“You know,” she says and pats my back a little, “I’ve noticed that you’ve been sorta jumpy lately, and I was thinking, there’s a party tonight and I think we should go, to you know, get your mind off things. You just worry way too much, and I think it would be good for you to relax a little. Also, you owe me from the other day.” That’s right. She had bravely rescued

me from answering a question in class when I clearly had not been paying attention. In fact, I had been scrutinously watching a Shadow that had appeared outside, not that anybody else knew that.

Bexley gives me a hopeful glance, and I cringe back. “Alright,” I say, “but only because you’re my best friend...and because then I won’t owe you anymore.”

“Yay! It’s gonna be great! I knew I could guilt you into it! I haven’t been to a party in forever, and it’s been even longer since you’ve come to one with me, Ms. Antisocial!”

I laugh a little as we turn onto Edra Avenue, and wave goodbye to Bexley when she begins walking up her driveway. “See you tonight, Bex!” I yell, and she waves back to me before opening the door and walking inside. Even from here, I can hear her mom in the kitchen, probably trying out a new cookie recipe. My mom used to love baking. I turn away from the house and walk quickly down the sidewalk, holding back the tears that are threatening to spill over. I haven’t cried in three years and I’m not going to start now.

Walking the rest of the way home is eerily quiet. Usually, there are people walking, or birds chirping, or something, but today the Shadows are more active, and while most can’t see the Shadows, they can still feel their presence. I see that one with the green eyes again, and I try not to look directly at it. Maybe it knows I can see, and that’s why it’s following me. Maybe it’s just going in the same direction as me. All I know is that I don’t really want to find out.

When I finally reach my Aunt V.’s small house, I look around, check-

ing again for the Shadow. I don't see it, so I start up the driveway, doing my best to avoid the potholes. Before reaching the porch, I notice two things. The first thing I notice is that some more of the baby blue paint is starting to peel away from the siding, as if it find the house repulsive to be around, and the second, is that my bedroom window is open. I could have sworn I closed it last night. Slowly, I open the marigold-yellow front door (it's never locked), and breath a small sigh of relief to find an empty foyer waiting for me, not a thing out-of-place, but before I release the rest of the air I'm holding, I check all of the other rooms, just to be safe. Then, I go do homework.

When I'm done, I check the purple holo-clock projecting on the wall above my nightstand, and find that I've been working for nearly six hours. The boxy green numbers read 8:56 p.m., but that can't be right because Aunt V. still isn't home from work. She told me last night that she was going to be a little late, but normally she gets off of work at six. I walk quickly to the kitchen, pick up the phone, and dial her office's number. As I wait for someone to pick up, I observe the photo of me and Aunt V. at the lake last year. I remember that day. There had been Shadows everywhere and... Gerty, the secretary, answers the phone and interrupts my thoughts. I tell her that my aunt still isn't home from work and ask what time she left the office today.

Gerty gives a little "oh" and says, "Honey, your aunt called in sick this morning. She wasn't at work."

When I don't respond right away, she hastily adds, "But I'm sure she's fine. Probably just went to get

some fresh air or something. You know how she is. Always busy, busy,busy, so don't worry any about her, ok?"

I tell her that I won't, but when I hang up, panic settles in the pit of my stomach like a stone in water. As I dial Aunt V.'s cell phone number, nervousness gnaws away at the pit of my stomach, and I tap my foot anxiously on the pink vinyl. She picks up after the seventh ring. "Hi, honey. Are you home from school?" she asks in a too happy, too sickness-free voice.

"Uh, yeah. I have been for like, five hours," I say, annoyed that she's acting so blasé about her absence. "Where are you?! Gerty said you called in sick today."

"I just needed some groceries, sweetheart. No big deal." Yeah, right. I can already hear her tapping her long green nails on something on the other side of the phone, a tell-tale sign that she's lying.

"Aunt V., you never call me sweetheart, or honey, and I can hear you tapping your nails. What's going on?" The tapping stops, and then continues a few moments later.

"Really, Eriligh, it's nothing. I just needed to get out of the house a little bit. I'm not used to being cooped up inside all day," she says, but I still think something's up.

"Ok, well, when are you going to be home? Should I just cook myself dinner, or what?" I ask.

"No, that's alright. I'll be home soon. Just sit and relax, and I'll cook your favorite, okay?" Her casual tone does nothing to hide the sadness in her voice. She seemed fine yesterday, but a lot could change in only a few hours. I would know.

"Okay, Aunt V.," I say, "Are you

alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I'll see you soon, ok?" I hear another noise in the background, but I don't question her about it.

"Okay. Hey Aunt V.?"

"Yes?"

"I love you," I tell her. I don't know why, but it feels like a good thing to do.

It may just be me, but I think her voice breaks when she says, "I love you too, Eriligh. See you soon." Then, she hangs up. I put the phone back in its place.

Just as I'm about to walk back into my room, the doorbell rings, and my heart begins to beat a little faster. Then, I realize that it's probably Bexley coming to pick me up for the party, and my heart rate drops slowly back to normal. I'm still in my uniform, so she's going to have to give me a few minutes to change because I'm certainly not wearing a pleated skirt to a party. The doorbell rings again, multiple times in a row. Just to be sure it's not a stranger, I pull back the curtains on the window to the right of the door, and scream a little when I see Bexley's face, puffed up like a fish, pressed right up against the window staring at me. I fling the door open and she walks in laughing.

"God, Bex! You scared me!" I say.

"I'm sorry, but I just knew you would look out that window to see who it was, and I couldn't resist," she says with a smug little smile, small chuckles still erupting from her mouth.

"Whatever! I can't help it if I'm a little paranoid! You know I hate answering the door."

"Yeah, I know, I know," she says while rolling her eyes, "But that's

not why I'm here, Eri. I'm here to take you to a party so why are you still wearing your school clothes?!"

I sigh and say, "I forgot about the party, so you're just going to have to give me a minute to go change. Also, I need a snack because I'm really hungry, and I need to write my aunt a note so that she knows where I am. I don't want her to worry." Like I'm worrying about her now.

"There'll be food at the party so just go get dressed!" She shoves me towards the stairs and I almost trip on the first step.

"Ok, ok!" I say, and run up the rest of the stairs two at a time. In my room, I throw on a nice peasant blouse (cream colored with ruffles at the bottom), and a pair of skinny jeans with holes at the knees. I slip on some ballet flats and start back down the stairs, but before I reach the bottom, I turn back and check that my window is locked, just to be safe. When I'm back downstairs, I write a note to my aunt on the pad we always keep by the phone. I wish I could just stay home and wait for her, but I told Bexley I'd come with her, and I can't let her down.

Aunt V.-

Bexley made me promise to go to a party with her tonight. I'll be back by midnight. I forgot about it, and that's why I didn't tell you on the phone earlier. Please, please, please call me when you get home so that I know you got here safe. I promise I'll answer. Sorry I can't have dinner with you tonight. Please call me.

Love,
Eriligh

I notice for the first time that Bexley is no longer standing by the door. I yell her name, and she walks out of the kitchen with a pint of ice cream in her hand and a spoon in her mouth. "What?" she asks, "Oh you're ready! Ok, just let me put this back in the freezer." I roll my eyes and wait patiently by the front door, checking my hair in the large mirror by the laundry room. She comes running out of the kitchen and practically drags me to her car, an old 2098 Volkswagen Wasp. "Hurry up and get in!" she yells, "We're gonna be late!"

I watch tree after tree fly past my window while Bexley drives. Oak tree, maple tree, evergreen, birch tree. I try to name as many as I can as a way to entertain myself, until something important pops into my head. "So exactly where is this party," I ask Bexley.

"Um, I'm not exactly sure. I have the address and some directions, but I'm not sure who's place it is or anything like that," she tells me. She hands me a small, square napkin with interconnected lines on it on it. I take one look and realize that the napkin came from the Meal Center.

"So let me get this straight. You stole a napkin from the Meal Center. That's illegal, as in very bad and punishable by law, in case you hadn't already learned from when Jaz got meal suspension for using an extra pack of vinegar! Also, these directions are absolutely worthless, Bex! How are you even gonna find this place?"

She shrugs, keeping her eyes on the road, "I'm pretty sure the M.C. will survive the loss of one extra napkin, Eriligh. You know I love you, so

you know it comes from my heart when I say LOOSEN UP. What's the point of being a teenager if you're not going to do anything stupid. Besides, we both know I'm great with directions. I always know how to get un-lost."

"That's not a word," I mumble, but she's right in any case. I've never gotten lost when she was leading. Rain begins to come down in fat drops on the windshield, and I sit in silence for the rest of the ride. As I let the rhythmic movement of the windshield wipers fill the silence, I think about the one thing that's consistently on my mind. Shadows. I remember the first time I ever had a shadow attack. It was terrifying, the feeling of being overtaken by Darkness, and the realization that I truly am different from everyone else....

I was lounging on the couch, eating marshmallow after marshmallow straight out of the bag, not caring about the sticky residue on my fingers or the few marshmallows that had fallen onto the fuchsia carpet. It was a sort of game I played with myself. For every marshmallow I ate, I had to think of one thing I hated about living at Aunt V.'s. So far, I had eaten 237. It's a wonder I wasn't obese, I ate so much in those days.

I looked around the room, doing a quick inspection, and saw a dark figure crouched in the corner, next to my aunt's glass bell collection. It looked like it was sitting cross-legged, like a giant, black sticker, so out of place in this eccentric house. The only bit of color the shadow possessed were its two round, pupil-less, Emerald-colored eyes. They peered at me curiously, and I stared right back, too frightened

to turn away from the boyish-looking shadow for even a second. After a few moments, the human-like being, raised one hand in what looked like a greeting. I sucked in a breath, and behind the figure emerged ten's of hundred's more shadows. They grew and stretched, morphing like figures in a funhouse mirror, to fit the walls of the living room. I sucked in, but the air was stuck somewhere in between my mouth and my lungs. Soon, every wall was covered in Darkness, and it overtook me. Shadow hands reached towards me from all sides, wisps of air caressing my skin like ghostly fingers, and I screamed. The last thing I heard before I blacked out was Aunt V.'s pumps clacking quickly on the vinyl.

* * *

When I woke up, my head was on a small pillow and I was still on the couch. Aunt V. was sitting next to my head, brushing the hair back from my face. "How are you feeling?" she asked, her big, dark eyes shining with worry.

"Alright," I said, but when I tried to sit up, the world started spinning. I laid back down.

"Ok, sweetie," she said, "What happened? I heard you screaming and then when I came in, you were out cold."

"I just, um, had kind of a panic attack, I think. I'm not really sure," I told her, even though it wasn't entirely true.

"Oh, well maybe we should see a doctor about it? I'm sure they have a medication that can help you."

"No!" I yelled, and then in a calmer voice, "I just think I'm a little stressed out because of, you know, my parents, and moving and all. No big

deal. How long was I out anyways?" There was no way I wanted to take meds. Only the crazies did that.

"Only a couple of minutes. I was going to take you to the hospital if you didn't wake up soon. Maybe you should try to get some rest."

"Ok, Aunt V. See you in the morning," I said, and stood up. I was still a little wobbly, but not quite so dizzy. I headed towards the hallway, and when I looked back towards the corner, the shadow was still there, sitting cross-legged on the wall.

I remember everything about that night. I remember how scared I was to fall asleep because of the Shadows, and how lonely it was knowing that I was so different. I knew that even if I told my aunt, she would never believe me. No one would. Shadows were a thing of the past for most people....

The sound of the tires on a gravel driveway pulls me out of my thoughts. I can already feel the pulse of the music. As we drive farther down the path, I note that whoever owns this place practically has their own road, except for that it's made of small rocks instead of pavement. About thirty seconds later, we arrive at a house. It's huge, at least three times the size of Aunt V.'s, with beige colored siding, a porch made out of stone, and windows everywhere. The only problem is that all the lights are off inside, so either there's no one in there or they're sleeping. We can hear the music (it's really loud now, coming from directly in front of us), but we can't see anything that indicates there's a party nearby.

"So, where's it at?" I ask no one in particular.

"I'm not sure," says Bexley, "This is

where the directions said to go.”

A dark figure holding an umbrella emerges from a group of trees and starts moving towards the car. Every nerve in my body screams “SHADOW!”, but I know that a Shadow would never be able to walk upright like that. Still, it’s hard for me to calm myself down. I try using the technique I developed over the past three years.

Breathe in, breathe out. It’s just a human. Breathe in, breathe out. It’s just a human.

“Eri, are you ok?” Bex asks me.

I just nod my head in response.

The nauseous feeling in my stomach makes its way to my throat. I squeeze my eyes shut and pull my feet up into the seat so that my face is on my knees, trying to ward off the vomit. Bexley rubs large circles on my back, but it’s not helping. I hear the window roll down, and then someone talking.

“Um, is something wrong with her?” a male voice says.

“No,” Bexley replies, “She’s just not feeling great. She didn’t eat lunch at school today. Did you, Eri?” I peak out of my left eye, but keep the other one closed tight. The person looks our age, and he’s wearing tight black shirt and khaki pants with black and white tennis shoes. His untamed blonde hair and bright green eyes are mesmerizing, and it’s hard to look away. Rain is hitting his face, despite the umbrella, and he’s staring at me, not as if I’m strange, but as if I’m someone that he knows. He has a smirk on his face, the kind of smirk that says, “I knew you’d be here.” The look in his eyes makes my heart flutter a little. No one this pretty can possibly be dangerous...or maybe that makes him more dangerous because

everyone assumes he’s not. I don’t know, but I still can’t get my heart to slow down.

“Hello? Eri?” Bexley says, sounding irritated.

“Huh? Oh, yea, right. Not feeling great,” I say, and reach my hand out to open my door. It takes a few tries because my hands are still shaking and I can’t seem to get a deep breath. I need some air.

As we walk, the boy introduces himself as Haiden, and quickens his pace to match my own.

“I’m Eri,” I say.

“That’s a pretty name,” he tells me quietly, and offers to share his umbrella. I accept. Turning my head slightly to the left, I try to sneak another glance at him, and find that he’s already staring at me. In the dim light, I can see his cheeks flush. “Sorry,” he says, “I was looking at your scar. That’s pretty unique.” Gently, he touches the star-shaped mark on the left side of my neck. It makes me shiver, but it’s not an unpleasant feeling.

“Yeah, well, most people don’t really notice it.” I reach up to cover the scar with my hand.

“Oh,” is all he says, but I can’t tell if he means it to be a question or a statement, so I change the subject.

“So, this is your party, huh?” I ask.

“Yeah. My parents wanted me to invite some people over, so I could “make some pals”.” His air quotes make me laugh a little.

“So how come I never see you at school? I mean, you’re throwing a party and my source tells me that practically everybody from G.P. is going to be here, but I’ve never even met you

before.”

“I’m technically homeschooled, but I play lacrosse for the high school, since I live in the district.”

“That’s cool. So do you know Bexley, then? She’s the girl who’s with me, and she dated Link Parker at one point last year. I figure you’d know him from lacrosse.”

He’s about to reply, but Bexley comes up behind us. I hadn’t even noticed she was gone. She’s drenched and doesn’t seem happy.

“What the heck, you two! You just left me back there! I could’ve gotten lost!” she yells.

“Sorry,” I say, even though we had only walked, like, 100 feet from the car, “What took you so long anyways?”

“My stupid key got stuck in the ignition and I practically had to wrestle with my steering wheel to get it out.” she says.

Haiden leads us to the party, which turns out to be in a barn at the back of the property. The whole place belongs to his parents. The barn is lit up inside and out with strings of multi-colored lights, and the music is so loud that, although I can see people talking everywhere, I can’t hear them at all.

We walk inside through the large set of doors, and immediately, Bexley drags me to a group of guys by the refreshments table.

“See you later!” I yell to Haiden. He is shaking water from his golden hair, but he looks up momentarily to wave goodbye.

When we reach the table, all of the guys look up. I don’t know any of them very well, and suddenly I feel like a six year old with my mother at the grocery store, hiding behind her skirt

while she talks to a friend. Why are they looking at us like that, anyways? Is there someone behind us, or something? I turn my head around, just to check. Nothing that I see.

“Hey, Bexley,” one of them says, eying her short, pink skirt. Oh, now I get it.

“Hey, Grayson,” she replies, “My eyes are up here, in case you couldn’t tell.” I blush with embarrassment, not for myself, but for Grayson, although he doesn’t seem to mind. He just rolls his eyes.

“Right,” he says, and stares at her face with emphasis.

“That’s better,” says Bexley, “So, where’s Benton?”

“Your brother’s here?” I ask, semi-surprised. He’s usually pretty closed off, not the partying type. Then again, neither am I, I guess.

“Of course, Eri,” she says, “I told you everyone would be here. Anyways, Grayson, where’s Benton?”

“Last I saw, he was sitting at one of the tables over there, eating or something.” He points to a set of circular tables off in the corner of the barn. They’re the kind that you would see in a cafe in Paris, small and made of iron, twisted and bent into intricate designs.

“Thanks,” says Bexley, “Come on, Eri.”

“Why are we going to your brother?” I ask.

“Because I want to dance, but I know you won’t come with me and I don’t want you to have to be alone, so I’m leaving you with Ben.”

“Bexley, I don’t want to sit with your brother all night!” I stop walking and cross my arms in front of my chest.

“Ok, that’s fine, so are you go-

ing to come dance with me?”

“I don’t really want to do that either,” I say, with a cringe.

“Ok, well, I guess it won’t kill me to come sit with you for a little while,” she tells me, but she seems genuinely disappointed at not being able to dance.

With an exaggerated sigh, I say, “No, go dance, Bexley. Have a good time. I’ll just go sit at a table or something.”

“Really, are you sure, Eri?” Her eyes light up a little.

“Yeah, I’m sure. I’ll be fine.”

“Alright, but if you need anything, come and get me!” With that, she runs off towards the dance floor.

I really want to find someone to hang out with, but as hard as I try, I just can’t bring myself to talk to anybody, not even the people I know. It’s just not in my nature, and I end up sitting at one of the Paris tables by myself. Out of the corner of my eye, I think I see something, and I turn my head. Against the wall, there is a dark, human-shaped figure; a shadow. I suck in a breath, and squeeze my eyes shut for a brief moment. I open them again, expecting it to be gone or expecting it to be a human, like before. It’s not. The Shadow is still there, creeping in the darkness. It moves further into the darkness, until I can no longer see it, but I can feel the Shadow’s presence. A shudder ripples through my spine, and it’s as if a dark veil has been lifted from my eyes. Everywhere I look now, I can see the Shadows; feel them. There is one by the door, crouching down as if preparing for a race, one slithering across the dusty wood flooring like a snake, another one on the ceiling, and

the list goes on. They are all facing the center of the dance floor. There is something strange about the way they are arranging themselves, something familiar, like I’ve seen it before, but I just can’t put my finger on it.

A hand touches me lightly on the shoulder and I nearly jump out of my skin. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you,” says a voice I recognize from earlier. It’s Haiden, and he pulls up a chair to sit down next to me. “That’s okay,” I reply, “I get scared pretty easily these days.”

“I can tell,” he says with a wink and a brilliant, white smile. “So, why are you over here all by yourself? What happened to your friend?”

“Oh, she wanted to dance, but I’m not big on that kind of thing, so I told her to go ahead and have fun.”

“I’m not much of a dancer either, but that might be because of my severe lack of coordination.”

I laugh a little and try to go back to my shadow searching, but he just won’t stop talking. “So,” he says, “if you don’t like dancing, and you don’t like talking to people, what on Earth could have possessed you to come to this party?”

“Bexley,” I reply, “She guilted me into it, and besides, it’s not like I don’t like talking to people, I’m just *uncomfortable* talking to people. There’s a difference.”

“Hm, I guess you’re right about that, but you seem all right talking to me. Why’s that?” he asks.

“I don’t know. I guess you’re just different from everyone else.”

“Well,” he says, another smile lighting up his tanned face, “It’s good to know that I’m easy to talk to. I’m

going to get a drink. Do you want some punch?”

“Hmm, only if it’s the kind with sherbet in it,” I say in a joking tone, but I’m kind of serious. The red stuff is gross.

“Ok. I’ll see what I can do.” he smiles at me and walks away, towards the refreshments table.

Alone again, I become even more aware of the Darkness that surrounds this place. Something inside me clicks, an instinct, and I know that whatever those shadows were trying to do earlier, they’ve done. It’s like I can feel their thoughts, but not actually see what they’re thinking. I look around again, and I can no longer see their misshapen human forms, but I can feel them. As the panic wells inside me, I decide that I need to find Bexley, just in case, but when I look around, she’s nowhere to be found.

Then, the lights flicker on and off a few times, and the room goes black. The music disappears and I can hear some people mumbling complaints, and others laughing as if a lack of vision is actually funny. Then, there are sirens and the sound of boots on the old wood flooring, and the room is in chaos. I am plastered against one wall, too scared to move without the ability to see what’s around me. My vision begins to adjust and all around me I see people running and screaming, some lying on the ground, some more with guns in their hands. I take deep breaths, attempting to calm myself, but I just can’t. Something hits me in my right temple, hard. I fall to the ground, and just before I am overtaken by the blackness, the blurry outline of a person comes over me. It says something

and brushes the hair away from my face, and then I am gone....

I awake with a splitting headache and a huge lump on the side of my head. I sit upright too quickly, and a wave of dizziness overtakes me. I drop back down, and I realize that wherever I’m lying is quite comfortable. As the rest of my senses become sharper, I can hear people talking in another room. I open my eyes a bit, and see that the room is empty, except for someone sitting next to me. I open my eyes all the way and try sitting up again, slowly this time. I turn to my left, and find Haiden sleeping in a chair next to my bed. “Haiden,” I whisper quietly, but he doesn’t move. “Haiden,” I say again, but louder than last time. He finally jolts awake, sitting straight-backed in the chair.

“What? What is it?,” he questions frantically, “Oh, you’re awake.” He rubs his eyes with the palm of his hand, trying to coax the sleep from them, and slumps back down in his wooden chair.

“Yeah. Haiden, where are we?” I ask, not quite sure I want to know the answer.

“Well,” he starts out, “We’re in the, um,...Dark Realm...” He mumbles the last part, and then cringes as if he’s scared of my reaction. He should be.

“What do you mean, “Dark Realm”, Haiden?” I ask in my calmest voice.

“I mean that we’re in the Dark Realm. It’s as simple as that,” he says.

I try frantically to get up out of the bed, but he pushes me back down. “Let go of me!” I yell.

“No, Eriligh! You have to stay here and listen to me! The Shadows

aren't what you think they are!"

"Haiden, I've been seeing Shadows my whole life! They stalk me and watch me and freak me out, even in my own home! Try living my life and then we'll see what you think about the Shadows!"

"Please, you have to listen! It's important, really important. Please."

His emerald eyes watch me warily, and I notice something. "You," I say in a suddenly breathless voice, "You're the Shadow who's always in my house!"

He looks at me in sudden disbelief, but doesn't say anything.

"I knew it! I could tell by your eyes! Why did you kidnap me, Haiden? I just want to go home." The tears flow freely now, even though I try hard to stop them.

His mouth opens and closes a few times, as if he can't quite figure out what to say, and he finally settles on, "Your life isn't what you think it is. There's a reason why you can see Shadows, Eri, and a reason why you were taken from that party, although we didn't anticipate the government attack. Eriligh, there's a reason we've, I've, been watching over you for the past three years."

"I don't understand. What happened to Bexley, Benton, everybody else at the party?" I know my voice sounds as panicked as I feel, but I don't care.

"Eriligh, your family and friends are safe. They're here, and they're waiting for you to wake up. As for the rest of the people at the party, they either got away or were taken in by the officials, but I'm sure they'll be released soon. None of them know

anything about our plan."

"I want to see my aunt, and Bexley." The tears are flowing freely now, and there's nothing I can do to stop them. There goes my record.

"There's something I need to tell you first," he says, but he's hesitant.

"Ok, well what is it?"

He takes my hand in his and says, "Eriligh, I know you won't believe me when I tell you this, but....well.... you are a Shadow...or half Shadow, at least."

And suddenly all of those days I spent wondering why, why it had to be me who could see the Shadows, why nobody else was forced to endure what I had endured my entire life. The answer hits me like a brick wall.

No. NO. No, no, no, no, no....



Prologue

GRIM WARS

FANTASIA HILLMAN

IT STARTED WITH THE BLISTERS. A week ago, Thomas, the old cropper was the first. He had just returned from tending to the villages crops carrying sacks of carrots and potatoes. Two days later we saw them, red, pussy blotches the size of a thumb. They seemed to have sprouted overnight on his neck. The blisters then sprouted more on his legs and groin areas, but they were bigger than a thumb, nearly the size of an egg. Then came the fever and vomiting of blood. Thomas died on the third day. Soon more people in the village started experiencing the same thing as old man Thomas but worse. Some parts of the skin turned black and some villagers started experiencing chronic pain. There were even small bite marks on their necks and hands that looked like rashes.

No one knew what the cause of this was. We heard from a messenger that people in town experienced the same thing as us in the village. The town's people called it; The Black plague.

Some of the villagers who became sick died within three days. We were a poor village, there weren't many animals roaming around to kill and roast. The crops grew but some were just too bad to eat. People starved and died after catching the sickness. I didn't have much to eat either. My parents tried their best to feed me at least once a day but a growing girl needs nutrients and a meal of three at least every day. I too will die because I caught the illness.

I laid in my dirty bed crying into my dirty bloody hands. I heard the screams of my people outside in the night. The hairs on my blistered bruised arm stood on end. I couldn't move because of the chronic pain in my groin area mainly on the right side. If I were to stand up something inside me might snap. Just two days ago I was picking flowers for my mother out in the meadow, and then I got this tickle feeling on my neck like something bit me. I had the same symptoms as those who died last week, just two after the flower picking. My parents deserted me as soon as they saw the blisters and me coughing up

blood. I thought they loved me, but I guess they didn't. I should've seen the signs, especially from my mother. She never appreciated the flowers I'd bring to her. Father never paid attention. I think it's because he wanted a son. It didn't matter, I was going to die, alone.

My mouth was dry like sand on a hot day and my stomach churned like butter from no food. I haven't eaten anything since my parents left; that was three days ago.

"WE HAS'T TO BURN IT ALL"

A crazed man shouted from outside. It startled me and I lifted my head up to look out the door across the room from me. Outside I saw some of the non-sick villagers burning down other huts with people still in them with torches. **"KILLETH THE SICK!"**

My whole body tensed up from hearing that. They will eventually come over to my hut and burn me alive like the others. The flames will kill me faster than the illness.

I laid my head back slowly onto the dirty mattress and pulled the wolf's skin over my head. Thought I was inside under a cover, the smell of blood and smoke polluted my one room hut. "What has become of mine village?" I cried.

My cries turned to violent coughs. I coughed so hard I fell out of bed onto the hardwood floor. I fell on my side feeling the pus ooze out of my blisters once the floor put pressure on them. I slowly rolled onto my stomach and use my arms to slowly pull myself up. I coughed up more blood.

"Th're's anoth'r one!" I heard a woman yell. I looked up and saw a

mob of people standing in the doorway with torches. My heart raced in my chest that it sounded like drums. I wiped the blood my face nervously and slowly crawled towards the mob.

"P-Please," I begged slurring my words. "K-Kill n-not me." I stopped a few inches away from them coughing up even more blood that it flowed out of my mouth like a waterfall in bright red.

"Gaze out 'r the lady'll infect thee with black hands!" A man yelled with a raspy voice. I look at my fingers and saw that the skin was decaying away.

"Burn her!" Another man yelled. Then a torch is thrown into my hut. It landed on the bed catching fire instantly.

"NO!" I screamed. The mob retreated outside closing the door. Fire seeped in from under the door lighting up the hut. I crawled to the center of the room still coughing up blood. I stopped in the center on all fours. A beam from the ceiling fell crashing onto me leaving me trapped under it. It caught fire and burnt my back. I felt the flesh on my back melt away from the flames. It felt like one hundred thousand needles poking me. I screamed to the sizzling pain.

"I DONT WANT TO KICKETH BUCKET!" I screamed. The smoke around me began to make me dizzy and it was getting harder to breathe. I shut my eyes and laid my head down in the pool of blood; my blood.

"Do you wish to be saved?" An eerie voice said in a weird language. I opened my eyes but only saw blurriness. I wasn't sure if it was my

imagination but I saw a dark figure. "Do. You. Wish. To. Be. Saved," the voice said more slowly this time in that same language. I didn't know what language this voice was speaking, but I understood the words, odd. The figure held out what I think was a hand to me. It looked . . . boney?

"I don't want to kicketh bucket," I said in a whisper, but it sounded more like a cry. "I want to live." I wiggled my arm out from under me and reached for the hand.

"So be it."

Everything around me fades and it became dark.

Chapter 1: The Reaping

No one saw me as I walked pass screaming-panicky humans towards the burning apartment building. I stopped by a young blonde girl with rosy cheeks sitting on the stone steps that led to inside. She looked so frightened and confused. Her eyes were wide open like someone was going to stick a knife through her throat. Tears flowed down the girl's eyes as did sweat from her head from the heat of the fire. I kneeled to her on one knee placing my palm on her cheek. Her body shivered, and she flinches away looking around.

"Katie!" A woman called. I stood up and saw another blonde woman running towards the young girl. "Katie I've been looking for you everywhere!" She wrapped her soot covered arms around the girl embracing her.

A loud explosion on the third floor caused a window to shatter and fall to ground. The woman took her child and ran off before the shards of

glass could kill them. I looked up into the burning night sky to see the falling shards. They sparkled like diamonds in the flames light.

"Hmm, I was going to use the steps but now there appears to be an opening to the third floor," I said. I held out my right hand summoning my death scythe. I held it straight up so that it stood taller than I. The rod is smooth black marble in my hands and the blade hung just a foot or two above my head.

With a slam of the staff to the stone ground, my body became light and I levitate off the ground up to the broken window. I went inside of the burning apartment room and look around for my victim. It was hot and smoky, luckily for me smoke had no effect on me. But it did sting my eyes as I walked through it.

I looked around the burning room seeing that the fire has already engulfed everything. The couch in the living room, lamps laid on the floor with the lightbulbs shattered, and a bookshelf faced down on the floor with a person under it. I walk towards the scorching bookshelf and kneeled to see the body of a young boy trapped. I reached for the boy's arms with my free left hand. The flames of the rubble instantly burned away my skin, but I didn't feel any pain. The fire felt like I was washing my hand with hot water. I pull the charred boy out with my now boney-skeleton-like hand and stood over the boy. I held my boney hand to my face and saw flesh already growing back. I brought it down turning my attention back to the boy.

I couldn't really make out

the face of my *victim* because of how burnt he was. Poor thing, all blackened like charcoal, eyes were snow white, and his clothes burned into his flesh. A child like this didn't deserve such a horrid death. His parents must've forgotten him and left him here to die. They were probably too busy saving their own skin. Humans can be heartless.

"Well don't you worry, I promise you, you are going to a better place," I said. I held my scythe in both hands and shut my eyes. I deeply inhaled tilting my head up feeling the flesh around my eyes rotting away turning black. It felt like my flesh was pressing so tight against my skull just above my left and right facial nerve. I opened my eyes and looked back down at the body. I focused my eyes over his chest and saw a small white light crossing over his chest.

With one swing to the boy's chest I sliced through that light and his soul slowly emerged out. It was small but perfect sphere shape; the size of a clementine. I took the soul stuffing it into a large pocket inside my hooded cloak along with the sixty souls I had collected earlier today. In total I have sixty-one, Master will be pleased.

Chapter 2: The Realm of Grim

I traveled to my home; The Realm of Grim. It's a home for every grim reaper my master, Azmaveth, had turned. There are two levels of this world, above ground was the lifespan graveyard, a graveyard filled with millions of stones with the names of every human on Earth from birth to death. In the very center of the graveyard was a huge patch of grass

with no stones in the ground. I went over to it and tapped the bottom of my staff twice against the dead black grass. The ground below my feet shook a little causing my scythe to vibrate a little. The ground opened revealing stone steps leading down. I went down the stone steps into a dimly lit cave. There were two paths in front of me both labeled. The right path lead to the afterlife of *Zion* and the left path *Damnation*.

I go down the *Zion* path passing the torches on the cobweb covered stone walls. I saw a dim blue light up ahead. I came up to a ledge that hung about twenty feet high from the ground. I looked down from the ledge and saw the *Holy Water* stream with billions of blue souls floating in it. I let go of my scythe and it disappeared. I then reached into the pocket of my hooded cloak and scooped up the sixty-one souls I've collected into my arms. I stepped up to the ledge a little further to the point where I could fall if I made a wrong move. "May you all finally have peace," I said then dropped them all into the holy water. They fell in illuminating the stream making it brighter. The more souls added to the stream the brighter it will get. Same thing for the *Damnation* only it's fire.

I said a quick prayer for the souls I've dumped then head back up to the surface of the realm.

I sat on the black grass staring at my own tombstone of the lifespan graveyard. It had my name in bold letters "**ALIZA THOMPSON**" and right under my name, the year I was born till the year of my *death*: **1331-1348**. 1348 was the year I died from the black plague and then brought back to life by the God of Death, Azmaveth. He gave me life in exchange for becoming

a grim reaper. I was hesitant at first but gave in and agreed. Ever since that year, that night, I've been reaping souls on a day to day basis for over six hundred years. The year was now 2017, December.

"Well well well," a male voice with a British accent said. From the sound of the voice I already knew who it was.

"Tanis," I said turning around. He was standing right before me looking down at me with his hood still over his head. I stood up so that we were face to face. "How long have you been standing there?" I asked.

"Not long," He said pulling his hood down revealing curly silver hair and pale face. He also wore an eyepatch over his left eye. If I remembered correctly he was a settler along with a group of Englishmen who set out to the New World during the 1600's. They were planning on building a town and the people already living on the land were not too happy about that. This was during the colonization of North America. Tanis fought in a war he did not plan to be in and was shot in the eye with an arrow by a Native. Like me, he was also offered a chance to live in exchange of becoming a reaper for eternity. His eye behind that eyepatch of his is as white as a ghost. It's a reminder of how he died. Every grim reaper has a scar on his or her body symbolizing how we died. I have a burned scar on my back from the fire and it will never go away.

"Do you enjoy watching me, watching my tombstone?" I asked crossing my pale arms over my chest.

"I think it's just interesting that you're the only grim here that actually reminisces about your past life and you're older than most of us."

"What makes you think I'm reminiscing about that? I hardly remem-

ber my past life," I lied.

"Hmm really? You're always here after you deliver your souls, that must mean something." He turned his back to me and walked off. "Well best deliver my thirty-one souls to the afterlife," He said before disappearing down the stone steps into the cave.

I unfolded my arms and sat back down and faced my tombstone once more. I touched the bumpy rock tracing my index finger over the numbers. What I told Tanis about not remembering anything was a lie. I remembered everything six hundred and sixty-nine years ago.

Chapter 3: The Change

I opened my eyes and saw a deep purple sky with no stars or moon. I felt little needles poking me in the back and my bare legs. I must have been lying on dead grass. I sat up slowly and rubbed my throbbing head. It felt like I've been hit on something, but what? That didn't matter; I had no idea where I was. I looked around and noticed that the dead grass I had been lying in was pitch black. I reached out with my hand to grab some of it but it immediately turned to dust in my hand. I looked around some more and saw withered and beyond that stones scattered everywhere.

A chill ran up my spine making my body shiver. I crossed my arms over my shoulders rubbing my hands up and down my arms. The air here was damp and cold, like death.

I stood up keeping my arms around me and began walking around the endless field of stones. They were unevenly shaped and size of a cow if they could stand on two feet. Each one I passed had names

and numbers on them. Eight numbers total with a line in the middle that divided them into four numbers on the right and left. I then saw one with my name on it. I walked towards it staring at it. I noticed that it only had four numbers on the left side. It read "1-3-3-1." I was born on those numbers. Mother told me it was a cold year.

I reached out to place my palm on the rock until a gush of wind blew forcefully. My long brown hair blew violently in the wind. I put my back against the rock with my arms stretched out to keep me from blowing away. A black fog then formed a few feet in the front of me. It grew thick and thick like smoke. A figure emerged through the fog and began coming toward me slowly like a ghost. I look this thing up and down and saw that it wasn't walking on feet. It was hovering. The wind ceased, and I dropped down to the grass bringing my knees up to my chest. The figure was now within arm's reach of me. I stared at the thing in front of me. I couldn't see a face because it was hidden in the hood of its long black cloak. I saw its hands, but there wasn't any skin. I trembled with fear from the sight of that. What is it?

"W-What art thee?" I stut-tered. "Art thee devil?"

The figured scoffed, "No. Just a pawn in his and in His." He pointed up with his boney index finger. His voice was deep and eerie, and . . . I didn't recognize the language he spoke. But somehow, I understood every word he said.

"What language dose thee speak?" I asked.

"I am the God of Death, Azma-veth and this is my world. And in my world, anything goes my way. You can understand me, I can understand

everyone. I also know the names of every human on Earth."

"Earth?" I looked around at the stones, black grass, and ominous trees again. "Wh're am I?"

"My realm; the Realm of Grim and what you're sitting in is the lifes-pan graveyard. The numbers on the stones represent birth and death. This world exists between heaven and hell."

Heaven and hell? Have I died, and my spirit is trapped? "Has't I kick the bucket?" I asked. I stood up slowly keeping my back pressed against the stone behind me.

"Not quite my dear. The form you're is only an astral projection, but in this world, you will still feel as human as you did on Earth. Your body on Earth is still burning; however, but you're still alive, barely." He held out his skeletal arm and a rod with a thick blade appeared. He gripped the rod holding it up so that the blade faced up. "Come and see."

My body trembled as I walked towards him. I stood face to face with him, almost. He was very tall, so tall that he could touch a tree branch. He pointed the shiny blade to me. As I clenched my eyes shut I could feel my eyelash brush against the blade that was to poke through my eyeball. I clenched up imagining the tip of the blade piercing my iris with white pussy red liquid coming out.

"Open your eyes," Azmaveth said.

"And look." I did as he said and gazed into the blade. It started to glow red, like fire. I looked closely and realized that it was fire, but the blade wasn't on fire. It was somehow showing me an image.

"How art thee doing this?" I asked.

"Just look." I looked even closer and saw a figure in the fire, trapped

under a beam. Her flesh was slowly burning away, and all the hair on her head was gone. I recognized that girl and my heart sank to the bottom of my feet. I started to cry. The tears came down my eyes like a waterfall.

"Fear not child," Azmaveth said. "There is a reason why you are here." The blade then disappeared, and he stared at me.

"Wherefore am I h're?" I asked.

"You called to me Aliza. You wanted so badly not to die, I'm here to offer you a second chance to live."

I remembered screaming; my screaming. I swallowed still terrified of this creature. "How?"

"Simple, I'll save your life in exchange that you become my grim reaper. You will collect souls on a day to day basis for eternity." He took a step closer to me and placed his boney index finger on my forehead. Images of blue and red lights, black cloaks, tall and thin marble rods with long and sharp blades at the top, and finally ... me? Only it didn't look like me. This me had skin as white as a ghost and silver hair. I gasped when the images disappeared, and my attention focused back on Azmaveth who was now standing fewer steps away this time. "So, what's it going to be Aliza?" Azmaveth asked.

Living forever collecting . . . souls for all eternity seemed like a wrong choice. This breaks everything about nature, humans aren't meant to live forever. "Nay," I said taking a step back from him. "I-I cannot." I turned my back to him. I felt his presence behind me. I then felt his bony hands on my shoulders. His touch sent a strong chill down my spine making my body tremble. It was like cold water running down my neck.

"Aliza," Azmaveth said. "I know this isn't what you really want, otherwise I wouldn't be here before you." He tightened his grip on my shoulders digging his skeletal fingers in my flesh through the fabric of my gown.

"How doth thee know what I want?" I asked turning around to face him. He dropped his hands back to his sides. "Didst I very much call to thee?" I looked up at him staring into his black hood.

"Again, I wouldn't be standing here before you if you didn't. I felt your pain and sorrow Aliza. Now, you must hurry and decide. Become my grim reaper and live forever or die?"

I looked down at the black grass thinking. Even if I died, will anyone even miss me? My parents abandoned me and the villagers, people who I thought were my friends nearly killed me. Maybe this was another chance to live. "Y-Yes," I finally answered looking back up at Azmaveth.

"Yes what?"

"Y-Yes, I shall become thy grim reap'r fr all et'rnity."

"Is that your final answer?"

I hesitated at first then said, "Yes." I then felt a sharp pain in my chest like I was just stabbed with a sword and my mouth tasted like blood. Blood filled my mouth and rolled down my lips. I looked down at my chest and saw Azmaveth's long-pointy-boney finger sticking out of my chest right where my heart was. A purple mist came out and my body went numb. He then pulled it out of my chest through my back. Blood leaked out from the hole in my chest as I turned around to face him. I held my twitching hand over the hole trying to stop the bleeding, but it kept pouring

out of me.

“And so it begins,” Azmaveth said.

My vision went fuzzy, my head pounded like I was getting hit over and over by rocks, and my legs felt weak. I didn't realize that I had fell to the ground swimming in a pool of my own blood. Every nerve in my body erupted like volcanoes. It felt like hot magma running its way through my body. “W-What. H-Has't. Th-Thee. D-Done. T-To. M-Me?” My words slurred.

“You're dying,” Azmaveth said.

“I-I. B-Bethought. Th-Thee. W're. S-Saving. M-Me?” I rolled on my back still holding my blood covered hand over the wound.

“The reaper serum is making its way through your body, Aliza. Everything inside you is shutting down.” I looked up and see him standing over me. “The last thing you should feel is your heart stopping.” Inside my body it felt like my lungs were being crushed by a boulder. It pained me to breathe. My esophagus burned every time I swallowed.

The pain in my body finally subsided and all I felt was my heart beat slowing down. I heard the slow thumps of my slow heartbeat. Thump . . . Thump . . . Thump . . .

“Now, something you should know before I leave you,” Azmaveth said. “Throughout time your skin will turn pale and your hair; silver. Human weapons won't be able to penetrate your skin. Blood will no longer flow through your veins. Humans will not see you unless you want to be seen. You will be death . . . When your heart stops, you will be a grim reaper.” He disappeared.

I lay there in my blood. I listened as my heart continued to slow

down. Thump . . . Thump . . . Thump. . . I turned my head to the right to see the stone with my name on it. I rolled on my stomach and crawled slowly towards it. I placed a bloody palm on the stone making a hand print over the numbers. My vision then went fuzzy again and I couldn't breathe. My heart finally stopped.

The numbers “**1-3-4-8**” was the last thing I saw before darkness consumed me.



The
UGLY DOLL
DANI MILLER

I REMEMBER THE DAY I RECEIVED MY UGLY DOLL FROM my grandma Mamie. She always loved spoiling me because I was the only grandchild she had, so when she told me that there was a present for me, I always cherished them.

I was sitting on the couch, watching cartoons when she came in and had said to me, “Dani Ann, I have something special for you. But first you have to choose.” I didn’t know what I could be picking from, but I was excited all the same. I turned off the TV as I jumped down from the couch and ran up to her, happy to see what I was getting. Grandma pulled an Esmeralda doll from behind her back and I reached out to grab it.

“No Dani, I said you would have to choose,” Grandma told me again as she pulled her right hand from her pocket. In it was a tiny piece of paper, green in color, and it had the number 20 on it. I’ve seen it before because Mommy would hand it to the lady at the store, but I didn’t know what it was. I just wanted the Esmeralda doll and looked back at her. She looked very soft and like she needed a hug, and I could see me playing with her hair and braiding it.

“I want Esmeralda, Grandma,” I said as I held out my hand for her.

“Why do you want this ugly doll when you could have \$20?” Grandma asked as she handed Esmeralda over to me.

I hugged the doll to myself as I gave Grandma a hug. “I don’t know what \$20 is, but I know I want Esmeralda. Look how pretty she is. Her dress is cute and I love the jewelry she’s wearing. And she’s my favorite princess right now!” I exclaimed while turning her over and over in my hands.

“Well, if she makes you happy, then I guess that’s all that matters. Don’t know why you’d want her when you could buy a much prettier one,” Grandma said as she put the green paper back into in her pocket and sat down in her rocking chair.

I didn’t know that I could get a new doll with that paper, but I did know that Mommy always gave

it to other people when we went to the store. Why would I want to give my present to someone when I had Esmerelda to play with? Grandma didn't see this, but she really was pretty, with her bracelets on her wrists and the one on her ankle. She even had her earring and the scarf in her hair! Her dress was a nice purple and I liked the skirt around her hip with the coins on it. I wish they were real so they would make noise like in the movie, but I was happy with how they looked. I knew I had plenty of other dolls to play with and now they all had a new friend.

I gave Grandma another hug and rushed back to my room to play with my new doll and to show her to Mommy. Mom really liked *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, so I was certain that she would love to see my new doll as well. I really did love Esmeralda and would take her wherever I went, even if Grandma called her ugly and didn't understand why I loved her so much.



Labyrinth

DANI MILLER

FELIX WAS LOST. THAT'S ALL THERE WAS TO IT. He had no idea which way to go and there didn't seem to be anyone within the general vicinity to ask for directions. His mother had asked him this morning if he would be fine getting to school on his own and even asked if he needed directions. It was the first day of his new school and he didn't want to show up to the front door in his mom's minivan. How embarrassing would that be? It was bad enough he was the new kid, but he didn't need to give his classmates any more of a reason to tease him.

It had always been like this: his dad constantly chasing a get rich scheme and dragging his family along. So far Felix and his sister hadn't stayed at a school for more than a year, except the one time where they were there for a year and a half, and even then they left halfway through the semester. Felix's mom always toyed with the idea of homeschooling the two, but they opposed it every step of the way. Besides, Millie liked moving around. She had an active imagination and said that each move was a new adventure, waiting to be discovered. Felix couldn't share in her enthusiasm, but went along with her games just the same.

A car sped past Felix, bringing him back to his current predicament. He thought for sure the school was on Elm Grove Lane, but when he turned down the street, he clearly saw that was not the case. The dingy road was lined with buildings all in a state of disrepair and it felt like some evil presence was looming over him.

"Don't be silly Felix," he chided to himself, "this isn't one of Millie's games." He kept walking down the road, hoping that someone would be in one of the doorways, maybe willing to help him out. Everywhere he looked, he could see signs of a broken neighborhood and one that needed some life brought back into it. Litter surrounded the curbs and the trash cans were overflowing. He could hear people shouting in the distance, but couldn't discern what they

were actually saying. A dog ran past him with a kid hot on its heels. Felix tried to wave the youngster down, but the duo was gone before he could say a word.

Deeper into this labyrinth Felix went, feeling even more lost and aware of how alone he was until he saw a young woman coming out of one of the buildings. She stepped down onto the sidewalk and looked left, and then right, taking little notice of the stranger before proceeding to walk in the opposite direction of him. Felix was so ecstatic to find someone that he forgot where he was and took off after her.

His running must have alerted her to him because before he could say something, she whipped around, brandishing a set of keys like a weapon. Felix reeled back and threw his hands up in defense, not sure how to take this approach. He knew he should say something, but the words wouldn't come out. The girl looked to be about his age and she had a backpack thrown over one of her shoulders. 'I wonder if she's heading to the same school as me,' Felix thought as he cautiously put his hands down.

"Umm, could I possibly ask you for directions? I'm new to town and I don't know where PS 119 is."

The girl looked him over and she must have decided he wasn't a threat, putting her keys back into her pocket. "Sure, PS 119 is over on Elm Glade Boulevard," she said as she started walking away.

'Elm Glade? No wonder I was

lost, I thought Mom had said Elm Grove,' Felix mused before realizing he had no idea where Elm Glade was either. Before he lost sight of his savior, he took off after her, hoping she would lead him in the right direction. She didn't seem too upset or bothered by a stranger walking a few paces behind her, but Felix couldn't stand the awkward silence.

"My name is Felix by the way. Could I get yours?"

"Kenna," was all she provided before walking along in silence again. She didn't seem keen on providing any more information about herself, so the pair walked on, keeping a safe distance from the other. For some reason, Felix was OK with this awkward walk. He didn't know if it was because he was now heading to school or because he was able to get out of the dingy neighborhood unscathed. Either way, he was lucky to have found Kenna when he did and he was grateful for her help.



The Day I Became Aunt Tata

DANI MILLER

MY BEST FRIEND JEN AND I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN TOGETHER since we were barely a year old. Even though we aren't related by blood or even marriage, we still saw each other as sisters. We went to the same elementary school, same middle school, even the same high school. The only time we were ever apart was when we went to college, she to Toledo and I to Ohio State. But even through that separation, we remained the best of friends. When her high school sweetheart Shane proposed to her in her freshman year of college, I was there for that as well. I got to take the engagement photo and see the love and appreciation on his face and hers. I have always been there with them and I told Jen that I would always remain by her side, no matter what happened. After all, isn't that what family is for?

I remember the day Jen told me she was pregnant. Her first pregnancy didn't do so well, so I could see the hesitancy on her face in telling me, afraid to get my hopes up on welcoming a new member to the family. A few weeks passed, and the doctor told her that she was safe, the baby was safe, and everything was going according to plan. When she relayed this news to me, I started crying. I was immediately seeing me playing with this small child and showing them the things their mother wouldn't want them to see. I wanted to be the best Aunt I could possibly be and give this child all the love that I was capable of. The only problem with this was the distance. Jen and Shane lived in California, where he was stationed, and I was still stuck in Ohio. I vowed that I would make sure to at least video message the little one twice a week, just so they would know who I was when they came to visit their family in Ohio. I wanted to be as much as part of their life as their blood relatives and I was willing to show that to Jen.

I had to fly out to California in the summer of 2011 to help Jen move back to Ohio. She was going to stay in California while Shane was deployed to Iraq, but all of us begged her to come back this way so she would have her family around her. I think it was my voice of reason that won her over, saying that Shane wouldn't want her to be alone with a new baby on the way. That she would need the help of her family to take care of the little one and that she'll be grateful for that help. So here I am, in sunny California, helping her pack up her apartment, handing her tissue after tissue because she couldn't stop the tears, the tears that were held in while she hugged her husband good-bye, unable to see him for the next 7 months. She wasn't really showing then, but I knew that I needed to keep her as calm as

much as I needed to so she wouldn't bring harm to herself or my future niece. It was a rough journey back from Cali to Ohio, but all of us made it in one piece.

The next several months into Jen's pregnancy were the worst. There were times where I could feel my love for her being tested, but I still stood by her. She was missing her husband, worrying about him and his safety, and becoming even larger by the day. When I would look at her, I could see her love coming through for her baby and for her missing husband. I would occasionally write to Shane, letting him know how we were all doing. Even if I never got a response back, I knew he appreciated my updates. I was doing the best that I could to keep Jen sane while she had so many things to deal with and I learned later how thankful everyone was to me for being there. The day my niece made her appearance, I was missing. It wasn't because I wanted to be, but I was in the ER with severe pain in my back and unable to be there. I knew I had upset Jen by not showing up during her birth, but I made it up to her as soon as I was able to. I drove to Jen's parents' house over on Curly Smart Circle to see my new family member, even if I was still a little loopy from my pain medicine. I will admit that I was very nervous about meeting my new niece for the fact that I have never really liked babies. It's not because I think they are ugly or anything, I just don't want to break them. They're so young and new that I'm always afraid of hurting them on accident. The first thing I did was ask, "Where's the baby?" Jen was shocked that I asked such a question, but she handed her over for me to hold. Everyone else around me looked like I had grown a second head, but they figured I was still loopy from my pain medicine.

The second I laid eyes on Audrey, I fell in love. She was the most perfect and

precious baby I had ever seen, and I couldn't get enough of her. Her round, little face was all squished up from being a newborn, but she still looked beautiful to me. Sitting on the couch, I started talking to Audrey, telling her I was sorry for not meeting her sooner, but that I was here now. I wanted to tell this little bundle of joy all the things I wanted to do with her, but I didn't know where to start. There was so much to tell her that I was at a loss for words, not sure how to begin or even where to begin. Luckily, I would have her entire life to share my wisdom with her, even if her mom and dad wouldn't see it all as wisdom. Around me everyone was shocked at how I was handling a newborn baby, but they didn't do anything to break the spell I was in. Jen's family could see how much I loved this baby already and they didn't want to take this moment away from me. Audrey was precious to me and my love for her has grown with each passing day. Watching her grow, even if it was on Facebook photos and FaceTime, has been a great joy to me and I can't wait to see the kind of person she becomes in the future.

Looking back at that fateful day, Jen's father will still tell the story how I demanded to see Audrey over Jen. Even when Jen, Shane, and Audrey would come home to visit for the holidays, I would still ask, "Where's the baby?" because of how much I care for my niece. Audrey may not be my niece by blood or even marriage, but these aren't the only two things that make up a family. Love, compassion, trust, honesty all are good traits to have with anyone, and I have all of those with Jen. She is just as much as a part of my family as my own brother, but it's by choice I made her family and she made me her family. Audrey will never have to worry about someone not loving her because I will always be there to love her.



I AM THE ONLY ONE IN TOWN WHO DOESN'T ATTEND CHURCH.

The Gaze
PATRICIA
MCCAMBRIDGE

I had been raised a casual but genuine Baptist, but my wife was a devout atheist. She was blonde with a knack for condescension despite her public appearance as an open-minded woman. In the first few years of our marriage, I had insisted on attending church, and at times invited her to join me. She always refused. A few debates and countless snarky, patronizing remarks later, I stopped attending.

Eight months ago she—teary eyed—had told me that it wasn't working, blubbered out a nebula of reasons why we wouldn't ever be able to make it work, and politely forced me to leave.

I spent the next few months between homes and couches and phone calls, but no one was able to house me for long. Men my age have their own lives, and adding another person, even an old friend, into the mix can only last so long before the welcome wears thin.

Finally, while running out my final acceptable days at the house of the last friend I could think of—“Yeah, Bill, remember? I lent you a couple bucks at that game senior year?”—my ex's brother and former best man, merciful man that he was, called and offered to let me stay for a time in his great-uncle's house, currently unoccupied, a few towns away.

“Did he pass?” I asked.

“No, he just up and left. Something about travelling across Europe? Personally I think he's too old. I dunno. I just got a call from the bank.”

And so I came to reside in Pancoastburg, Kentucky. The town had been smaller and much more isolated than I had anticipated, located deep within a valley that I would surely be trapped in come winter. The population was small. Many of the residents lived outside of town's borders, up in the hills. A few stores dotted the blocks of the town, a large portion shut down years ago. This didn't stop the town from having a quaint, homey feeling though.

One of the first things I had noticed about the town was the presence of only one church, right in the middle of town. It was relatively small, white. Exactly how you would imagine a small town church. I vaguely noted that the sign outside labelled it as Baptist. At first I had been tempted to check it out, but had

quickly changed my mind.

My former brother-in-law had offered to let me stay in the house until his great-uncle returned from Europe. However, as the months dragged on, I was beginning to forget that the house belonged to someone else.

The townspeople were friendly. Beside a few drifters, they hadn't had any long-lasting newcomers in years. Except, shortly before I moved into the house, a new preacher took up residence in the small, white church. The previous pastor had left abruptly, muttering something about "official business" to the locals who had had the chance to ask.

The new Preacher, from what I was told, was a lively, kind man, with the biggest smile you had ever seen. I say from what I was told because I had never actually seen him. He never seemed to leave the church. In fact, no one had seen him come in to town. The Sunday following the departure of the previous preacher, the townspeople had gone into the church, feeling it was the right thing to do, fully prepared to do their own Bible readings. They were surprised to find the Preacher, dressed up, standing at the center, and fully ready to give a complete sermon. And he never left—not that anyone ever witnessed, anyway.

Which, of course, meant I never saw him.

In my first few months of my residence, the townspeople that I would meet, kind as ever, would ask me to join them at church. The Preacher was offering two sermons a week now. He was the best they had ever seen. They talked about how his eyes alone seemed to wipe away all their troubles.

"We're all Baptist," they would always be sure to add, with big smiles,

though I was fairly certain I had never informed anyone of my former denomination.

I slowly began to realize that "all" did indeed seem to be the case. It truly seemed as though everyone in that town was crammed into that church on Sunday—and Wednesday.

I would always return the smile, though I could never match the intensity, and politely reject the offer with as vague an explanation as I could.

"I have a lot going on right now," I said before I returned to the empty house to continue my job and house search.

Things went on this way for a while. Conversation would always drift toward the church and the Preacher, but the people were kind toward my rejections, at times excessively so, smiles ever growing.

A couple of months later a teenage boy went missing. I had seen him arguing with his mother—a gray-ing blonde—through my window one Sunday morning. I, naturally, had decided to mind my own business, and walked away. I saw him later that night outside of his home and then never again. When I mentioned it to my neighbor later on, he laughed and smiled at me.

"He's travelling abroad," he said.

Strange, I thought, but I was glad to hear of the opportunity for adventure the boy had been offered.

Smiling faces continued to ask me to come to church. Sermons were being offered four days a week now. "The Preacher's gaze alone can save lives." It was beginning to become a bit tiresome.

"I can't this week," I would reply,

increasingly curtly. The smiles never wavered.

I'm not going on principle alone, I would think as I stormed into the house.

One smile though, began to wear at this resolve. A pretty young woman, hair the deepest brown I could imagine, named Lyla. We began taking walks around town, and I was eager to get a little more serious. I told her as much.

"I'm not sure I'm comfortable with that," she said, playing with her dark, dark hair.

"Well, how can I make you comfortable?" I asked, certain I already knew the answer.

"Come with me to church." Of course.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes and barely repressed a sigh, but then I caught myself. This was exactly how my ex-wife would have responded. I scowled as I remembered the effect she had had on me. Hadn't I loved attending church before she had shamed me into avoiding it? And here a pretty brunette was practically begging me to attend with her.

"All right, I'll go," I said with a confidence I had forgotten I had. She merely giggled and shot me that huge smile, bigger than ever.

The next day—church seemed to be offered every day now—I walked in, debating whether I wanted to grab Lyla's hand, right next to mine. Before I could, she stopped to speak with a woman just outside the door. I looked up to see that it was the mother of the boy who was off travelling.

I joined in their conversation briefly, and when the talk began to lull a bit, I asked her if she missed her son.

"Sometimes, but at least I

don't have a son who fights me on the way to church anymore. If the Preacher can't reach him, he cannot be saved."

Her words struck me as odd, especially as that wild smile never faltered. I looked to Lyla, who seemed unfazed as she returned the smile. I shrugged it off and followed them inside to the pews, and took a seat in the front row. The Preacher was standing there, still-faced, but with an impossibly large grin. Even in the close proximity, he looked as though he wasn't even breathing.

When the clock struck 9:30 exactly, he came alive with exaggerated movement and over-the-top greetings to the entire town. His motions looked like a parody of human motion.

"Before we get started," he said with a dramatic flourish, "I'd like to welcome our newest member."

I began to rise to explain that I was visiting with Lyla when I looked directly into his eyes and saw—

I felt a smile cut across my face, so big I thought my head might split.

Everyone in my town attends church.



The LEPRECHAUN WARRIOR

W.E. MOODIE

AT A CERTAIN TIME, THERE WAS AN ISLAND WHERE a race known as the Leprechauns built a Kingdom. This Kingdom was known as the Kingdom of the Emerald Isle. The Leprechauns are very short in stature, the average being only three and a half feet tall. However, they can eat and drink as much as three grown men. They were chased onto this island by a Tribe of Men called the Swavi. It had been twenty years since the poor Leprechauns were driven from their homes and fled to the Isle. They had to rebuild their Kingdom and had established the port of Dundalk as the capital of their King. King Padraig II was now a very old Leprechaun and he had seen the exodus and the rebuilding of his Kingdom. Unbeknownst to Padraig, his old foe once again coveted his lands. The Swavi Tribe was being defeated by another Tribe of Men called the Kasimirians. Now the Swavi saw the Isle as their last place of refuge. The Swavi Chief decided to conquer the Emerald Isle to escape, as Padraig had done two decades ago.

Padraig was sitting on his throne discussing the future with his son, Prince Dubhglas, when a message arrived. The aging King looked up as the messenger opened the doors. The old Leprechaun could barely lift his head and was weighed down by the large green robe he wore.

“What is it?” the King demanded.

The courier had been running and was out of breath. After catching it he said with a rasp, “Our towers at the harbor have spotted many Swavi ships approaching. Attack is imminent.”

The King let his head sink to his chest. “I am too old for these things,” he complained. He looked to his son and said, “My son, you are the last hope for our people. Go forth and defend Dundalk and the Leprechaun folk.”

Dubhglas rose to the impressive height of four feet and replied, “As you wish father.” He bowed and turned to the messenger. “Where is the enemy going to land?” he asked.

The messenger replied, “Our scouts think that they will land to the north, but it is unclear how far away from Dundalk.”

The Prince nodded thoughtfully and said, “Send a message to all our troops. Tell them to prepare for an attack on our northern gate.”

“As you will my lord,” the messenger said with a bow.

When his forces arrived the Prince came forth in emerald armor and riding on a white pony. He carried a shield and a lance with a sword on his hip. His shield had the royal Leprechaun seal, a golden knot that symbolized the binding of the soul to the world. He rode to the front of the troops where his commanders were. There were three commanders waiting for him.

“Has our enemy landed yet?” the Prince asked.

“Not yet,” said one of the commanders, “Our scouts think they will land in the next hour and it will take another hour for them to organize and march on us.”

The Prince looked to the north and surveyed the landscape. It was flat and it would not take the enemy long to march on his position. He believed that the enemy would not bring horses because it would be difficult for them to transport them by sea. This could be an advantage for his army.

He turned back to his commanders. “My plan,” he said, “is to have the archers march out on the southern and western flank of the enemy. Then I will light a signal fire and they will fire upon the enemy. Then our Pony Knights can charge into a confused enemy and route them. As the Knights pass the archers the men will cease their fire. Our infantry can mop up the remaining Swavi dogs.”

His commanders looked at each other. One replied, “That is a simple plan my lord. However, it is risky.”

The Prince nodded and said, “Yes, but I believe that the enemy will think that they can lay siege to our city

and wait for reinforcements. For we have never been aggressive in combat before. If we catch them off guard we may be able to prevent this outcome.” The commanders did not like the plan but knew that there was no other option left. They nodded and gave out the orders.

The Leprechaun archers were dressed in leather armor dyed emerald. It was light and breathable. It would allow them to crawl and diminish the chances of being seen. Not that it was easy to spot a Leprechaun before he was in bow range. The archers numbered five hundred. A group of two hundred archers were able to set up just north of Dundalk for the southern flank.

A second group of three hundred warriors made the core of Dubhglas’ army. This force was made up of Pony Knights and infantry. The infantry was made up of spearmen and swordsmen. Each had emerald armor from boot to helm. Their helms covered the back of the head but did not cover the face. The spearmen had shields and six-foot long spears. The Swordsmen had shields and two-foot long swords.

The Pony Knights had the same emerald armor however, their helms had a white plum sticking out the top. They were armed with a sword, shield, and lance. They were mounted on the swiftest ponies that had been bred by the Leprechauns for centuries. The Pony Knights may not sound like great warriors but the Leprechauns are a fierce race when defending their homes.

The Prince had the main army line up fifty feet behind the southern archers. This would give the Swavi a target, for it was unlikely that the

archers would be spotted until the trap was already sprung. The signal fire was built beside the Pony Knight ranks so that the Prince could give the order.

The Swavi plan was just like the Prince predicted. The Swavi tribe was being defeated by another human tribe and needed to take the Isle for themselves. This first wave was to cut off Dundalk and make it safe for heavy equipment to be brought to the Isle. The Swavi did not wear as much armor as the Leprechauns did. Before their latest struggles, they were able to overwhelm their enemies with large numbers of swordsmen. They wore animal furs and leather armor. The only metal armor was their helmets and that only covered the top of their heads.

The Swavi brought two thousand men in the first wave. The commander of this force left five hundred to guard the ships. He had the rest of the force march straight unto Dundalk. As all Men the Swavi did not think the Leprechauns could hold out against them. This army of undisciplined warriors did not begin to imagine that they were walking into a line of archers. They focused the main force of the Leprechauns.

“Hmm,” the commander said, “They want to fight, do they? We will simply charge them and teach them not to resist the power of Man.”

As the Swavi were about sixty feet in front of the hidden archers they began to organize an attack. Before they were prepared the Prince gave the signal. The signal fire was lit and it was large enough for all the archers to see. Within seconds the entire Leprechaun archer force rose and began to pelt the Swavi lines. The Swavi began to panic for they did not know where the enemy was, because arrows were hitting them

from all sides. Some of the Swavi hid under their inadequate shields. Others tried to hide under their fallen comrades.

After four rounds of arrows the Prince ordered his Knights to charge. There was a small gap between the two archer groups in the southwestern part of the lines. Two more rounds of the barrage fell before the Knights passed and the archer commanders ordered a cease to the barrage.

The surviving Swavi got up and lowered the shields that they had. They had been completely unprepared for the archers. As they rose they were hit on their southern and western flanks by a couple hundred pony riding Knights. The Swavi were unable to stop the Leprechaun Knights as they rode through the ranks of their army. The invading force began to disintegrate and fly from the field of battle.

The brave Knights and their fearless ponies were able to route the enemy. The Swavi men fled before the Pony Knights. About one hundred Swavi attempted to form a defense, while the remaining forces and the commander fled to the ships. This formation was at the eastern end of the original Swavi line. By this time the Leprechaun swordsmen and spear-men had advanced. The southern flank of the Swavi was battling against the Leprechaun footmen. Then they were smashed by the Pony Knights. The men melted under the pressure of both forces. The men were unable to keep up a defense against the powerful and low swings of the Leprechaun swordsmen and the ponies were swifter than they could believe. The proud and strong Swavi warriors, who raided and hunted as a way of life, were routed by a foe that stood under four feet tall and

rode ponies into battle. Almost the entire Swavi force perished that day and the Leprechauns suffered no more than one dozen deaths, and no Knight fell.

The remaining Swavi forces were loading their ships as the Pony Knights caught up to them. The survivors of the battle only numbered about one hundred men. As the Leprechaun Knights, approached the Swavi frantically boarded their ships and left much of their food on the beach. For the ship guarding force had unloaded most of the supplies by the time the survivors returned.

The Leprechaun army stopped about fifty yards away from the ships. Prince Dubhglas advanced alone toward the ships. The Swavi commander walked to meet him. The Swavi were humiliated and knew that they had been lost their honor to the Prince. The Prince removed his helm and let his red locks flow in the breeze and the man fell to his knees.

He told the Swavi, "Leave the Emerald Kingdom and never return. The Swavi will never threaten our homes again. haven't you any homes of your own. Begone!"

The Swavi commander took out his sword and placed it on the ground before Prince Dubhglas. Then he scampered back onto his ship. The Swavi would never again threaten the Emerald Isle.

Prince Dubhglas rode triumphantly through the streets of Dundalk. As he rode, he lifted the Swavi sword so that all could see his victory. The streets were flooded with green as the Leprechauns praised their heroic Prince. Finally, the Prince entered his father's throne room.

"It is finished, father," the Prince said and laid the sword at the King's feet.

"Well done my son," the old Leprechaun said, "You have saved your people. When I am gone you will lead our people into a golden age."

When he became King he was crowned, King Dubhglas II the Defender. He advanced the construction of a greater Kingdom of the Emerald Isle. He indeed led the Leprechaun folk into a golden age of peace and progress. He is still remembered for his heroism by the Leprechauns and the relics of his life are held in the Great Temple of the Leprechauns. He is honored as the greatest Leprechaun Warrior to ever live.



The Golem & The EMPATH

AMY PLOUGH

IT STARTED OUT SO SWEET. IT SEEMED SO GENUINE TO HER. A simple man, ready to take her to the ends of the Earth and back. A man whose love appeared so deep that it could be the net that caught them both. The flawless façade he kept, the charisma and charm, like the short-lived, shade loving Azalea. She was quickly drawn in by his exotic charm, and drank the mad honey, trusting in its safety, as his act and outward appearance suggested to her. Just as quickly, once ensnared, the honey turned to poison, that would kill her over the years.

Her premonition, her empathetic powers warned her, but his charm and craft were too great. She resisted, if only briefly, to wed, and cry tears of sorrow, longing, loneliness and despair, for her renewed inward cries manifested loud and clear. Only two weeks after the ceremony, he demonstrated her helplessness, flying to other women, and returning, spitting sorries, and blame. She realized too late, how seemingly permanent the cage she had crawled into. Once crafted, his eager mouth set open wide, in front of her parent's doors, that she so willingly fled. Her parents, who should have cared so much more, and protected her from the soul sucking predators, pushed her toward the gateway to the hungry world, where he patiently waited at the threshold, picking her, not as an easy target, but as a delicious one. He saw in her, her ability to feel, without stealing, other's emotions, energies, and histories. Hungerly, maw stretching wide, he waited for her, the meal that would last a lifetime.

It started out small, a constant quid pro quo, constant guilt, and a constant threat to her and those she shared such deep feelings, and care for, those who, like her, were vulnerable empaths. Her children are her greatest joy, and his greatest means for control, and alternate snacks, when he wanted variety, or when he became greedy, sick with hunger that would never be satisfied. He wove and spun the guilt, lies, and shame, creating false memories, and the belief that his constant theft of energy, financial, sexual, physical, and emotional well-being was deserved, and righteous punishment for an unknown sin.

He too was an easy target, due only to his willingness to allow greater predators a glimpse into this world. They heard his enthusiastic calls, sensed his want of

Dedicated to: RFB, the empath in my life, and the one who gave life to me, when others would so readily gnaw it away. My teacher, validator, and friend. May you forever find a way in this dark and hungry world. Be safe, always.

true emotions and redeemable soul. One by one demons and malicious, angry spirits granted his wish for a consensual possession. They took glee in the use of his hollowed-out body for a while, in return for his offerings, gifts, and sacrifices to them. Through them, he became a crafty wolf, testing boundaries, finding holes in defenses she began to build. Though he was neither smart nor strong, he ruled through a strong bark, the ever-present threat. The more she wanted to hate him, the less she could. It is not the way of an empath to hate, even the most deserving of villains. Drawing willingly offered strength from her younglings, and friends who borrowed, amplified, drew and channeled energy, and emotion into her, still yet, intelligent and strong body, allowed her mind to once again know and accept that she is magnificent. They helped her to find the strength within, to chip away the chains that bound her, and bravely take on the hollow, to deprive it of its meals, cause it to wither, and shrivel as its greed eats the shell which housed it so willingly.

In the final hours of the meal, cut abruptly short, he tossed his deceptive veil aside, no longer finding it beneficial to slurp greedily, and instead, in an act of desperation, crawled from his shell, bore down on her and tried to gulp what was left of his carefully chosen meal. He had grown fat and lazy, enjoying what he thought would be an endless meal, and she had built an impenetrable fortress, from past experience, memory, evidence, and support, secretly obtained.

Too late Golem, you lose. Your false kingdom crumbles, your meals fly away, and you are now too bloated to chase. It seems fitting that you now

lie close to the ground, unable to fly. Slither away, you greedy man, and live life starving, for you will not soon find such an abundant meal. Now wither, and crawl back into the hole from whence you came.



SAPPHIRES & EMERALDS

D.G. RIVERS

THIS WAS MY FIRST DAY AT THIS RITZY SCHOOL.

Each room was themed and elaborately decorated. Adorned with MacBooks, iPads, and Mac desktops. Oh! They had plenty of money and even had an active and involved PTA, who supplied the teacher's lounge with sweets, silverware, hot chocolate and coffee. This was the kind of school I would have loved to attend as a child because it was beautiful. One of the fanciest elementary schools I had ever seen. It was like a scene from a school on the Disney Channel. This school was the opposite of the public schools I attended in inner city South Memphis. On my walk to the office I completed my routine scan of the students and staff to see if anyone else looked like me and instantly realized they didn't. I became a little nervous. I checked in to the office, got signed in for the day, roamed through the halls and headed up the stairs and around the corner, finally stopping at my room for the day. From what I could see, and my four eyes were looking hard, there was no other Black Teacher or Staff in the entire building and not too many Black or even biracial students. This was a situation I had encountered numerous times in this little pocket of Ohio. On this day I was a 5th grade intervention specialist, my specialty was reading. The perfect assignment for the little avid reader in me. I was expecting three-to-four students in the first period hour. However, I learned that this was a semi optional check in session and I would get them all after their first period classes. I sat at my desk anxiously and excitedly waiting for my first students of the day.

To my surprise I walked a little Black girl. She had hair not too different from my own, and a lot of it. It was thrown together in unkempt pigtails. The poor girl's hair was so matted that there wasn't even a visible part to divide the left from the right ponytail. I didn't even have a comb on hand because I was running behind when I woke up that morning and left my fro pick at home. Who knows the last time that baby's matted head had seen a comb. She had a caramel complexion, tall and lanky, just skin and bones and extremely tall for a 5th grader. She had glasses with lenses as thick as mine with a purple square frame. She wore Sketchers that looked like Converse and a jacket that should have been replaced three Christmases ago. When she saw me her eyes immediately connected to mine, her face lit up, and just like that I knew we were about to have a wonderful day! Yet, I couldn't help but wonder about her story? What is she doing at this school where no one else looks like her and all the other students were from a higher socioeconomic class? But what was I doing there.... working

and she was.... learning. Although we had years and life experiences between us, our skin and our natural hair united us and at the end of the day we were just two little Black girls, hustling our way to the top, while navigating through white spaces.

I introduced myself, "Good morning, I'm Ms. DG, your sub for today". Elated, she immediately bombarded me with questions. She was eager to learn my real name, I divulged, "De'Garrica, but most people have a hard time pronouncing it and I don't like explaining so I just go by DG." She told me that she thought my name was beautiful and unique. She was quickly becoming my favorite. She told me her name was Emerald and my heart skipped a beat! She informed me that there were three boys in our morning session and that they didn't usually come until after first period. It was only the two of us during this session. The regular teacher left a reading assignment intended to be a simple small group reading, which subsequently turned into one on one because the group didn't come.

We began reading. She did have some struggles, but was very good at taking her time and sounding words out phonetically. We got about two pages into the book when her curiosity took over. She stared up at me, her thick lenses looking through my thick lenses and she started, "De'Garrica I want to ask you something", and so it began. "What's up?" "Why come every boy I meet asks me if all Black people are rude?" (by boy she meant white boy) "Should I be friends with him?" Well this immediately pissed off the big sister in me. I had to get my thoughts together quick, In the words of Jay-Z, I had to give this baby a "million dollars worth of game for \$9.99", but in a school and kid appropriate way.

I started out with what my parents always told me "NO BOYS!"

"First of all, you are too young to be trying to date, enjoy being a kid, leave

that for when you are older and have the brain capability to do that. Second my dear Emerald, You are 'KIND, SMART, AND IMPORTANT', and you don't want to be friends with someone that is ignorant. It is not your job to defend your race or your culture to foolish boys or anyone, you don't want to be friends with someone like that. A friend would KNOW BETTER! A friend would not approach you with stereotypes. Do you understand what a stereotype is?" Yes, she did, she even told me that she had real friends, friends that got angry when boys said that to her, friends that told her the same things I did, to stay away from boys like that. I told her that if someone wanted to be her friend they would always treat her with respect and see her for who she really is. Yes, she is a Black girl, but she is also a person; a kind, funny, intelligent young woman, and anybody who wasn't for her was against her and people who fell into the against category, could either get with it or get lost.

"You are in school to learn, you have to work harder to get the level you need to be at and boys right now are a distraction, one that you don't have time, energy, or patience for anyway. And a friend, a good friend is hard to come by, but when you find one you will know because they will always have your back and you will want to have theirs."

When our little talk was over, we got back to reading, because we must learn to love reading. I gave my new found little sister a big hug and I thanked the Lord that we crossed paths. I hope when we meet again she will tell me that she has made more friends that treat her nicely, instead of chasing after boys that don't understand her and are little racists in the making. Most importantly I hope she moves out of reading intervention and more into self-love.



ART & PHOTOGRAPHY



Dustin Decot, “Closed-Off Mine Shaft”



Dustin Decot, "Frog"



Brandon Gobrecht, "Long Exposure on Main Street"



Lilly Grooms, "In the Woods"



Ruksana Kabealo, “Dulhan (The Bride)”



Ruksana Kabealo, “Hope Costs \$2.07 (Before Tax)”



Ruksana Kabealo, “MIG Welding”



Ruksana Kabealo, "Paroxetine"



Ruksana Kabealo, “Zuleikha”



Shaina Orewiler, “Along the Water”



Shaina Orewiler, "Sting Rayz"



Amy Plough, "Twilight Tower"



Rhonda Hero Wilson, Untitled

CONTRIBUTORS

T.C. Albright: Battling through corporate America day by day, fighting with two teenagers night by night, and refusing to let any of it stifle her creativity.

Victoria Bell is a junior majoring in English at OSU Marion.

Dustin Decot is currently a senior at the Ohio State University regional campus Marion. He switched majors from engineering to history; which he will be getting bachelors at the end of the spring 2018 semester. When not doing School work, he is hanging out with friends, playing online with friends, or doing things with family.

Ben Ditmars is an author of gnomes, plays, poetry and more. He has been featured in several online literary journals. As a founding member, he helped start the Quillective Project with Amber Norrgard, Scott Morgan and Rob Zimmermann. Their goal is raise money for different causes. This past issue they sponsored a no-kill animal shelter called Dog and Kitty City in the Dallas Texas area. Ben has recorded several episodes of a podcast on poetry (Lyrical Versification) with his co-host, Amber Jerome-Norrgard. Listen in on iTunes or Stitcher Radio. Currently, he lives in Marion, Ohio and works in payroll and accounting.

Anthony Fernandez: If I had to describe how I was a writer, I would say I am a spontaneous shut in. I don't exactly have loads of works lying around by house, but when I get an idea, I feel compelled to do what I can to give it life on paper. As such, I can just sit in front of my computer for hours sometimes in order to do so.

Hannah "Sal" Gable is a third year Marketing major working towards a double minor in Mathematics and Statistics. She enjoys video games, make-up, writing, and food. Her lifelong dream is move forward after her bachelors and earn her Ph.D in Statistics.

Brandon Gobrecht is a student at OSU Marion.

Lilly Grooms is a senior and high school and has been a full-time college student since her sophomore year. She just receive her Associate of Arts degree at the end of the Autumn 2017 semester, and will be graduating from high school in May of 2018. Next year, she plans on attending the Ohio State University at Marion to continue her education and double major in Early Childhood Education and English. When she's not busy with school, she enjoys writing poetry and fiction stories, spending time with her family, and going on

adventures!

Rhonda Hero-Wilson: I am amateur photography taker. A published author and a writer. These photos are just a glimpse of some my favorites.

Sally Higgins, for many years an action hero who inspired the great and the good (that is, she was an elementary school teacher), is now retired and happily enjoying auditing classes here at OSU-Marion as an enrollee in OSU Marion's "Over 60" program, where she gets to read and write whatever she damn well pleases.

Fantasia Hillman is an English major at the Ohio State University in Marion, Ohio with a focus in creative writing. Fantasia is in her third year in college and has a talent for writing. She loves writing on her spare time as well as reading. Next year she'll be continuing her education on the Marion campus.

Ruksana Kabealo is a maniac with a dream.

Stuart Lishan is an English professor here at OSU-Marion. Over the years he's published tons (well, may several pounds worth) of poems and stories, as well as stuffed-shirt scholarly articles about the pedagogy of creative writing. One of his favorite things to do is to hang out with his students, his fellow voyagers of the sweet words, and frolic about in the reading and writing of poems, creative nonfiction and fictional stories, and one-act plays. He gets really jazzed when he can do that.

Dathan Lyon is a student at OSU Marion.

Patricia (Tricia) McCambridge is a hella super senior at The Ohio State University pursuing a degree in English. She received a Bachelor of Science in psychology in Spring of 2017 and is currently pursuing a second undergraduate degree due to an inability to make decisions. She currently plans to apply to law school in hopes of beginning in Autumn of 2019. It is her ambitious dream to one day be finished with school.

Dani Miller is an English Major at the Ohio State University at Marion. When she's not spending her time panicking from looming deadlines, she likes to kick it with her cat and husband. Dani is a starving artist that loves her Kia Soul, but her true passion lies in writing fanfiction. She's an avid video gamer and loves reading weird and strange books.

W.E. Moodie is earning his Bachelor's in History. He is a rabid fan of English art and literature, such as

CONTRIBUTORS

Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Milne, and Monty Python. “Someday” was written by **Kara Day (Moore)**. As the mother of a crazy 9-year-old son and being hairdresser for 12 years, life has not always been easy. After 8 years at OSUM, I will now have a Bachelor degree in English and will continue my research on the Environment and the animals of the planet. Her inspiration comes from her love for the planet and trying to preserve what we can, while we still can. “Someday” is a calling for people to wake up before it’s too late, but some will not listen. Maybe someday we can care, why not start today?

Kristen Orewiler is in her fourth year here at Ohio State Marion and is majoring in English with a minor in writing. She plans to continue her education next year at Marion.

Shaina Orewiler is graduating from Bucyrus High School this spring and plans on attending Ohio State Marion in the fall for nutrition. In her free time she loves capturing pictures along with drawing.

Mickey Pfarr: OSU graduate, mother, writer, perpetual nerd with way too much anxiety.

DG Rivers: Denison University class of 2015 with BA’s in Psychology and Women’s and Gender Studies, still trying to figure out what to do with my degree. In the meantime I’m just trying to make a dollar and a difference.

Known as a mafia boss-like figure amongst her friends in the English department, **Rosa Ubaldo** has often been told she would make a great cult leader. Her spirit animal is an armadillo and she would describe herself as the chocolate bit at the bottom of a Drumstick ice cream cone. Her current dream is to do stand up and work on

SNL, but her back up plan is to be a hobo in Hawaii. **Amy Plough** attended COTC, and earned her Associate of Applied arts, in 2016, after switching her major several times in order to find what she is passionate about. During her time there, she was a member of the Phi Theta Kappa National Honor Society. She is currently a senior at OSU, and has enjoyed the semester with Dr. McCorkle and the rest of the CR Editors. She is a senior and is working toward earning her Bachelor’s in English by Fall 2018 or Spring 2019. She is currently a member of the Phi Sigma Theta National Honor Society and the National Society of Collegiate Scholars, and plans to continue on to earn a graduate degree at OSU. Amy is an Army veteran and is actively involved in her community. She is a board member of Rolling Thunder Chapter 5, Ohio, Non-profit organization for community education and advocating for veterans and P.O.W./M.I.A. and their families. She rides a Honda Rebel, and is looking forward to this year’s Thunder Run in Washington D.C. on Memorial Day.

I am **Daniel Schirtzinger** and I am a junior English major. Hope you enjoy my work.

Paul Winters is an English Major at Ohio State Marion. Originally a Communications Major, Winters made the switch after finding a new found love in writing. He is a member of the Moccassins sustainability club on campus, along with USG—Undergraduate Student Government as a Senator for the junior class. Winters was also the Ohio State Marion campus 2017 Homecoming King.

COLOPHON

This issue of the *Cornfield Review* is printed using **Georgia, Benguiat Bold, KGLIFEISMESSY** and Helvetica Neue Thin fonts. The layout was handled in Adobe InDesign. The interior artwork and photographs, as well as the cover design, were all edited using a combination of Adobe Photoshop and GIMP. The cover concept was developed collaboratively by the Editorial Board, and designed by Christy Horton.



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KAPW!



Feeling like you'd like to share your creative writing with a group of like-minded voyagers of the sweet word? Well look no further!

KAPW! is the campus creative writing club. It's made up of fellow voyagers who like to write poems and stories of various sorts and stripes. Come share yours with us! Or, you can just hang out and listen.

We get together a couple of times each month during fall and spring semesters: just look for flyers around campus when the semester begins. Or you can email dear, doty professor of English Stuart Lishan (lishan.1@osu.edu), and he'll be happy to tell you all about it!