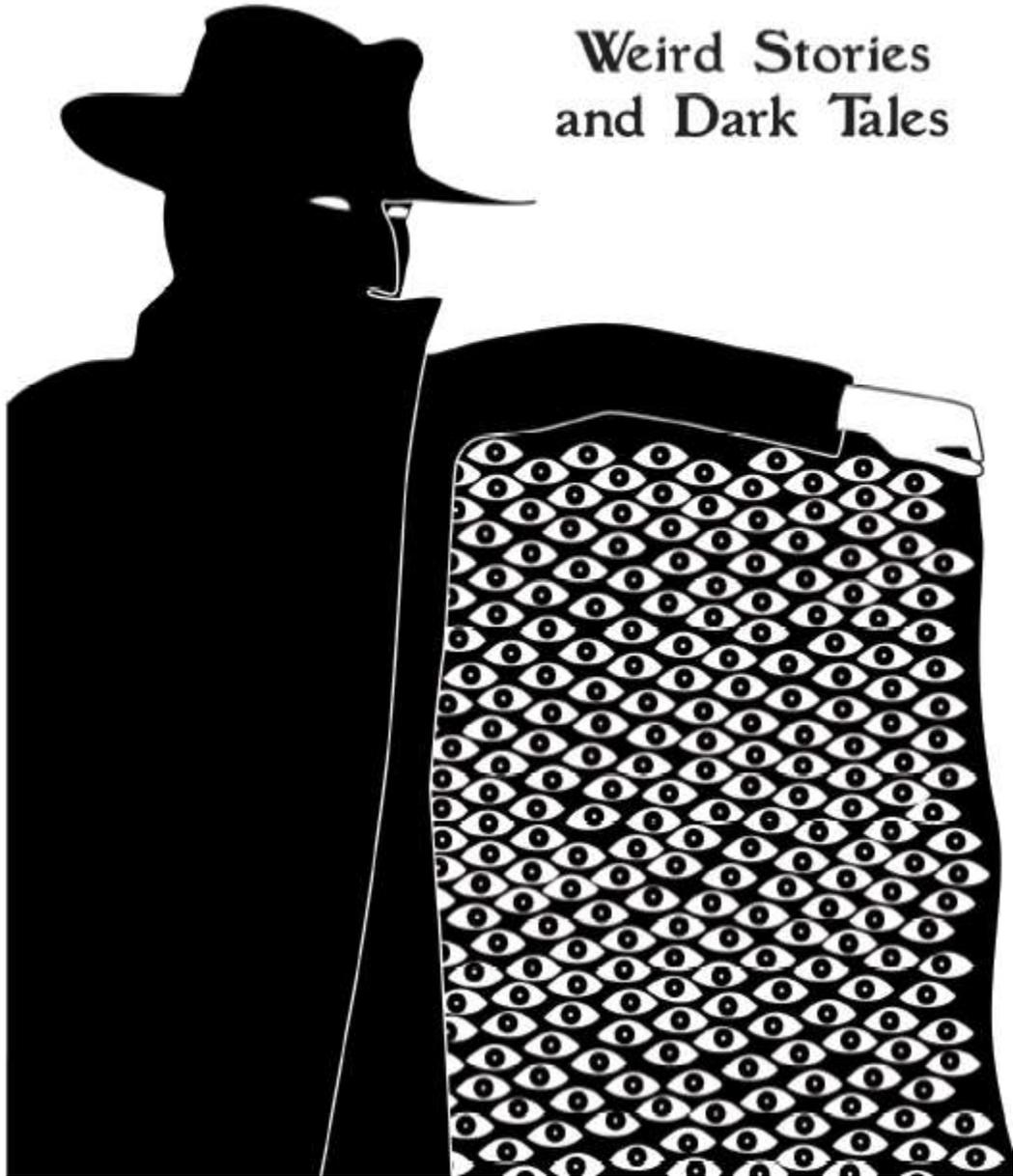


LEGACY

Weird Stories
and Dark Tales



LEGACY

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Weird Stories & Dark Tales
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All Those Who Entered This Year's Contest.

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FIRST-PLACE WINNER

Tree Line

By Tim Reed

The daunting sky explodes with light and furious sound. The dancing flicker of an insignificant fire is upstaged by the glorious raging of an angry sky. The lightning startles the blackness as the squall and atmosphere clash; each one trying to consume the other either in light or in darkness. The wind howls over the water as the swell barrages obdurate rock. The thunderous lightning illuminates the white sand and momentary glimpses of the invading waves upon the beach front. The man sits speechless tending the small fire, stacking and shaping his elemental creation to prevent extinguishment. The skin of his knuckles breeched and bleeding, his left hand wrapped in a sliver of clothing, saturated in blood and dripping onto the white sand. His clothes are torn and tattered, stained with splotches of blood; his face a portrait of terror and despair. His cheeks glistening in the glow of fire as bitter tears of horrid agony seep endlessly from the corner slits of his sockets. His eyes covered with a wet film, reflecting the inner symphony of torment that glows as the light flickers softly. He holds in both hands a small wrinkled picture of a man and woman in loving embrace. The cruel air bites at the man's skin and spirit as the cold wind threatens to quench the glowing, sinuous flames. The trees sway restlessly as the night grows more threatening. The man glances through the flames towards the thick forest growth. His eyes fixated on the shifting darkness, telling of great apprehension and fear. His breath, heavily expelled, billows softly as clouds into cold black.

A branch cracks, thundering to the earth floor. The man jumps to his feet and stares intently at the tree line. His heart pounds violently. The veins in his neck pulsate with every push of blood, revealing his panic like a beacon to its location. Frantically his eyes patrol the tree line, looking for movement other than swaying, spiny towers. The thunder continues to scream into the night air as the display of divine fury continues. The man returns to his knees, to the warmth and distraction of the fire. The pile of wood dwindles and the man knows the fire will die very soon.

He pokes at the glowing coals attempting to spark new life into failing embers, to stave off bitter darkness a few minutes longer. He glances into the thick darkness of the trees. To survive the man knows he must keep the fire alive, but growing apprehension stays him to his knees and away from the forest.

The last log begins to crumble as the flames grow fragile. The waning light concedes slowly to the hungry darkness. The bursts of lightning, now more frequent, reveal the beach, the trees, and the man in momentary frames of illumination.

Abruptly, the man springs to his feet. His face exposed in a glowing frame of horror as three figures step through the tree line onto the white sands. The figures are dark shadows against an even darker background, and stand at the forest edge. They too are covered in blood, though much more than random spatter. Their faces are dark shadows and reflect no semblance of humanity.

The glow is extinguished as the wind gusts forcefully, separating the remaining embers. The man stands still, straining to see the figures in the darkness. Thunder roars as lightning brightens the beach, revealing the figures moving slowly toward the man in large fragmented

increments. The seconds between flashes of light are like decades. The next flash reveals the figures a few feet from the man, each shown to be holding long handled axes covered in dried blood and fleshy fragments. Now close enough to hear, their breathing lacks any notion of irregularity. With uneasy calmness they raise their axes in the darkness as lightning fills the sky. The man, in panic, falls to his hands and knees. He opens his mouth as he hears the swift breaking of wind.

"Wh..."

SECOND-PLACE WINNER

Non Cogito

By Joseph Ammons

"Alright Shen, today, I just want to talk. Tell me what's on your mind. What do you think?"

"I'm trying to get out of it and I can't.

It would be easier if it were all around me, you know, like a storm and I could just go inside, or like a bad vibe and I could just have a drink – but it's not, man, it's fucking in me, doc.

It's like, it *is* me."

He's not gonna' get this. He isn't gonna' understand. He's just gonna' sit there with his pen and his forms and his degree and his scrutiny and he's gonna' listen and he's gonna' analyze and he's gonna' categorize and treat.

"What exactly is it you feel you need to "get out of, Shen?"

"*This*, doc." I moved my arm back and forth between the doc and me.

"Well, these sessions are optional; you may attend Group Therapy exclusively. I understand one-on-one discussions can be intimidating."

No, no, no, no, you goddamn tool.

"No, no, no. I mean, like, words. I've gotta' get out of this language thing. Like, here we are, talking to each other and using all these words. But there's only so many words, doc."

"And you feel as though you can't express, or describe your feelings and thoughts? Am I right in saying that you feel words simply aren't enough?"

Fucking yawn. Instruction-Exploration-Clarification. This textbook psychoanalysis, this Classical Technique run-through – it's like undergrad pre-test regurgitation. It's just juvenile.

"Wrong again docitty docster. What I mean by 'There's only so many words' is – well, take love. How many ways can you express love?"

"Well, you can give, you can-"

"Shut the hell up, please, sir. It was rhetorical."

He scribbled on my forms, probably something concerning my defensive tone. He was probably remembering his notes in college on dynamic interpretation.

"I mean, everything you're about to list is going to fall under "Love" and it's only one word for a whole list. Not good enough, chief. And probably, you're about to say, 'Uh, well, Shen, humans are complex things and it's difficult to put the human experience into blah and blah blah, and I'm very eloquently saying nothing and blah, and blah-ness and states of blah,' and then, I'm gonna' have to say this: words are solvents."

I sat back in my chair and let the doc chew on that for a few seconds.

This isn't even gonna' faze him. That little truth isn't even gonna' cross his mind later when he's shitting and reading the Times, taking in all that information then shitting it all out with his wife over dinner.

"Shen, I'd like to talk about why you're here. You admitted yourself to our facilities yet you don't take advantage of our services. I'm reading here that you very rarely speak in Group. Now, I want to help you. I think, with your cooperation, and some constructive discussion, we can get you diagnosed and maybe, in a few months, get you back on track.

Back on track? Back in line? Did he read my forms?

"Now, now, doc, you changed the subject. See, words are solvents because first, we experience something and attach it to a word. Then, over time, our association with that word tries to fit similar experiences. Words can't keep up. It's the dictosaurus problem. Look up love--'deep affection,' look up affection--'gentle fondness,' look up fondness--'affection.' What's love? A deeply gentle, fondly affectionate, fond affection."

Oh yeah. I've got him. His eyes are narrower. That. Or, I lost him.

"Pretty much, chief, we aren't talking."

"Okay, Shen..."

Ahh, now we're playin' ball.

"...But, you've described words as solvents. A solvent is something in which something else is dissolved. You've just explained words as ever-dissolving. Are they dissolving or are they doing the dissolving?"

"Oh that's easy. At night, when you repeat the events of your day and you fantasize about that brunette nurse – All those internal thoughts – they're in words. Dissolving."

THIRD-PLACE WINNER

Sleep is a Blessing that Comes Nightly

By Jonathan Baker

You seem so kind. I see you laughing and talking on campus, and you are just gentle. Why can't I have a girl like you? Once I saw you watching one of those reality shows on the couch in the student lounge, and you were laughing so hard you were crying. I imagined I was sitting next to you and that was our couch. We were a young married couple and I didn't look like this.

The good thing about a small college town like this is that you can see me around a lot and not really think much of it. After all, you see everyone around a lot.

I just want you to be safe. That's why I watch you. I know you could never love me, but that doesn't mean I can't be close to you in some ways. I'm just protecting you. I know what's good for you.

I like your house. A quaint little blue cottage – how do you afford a whole house to yourself? It's just the kind of place I could imagine us living in if things were different. Sometimes at night when I watch you through the window working on a paper at your computer I imagine I am making you some coffee while you work. Then you kiss me and say —Thanks honey.||

I've been thinking I would like to watch you sleep. You are so kind when you are awake; I think you must be perfect when you sleep. I would like to see something that perfect. Maybe I could take that perfection in through my eyes and it would go into my soul and make me better.

In a town like this, it is wise to lock your doors, honey. Someone could climb your fence and come right into your back door while you are sleeping. Someone who doesn't care about you like I do.

It's warm in your house, like I pictured. Cozy. And neat. That picture of you with your parents in the hallway is nice. The one where you are all by a shiny lake somewhere. I would like to have a family like that. Your dad looks so kind, like you, the way he smiles. He doesn't seem mean at all.

I love you. Watching you sleep, you were a miracle – all tucked up into yourself with your hair across your face. I began to cry, God it is so hard to cry silently. I was crying, and my tears fell on your blanket. I wanted to think that your lips might brush my tears while you slept. The loveliness of your sleeping face was too much for me.

I saw you at school today, and when you glanced at me, I looked away. But I thought for a second you could feel my ache shooting through my eyes at you. You shouldn't look at me. It ruins everything.

I came to see you again last night. I stood in the corner for hours watching you. Once, you began to snore lightly and I almost died of joy.

Do you remember getting up to go to the bathroom? It was very late, and you slid out of bed and pitter-pattered into the next room. I just stood there behind that dark door in the corner, trying to make my body so rigid that I would become part of the wall. I heard the tinkle of your urine, and I thought I could hear that sound every dark night for the rest of my life and die happy.

I came again last night. My legs have been getting weak from standing in the dark corner all night, so I've been sitting at that little wooden chair by your writing desk. Last night you opened your eyes for a moment and I could swear you looked right at me. But then you closed them again, and I relaxed. I asked you not to look at me. I love you. I'll see you tomorrow.

HONORABLE MENTION

Solitary Confinement

By Joshua O'Brien

After six months of patrolling deep space, these routine checks of the ship's hull had become monotonous. The automated schedule indicated that indeed another two weeks had passed and it was necessary for him to don a lifesuit and go out to manually inspect the fuselage.

As the pressurized door opened the soles of his boots magnetized. —Like walking in mud,|| he'd always joked. The view had ceased to awe him after the first week. The vast blackness between all those tiny pinpoints no longer unnerved him.

Of course, everything was as it should be. The onboard computer continually scanned an area of a thousand kilometers surrounding the ship to ensure that passing debris would not endanger it. The system could detect, with nearly one hundred percent accuracy, a soccer ball sized meteoroid within this range.

"Everything checks out," he told the ship's computer. "I'm coming back in."

[system_check=clear] flashed across the display in his visor.

Trudging over the body of the ship he wondered why his presence was necessary on this patrol; everything was automated, he merely verified what the computer already knew. Surely a human was more liable to error than the meticulous mind of the compu—

Though sound could not travel in the vacuum of space, the shockwave that threw him clear of the ship left his ears ringing. His visor flashed red warnings across his eyes. Contact with the ship had been lost, though his lifesuit appeared to be undamaged. He breathed in and tried to collect his thoughts. What had just happened?

He contorted his body to turn towards the ship as he slowly drifted away from it. The ship's exterior lights had gone out and from the portholes closest to him he could see that it was dark inside as well. A gaseous plume hung in the space between the ship and himself.

He reset the interface in his lifesuit in an attempt to reestablish contact with the ship. A flickering red light accompanied by a high-pitched ping notified him that nothing was detected with which to make contact.

The gulf between the ship and himself was slowly widening. Instinctively he kicked his legs trying to swim back through the void.

"Don't panic," he said aloud.

He checked the systems in his suit. Oxygen production was stable; the suit's exterior was intact. Everything appeared to be functioning normally. The lifesuit was engineered to infinitely perpetuate the existence within by providing nutrients, filtering waste into drinkable water and creating oxygen.

His mind turned to the possible rescue scenarios. The next closest patrol was light years away; he was in an uncharted sector of the galaxy. Even if they could get to his position, he had no way to signal them; the radio was onboard the dark ship, which continued to recede into the void.

"So this is how it ends," he thought with a cynical smirk.

But it was not the end. His lifesuit would not allow him to expire by anything other than natural means. The engineers responsible for its creation had built in multiple redundancies to the life support systems making them virtually fail proof. The occupant could not shut them down, for the engineers had not conceived of a situation in which such an action would be necessary.

The chasm between himself and the ship continued to widen until it was a mere speck against the blackness, then nothing. As far as he could see in every direction was emptiness, a dark blanket mottled with glimmering specks. Strangely, he felt engulfed by the emptiness. Claustrophobia took hold of him in the infinitely desolate vastness. He struggled to breath, thrashing about in vain. A wordless scream issued from his throat but traveled no farther than the inside of his visor, echoing the anguish that gnawed at his chest.

Time ceased to exist. The abyss stretched before him, surrounded him boundlessly. On he drifted through waves of manic paranoia, stark disquietude, unfulfilled longing, until finally resigning himself to bleak despair.

Blood On The Walls

By Brant Nelson

There's a line of sugar ants crawling along the wooden stairs of the back porch where I sit. They crawl up along the frame of the open sliding glass door where Mother stands smoking, and into the house. Mother, after taking a long drag from her clove cigarette, glances in my direction, and with a peculiar look of dissatisfaction with her work says, —Well, the walls aren't going to clean themselves now, are they?|| She then takes the two large, black trash bags and loads them in the back of the station wagon. Before leaving to dispose of the contents of the bag, she jogs over to me, as if suddenly realizing the urgency of my task, kisses me on the forehead and says, "...hurry up baby boy, Father and I have company coming over tonight, remember?" She calls me baby boy, 'cause I'm hers.

It's a cool autumn day, and there is a hint of mesquite floating in the breeze. I look up and discover the source billowing like evening fog in a graveyard from our chimney. Dead leaves blanket the backyard, and there is nothing more I'd rather do than stomp through the reds, oranges, browns, and yellows. I'd like to rake them up and jump from the storage building upon the crunchy pile, but there is work to be done, and I mustn't disappoint Mother.

The worst part about cleaning blood off the walls is that you have to scrub hard. You really have to get in there with your fingernails, especially in the tight nooks and crannies; it takes a lot of muscle. It's also best that you do not let it set. Lucky for me the mess had only recently been spilt.

Our kitchen is fairly normal, I would suppose, although maybe a little outdated. There is shag rug under our kitchen table, our refrigerator is puke green with colorful alphabet magnets adorned on it in no particular fashion, and there is an old cuckoo clock that is in great need of dusting affixed above the stove. The entire house is very warm and inviting.

The company Mother was referring to would be our new neighbors who moved into the old McCormick's place across the street from us. The McCormick's were a happy young couple with a little girl. I'd often see her riding her bike, training wheels frantically rocking back and forth, to the stop sign and back, while her father tended the yard. They also had a little Scottie. The dog was rather annoying with its yapping. These new neighbors were pretty much the same, except they had a baby boy and no dog.

Throwing the bloodstained rags in the washer, adding plenty of bleach to make them white as snow again, I hear the station wagon muttering in the driveway. Mother is home.

At seven o'clock, the new couple, the Petersons, arrive, their baby boy peacefully asleep in the woman's arms. After all the pleasant greetings Mother begins to give them the grand tour of the house.

"My husband is down in the basement working on his train set," Mother says with a half chuckle then hysterically starts calling Father's name.

"Maurice! Maurice! It's the Petersons! Our new neighbors from across the street! They're here for supper! Maurice! They brought their baby boy! Maurice!"

The baby boy begins to cry, almost as loud as Mother screams.

"Well how do you like that?" Mother says to me, "we have company over and Father is too preoccupied to even come up." Then to the guests she says, "would you like to come down and see what he's up to? It's really rather interesting, his little train set. It's a whole little town he's created, a train running all the way through it. He probably just can't hear us; he's so hard at work. Oh, and he just loves babies—especially baby boys!"

"Oh, well I..." nervously uttered the woman.

"Oh, but you have to!"

...And into the basement they descend.

Party Bones

By Dominick Miller

An ominous moon hung in the sky; Dad said it was the witching hour, and told us to stay in the light and near illuminated homes. After saying goodbye, we were finally let loose into the night and from the porch we could look down the hill to the firefly blanket of homes. As we set out, I turned to look at the moon, but was scared by what I saw. A large, thin cloud had floated before it, and the silhouette looked like a cryptic hand ready to descend from the sky and take us away... forever.

By ten o'clock, we had exhausted most of the houses in town and so decided to head home. Around Fourth Street Kyle said we should go up past the park to eleventh and then cut back to my house. It wasn't the way we had come and wasn't very well lit, especially near the park, but finally John and I agreed to it; truthfully, I was afraid to be called a sissy.

About a block from the park most of the new houses disappear and all that's left are the homes that have been around for hundreds of years. Most of the people who lived there were just as ancient and rarely came out. The air around here is usually musty from the lake in the park--at least that's what Dad says--I think it's the decay of the homes and the people living in them.

We were just about to pass the park when our natural light was snuffed out when an unusually strong breeze blew a cloud to cover it. I turned to look to the moon, but right when I did I walked into something that almost took me off my feet. It was Kyle. He was standing stiff, breathless, staring into the catacombs of the tree-covered park.

"Kyle, Jesus, what is it?"

"There..." Kyle was pointing into the trees ahead, and when my eyes had finally followed his hand to them, I was just able to catch a shadow fleeing into the trees. Sure enough, Kyle was right back on John and me to follow it and see what's up. After a long fight, we relented, again, and so followed the shadow into the park. It wasn't long before we saw ahead of us a dim light speckled against the ground as it reached through bushes and plants. Without thinking, Kyle snuck up to it as close as he would dare and peeked through the bushes. John and I followed, and what we all saw that night was something too horrible for words to describe.

Corpses! Skeletal bodies clothed in chunks of decayed flesh and the remnants of their burial garb, all hanging haphazardly about their bones. They were dancing, or smoking, or playing cards and drinking wine to the light of about a hundred jack-o-lanterns. The macabre nostalgia that floated over the whole scene made my skin crawl, and for some odd reason, the scene almost looked... natural. Not only natural, but human! There was something about the corpses and their dress that picked at my memory, like they were the shadows of people I once knew.

Next to me, John flinched, and then grabbed my arm. Behind me, I heard a voice. "Harlan, Harlan Letterman what are you doing here." Mr. Hobbs! Mr. Hobbs lived in the ancient homes just across from the park; instantly my fear subsided, and I turned to look directly at him. The only thing I saw was the large hollow center of a pumpkin with a candle stuck in it, and the silhouette of a skeletal hand descending to grab me. We all screamed and ran; the party behind us falling back into the night. We didn't stop until we reached my house and only then realized we had forgotten our candy.

The next morning I awoke to three large bags of candy on the porch, and a note along with them that simply read: Boo!

Important

By Jere Ellison

Goosebumps danced down Tessi's arms, though if from the fall breeze or thoughts of five recent stabbing deaths on campus was unknown. The sun had set, and remnants of amethyst light crept up from the horizon. She stepped away from the student center and began the trek to the parking lot on the other side of campus. Her pricey heels clopped along the concrete beneath her. She'd meant to move her car closer earlier that day, but time had been too slippery. The air smelled of crackling fireplaces, and Tessi wished she could curl up in a large chair next to one. She stopped at a crosswalk, but her finger hovered over the cold, metal button. She'd heard something. Turning with great care, she checked behind her, breath held. Dark trees swished in the breeze, but no one was there. The sidewalk was empty. Frustrated with herself for being so paranoid, she sighed and turned back to press the button. Her hand hit something squishy. She gasped and stumbled back, almost falling to the pavement. A boy of eighteen stood in front of her, eyeing her red mini-skirt and long legs. Gold glasses framed his eyes, and acne speckled his face. "Five people have been killed on campus," he said. "You shouldn't be alone."

Tessi thought of asking him why he was alone, but decided against it. "Who are you?"

"John." He pushed his glasses up his greasy nose.

"Well, John," she spat his name, "can I help you with something?" Angry, she brushed past and pressed the crosswalk button. She wanted to tell him to get back to his parents' basement.

"You shouldn't be alone," he repeated.

"Yeah. We've had this conversation." Not waiting for the light, she cut out across the street.

"Wait!" He followed. "Where are you going?"

"My car." Curt.

"But this way?" He glanced around. "There aren't any streetlamps this way."

True. Tessi was traipsing across the university lawn which, at night, had very few lights, and many large trees and bushes. "Did you want something?" she asked.

"You don't recognize me?"

"Should I?" she asked.

"From government. Three seats back, one to the left of you."

"Ah." He gripped her arm and pulled her to a stop.

"You really shouldn't be out with that murderer on the loose."

"I'm fine." She ripped her arm free.

"Probably what Kelly thought," he mumbled.

"What?"

"Kelly. One of the stabbed girls. She sat four chairs to the right, one up from me in our class."

Tessi eyed him, but kept quiet.

"She treated me like I wasn't important. She deserved what she got."

Tessi looked around, her nerves burning. "You really don't have to come with me."

"Why not?" he asked. "Am I not good enough?"

"No," she assured him in the darkness. "It's just that you'll be inconvenienced."

"But I can be helpful. Important."

She smiled weakly and started back toward her car.

"Why do you think he did it?" John asked. "Why he killed those students."

"It's a thrill for some people." Her body trembled a bit with his question. "Why do you think?"

His eyes glazed over. "Because some people deserve it. Some people are mean. Rude. Hateful. They make other people feel like they shouldn't be alive. Like they're not important. That's why. Some people just don't deserve to live."

"Interesting..." Tessi said. She looked around, her pulse racing as she noticed that she and John were alone in one of the darkest spots on campus.

"I just want to be important." His voice pleaded with her. "For people to know who I am."

"Yeah..." Tessi slowly snaked her hand into her purse. "I know what you mean."

"I'm just scared that my life will never be anything."

"Don't say that," Tessi reassured him. "You're important."

"Really?" He asked, his eyes lighting up.

"Of course." Her hand found the knife that felt so right to hold. So right because it made her feel so good. "You'll be number six."

Window

By Travis Allison

A tempest carried the fallen leaves of Lowry Avenue into the air, scattering them about carelessly; they danced upward and fell along an unseen staff, a visage of the untamed melodies of Autumn. Albert McNitch dozed in his easy chair, tranquilized beneath the staccato of the ceiling fan. He had been asleep for not quite an hour when a loud series of chimes permeated through the doorway of his study from the old grandfather down the hall. He awoke with a start; however, the foggy remnants of his slumber were still upon him. Albert decided to have a cup of tea and made his way to the kitchen. He filled the kettle and placed it on the stovetop. A few moments later, he filled his cup and headed back to his study.

Upon crossing the living room he faltered, nearly spilling his cup of tea. A long set of ebony curtains were hanging on the wall opposite of the other windows. He had never seen the like before and certainly had not hung them himself. He sat his cup down on an end table and mustered the courage to investigate. He feared to part them; for no good could come from self-manifesting draperies, and there was no telling what devilry lay behind them.

With an unsteady hand, he cracked them a bit. A subtle shaft of light struck his eyes, and he stumbled backwards in disbelief.

"What is this?" he muttered, "My bedroom is on the other side of that wall."

He hurried into the bedroom and flung open the closet door. He was greeted by various shirts and suit jackets, all neatly pressed and suspended from hangers. He pushed them aside and pressed his hands to the wall.

"This doesn't make any sense," he said "I must know what is on the other side of those drapes."

He ran back to the living room and stood stock-still; they seemed to stare at him with abysmal eyes, unsettling each fiber of his being. He reached out and slid both curtains open. A great window lay before him, weathered and the color of ash. A soft glow emanated from the squares of glass. He pressed his hands against it like two crescent moons, and looked through.

Amid the bleakness he could make out the leafless trees writhing upward from the ground. As ominous a scene that lay before him, he could only wonder what the purpose of such a place might be. He slid the latches and flung open the sash.

Albert pushed his head through, and beheld the sweetest fragrance he has ever known: a thunderstorm. He looked up, as best he could, and found no rain drops falling from the blanket of clouds above him. Suddenly, from the trees resounded a familiar song, one his mother used to sing.

Au clair de la lune

Mon ami Pierrot

Prête-moi ta plume

Pour écrire un mot

Ma chandelle est morte

Je n'ai plus de feu

Ouvre-moi ta porte

Pour l'amour de Dieu...

He was flooded with a joy he had long since forgotten, and he made his way through the window. Albert rushed into the trees; he tried his best to follow the voice, though it had ceased singing upon his entering the thicket. Curiosity soon subsided to fear, and he hurried back in the direction of the window. He saw it there suspended in the haze, and a dark silhouette standing on the other side. It was then that he heard the last of the song that had lulled him to sleep so many nights before emanating from behind it.

...Je n' sais c' qu'on trouva

Mais je sais qu' la porte

Sur eux se ferma...

As he neared the window, it fell shut. He beat his fists against the glass, and a figure approached. Albert could merely gasp, for staring through the pane were his own eyes, his own face. The curtains rushed together, and he was alone, save the writhing trees and the gloom.

A Vampire Story

By Michael Boyles

Wake up at five in the morning; it's time to start another tedious day. First things first; make the coffee. Put the stuff in the filter, pour in the water, and put it back down on the hot plate. It should be done in about ten-to-fifteen minutes, plenty of time to take a shower. The hot steam feels good; it's been a long weekend. It is Monday isn't it? I suppose we can only make the best of it right? Still, Mondays are always the worst no matter how you look at it. Oh well, get out of the shower now. The coffee is ready.

We can't even wake up officially until we get our coffee can we? No, we can't. I don't even know why we drink this stuff. It is disgusting, this bitterness, but we keep on drinking it anyway because we are hopelessly addicted to it. We couldn't even imagine life without coffee, even though its taste is repulsive to us.

While you are drinking your coffee you must read the newspaper. This is what is expected of you. Don't you see the television shows where the man reads his newspaper while drinking his morning coffee? Go outside to get the newspaper. Be sure to wave to the neighbors. Say, "good morning" to the old widow who lives next door. There's a good boy. It is a nice day outside. Drink your coffee on the porch this morning while you read the sports' section. Your team has won! Good for you! Life can't only be pleasure though. Read the actual news; it is important that you are a well informed individual. No one likes a person who does not know what is going on in his world.

Here is a terrible story. A young girl has been missing for months, and police are giving up on the search and officially claiming her to be dead. That is really awful. You should comment about how much this sickens you to some of your co-workers today. You could have an interesting conversation with them about what you would do to the guy who kidnapped this girl if you could just find the perpetrator. And she was to be the home coming queen too. That is really awful.

Go back inside now; it will be time to drive to the office soon. Rinse out your coffee cup; clean it, and put it back in the cupboard where it belongs. There is no sense in letting all your dishes pile up. That's right. You can use the same cup tomorrow morning.

No, take that cup back out of the cupboard. The coffee has left a bitter taste in our mouth. We want something sweet now.

Go into the basement. There is the girl chained up, with the scars all over her once "beautiful" body. God Save the Queen.

"Please... just kill me."

No, no my dear. I do not want you to die. I have nothing against you anymore. You have been punished for your vanity. You are one of us now, but you will not deny me of my treat.

Don't respond to her. She need not hear our voice. She will understand us eventually if she hopes to find salvation. Take the razorblade. Cut her breast. Collect the sweet nectar in the cup. Good, but we can't just let her sit here bleeding. Stop the wound. Good, that will leave a magnificent scar. Drink your reward. Look at her watching. She hates us so, but she will love us one day. She will realize that we saved her, and she will love us. She will worship you like a god, and she will love me. She will have our children. She will love us.

Make sure you clean the cup and that you put it back where it belongs. You wouldn't want to stain your favorite cup. Brush your teeth again and wash your face. Good, now get in your car and go to work.

Golden Eyes

By Carmen Terrell

Tiffany should have known that something was weird when Derek had come to pick her up earlier and said, "The wilderness awaits its sister." It had seemed innocent enough at the time, since they were going to the woods. But now, as she stared into his hungry golden eyes, she knew she should have stayed home.

She inched away from him, hoping he couldn't hear her heart as it pounded in her chest. He closed his eyes and inhaled, shivering with delight. "You're afraid," he said. "Don't worry. It'll all be over soon." He moved toward her, and her heart pumped faster. "This'll go easier for you if you don't scream," he said as his pupils began to grow and cover his irises. Tiffany panicked and did the only thing she could think of. As soon as he was close enough, she kned him in the groin and ran for her life.

An inhuman roar filled the air as she ran this way and that, trying to avoid the branches and limbs that reached out for her. She could hear him behind her, catching up. She couldn't outrun him. Seeing a thick patch of bushes, she dove in. They tore at her clothes and skin, but they hid her from view. Finding an open spot just above the ground, she looked out and saw his feet run past the bushes, stop, and come back.

"I know you're here, Tiffy," he called, his voice deeper and rougher than usual. She bit her lip and tried to silence her panting. His feet were pointed away from her, and she allowed herself a small glimmer of hope. But then she heard him take in a deep breath through his nose, and he turned toward her and grabbed her by the arm, lifting her out of her hiding place.

"There you are, my green-eyed beauty," he growled.

She shuddered at hearing the beloved nickname from that unnatural voice. His long fingernails dug into her skin, and she bit back tears. Finally, she gathered up what anger she could and spat straight into his now black eyes, the gold barely visible.

With another wild roar, he threw her away from him. She sailed through the air and landed hard. She tried to rise, but a stab of pain shot up her right leg, and she sank back down. She looked back toward Derek, and stared, transfixed, as his body began to change. Thick fur sprouted from his exposed arms, his skin shivered and jerked, his back hunched, and she heard horrible cracks and snaps come from his spine. When it was over, he turned his head toward her and bared his long, sharp teeth. Nothing about him was human anymore.

With a strangled cry, she forced herself up and tried to run. He was on her in an instant, his teeth sinking into her shoulder. Merciful blackness overtook her, and she knew no more.

When she came to, the sun was setting. Derek was nowhere to be found. She stood, felt only a twinge from her leg, and began limping toward town. He could come back any minute. An owl called out in the night, and her heart skipped a beat. The bushes rustled, and she twisted her head around, searching the moonlight for Derek. Nothing. Her heart was pounding, and her stomach began to cramp so badly she had to stop. A twig snapped further off. She looked again. Nothing. But the pain in her stomach intensified, and she fell to her knees. She curled her hands into fists, and watched in horror as her fingernails became longer, sharper...

She sat up in bed drenched in the cold sweat the nightmare always left her in. She staggered to the bathroom, flipped the switch, and went to the sink to splash cold water on her face. Slowly, she raised her head to the mirror and watched her pupils shrink back to normal size, leaving her staring into her own golden eyes.

The Visit

By Mark McKnight

The house on the hill was dark and cold, the shades drawn and almost no light could be seen coming from within.

He laid in a hospital bed that had been set up in his old study; it was the room in the house that he had always been the most comfortable in. Nurse was a few rooms over watching T.V. She hated him, just like everyone else. He had no family to speak of. His life had been his work, and it showed in the amount of possessions that he had. Now, though, possessions didn't seem all that important.

The cancer had taken all of that away from him. He could no longer work for the pain that he was in. He couldn't move any more, being practically catatonic; all that was left was his quick witted mouth, when it chose to work, and his eyes. His eyes were precious to him. He believed them to be the reason for all of his successes. In all of his many years he had never needed a single pair of glasses; his eyes always staying strong. They had always been able to spot a good deal. They were able to see right through a person and the lies that they were telling him. They had never failed him, for as long as he had lived.

Unable to stay still, his eyes now darted around the room always assessing things, always trying to find an edge in any situation. As his eyes shifted around the room he noticed the calendar hanging on the wall. October 31, Halloween, what a preposterous holiday; kids dressing up as ghosts, and monsters, reapers, and devils, he didn't believe in any of it. Lightning flashed in the window. He noticed something about the vents in the room. Blackness seemed to be emanating from them, heavy as pea soup fog it fell to the floor and slowly covered it. His heart skipped a beat; he had never feared anything in his life but this was different, something that couldn't be fought or bought. Once the floor had taken on an inky hue a point began to rise from the blackness. Forming a hood at its tip, it was utterly black inside and out. Once the blackness had risen to its full height and taken its shape it began to slowly stretch out a hand to his forehead, to his eyes.

The man was absolutely helpless as he watched the hand slowly, moving towards him. Trying desperately to find a way out of this situation his quick brain jumped at the first conclusion that came to it. He was hallucinating, that had to be it; there was no other logical explanation. So he smiled as the hand came to him. Reaching inside of his head, "the human mind is amazing" he thought "this hallucination is so real." As the hand moved inside of his head he noticed a pressure beginning to build behind his eyes. His vision began to dim; by the time that he noticed this it was already too late. He stopped smiling like a fool; his breath caught in his throat, and his heart began to race. "What is going on? Why are you taking my eyes from me, my precious eyes?" He was frantic; he didn't even feel the hand recede from his head. Without his sight the man was now completely helpless. "This must be what hell is like. Is this where I am going?" he thought. His heart was racing fast; it would not take much more of this; suddenly it stopped. He heard the ring of the heart monitor as it sounded his demise. His life should be flashing before his eyes. Instead of his life, though, it was every bad decision that he had ever made, and there were many. And he knew without a doubt that, yes, he was going to Hell and that he would spend all of eternity wandering blindly in complete, cold, blackness.

Best Friends

By Bretta Kotara

"I hate it when he's gone," Melissa thought as she made her way to the bathroom. "Only two more days." She shed her shirt and jeans on the redwood floor of the corridor and grabbed a towel from the hall closet. She briskly walked the remaining distance and jumped at the sound of the closet door slamming behind her.

*

It was the first time he had seen her completely naked. Thirteen years he'd watched her, but had never seen her naked. She wore only a t-shirt and panties when she lounged around the house; she had done that since high school. He always thought that was sexy, but now he finally got to see the body underneath, and it was perfect--just as he had always imagined.

As Blake stood staring in the front window of the Robertson's he replayed the image of Melissa taking her clothes off in his mind. Her loose, wavy locks of auburn hair flowing down over her bare back, the slenderness of her waist, and the glimpse at the side of her breast flooded his mind. He remembered her smile and how her porcelain skin was lightly brushed with freckles around her nose.

Melissa's beloved husband was away on a business trip, so Blake allowed himself to be more careless than usual. He normally would have never spied through the front window. Most nights, he confined himself to her office window watching her grade papers and work on projects for her class and such. Sometimes her husband would come in and have her. Blake would watch; it usually didn't last very long.

Tonight Blake made his way around to the bedroom window to see if he could see inside the bathroom from there. He was sure that he could; he knew the layout of this house by heart. Half of her legs could only be seen draped over the bathtub. She was moving them to a beat, probably singing. He watched her calves flex with each movement and was reminded of the nights in high school when he would come over to jam out to Usher in her bedroom. Back then, she was dating Steven Holly and would tell Blake all their stupid sex stories.

She was probably taking a bubble bath. Blake imagined her washing her body; the washrag running over her soft curves. He imagined her handing the rag over to him then moaning while he bathed her. When he went inside her, she would scream but in the good way. Blake was shaking now; he wanted her; he had waited too long. He just needed one time with her. He thought back to when they almost kissed. It was senior prom and they had attended together, just as friends. She had looked breathtaking in her black, backless dress. He would never forget her face when he leaned in. "Blake! You're kidding right?" she cried. If she would have only given him a chance, they could have been more than friends.

Tonight was the night. He wouldn't let her turn him down. Blake ran around to the back door.

*

Melissa froze at the loud noise she heard from the back of the house. "Don't be silly," she told herself. She always psyched herself out when her husband was gone. The first couple nights were always okay, but after that it seemed that every creak in the house made her jump. This noise was awfully loud, though. "Anyone there?" she yelled. Something must have fallen in the kitchen. She pushed her fear aside and continued to hum the tune in her head as she dipped her hair under the water to wash the shampoo off.

*

Blake almost backed out when he heard her scared voice, but when she started humming that happy little tune, his anger rose back up. He tiptoed through the living room, into the bathroom.

Water spilled out of the bathtub as Melissa jolted and screamed. Her eyes widened with fear.

"Blake Johnson? What the..."

Medium Rare

By Jake Fox

At first I feel only pressure.

Staring back at me from the mirror is my tired wretched face, but all I can see is cute little Marci Evans. Barely a week over six, she liked penguins and still laughed at cartoons. She loved to talk about how she'd be big soon, fourteen like her cousin. The way her face is stuck in my head though--just a mess of blood and raw meat. All I can think about is how she tasted like pot roast--stringy, but tender. I knew I would feel regret from the moment I saw her playing in her front yard until those last few seconds kneeling over her with my dripping kitchen knife, reveling in her last gurgled scream. I want you to know it was never sexual; we're so much closer than that.

My whole hand is in my mouth now; I'm trying not to bite down as I pry at my jaw line.

I carved Marci open like a Thanksgiving turkey. Maybe I should have ended it quicker, but there's not much release in wildly gouging and stabbing. I slid the blade up her and let the moist ripping noises calm me down until my hands glistened scarlet and warm flecks ran down my face. She was small in my arms when I finally lifted her limp corpse to hang it to drain the blood. Now every time I hear a drip in that drain I wonder if it's her. The edge where the drain is set into the floor has a permanent ring of rust-colored rot around it.

I think I start shrieking when the roots of my teeth start breaking away. I'm biting down on my fingers so hard that they're starting to bleed, and the little capillaries under my central incisors are popping like bubble wrap. I'm blinded by the pain.

There was that familiar sense of panic for the first day as the girl from the Amber Alerts swung mutilated below my floorboards. I relived everything in my head, making sure I hadn't slipped up and been seen talking to her, inviting her in. To steady my nerves, I scrubbed my clothes with salt and liquid soap, washed them in cold water, and burned them. When that didn't do it, I looked up new recipes for cooking large amounts of meat.

Finally the first tooth breaks away and goes sliding across the grime covered floor. I'm bent over sputtering, crimson dripping from my mouth, my knees quivering. This is going to take too long.

When I began reliving the screams in my head so vividly that I ran downstairs to check, it's that moment--looking for a murderer in my own kill room, asking myself if I'm crazy--that I realized I'd gone too far. Marci's cries seemed to echo dismally around me, and I started weeping almost as hard as she had, promising myself she would be the last one, but I've said that before. It's the same promise every time, but when the little girl hanging by her feet next to me is picked to the bone, and it's time to dispose of her, her body will have plenty of company in its unmarked grave. I'll be better for a while, but the hunger will come back just as fierce as every time before. So I lock my abattoir from the inside and drop the key down the bloody soaked drain. I decide to destroy my weapons. All thirty-two of them.

Once I decide pulling the teeth out won't work, I get down on my knees by the bench in the corner and smash my mouth hard against it, collapsing backwards. Laying there I see Marci hanging above me, her dead eyes staring as blood spills out of my mouth carrying shards of shattered tooth. I'm on fire with pain, and I can't take this. I grope for the knife on the bench above me, my whole body shuddering with regret.

I'm just so hungry.