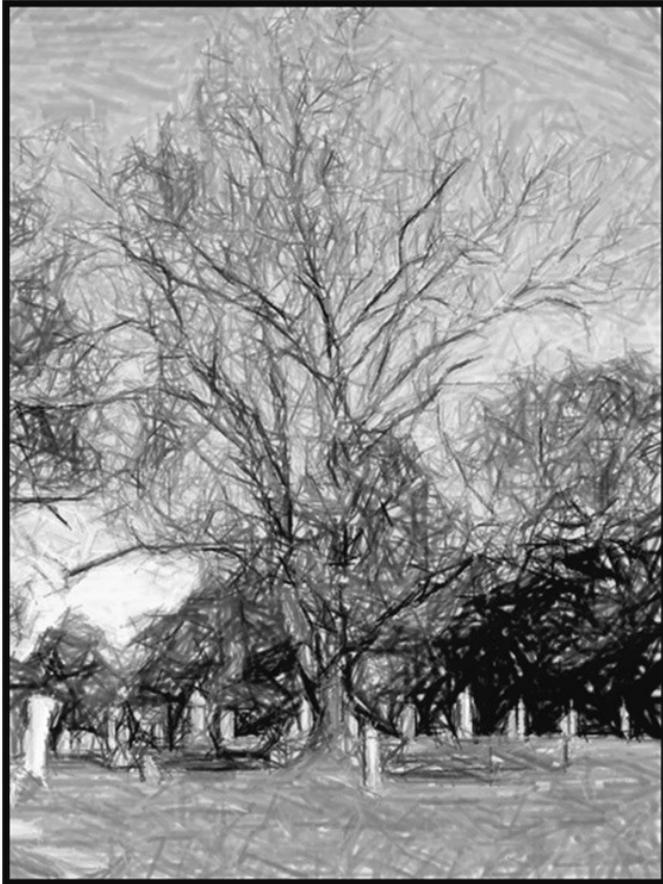


The Piney Dark



The Winners of the Fourth Annual
SFASU Horror Fiction Contest
2015

The Piney Dark:

The Winners of the Fourth Annual
SFASU Horror Short Story Contest

PRESENTED BY THE STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY
ENGLISH DEPARTMENT
2015

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ABOUT THE CONTEST

The Piney Dark Halloween Horror Writing Contest began at Stephen F. Austin State University in 2012. Created by Dr. Steve Marsden to foster high quality genre writing at SFA, the contest is open to enrolled SFA undergraduate students, graduate students, alumni, and Nacogdoches-area locals.

Winning authors were presented prizes and copies of the anthology at the 2015 Sigma Tau Delta-organized departmental Halloween party. The print edition of this collection features the top entries in each category. For more information on the contest and previous anthologies, please go to

thepineydark.wordpress.com.

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Undergraduate Winners

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By Echo Fondly Loved

Elyssa Winch

“I’m here for Howard Black?”

Daphne’s purse crashed against the countertop, car keys and old credit cards clattering against each other inside. Her hand came down too, press-on nails clacking one, two-three-four, one, against the synthetic wood of the reception desk. The reception worker lifted his head from the pillow of his keyboard, sleep-sanded eyes finding her hand and following up her arm before landing, finally, on her face.

He blinked at her, mouth slack.

Daphne’s nails rapped again, two-three-four, two-three-four. She strained a smile across her lips. “Howard Black?”

“Howard Black?” He echoed, drawing out the words like a sip of fine wine. “Oh, Black! Right, right, yeah.” His hands went to the keyboard and tapped away at the keys, glancing back at her every now and again. “Uh, this’ll probably take a minute.”

Her chest heaved with a sigh she kept caged in her throat. “That’s fine,” she said, craning her neck to look around the reception room. It was, like most Lotus Tower reception rooms, all chrome and glass and polished marble, somehow kept spotlessly clean. Pristine leather couches lounged along the walls, bay windows yawned to the outside world, and above, chandeliers of shattered glass and bare lightbulbs sparkled from the ceiling.

The street outside was a mess in comparison – carpeted with leaf litter, complemented with trash, without a soul in sight. An antique store stood on the other side, some Mom and Pop chain Daphne had never heard of, with a closed sign in the window that had begun gathering dust. A number of trees, black and barren with winter, pushed through the pavement, their branches clawing at the windows to the inside. Even the air was choking, clogged with smog and decay, like spider silk that webbed around her lungs.

The Lotus Tower reception room was having none of it – not a single leaf had sneaked in through the door, not a speck of dirt was to be found. Even the air was clear and easy, if smelling somewhat of antiseptic. The only indication that it was the same world at all was the winter chill, and the jar of jonquils kept at the

front desk – although, they were withered around the edges a bit. Trouble with cut flowers, she supposed.

“We don’t have a Howard Black here, currently,” the worker piped up. Daphne’s eyes snapped back to his, and she plastered on another smile.

“He’s dead.”

“Oh.” The worker turned back to his computer, clicking through some record she couldn’t see. “So he is. Uh...” he turned back to her, “are you his...?”

“Daughter.”

“Daughter. Right.”

Daphne’s nails were rapping a tattoo now “Excuse me, Mister –” she glanced at his nametag. “–James. Is there... a manager or something? Someone else I can speak to?”

James’ mouth quirked to the side. “There is. But the manager’s always grumpy after he wakes up. Are you here for Howard’s body?”

“I–” Daphne’s jaw worked, “–suppose.” Truthfully, she didn’t know what she’d come here for. She had unplugged from her lounge with a message that her father had passed—that someone needed to come collect his remains.

The whole thing was a bother to her, really. It wasn’t like he was *gone*.

“Well then,” he flashed a smile at her – a real one. “Come with me, I guess.”

He swung an arm in the direction of the door behind the desk, and Daphne followed as he led her down the white hallway. Her heels clicked against the tile, echoing as he took her past clusters of consultation rooms, visitation lounges, medical labs, and—towards the end—rooms of test Lotus chairs that sat like empty thrones in the dark.

“Hey,” James said. “It’s probably not worth much, but... well, I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Don’t be.” Daphne shrugged. “He’s not gone for me.”

James shot her a wary look. “Uh... right. Of course.”

She peeked down the darkened halls, through the empty rooms, frowning. “Is there no one else here?” She asked.

“Oh, no, there’s loads of people here. We maintain a full staff of doctors, programmers and engineers year-round.” He

glanced back at her. “But they’re all on break right now.”

“All of them?”

“Yeah. And they’ve been on break for the last... twenty-six months, I think.” He flashed her that smile again. “Haven’t had a displeased customer since.”

More questions bubbled up in Daphne’s mind, but before she could ask they reached the final door at the end of the final hallway and James swung it open into the Lotus chamber. It was vast, a void of low lighting, filled by stacks upon stacks, rows upon rows of Lotus lounges. Green rings glowed gently in the dark, lining the labyrinth of walls and lounges. A control panel sat at the heart of each, surrounded by a moat of glass, and James rubbed through the fog on one, peering inside.

“Hello, Mrs. Leary,” he chirped, “and how are you today?” He tapped at the control panel, bringing up a menu of waveform monitors and other medical minutiae. “Good to hear, then!”

Daphne peeked over his shoulder to the window of the lounge. A woman lay inside, face wrinkled with age, peaceful in sleep. Daphne could just barely hear her breathing over the machine’s quiet hum.

“Oh, let me introduce you to everyone.” He looked at Daphne and tapped on the window to the lounge. “This is Mrs. Leary. She’s a baker, or she always wanted to be. I guess she thinks she is now.”

She arched an eyebrow. “You know her?”

“No,” he shrugged, “but it was in her file. ‘Customer request: Include expanded baking module.’ And – oh!” He darted across the aisle to another further down. “Hello, Karen! Doing well? How’re the little ones?” He conjured up the menu on hers as well, nodding at what he found. “This is Karen. She’s a great mother – in her dreams at least. She lost her kid during pregnancy in real life, so she came here and the AI made her a virtual one.”

“That’s great –”

“And this.” He skipped down to yet another, babbling. “This one, this is Daniel. Daniel *loves* dogs. He trains them, professionally – in his simulation, you know. I think.” He tipped his head back, trying to draw up some memory. “It may have been Martin who trained dogs, actually. He was in this lounge before, but then he had an aneurysm, so we moved Daniel in. I still miss Martin,

though.”

“Excuse me –”

“Do you think he died happy?” His thumb waved over the lounge’s window. “I guess he must’ve. Wouldn’t be much point in coming here otherwise.”

Daphne stretched her neck back, looking for the end of the columns of lounges. She couldn’t find it, couldn’t see the ceiling. Perfect. “Would you *just* take me to my father?”

James blinked at her, stunned for a moment, before understanding snapped in. “Oh, oh right! Sorry, we um... we don’t get a lot of – you know, customers, in here, anymore. It’s sort of –” he coughed into his fist, “– dead.”

Daphne straightened her neck back to stare at him. “And my father?”

“Your father. Right, right.” He nodded, moving off down the aisle, twisting to call “Goodnight, Daniel,” over his shoulder, and then “Goodnight, Karen. Goodnight, Mrs. Leary.” They walked in silence after that, although he would occasionally slow to rap his knuckles against the windows of the lounges, as though brushing the shoulder of a passing friend.

“Soooo,” he said eventually. Daphne managed to keep her eyes from rolling. “Are you from around here?”

“Up north. Dallas.”

“Oh.” He peeked back over his shoulder at her. “And you woke up to come here?”

“I unplugged.” Her face twisted at his implication. “Why wouldn’t I? He’s my *father*.”

“Right, no, I didn’t mean... I didn’t mean it like that.”

Daphne hummed in response, peeved nonetheless. She did love her father. Dearly. Loved him enough to unplug from her private lounge, step out of her perfect ranch home, brave the polluted mess of the waking world long enough to get to this godforsaken stain of a town, all to get the bastard’s body.

Well, no matter. She’d get back to her lounge soon. And he’d be grateful when she did – he always was. He’d see her, muss her hair and kiss her forehead, call her Daphodil, like he had since she was a child – her lounge AI did a marvelous impression of him. She couldn’t wait to get back and be done with this whole inconvenience.

She peered out into the shadows, searching for the end of the room. “Does it have to be so long?” She asked. “And so dark?”

“The Lotus Chamber must be kept at a lighting level of ten lumens for every ten square meters in order to preserve the stasis needed for Total Immersion VR.’ That’s from the Lotus User Manual.” He grinned at her. “I get a lot of reading done.”

“I didn’t ask.”

“No, I guess you didn’t – oh, here it is!” The back door of the facility loomed – finally – from the chamber’s gloom before them. James pushed the door open with a cheery “Hello, dead people!” and Daphne followed him into the very back of the facility – a musty old room lined with shelves, themselves lined with small cardboard boxes, no bigger than a lunchbox, each marked with a name and a number. He searched for a while, muttering “Black, Black, Black,” to himself, before pulling an unassuming clone down from one of the highest shelves.

“Here you are.” He pushed the box into her hands. “Number 304, Howard Black.”

“You-” She stared at the box in her hand, fingers flicking off the lid. Inside was a pile of ashes, confined in plastic lining, looking like nothing so much as a bit of old dust. “You cremated him.”

“It’s standard procedure.” James’ eyes widened in genuine worry. “Did he not want to be cremated?”

“I don’t... I don’t know.” She glanced at a spot of color on the box’s face – a picture of a strange man, gray-haired and wrinkled. Daphne almost passed the box back, almost thought she’d been given the wrong one. But no, she could see herself in him now, her blue eyes in his face, streaks of her red hair beneath the gray. He looked so different from the face her AI had dreamed up.

Something deep in Daphne twanged in discomfort. Her breath caught a moment in her chest. It’d been years since she had seen him in the waking world. They had tried, once, to share the same Lotus dream, but the long-distance lag proved too inconvenient. Instead, her lounge made an AI copy with his face, pretended to be him. Was him. Still was.

Daphne frowned, replacing the lid back on the box.

“So, this is it.” She turned the box over in her hands. “All there is.”

“Oh, no,” James slid a piece of paper off the shelf behind

her father's spot. "There's this too. Some final message."

"Really?" Her thoughts swam – her father had time to write something before he died? What did it say, some message to her? He was always leaving little notes to her, tucked in her lunchbox or slipped in between school papers. He must have–

"My will's in between the walls of 2041 Riverside Place." James read.

She blinked. "That's – that's it? There's nothing more?" Nothing to her?

"Nope. Good to know, though, in case we lost the copy," James crumpled the paper and stuffed it in his pocket. "Sooooo... what are you going to do with him?"

Not even a note? That was – unlike him. Unlike the him she knew, at least.

He could be different, she supposed. The AI wasn't perfect. He may have changed beyond the parameters it had expected. The thought snaked around her heart, squeezing.

Daphne shook herself and held out the ashes for him to take back – before her eye caught on the shelves surrounding them. All the boxes, names, numbers, left to languish. Unremembered.

"Are these *all* people who died here?" She asked.

"Yeah. People stay under for years. A lot of them don't wake up."

That something squirmed again in Daphne's gut. She pulled the box back to her chest. "I suppose I'll have to deal with it then." Except... she didn't have the first clue about funerals. Who did she contact? Where did she begin? "Do you know any funeral directors?"

James blinked at her, as though she had suddenly slipped into French. "I... don't know anyone, really." He paused. "Oh, no wait, I think Mrs. Leary's a funeral director!"

"Right." She pushed another sigh back down. "I meant a working funeral director."

"Oh. No." His brow scrunched up in thought. "You can have your own funeral, I guess. There's a park nearby. I could show you."

"Why would I have *my own* funeral?"

He shrugged. "I mean, you could leave him here but..." James waved at the boxes around them. They peered back at her,

each brown face with a forgotten name. A shiver slid down her spine.

“Fine, fine.” Daphne rubbed the spot over her sternum, trying to ease her breath. “Let’s just get this over with.”

“It’s just up here.” James said as fallen leaves crackled beneath his feet. The winter air wrapped around Daphne’s bones, frost and smog clogging her lungs, that spider web silk cocooning in her throat. The street – the whole town – was silent and still, only the wind whispering in the leaves, groaning in the canyons of old shops and darkened apartments.

“And where is everyone?” Daphne asked.

“Where do you think?” was all James said. The Lotus Tower sparkled silver in the sky behind them.

She rubbed again at her sternum, as if she could massage the unclean air away. Thoughts of the will still plagued her – had he left a note there? Maybe. But the will was years old at this point. And she wanted some piece of him now, from today. What would he even say to her? She could think of what the AI might come up with, but she wanted something from *him*. Just to be sure that she still...

Still knew him.

No, no. Daphne shook her head. She wouldn’t think about this. She’d be back to the lounge soon. That’s all that mattered.

The town’s streets twisted and wended, winding as they did in the distant past, when settlers were just then driving through. They tangled back into the town’s once-beating heart, a small square with city hall standing on the other side. In the center was a patch of frozen earth, a single, gnarled tree, reaching for them with black bone branches. It was ringed by park benches, themselves striped with graffiti, choked in weeds, cloaked by trash. Daphne eyed it with a frown.

“What an eyesore.”

James shrugged. “Best you’ll get here.” He held out a hand to take the box, but Daphne held it tight against her. He shrugged, watching as she stepped forward and knelt at the tree’s feet. She placed the box aside, bent over the barren earth, cupped her hands

– her fingers froze before they could dig into the dirt. She flexed them, looking at her clean skin, her press-on nails. She couldn't go digging with these.

Leaves crunched, and James fell to his knees beside her, spearing his hands into the dirt and pulling out a small furrow. He dug in, again and again, and Daphne watched him work, soil seeping in beneath his fingernails.

“Thank you.” She said.

He shrugged. “No problem.” The furrow deepened enough to fit the box, and he grinned up at her, waiting. “Well?”

“Yes.” She sucked in a smog-stained breath and set the box in the shallow grave. James pushed the pile dirt back over her father's ashes. He patted it down until there was no sign, no hint of its existence. She didn't look away from the space where it should be.

This was it, then. The best she could do. It seemed so – imperfect.

But, the important part is that she tried. He would have said so. Would say so. Of course he would.

Thoughts of the will constricted around her heart.

“Is there – ah!” He plucked a sharp rock from the roots of the tree, stabbing it into the bark of the trunk. He slashed one, two, three strokes down the tree's flesh, and then three more, crosswise now, stepping back to look at his handiwork.

A cross scarred the tree's skin, stark white against the black.

He dropped the rock and touched her shoulder. Shaking, Daphne stood and stepped back, standing beside him in the scarce shade of the tree.

“How,” she faltered, swallowed, tried again. “How did it happen?”

James blinked. “Uh... suffocation, I think. Some sort of lung defect.”

The wind howled, cold and poisoned breath blowing over her. She pressed a hand over her mouth and nose.

Suffocation. The air clogged in her throat at the thought. But – no. No, he wasn't. She had seen him, hadn't she? Just hours ago. He was smiling, laughing. Living. It was just the lounge, sure, but it – it was *him*.

It was.

James coughed beside her. Daphne's head snapped up to

look at him. He gave the grave a pointed glance.

“Oh.” She said, and then, “what? What do you – what do you want?”

“Well.” He shrugged. “A man should have something said about him at his funeral.”

“Oh,” she repeated. Her mouth opened and then snapped shut. There was so much to say. All the little things from her childhood crowded in her mind – every birthday, Christmas, Thanksgiving, graduation. The way he kissed her knees when she skinned them on the sidewalk. The time he washed her hands and shoes after she made mud pies. That ridiculous nickname, Daphodil, written at the bottom of every birthday card.

Or had the AI done all that? She couldn’t remember.

James cleared his throat once more, and when it became clear that she was silent, began to speak. “Grief saps my strength, the sands of life are run – ”

She combed her mind and memories. There had to be – had to be something. Something she could say about him, something she could leave behind. Something more than stories about a dream with his name, more than a tree and a cross and a goddamned *box*.

“– and in my early youth am I cut off – ”

She cast about the square as if she could find a story written on the walls. Dark and shattered store windows stared back at her, like empty sockets in a skull. She thought of him breathing, suffocating alone in his lounge. Had he been happy? Had he thought of her as he died? It’d been years – years since they’d even seen each other. What face had his AI dreamed up for her? Had he even thought of her at all?

“– but death is not my bane – it ends my woe – ”

Dead. He was dead and she didn’t know. Didn’t know what to say.

That slick, sick something slithered up from Daphne’s gut, crawled up her throat, clawed at her heart. The spider silk stuffed her lungs and she couldn’t – couldn’t speak – couldn’t breathe –

“Oh, hey, hey,” James crouched beside her – when had she dropped to her knees? – his hands anchored on her shoulders. He shook her, slightly, saying “Are you okay? What’s going on?”

There was dirt on her jeans, getting in between her nails from where they scored in the earth. She hated it, hated all of this.

She wanted her father – her father, who knew her and loved her and thought of her. Her father who hadn't died alone in the dark. She needed –

The Lotus Tower stood in her mind, a chrome flower blooming in the city's corpse. "Take me back." Her hand twisted in his shirt. "I have to go back. Please. *Please.*"

"Okay, alright." He hauled her off the ground, looping an arm around her shoulders, walking her back down the street they came. The skeletons of old storefronts watched them as they passed, silent except for the wind's banshee wail.

Daphne didn't see the street, didn't see anything beyond her own feet in front of her. Soon they collapsed into the reception room of the Lotus Tower, James' shoulder a rock beneath her. She broke away from him, hunching over the desk, sucking in breaths of antiseptic air.

He wasn't dead. She told herself that, screamed it in her head. He wasn't, he wasn't, he wasn't. She needed to get back. She just needed to get back, everything would be fine if she just –

"Are you alright?" James asked. "What happened? Why did you just—"

"Do you *ever* stop talking?" Daphne snarled.

She shook her head and returned to lean on the desk. Her eyes landed on the backdoor.

An idea dropped in her head like a stone in a still pond. She could feel it sink through her mind and bury itself in the bed of her thoughts.

"You still have my files, don't you?" Her voice was weak, cracked with a sob. "For my lounge?"

"Uh..." he nodded. "Yeah, I can probably pull them up, no problem."

"And you have an empty lounge here, right? You have to, now."

He nodded again. "Yeah, I suppose that's —"

"Put me in it."

He gawked at her, mouth shutting, opening, shutting again. James was, for once, speechless.

"Yes." The more she thought it, the sounder it seemed. She could go back, right here. This would just all be some, some terrible dream, half-forgotten in the morning.

Yes. A dream – just an awful dream.

“I need it,” she whispered. “Please. Just... please.”

He looked between her, the door, her heaving shoulders, back around again. “I...” his jaw worked. His brow cracked in a frown. He trudged past her and pushed open the back door. “Come with me.”

They shuffled in silence through the empty hallways and forgotten anterooms, all the way to the back, to the stacks. James slipped off his key, unlocked the door, waved her inside the chamber.

The lounge stacks waited inside, staring her down with a thousand glowing green eyes.

“This way,” James said, turning off to the left. They had only gotten a few steps when he spoke again. “Hey, you know, I don’t think you’ve seen the river, have you? It’s pretty, this time of year.”

Daphne didn’t respond.

A not-quite smile pulled at his face. “Or the library. They have more books than I’ve ever seen there. And...” he thought a moment, “and the fountain? You have to mess with the plumbing, to get it to run, but I promise it’s worth it.”

“And the lounge?” Daphne asked.

“It’s...” He stopped precisely where he stood. “It was back there.” He turned to a column two aisles back, leading her down the corridor, into the cavern of the stacks. A single lounge stood out among the others, empty of a sleeper. He tapped at the control panel, and the maw of the lounge opened, the tongue of the bed sliding out with a piston hiss.

Daphne climbed in, lying in its open mouth.

“I always hate this part,” she muttered.

James didn’t respond, tapping away at the control panel – her control panel.

“Like lying in a morgue.” She continued.

“A morgue?” He shook his head. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Oh,” she watched him, upside down, as he finished up the calibration and the lounge rolled back into the wall, darkness devouring her inch by inch. The lip of the lounge sealed shut, a breath of gas filling the chamber, the machine’s quiet hum filling her ears. Sleep creeped in, settling in her mind, pulling on her eyelids.

“Just one little, terrible dream.” She said to herself.

A tap. She woke long enough to see James, find his face through the glass. He wore a smile – weak, but still there, still real. She saw his mouth move and the darkness pulled her down again, but she heard it, his final faint words, the barest echo in the silence.

“Goodnight, Daphne.”

And then she heard no more.

The Perfect Man

Elizabeth Hughes

Blinding pain. Flashes of white light. A sickly drip of something sticky down his face and neck. The taste of liquid metal in his mouth. A shrill, ear-piercing scream that couldn't possibly have come from him. He gagged and felt himself heave again, but anything that had been in his stomach had long since been expelled. He strained against the heavy leather straps that bound him to the metal table, but it was a feeble attempt at best. His strength had all but left him as he faded in and out of consciousness. His fear was the only thing keeping him alert. He felt it in his skin, his bones, in his very being. He sensed the presence beside him move away. Darkness consumed him again.

When he awoke, he was alone. The harsh white light hanging above his head was off, enabling him to finally open his eyes enough to look at his surroundings. Gingerly he tried to raise his head but was immediately met with a throbbing pain. Lights flashed behind his eyes, and his vision blurred. His stomach heaved again, but when he gagged he found he could not open his mouth. With his head back on the cold metal table, he realized that the entire lower half of his face was wrapped in gauze. It brushed against his nose and smelled of blood and disinfectant. This new gauze joined the bandages already covering the place where his left ear used to be.

He slowly turned his head to the right, no longer trying to pick it up. He instantly wished he hadn't. A narrow table stood against the wall with small glass jars sitting on top of it. Each jar contained a different body part. Eyeballs, noses, hands, ears, all floating suspended in a clear yellow liquid. He felt heat rise to his face, felt it travel through every nerve fiber in his body. *What is this place? What's going on? How many others are here? Help me!* But he knew no help would come. This was his third day here. On the first day they took his left foot, the second, his left ear, and now, as he smelled the bloody gauze, he knew his lips were the third thing to go. But who they were and why they were doing this he didn't know.

Turning his head to the left, careful of the bandages cover-

ing the now gaping hole in the side of his head and his mouth, he saw a similar table piled with more jars of body parts. Above the table, pinned to the wall, was a diagram of the human body. Next to it was what looked like a huge collage made out of cutouts of various magazine pictures. Eyes, nose, ears, mouth, all of it pasted haphazardly together to form a complete person. A man. The perfect man. He swallowed. His breathing became faster and more ragged. *The perfect man? Is that what they're doing?*

Suddenly the door banged open and the blinding white light above his head came on again. He couldn't see clearly, he couldn't hear clearly, he couldn't think clearly. He began to scream but his cries were muffled by the gauze now completely soaked with his blood. He writhed and twisted on the table and he felt hands grab him to hold him in place. He felt long hair tickle his face and squinted up at the figure before him. A woman. She was wearing a surgical mask but there was no denying the hungry look in her eyes. Crazy and determined, all they wanted was the perfect man. And since they could not find one, they decided to create one themselves.

He knew he would die on this cold metal table, whether from blood loss or shock, he didn't know. All he knew was that their twisted, psychotic, demented pursuit of perfection would kill him. He closed his eyes and tried to steady his breathing. He heard a clink of metal and a second later felt a knife tear its way through the soft flesh around his right eye. He screamed and thrashed, then everything went black.

The Butcher's Daughter

Susan Groce

James remembered the day before, when he was whisked into the shop partly by the unforgiving winter gale, and partly by his mother's supercilious insistence upon him fetching her a pound of sausage, with a smile. He hadn't expected the gray winter day to turn out so happily. He began to hum as he drove.

He remembered exactly how Hal's Butcher Shop had smelled as he walked in. Though he was a vegetarian, this time the memory of the smell of meat in the air did not turn his stomach. When he got to the front of the line, Hal was there, staring down as ominously as ever through his bushy white eyebrows as he demanded James' order. He was about to repeat his mother's order to the butcher when the old man received a call from his wife, and was forced to step out in order to yell into the phone. In his place, a short, brown-haired girl who looked to be in her late twenties took his order. They chatted a bit. During this time, he learned that her name was Edna. She gave James a smile that made him zip up his black hoodie to conceal the fact that the blush had spread to his neck. When she handed him his order, he found that the neatly-wrapped white pack had a phone number taped to the bottom of it.

He hurried home, handed off the package to his mother (after extracting the phone number, of course), and even feigned interest as she launched into a soliloquy about how "that wasn't so bad, now was it," and "You'll enjoy this, Hal only uses the best quality meat," and "Maybe next time you'll go the first time I say to," before he hurried off to the safety and solitude of his basement.

His mother brought down a plate of the sausage, and to her satisfaction, her boy put up none of the usual nonsensical protests about vegetarianism. Perhaps he had finally stumbled upon some sense.

James, for his part, felt guilty for eating the meat, but was in such a good mood that he did not feel up to the usual argument with his mother over the morality of killing animals (they were so innocent, unlike people). Five years of steadfast refusal in the only area in which he expressed independence was circling the drain, but he supposed the happiness caused by the events of the day atoned

for this.

Waiting until Edna was off work was torture. However, when the five on the clock changed to six, the time at which she had mentioned she left work, he froze. Though he had thought of nothing but Edna for the past few hours, when the time came to send her a text, he was paralyzed with fear. After all, the text had to be witty, but cool; it had to be self-assured, but not arrogant. He reflected on the fact that he was a college dropout in his early thirties living in his mother's basement, and conceded to himself that he possessed neither wittiness nor self-assuredness, though he recalled with a slight brightening of spirits that he was technically cooler than the average *homo sapiens* due to chronic low blood pressure.

With this in mind, he sent a text that caused nearly instantaneous regret. Milliseconds after releasing "Heya qt 3.14 ;)" to soar through the open expanses of the internet with the ultimate goal of alighting upon the digital doorstep of one Edna Railbender, he concluded that his life was over. However, this was a conclusion that was drawn every day at around noon when his mother bellowed from the top of the staircase for James to, "Wake up and run my errands." As such, the blow of the realization that his life had reached its terminus was hardly paralyzing. "Oh well," he thought, "at least Dr. Who can never leave me." Within the hour, he was in the process of writing a particularly angst-ridden fan fiction about the twelfth Doctor.

To his surprise, he received a call. His thumb hovered over the "decline" option for a second, but he ultimately decided to answer.

"Hey!" said Edna, in her high, laughing voice. "I was thinking that we could go and see a movie. I don't know what's playing now, though. I guess I should have checked." She giggled nervously.

"No, no! That's fine! We'll just go and see what's playing. Maybe a kid movie."

"Sure, that sounds great. Pick me up at my place after work?"

"Okay! Where do you live?"

James took down her address, bade her goodnight, then hung up, smiling. He couldn't wait until the next day. It had been forever since he had been on a date, which made him slightly nerv-

ous, but mostly very happy.

He was apprehensive by nature, so after squabbling with his mother over whether or not he could borrow the car, he set out very early to pick up Edna. He had never been near her place before, and would be mortified if he was late because he had lost his way in the forest. After all, pine trees all look the same. He hummed a bit, recalling the events of the previous day.

He arrived at Edna's house with no problem, albeit an hour early. She lived far out in the woods with her parents, but the path was hardly difficult to follow. After a few minutes of sitting in her driveway, debating with himself, he decided that it would be less awkward to walk in an hour early than it would be to pull in, drive away, and then come back, so he jumped out of the car, took a deep breath, then grabbed the pot of poinsettias he had swiped from his mother's porch. He figured that potted flowers were better than nothing.

He found that no one answered when he knocked on the door, but it was open. He considered his options for a second, but ultimately decided that the risk of going in was better than staying outside in the drizzly cold.

"Hello!" He called out, as he did not want to be mistaken for an intruder. "Hi! I came to pick up Edna. Sorry I'm so early. I just didn't want to get lost, and—"

He dropped the potted plant upon entering the kitchen.

"You, uh, weren't supposed to see this," Said Edna, tossing aside one of her braids, and lowering the cleaver that she had been using to tenderize a flank that had been recently separated from the human leg lying on the counter.

James said nothing. Inwardly, however, he was relieved. He had not eaten the flesh of an animal, after all. Could he, therefore, be considered a vegetarian still? Yes, he decided. He could indeed.

The Cell

Joshua J. Hines

Sam opened his eyes and moved to sit up, but was suddenly struck by searing pain. He fell back to the ground, grabbing his head. “Son of a bitch!”

“You ok, boy?” a hoarse voice asked from behind.

Sam sat up, holding his head. “Hell if I know.”

Blinking away tears, he turned to see a bald, wrinkly old man, staring at him with beady eyes below furrowed bushels of thick white eyebrows. He had a hawkish nose that had clearly been broken once or twice. The old man’s skin clung tight to his scrawny body and he wore loose-fitting clothes draped over him in a failed attempt to hide his frailty.

Sam shrank back from the sight of the man, “I mean—I’ll be fine. Once I stop seeing spots and my head quits pounding.”

Seeing his reaction, the old man grinned, “Your name boy?” His voice sounded rusty as a nail left in the rain too long.

Suddenly nervous beneath the old man’s gaze, he answered, “It’s Sam. My name’s Sam.”

The old man rubbed his hairless chin, “Oh. Sam eh? Well tell me, Sam. How’d you end up in this here humble home o’ mine?”

“Your home?”

Sam tore his eyes away from the old man to see where he was. The blood drained from his face. He tried to comprehend what he saw. He was in an empty room with stone walls, slick with condensation from the damp air. His eyes moved around the room. There were patches of dark stains and matted clumps of black moss scattered along the circular walls— circular walls that never ended.

“What the hell! Where’s the door?”

Sam closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. When he opened his eyes, he looked around the circular design of the room, until his eyes came to rest, once again, on the old man; sitting, staring, grinning.

“I rarely have guests,” A grin stretched across his lips, but the old man’s eyes didn’t show the same satisfaction.

“Where the hell am I, old man?” Sam tried to get to his feet. His vision swam and he stumbled to brace himself against the unending wall.

“My cell.”

“Your what? What the hell are you talking about?”

The old man’s grin fell away, and he met Sam’s eyes, “Like I said,” He bit off the ends of his words and spat them out at the boy in a throttled voice. “You boy. Are here. And that. Is in *my* cell.”

Seeing the old man’s unyielding gaze, Sam forced himself to look away, “O.K., fine. I get it you crazy bastard. I’m in *your* cell.”

He began to move along the wall, hands pressed against its surface in search of the door he knew must exist. He continued around the circle of the room and began to feel the burning sensation of the old man’s eyes on his skin, following his every move.

“There’s no door. Sit a spell.”

He smiled again and gestured for Sam to sit on a dark colored patch of floor.

Sam searched the room. He wanted any other option than sitting with the old man, but found none. He blew out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. He looked at the place where the old man gestured.

Something’s off with this old coot.

Instead, Sam sat on opposite side of the room. He touched something cold and wet on the floor. Pulling his hand up, he saw that it was covered in a thick black film. A shiver ran down his spine at the sight of it and he quickly wiped it on his pants.

Sam and the old man stared at one another from across the room.

“Why didn’t you tell me there wasn’t a door to begin with?”

The old man just sat, staring, grinning, silent.

Time stretched on and Sam blew out another nervous breath.

Damn it, what’s this guy’s problem?

Finally, Sam got up and walked to where the old man had gestured. He sat down heavily.

“Happy, you old bastard?” He pointedly avoided the old

man's smug, full-toothed smile and looked at the wall instead.

"Thrilled."

Sam turned his attention back to the old man. "So why didn't you tell me there wasn't a door to begin with?"

"Wouldn't have believed me." The old man shrugged. "They never believe me. Not until they check for themselves."

Sam rubbed his temples, the pain in his head hitting him again. "I thought you said you never have guests."

The old man waved his hand dismissively. "I said rarely." He held up a finger and pointed to Sam. He sounded amused. "Sure you have questions. Ask me something new. It's been a long time since the last dinner guest."

"Fine!" He threw out his arms in a grand gesture. "How did I get here, and why isn't there a door?"

"That's simple. Someone brought you." His grin fell away again. "And I guess, so you can't escape."

"Well then, who brought me here and why?"

"Whoever you made mad." The old man yawned. "I'd assume, because you made them mad."

"How'd they get me into a room without a damn door then?" Sam's face flushed. "What the hell did I ever do to anybody to get thrown in here?"

The old man yawned again; his eyes glazed and aimlessly roved the walls.

"Damn it old man!" Sam leaned forward and snapped his fingers. "You told me to ask, now I'm telling you to answer!"

The old man's eyes snapped into focus on Sam, but his grin didn't return.

"You were brought in through the door. *Maybe* you snapped your fingers at the wrong person." His eyes grew yellow and animalistic. "I said ask somethin new. Your questions bore me— no challenge. I thought I saw something clever in you. Guess I was wrong."

Sam's mouth moved, then stopped.

Did the old man's eyes just change?

Sam rubbed his head again, the pain was getting bad. He looked back at the old man across from him. He noticed the old man's clothes were old, but weren't the tattered rags he first thought them. They weren't even dirty, just aged. The light gleamed off the old man's head. At first Sam thought the old man had just gone bald

rotting in his door-less cell, but now he saw it was actually shaved, recently.

“How long have you been here old man?”

He realized the old man had never stopped watching him. A drop of sweat slid down the back of Sam’s neck.

The old man didn’t reply.

“Are you going to answer my question?” He sounded agitated.

The old man seemed to inflate against the wall, his posture changing for the first time. “A long time. Suppose a long time more to come.”

“So tell me this, how do they normally bring you your dinner?”

“Simple. Through the door.”

Neither spoke. Then the silence broke with the growing sound of teeth grinding.

“Well, if you’ve been here that long, have you ever tried to escape when they open the door to bring you dinner?”

“Nope.” The old man’s voice was steady and flat. “Never wanted to escape.”

“Well I do. They must have an easy way of getting your food in here. Do they wait till you’re asleep to bring it in?”

“Yeah, actually. They walk it right through the door when I’m asleep and I wake up to a feast laying on the floor, just waiting.”

He’s telling me the truth, at least most of it anyway.

The vulture of an old man tilted his head to the side. “Ah, so it was something clever?”

Sam watched the old man carefully as he spoke. Something had changed.

Hadn’t his voice been raspy and rough before?

The old man’s eyes danced. “Ask me something else. You’re getting good at this.”

“Why are you in this cell, old man? What did you do?” Sam noticed the old man tapping his fingers on the floor.

Is that a nervous tick?

“Great question.” The old man lifted his arms up together in a stretch and yawned. “I’m too dangerous to be out. What I do? Well, I did something that got me in a place I’m too dangerous to

be out of.”

Sam watched the old man stretch his arms into the air; his long, loose sleeves slid down his upstretched arms to rest at his shoulders. Sam found himself staring at lean muscles, rippling and writhing beneath the skin on the old man’s arms.

How did I ever think this man was scrawny and frail?

“You said it’s been a long time since you’ve had a dinner guest, right?” A shiver crawled its way down Sam’s spine.

“I did.” The old man looked eager.

“When did they last bring you your dinner, then?” Sam chewed on his lower lip.

The old man smacked his lips. “Oh, they brought my dinner some time ago now.”

Suddenly, the old man flashed a full-toothed smile in satisfaction. The movement pushed his cheeks up, narrowing his beady eyes into dangerous slits, prominently displaying a mouth full of teeth, sharpened to points.

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Poetry Winners

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Auto-Erotic Asphyxiation

Ashton Nicole Allen

After a one night stand,
the rich man showers for his eight-o'clock meeting.
Vent on, he steps out, applies lotion
to perform a little 'morning delight'
while staring in the mirror.

As he's stroking his ego and gazing
into his own emerald eyes, he moves closer
contemplates himself—
then kisses his reflection

and it kisses him back.

His greatest fantasy realized, he forgets the woman
in his bed, and loses himself in the fragmented reality of the looking
-glass,
unaware of the viscous tentacles
navigating their way across the portal,
gently adhering themselves to his flesh,
twisting him through the watery surface.

He realizes his mistake too late:
moans turn to cries for help.
As his lips pass through, the last thing to go,
he lets out a shriek sending shockwaves rippling
across the crystal surface. It bursts into a million
mini-men being carried into oblivion
by a mass of writhing limbs.

A Fairly Foul History of the Witch Hunt

Mary Perkins

Round about the cauldron go
in the poison'd prejudice throw.
Dice the slanty eyes of that jap,
rinse and roast that terrorist wrap.
Now a birth mark of a hag,
and that damn Confederate flag
to this pot condemned with hate
— tis a hell broth that boils and bakes!

Simmer, simmer tide of tempers,
fire burn so we remember.

Retrieve the harlot's pole to stir,
the batch grows hot with broiling slurs.
Time to "cleanse" the deaf and dumb,
and grill them with the Nazi scum.
Braise a wretched woman's throat,
a lucky spud, and bloody coat.
Last a fob to spice it hot
— mix and mix this melting pot!

Simmer, simmer tide of tempers,
fire burn so we remember.

With the spark of Dorian's shame,
stoke the Reds' hysterical flame.
Empty out the Jewish purse,
add a dose of slavery's curse.
To season one cannot forget
the greasy glutton's stale regrets,
and dirt from native lands so took
— thus full circle we come and cook!

Simmer, simmer tide of tempers,
fire burn so we remember.

bird

Tyler Heath

i'm anonymous. i'm what you promised me.

look at the piss soaked sunshine. look at big bird rubbing

coke on his beak. i'm your sing-a-long now.

(he's pulling his feathers out) look at the yellow scream.

i'm what happens on the count of three.



Graduate, Alumni, and
Local Winners



All to Yourself

S. Kay Smith

You were sitting on the roof when the newcomers showed up. It was your turn to take watch, so your shotgun was sitting across your lap, legs dangling over the edge. You looked out over the cracked parking lot surrounding the building. Nothing ever happened while you were up there, but you enjoyed it. Occasionally, you'd take a shot at a corpse wandering by. It was the only time you had to get away from the rest of your group. The kids—two six year-old girls—despite your best efforts decided you were their favorite person, and tended to follow you around. Their parents saw you as their personal babysitter. Not that they really had so much to do that they couldn't look after their own kids. Most of what they did was sit in the nail salon and demand what the government was going to do about the ongoing crisis known to you as life. As if there was much of a government left to do anything, it's been so long. Your band of survivors consisted of two others: a man you thought had been a businessman before and who gave the impression of being a pervert, and your father. That man was not really your father, but he had taken you in when your real parents were killed by a horde of corpses. That was years ago, at the beginning. By now you could handle yourself, but you owed the man, as he frequently reminded you.

It was a small group who showed up at your door. They arrived in an old pick-up smeared with something brown. There were two people in the cab, but you couldn't tell what they looked like from that distance. In the bed there were three others. Two of them looked about your age, the other was just a little kid. The older two had rifles laid across their laps, the kid asleep at one of the older one's feet. You guessed from the short brown mop of hair he was a boy. He looked up at you on the roof and waved.

You sounded the alarm as they slowly drove through the entrance gate. You weren't any less curious than the others, but you hung back from the rest as they gathered to greet the travelers. The older male of the group assured you they wouldn't stay long. They'd just restock their supplies and rest up. They'd stay no longer than a week.

A week became weeks, and weeks became months. Your group didn't mind. They drained little of your own family's resources, and their supply of ammo and weapons expanded the armory you kept in the shoe store. Even the kid helped out around the place. You especially liked the boy. Along with his honey-haired girlfriend who went wherever he went, he was the only other person your age around. She took a particular liking to you.

The three of you became allies against your family's malice as their stay went on. They made your time on the roof more enjoyable. You and the boy would make games of shooting the corpses, and his girlfriend would giggle, a high-pitched *mm hmm hmm*, at every joke the boy made. They also helped with the two little girls. The blonde had a way with them, and the little ones began to prefer her company over yours. Normally, when you weren't taking watch or baby-sitting, you were forced to either endure the attentions of the businessman or do chores for your father, while he stood over you and reminded you how much you owed him. While the blonde was with the little ones, the boy took you up to the roof to avoid the older men's attentions. He said it was for target practice, but you knew he did it to save you.

Once, the blonde managed to get you alone. She never got to hang out with just you, she said, and now was as good a time as any. She took you to the nail salon. For once, the parents were watching their own little ones, so it was just the two of you. Still, you felt uncomfortable. The chemical smells made your nose burn, and even without the gossipy parents, you felt out of place. The boy's girlfriend glued fake nails to your real ones and painted them pink. When you tried to pull them off, they started bleeding and you had to stop.

A few months after the family arrived, your father found you and told you that the generator keeping the lights on in the building was running out of gas. The three of you jumped at the opportunity to get away for awhile. You volunteered to go out and collect the fuel and a list of other groceries. Your father, the leader of your group, had made it a rule that no one was to leave the building alone, and the boy and his girlfriend were the obvious choices to go with you. Your father said he'd noticed how well you and the other two got along, and he didn't anticipate any problems.

The last time you were out, you remembered seeing a few

cars parked near a grocery store, with a gas station in front of it. You were the most familiar with the area, so your father put you in charge of the mission. You picked the truck closest to empty; since you were getting gas, you might as well fill up one of the vehicles as well. The boy and his girlfriend piled into the cab while you grabbed the appropriate key hanging from the nail in the wall. When you rejoined them, they were chatting excitedly. It was the first time they got to go driving in a while, and they were eager to get going.

You pulled off the curb and onto the pavement. The store you were going to was just around the building and across the street. It was not a long drive, you told them. They didn't seem to care.

There was a corpse standing under the long-dead traffic light. You gunned the accelerator and ran it down, you and the boy laughing the whole time. The blonde frowned. That was mean, she said, but you shrugged. It was already dead, the boy reminded her. No big deal.

You parked the truck directly in front of the door. The three of you poured out of the cab, you and the boy grabbing the gas cans out of the bed and the blonde taking the grocery list into the store. She left her gun in her seat. The boy didn't notice, and you didn't mention it.

The boy took his time wandering all the way to the end of the parking lot. He sauntered, as if putting on a show. You watched him for a few moments, then started siphoning gas from the abandoned cars. It was slow work. When your two cans were finally full, you lugged them to your truck. As you were filling the tank, you looked around to check on the boy and his girlfriend. He was still at the pump, filling his third can. He carried four, while you could only handle your two. You didn't see any sign of the blonde. You looked through the window and saw that she hadn't come back for her gun. You thought about going in to check on her, but instead you hopped up on the hood of the truck and stretched out.

The boy was starting back when his girlfriend burst from the store. There was blood spatter all over her face, and she was carrying a heavy metal pipe. It was covered in blood. She waited by the edge of the door, and when the corpse came through she swung the pipe, catching the corpse in the torso. It was recently dead; its

skin pale was and clammy, and the blood oozing from its wounds still with a hint of red instead of completely black. You wondered if it was someone you once knew.

Her hit did not do much to slow the corpse down. Your gun was sitting next to you, waiting to be fired. It had never left your side since you left the truck. In a swift motion you grabbed your gun and shot the corpse. You did not take your time, and the kick knocked you on your back. Your fake nail got caught on the trigger and broke off. Upside down, you saw the boy drop his gas cans and start running. You rolled over off the hood, landing on your feet with your gun in hand.

The blonde landed on her ass, blood spurting from her shoulder. The corpse loomed, then fell on her, its mouth going straight to her wound. She shrieked even louder, kicking and punching at the corpse with her good arm.

Your second shot did not miss. The corpse shrieked, the sound like the screeching of a braking train, and slumped over the blonde. Goopy gray matter oozed from the back of the corpse's head. It made no more noise.

Underneath the corpse, the blonde was crying. She didn't have the strength to shove the corpse off her. Help me, she mouthed at you. Please.

You lowered your head and pulled another couple rounds from your pocket. As you loaded them into the gun her sobs became audible. "Please, no." Her voice was barely a whisper. You could hear the boy shouting at you. You aimed your gun, the boy shouted again, and the boy's girlfriend mouthed. You fired.

Understandably, the boy didn't want to get in the truck with you. You had to wrestle him in, abandoning his gas cans in the parking lot. You told him that, with all the noise, any corpse within a mile would come running. You had to return to the safety of the mall. Even so, he fought you. You were stronger.

The corpses started up their shrieking as you pulled back into your building. You ran inside, pulling the boy and the remaining gas can with you. The businessman asked where the boy's girlfriend was as you barred the doors, but you shook your head. Your father balled his hand into a fist, cracking his knuckles and glaring. You ignored him, shouldering your gun and following the direction the boy took.

You were not surprised to find him on the roof, fighting his tears. You sat down beside him, petting his hair. There was nothing you could've done, you whispered. The corpse had already gotten to her.

At that, the boy pushed you away. "You're a liar!" he shouted. "A liar and a murderer!" He gave you another shove. You almost fell off the edge, but you caught yourself. When you regained your balance, he was gone.

A slow grin spread across your face as you looked out over the heat waves rising from the parking lot. He'd forgive you, eventually. Then you'd get him all to yourself.

Wanna Swim?

Joshua Fisher

Moving is always hard.

The two bedroom apartment, top of the hill, “off University Drive in Nacogdoches” was my fifth, our third. Nice view, if you enjoyed cow filled pastures and woods in the distance. Unpacked, a week in, and my fiance had little to no contact with any of the neighbors.

Sam's a student, full time, and works part time at a local burger joint. She loves the job and the view of the pasture and woods behind the apartment. I think it smells of cow patties and wet grass. Cows to her are something akin to zoo animals, too big to have in a petting zoo. She's content to sit and watch them from our veranda as they stare back. It's unnerving at times, but I've gotten almost all the boxes unpacked.

My name's Matt. Sam and I came down from North Texas, the Wichita Falls area to be precise. My mom and dad both went to Stephen F. Austin; in fact, they met there. Dad was a local who eventually went to A&M for architecture, and mom started to be a nurse, but went to A&M and is now a pharmacist. Sam's folks are from up north: Yankee folk, as my dad jokes. They came down when she was ten, oil and real estate. They're not hurting, but neither are my parents. She came down to SFA to enter the art program here. There were a few artists she admired who did clay pots and metal work in the area.

I go to school part time and work at a local video store. I've got good hours, and (when I get home) wind down with a good movie or listen to some music; “the bad side” is I get home at midnight. Sam's usually getting ready for bed around then. Weekends are hit and miss, but after the first month, we got into a groove.

It was late August when Sam started having a certain trouble sleeping. This was right around the time school started. She'd wake up, feeling the need to pee, roam, or seek munchies. Not uncommon for anyone, and in a new house you're more likely to still have that mental image of your old home. In the dark you might end up in the wrong room. The issue wasn't that she'd wake up not knowing where she was. She'd wake up, look at the time and it would be

hours later. Sometimes she'd notice the faucet was on and not remember washing her hands.

Missing time?

I joked with her about aliens, but I thought it had to be sleepwalking.

One night, she woke me up getting up. She slid out of bed, and I heard her walk down to the bathroom.

Waiting, I flipped the pillow under my head, and reaching for my phone, I saw it was 1:36 am.

I flipped over and stared at the ceiling.

The A/C cut off, and I realized I could still hear a similar sound. I started to smell the moisture of the steam coming from the bathroom. Sitting up, I peered down the hall. The bathroom door was open, but there was no light coming from the room.

When I got up and felt for the hall light switch, I thought I saw someone standing near the front door in the darkness of the living room. Blinking, I flicked on the hall quickly, but the light revealed nothing.

“Hey babe?” I asked, a bit shaken but shrugging it off as I rubbed the sleep from my eyes.

“She's listening.”

“What?”

No reply, only the sound of the water.

I looked into the bathroom, and Sam was standing there, her brown hair tied back, in her pajama bottoms and sports bra, staring at the mirror. The steam filled my nostrils, and I reached in and flipped with switch. The light didn't come on.

Several flickings did not reveal anything, so I reached out and touched her shoulder.

I pulled my hand back quickly when she let out a startling yelp.

“Matt!” She shouted and turned to me, fully awake. “What the hell?!”

“Sorry... sorry, you were just standing there.”

She reached for the switch, but before I could say anything she flipped it and the light came on.

“I... I just tried that and the light wouldn't come on.”

This wasn't the first time that had happened. It wouldn't come on for me sometimes, but it always came on for her.

“I was sleep walking again, wasn't I?”

“I don't think it's sleep walking. Sleep standing, maybe?”

I shrugged, coming in and turning off the faucet. The sink was half full, as if something was clogging the drain.

“You ok?”

“Yeah...” She replied half heatedly, as the situation seemed to just dawn on her. “I'm ok.” She muttered and walked back to the bedroom.

I looked at the water in the sink and ran a finger through it: pretty hot. Taking a short breath, I reached in and felt for the clog. I'll admit as a man, I tended not to clean the sink after a shave. I'd wipe off the counter, but...

Clogs in the sink? Common for a healthy shaving male.

I ran my fingers through the hole, brushing against the drain, dragging up some of the bits of hair. I lobbed a small glob of reddish hairs off onto the counter top, remnants of shavings of days past. Making another swipe, I pulled up a much longer bit of hair; this time it was darker, almost black.

The hair was as long as my fingers to my elbow.

“Huh.”

Scraping at the drain one more time, finding nothing, I wiped off the globs and put them in the trash. Looking up, the fogged glass showed my murky figure in reflection. Something moved behind me, and I turned around as the door slammed shut. I shouted, nearly shit myself, and I heard Sam scream my name from the bedroom.

I grabbed the doorknob and pushed open the door. Sam was storming down the hallway giving me the darkest look.

“What the hell was that!?”

“What?”

“You slammed the fucking door! It scared the shit out of me!”

“I didn't slam the door.” I held up a wet hand. “I was unclogging the damn sink. You shut the door.”

“I was sitting on the bed, waiting for you to come back.”

“Oh come on! It didn't shut itself.” It was then that I thought about the dark figure I'd seen in the hallway.

Sam must have noticed my look and turned on the bedroom light.

"I'll go check the living room." I turned, and we both inspected the entire apartment.

The front door's deadbolts were locked, and the sliding glass door bar was down, so no one could have gotten out from there.

"This is fucking creeping me out. You're not messing with me?" She pleaded coming down the hallway into the living room.

I shook my head.

Trying to defuse the situation we both sat down, and I poured us a small glass of milk.

"We're a little jumpy, new place and all. Let's just get back to sleep. I get with maintenance in the morning about the lights and the clogging."

As we headed down the hallway, I thought of something. "What did you mean 'she's listening?'"

"What?"

"Before I came into the bathroom, you said..."

She looked at me as if I was crazy.

"What?"

"Never mind. I must have heard you mumbling. I could swear you said 'she's listening.'"

She hit me on the shoulder. "Are you TRYING to scare me so I don't get any more sleep?"

"Let's get back to bed, alright?" I gave her my winning smile.

"God, today is going to suck," she said as she sipped on her milk. I bumped my hip into hers and she mine as we walked.

She smiled.

"Why's that?" I asked playfully slipping a hand around her waist and gave her a wink.

She bumped me away and grinned.

"Down boy... I'll have to be up in a few hour or so. Got an 8am class."

"What are you talking about? It's like almost two in the morning."

"It's nearly five, Matt," she said, pointing to the clock near the bed.

I went to my phone and checked it.

"What's wrong?"

"That can't be right. I checked the phone when you were in the bathroom. It was 1:36."

The clock read 5:40am.

Now I was experiencing 'missing time'.

Sam forgot to tell me goodbye before she left, or I slept through it. My body felt weak. I'd slept only a few hours, even though my clock read 11am. Showered and shaved, I noticed the water again was filling in the sink and decided to contact the office about it. I pulled on a clean shirt, hopped into a pair of pants I'd worn the day before, and headed out the door. When I was locking the door behind me, I heard someone open the door of the apartment above.

I leaned over but didn't see anyone come down. I couldn't see much from my vantage point, anyway. Maybe they had come home?

It was late, so I left without being nosy. I needed to stop by the office to let them know about the light and the water anyway. I put my keys in my pocket and started down the walkway. As I walked past the stairs, I took a quick glance and noticed the door to the upstairs was open. It looked as if someone was staring out: a very pale young lady with dark hair.

I'd been about to wave before she shut the door. Shrugging, I headed to the office.

I filled out a report, submitted it, and went to work. When I got home, I found a covered plate on the table with a note on it. Had Sam cooked?

Hearing her in the shower, I sat down and read the note; it was from the plumber.

He'd pulled a large amount of black hair from the drain and a scribbled note at the bottom that read for us to dispose of cut hair in the trash. No info on the lights.

I picked up the lid, fast food burger and fries, found my fountain drink in the fridge.

A schoolboy grin crossed my face as I sat in the living room.

I switched on the tv, started up a movie, took a long sip of my drink, and let out a long sigh.

Early on in the movie, I started getting a weird chill down my back. I paused the movie and looked around. From out the sliding glass door, I saw a face staring at me from atop the wooden railings of the veranda.

Whoever it was ducked away, and I heard thumping up the stairs and a door slam.

“Hey babe?” Sam asked from the bathroom, she must have finished showering and was now doing her drying routine. She leaned out into the hallway. “What was that?”

“I think our upstairs neighbor is fucking with us.” I felt kinda pissed.

“What do you mean?”

“They were watching me from outside, and this morning a girl watched me leave.”

“Let it go. What were you watching?”

“Bond.”

“Which one?”

“*Live or Let Die*.”

“Maybe they're a Bond fan.”

I shrugged, letting out a breath. “Nearly choked on my burger.”

“Well, finish up and come lay with me for a little bit. I want to tell you about my day.”

“Alright.”

Two cans of Red Bull later, after a bit of time with Sam, I got up and put palm to paper for a project for my art class.

I'd done a few landscapes lately, and recently got into drawing the pasture behind the apartments. Off in the distance, there was a small barn, the only structure on the hill, its door always closed. The brown cows always seemed to eye-ball you if you got up at sunrise. None ever came to the fence. Sam called them “the cows of the corn.” I wanted to point out the pasture held no corn, but I let it slide. The white egrets were beautiful, and I had snapped a few pictures of them from the pasture with my camera, never could get a clear picture. Once, on a particularly windy day, I heard a banging sound. I came outside and saw the barn door slamming open and shut in the wind. There also seemed to be a noticeable dark patch of reddish earth, like a trail traveling down from the barn to the fence. I'd wondered why I hadn't seen that before, though it had just rained the night before.

In the distance, the old barn was haunting, in how small and isolated it was. The forest behind it seemed only to make it grander. Never seeing any of the cattle go near it added to the mystery. In

fact, I'd never seen anyone tending the pasture, but my hours weren't exactly conducive to early hard clean living.

Around 3am, I heard the bedroom door open, then the bathroom door. The toilet flushing stopped me from getting up. Soon after, the door to the office opened. Sam walked into the office and sat on the old brown recliner I'd gotten from my uncle. She leaned it back and curled to the side, looking away from me.

The room was only lit with the lamp over the drawing table. I'd been working real close to the table and pulled the light up, illuminating the room.

“Can't sleep?”

She grumbled. “Can't sleep.” She seemed to repeat.

“You can chill if you want. I'll be done in a bit.”

“Can we go swim?”

I frowned and turned completely around. “Sure. It's still in the nineties during the day, so it shouldn't be too cold. Not sure when the pool closes though.”

Sam wasn't much for swimming, but after seeing the pool I was all down for it. Sam said she didn't much care for it. She did, however, think the hot tub might be nice. If she was down for some swimming, I wouldn't complain.

“She likes to swim.”

I practically broke my neck. “She?”

“I like to swim.” She said, as if to correct herself.

Her voice sounded so plaintive and sad; I could tell she was tired.

Sam liked to swim, but after an accident at a training camp at a local lake a year after we met, she'd been a bit shy about going swimming. She'd almost drowned, and she was still getting over that fear. Sometimes, she'd cry herself to sleep. Before the accident, she was what her mom called a 'water baby,' and she'd been a part of the swim team. After the accident, she'd swim but it wasn't a part of her life any more. I was always glad when she'd acted interested in a swim. It was murder on the skinny dipping fantasies, let me tell you.

“I know. Rest. I'll be done in a bit.”

Tomorrow was a weekend, so we both could spend some time together. I was exceedingly excited that she brought it up; it jazzed me up to doing some more work.

When I turned my back, I heard the recliner click back a lit-

tle; she was fully reclined now. Sam wasn't great about going to bed by herself, but with my late hours she's made due. Though we'd slipped into a routine, some things never changed. Once I was done, I leaned in and shook her shoulder.

We both laid back in bed and tucked in for the night. It was only 4:30 when I started yawning and felt myself drifting off.

"G'night," I whispered.

A long pause.

"She says you're not listening."

"Huh?" I was groggy, but I knew what I heard.

"She keeps asking you..."

That got me sitting upright.

She?

I reached over and felt for Sam, but there was nothing there. The bed was also cold.

"You're not listening," I could hear Sam say from beside the bed.

"Babe, you're kinda creeping me out." I reached for my phone and touched something wet, feeling damp cloth. I brushed it away. Unlocking the screen, I shined the light up and saw Sam walking towards the hallway.

"Babe?"

"Wanna Swim?"

I dropped my phone.

The voice, next to me in the dark, wasn't Sam's.

The cold breath had been right on my neck; I rolled out of bed and grabbed for my phone. Reaching for the bedroom light switch, I was frantic to turn on the light, but it wouldn't come on.

I cursed as held out my phone to dimly light the room.

Sam was gone.

The front door opened, and I saw a shadow walk down the hall between the two apartments.

A sharp cold shiver ran up my spine as my foot splashed into a cold puddle. The concrete walkway was submerged in a quarter of an inch of water. I don't remember it raining.

How was that possible?

I saw Sam in the distance at the end of the hallway between the apartments.

Sprinting forward, I toppled over two buckets and a dirty

shovel that were placed at the corner of the hallway.

My right foot hurt, and I felt as though I'd torn a toenail.

"Fuck!" My cell phone clattered to the ground, falling a few feet away in the muddy water. A small stream of reddish clay mud tinged the water.

Falling on my side on the wet pavement, water splashed in my eyes. I rolled onto my back and clutched my foot. The water was so cold.

A stream of dirty red clay water seemed to be flowing down like a small river from the field above, through the hallway and out into the parking lot.

Had someone been digging?

Who the hell would be digging in the rain?

I didn't even remember hearing a storm.

Shaking my head, I couldn't think about that.

Looking up, Sam was walking into the darkness of the parking lot.

"Sam!"

Grabbing my phone, I could see red as the blood from my toe mixed with the brownish red of the water. I felt a searing pain as I walked on the ball of my foot, like a peg legged pirate. Down the small set of stairs and past the cars. Through the freshly cut grass as I crossed to the second parking lot. The lot was dimly lit. The only light came from the cell phone and the quarter moon high above that peeked in and out from the clouds.

I used the railing to help me down the steps, partially sliding with my weight to the bottom. My toe throbbed in pain as I made my way to the power back gate of the pool.

The pool water reflected in the moonlight, and Sam was nowhere to be seen.

Everything darkened as the clouds covered the moon again.

I couldn't see anything, so I shone the light from my cell phone all around.

Two hands gripped my shoulders from behind me, my foot scraping the edge of the pool as I fell in.

Cold water enveloped me, and I nearly breathed in the water. My phone fell from my hands. I came up sputtering to breathe and trying to stay afloat. A strong hand grabbed, as I tried to reach for the edge of the pool. The hand pushed me down into the wa-

ters.

My chest stung as if filled with fire ants. As I screamed, I could only hear the bubbling portions of my own voice filling my ears with a low echoing hum. Reaching up to grab the hand, I tried to wrench free. Eyes open, I suddenly stopped as the light from my phone at the bottom of the pool revealed a dark figure with pale dead eyes.

Water flooded in.

Kicking, I felt myself shoot out of the water. My head collided with a hard surface.

Warm hands came to my face, and I tried to fight their grasp.

I flailed and screamed, a curtain fell and hit me on the head. The warm water splashed on my face was a shock. A shower head sprayed water out into the bathroom and water spat against the plastic of the curtain.

Sam screamed.

“Matt! Stop!”

I found footing with my other foot and braced myself, knuckles white with pressure on the bathtub edge.

“Matt, you okay?”

“What... what was that?”

The memory of the cold water and the floating black hair around that pale face, and those eyes. I looked up at the fear in my wife's eyes.

It was the same.

“Babe, when I woke up, you were taking a shower. You screamed. The door wouldn't open.”

“No, I was working..” My head ached and throbbed as if I'd hit it, “you came in and laid on the recliner.” I said, suddenly looking at the red stain running down my leg.

“Oh god Matt, your toe. There's so much blood... Oh god.”

Sam called the ambulance. I'd wanted to tell Sam I'd be ok, but I felt so drained. When the ambulance showed up, I'd drifted off to sleep. I remember them loading me into the gurney, and I remember them taking me out the door.

A woman's face stared down at me from the second story landing as they took me to the hospital.

Those eyes were wide, and seemed to take in everything.

The paramedics said I screamed and fainted.

The next morning, I woke up with Sam asleep on a second bed they'd brought into the room. A nurse came to check and make sure I was comfortable.

It seems I'd cut a pretty good gash in my big toe and had lost a good amount of blood. They wanted to keep an eye on me for a bit, but if I wanted to go I could be discharged early that afternoon after a doctor got a look at me again.

Sam had called my parents, and they had planned to head straight down, but I called them back telling them I was ok. I was scolded and babied by them both, all in the twenty minutes I talked to them. Sam's folks called as well. The doc gave me a few stitches, a few large rolls of bandages, and a prescription for pain killers. When we got back to the apartment, Sam had told me to rest while she cleaned up.

Sitting on the couch, I sipped a soda and propped my foot on the coffee table.

"So, do you remember what happened? Did you sleep walk into a shower?" she asked, coming in smelling of cleaning products. I kissed her anyway.

"It was so weird." I let my head rest against the couch.

I told her about the weird dream, how vivid it was, about the buckets and the large hand on my head, the wet floor, and the eyes of the girl upstairs.

"Huh, that's weird. I talked to the office yesterday. They said there hasn't been anyone upstairs in a few years. Seems there was a young girl who almost drowned up there. Domestic issues, angry step-parent or something."

"Huh, so I guess that rules out ghosts huh?" I said chidingly.

Sam shrugged. "I asked about that: deaths in the apartments."

"What?"

"After what happened? Damn right I did."

"You never told me that." I said, wondering what else she'd been up to.

Sam sighed and leaned against me.

"Well the girl was a swimmer, like I... used to be. Seems her step-father didn't want that. There was fighting, noise ordinances and so on. CPS was called a bunch of times. Seems she was a bit of

a trouble maker. Sneaking out late, maybe boys, don't know. Manager said it was rough, but things seemed to calm down for a while." She shrugged. "Till he tried to drown her in the tub, seems she got hurt real bad, taken to the hospital. She got removed from his custody and lives with her grandmother. The old man packed up everything, and the place has been empty since."

"Huh. Why?"

"The office has never been able to rent the place. No one gives a reason."

"That's kinda creepy."

"Yeah, they said she stopped swimming after that. Hurt her lungs or something."

"Ow. That must have hurt."

Sam's voice lowered a little, talking in that tone Matt usually knew not to press. It was that sorrowful introverted voice. "It's sad. Maybe she was freaked out." She curled into my shoulder.

"Like you?"

Sam nodded. "Yeah. I never told you about that, did I?"

"Figured something happened, when you were ready you'd tell me."

"Coach got a cramp, we swam out to save her. She was so freaked out she nearly drowned me."

This was the first time, in the five years we've known each other, that Sam opened up to me about this. "You were both okay, right?"

"Yeah, and she apologized, but it was me and another girl and... her name was Jules. She got pneumonia, died. She was 16, the same as the girl upstairs."

After that we cuddled for a while, then Sam went to dry her hair.

I tried to work it all out in my head.

There was just a creepiness to it all.

Searching the net on my phone, I came across some interesting yet limited information. Seems the mom died in a boating accident. Afterwards, it came out that she'd had, an adulterous relationship with a diving instructor. This was about four years ago. The father got mad that daughter was slipping out at night to go swimming. It was probably abandonment issues.

One day, he'd had enough. After a string of smaller instanc-

es, he tried to drown her in the tub.

No info on the biological father; he was never mentioned.

Seems the girl went to live with her grandmother in Lufkin, then a few weeks later, she vanished. The case never went to trial, though the step dad was the prime suspect. He went on to committ suicide: a self inflicted gunshot wound in a car, less than a month after the girl vanished. He'd still been living upstairs just before he'd packed everything up. Dead a day or so later. Most people say he killed her.

Her body was never found.

I set the phone down.

I couldn't shake the empty feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Sam came in, kissed my forehead, and went to bed.

I finished my drink and let out a big sigh.

“Fuck, what a day.”

Leaning my head back, I looked out the sliding glass window of the veranda. My breath caught in my chest. I grew cold, the blood leaving my cheeks. There she was, as if hanging upside down from the above apartment. Eyes meeting, those eyes so wide, the hair a cascade of water down a black haired curtain. A toothy smile as the mouth moved in the words I remember hearing in the dark of the bedroom.

“Wanna Swim?”

The sky lit up behind, lightening from a coming storm. Her head casting her shadow in the room over me, a tunnel of darkness seemed to envelop me, and a strange banging sound echoed in the distance.

Little rhythmic claps of thunder in the distance.

It reminded me of a wooden barn door slamming in the wind.

Unteachable

Brittany Krantz

Case No. MP-50286: Layla Thimpson. Female. Age 26. Last seen 8/17/2009 from ZIP Code Area 75667.

Case No. MP-62089: Andy Sampson. Male. Age 20. Last seen 3/21/2007 from ZIP Code Area 75993.

Case No. MP-11286: Carolyn Woods-Becker. Female. Age 34. Last seen 6/12/2013 from ZIP Code Area 75982.

Sergeant Mills and I pored over the missing persons records, from years 2007 to 2014, as we uploaded digital copies of the files for database transfer and electronic storage.

“No consistencies in age, last known geographic location, or physical characteristics,” the sergeant discerned.

“Naw, I’d be willin’ to bet these are isolated incidents that have no connections,” I responded. “So, serial killer and copycat crime theories are out.”

“A psychopath?” Sergeant Mills pressed, as though the both of us were going to become enlightened by some profound epiphany if he spoke just the right words. Sheepishly rolling my eyes as I turned around, I pulled a folder and pretended to become deeply engrossed in the file of *Case No. MP-22834: William Darvyn. Male. Age 24. Last seen 4/6/2012 from ZIP Code Area 74881.*

Amid the constant rumors around the station, the newest claimed that all detectives were set to receive termination papers, while all investigative duties would be transferred to sheriffs, deputies, and sergeants. Personally, I’ve never understood the logic justifying a career as a law enforcement officer. Sure, there will always be crime, but everybody’s broken the law before, anything from speeding to tossing a cigarette out the car window. In order to stay a step ahead of criminals wouldn’t that mean that the officers would’ve been criminals themselves? What’s more, if said officers do indeed remain righteously upstanding citizens, then wouldn’t that make them downright incompetent, due to inexperience and naivety? The older I get, the more I realize that some things just remain unteachable—they must be learned through genuine encounters and authentic endeavors.

“Maybe...yeah,” I said to Sergeant Mills. “Or kidnapping...”

sex slave trade...bondage and torture fetish...hell, drugs, who knows,” I answered a few moments later, as I turned around and sat onto a chair, fondling a small pearl ring in my trouser pocket. “Only thing is, with each of these cases, no bodies or physical evidence was ever found. Without all that, we got no leads, no possible motives, no suspects. What the hell am I supposed to do with a lot of *nothing?*” I vented.

Leaning back in his chair, Sergeant Mills sighed as he let out a whistle and mused, “As dangerous as it is nowadays, bein’ an officer, at least we know what sumbitches committed the crimes most of the time. We just gotta catch ‘em or find ‘em. You ain’t got nothin’ but a jigsaw puzzle with invisible pieces.”

I feigned a tired smile, in an attempt to disguise my annoyance. As someone whose livelihood depends on meticulous discernment, I *despise* when people vocalize the obvious; it’s like a verbal billboard putting stupidity on full display. Similarly, it always astounds me to witness how many people substitute mere assumptions and popular opinions for legitimate knowledge, continuously waiting for it to just somehow emerge or for someone to hand it to them neatly packaged and cleanly wrapped, like a restaurant doggy bag. (I must say, however, that these types of people generally overestimate their abilities and inflate their knowledge, thus providing silent comic relief for those who know the reality of the situation. For that, I suppose I should extend my gratitude.) Everyone wants to reap the rewards without ever sowing any effort. Typical. A great many also emphasize symbolic representations of achievements (trophies, medals, certificates, awards), rather than the actual achievement and its effects (intellectual growth, more confidence, professional promotion). An even larger percentage of people do not even understand the differences between the two.

After completing my fourteenth year as Lead Detective in the Missing Persons and Disappearances Unit with the Rusk County Law Enforcement and Police Force, I find the latter situation unnerving...hours of investigative work on leads, questioning, gathering potential evidence, interviewing families, scouring criminal databases, and nothing to publically show for the hours of painstaking detail scrutiny and brainstorming sessions. No bodies, no murderers in handcuffs, no captives rescued, no traces of foul play, and no DNA...at least, not in my unit. But I guess that’s the whole point of

my professional existence.

Standing, I secured the pearl ring back into the deepest depths of my pocket just as Sergeant Mills made a beeline to the computer. Displayed on the monitor was an enlarged photograph of *Case No. MP-77249P: Meagan Ramsey. Female. Age 19. Last seen 5/14/2014 from ZIP Code Area 75643*. The photo was allegedly taken on the night of her disappearance.

“I thought she was reported not wearing any jewelry,” Sergeant Mills examined. “That’s what the report here says. W-What’s this here?” Squinting, he pointed to her hand. “Some kinda ring, looks like a pearl or some sort.”

In my most matter-of-fact demeanor, I inquired “How does that provide any indication as to where she might be? Better yet, *does it?*” Sergeant Mills cocked his head as he drew one corner of his mouth to the side, sighed, and shook his head. For dramatic emphasis, I added, “Solving cases involves knowing which details matter and which don’t. Important details are ones that indicate motives, possible suspects, or strong leads.”

“Well how do you recognize ‘em?” he prodded, transfixed between confusion and amazement.

Putting one hand in my pocket, I felt the ring. “Ya live and learn. Guess that’s why y’all need to keep us investigators around.”

I stood and grabbed my briefcase. Before heading out, I looked over my shoulder and locked eyes with the sergeant. “Some things just can’t be taught, ya know,” I insisted with a wink.

About the Authors

Undergraduate Fiction Winners

Elyssa Winch is an undergrad at SFA and never learned how to write an author bio.

Elizabeth Hughes is an English major, who loves to read and write in her spare time. Someday, she would like to travel the world.

Susan Groce is a student at Stephen F Austin State University, where she majors in English and Spanish and minors in Secondary Education.

Joshua J. Hines is an undergraduate attending Stephen F. Austin in Nacogdoches, Texas, where he is a junior, working on a BFA in creative writing.

Poetry Winners

Ashton Nicole Allen is an undergraduate senior in the SFASU Creative Writing program with a thesis in Poetry. She lives and works in the Nacogdoches/Lufkin area.

Mary Perkins is currently a graduate student studying English and Creative Writing at Stephen F. Austin University. Her poetry and creative nonfiction has previously appeared in *Hothouse Literary Journal*.

Tyler Heath lives in Dallas. The poem "Bird" is dedicated to his buddy Brian.

Graduate, Alumni, and Local Fiction Winners

S. Kay Smith graduated from SFA in May 2012. She currently lives in Lufkin, Texas, with her fabulous roommate and her cat. Her writings have appeared in various journals online.

Joshua C. Fisher is a locksmith, writer, amateur film maker, digital artist, horror fan, and gamer. He's been writing and drawing since he could pick up crayons.

Brittany N. Krantz is pursuing a Master of Arts in English and works as a graduate teaching assistant. She is published in *Theocrit*, *The Human*, and *The Quint*.

