

DIVINATIONS

MAGAZINE

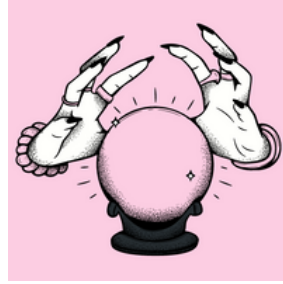
INTUITION

MAY 2023

FEATURING

ÁLVAREZ, ASUN · BEST, SAMUEL · BIGGS, JULIA · CABLE, JOSHUA LUKE ·
CHANGE, FELICIA · DAVIDSON, A.L. · ELLIOTT, GEMMA · GOSTELOW, MATHEW ·
HARDY, FLORENCE · LAYNE, ASHTYN · LLEWELLYN, RACHAEL · MARSH, AMBER ·
MARTINI, MELISSA · MULHOLLAND, ENDA · NG, RENEE · PERROS, ROBYN ·
SEOIGHE, BA · SOUM · WEIDNER, ERICA LESLIE





DIVINATIONS MAGAZINE

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May 2023**

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The Repentant Magdalen by Georges De La Tour (c. 1635-1640)

Competition Image:

Séance by Stephen Mackey (<http://www.stephenmackey.com>)

Editor-in-Chief

Amy Douglas

Content Warning

This issue contains work of a potentially triggering nature. Individual works contain content warnings as necessary.

To find out more about Divinations Magazine,
visit www.divinationsmagazine.co.uk.

INTUITION

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Editor's Letter

Dear Reader,

Like many an idea, Divinations Magazine was brewed up in a pub. I'd been toying with the thought of founding a literary magazine for the longest time but was never sure where to start. It was there, armed with a diet coke and a 6 quid pizza, that inspiration struck. Divinations Magazine would be thus:

- An indulgence in prediction, showcasing new horror authors and/or new spooky pieces of work that will be big in the future
- Have a hint of magic to it, with stories, poetry and non-fiction that spark a spell of excitement
- Playful, fun and **Pink!**

It only seemed fitting then that our first issue should explore the trait that defines us most: intuition. This issue features pieces that explore this theme in a variety of ways; be it through emotion, narrative, or metaphor.

I am thrilled to be able to share the works of such talented individuals with you, and grateful to the artists whose stories grace our pages. This issue would not have been possible without their patience, generosity, and kindness.

I hope that you find this issue both terrifying and exciting and that we inspire you to continue your journey towards the future.

Stay Spooky,

Amy M. Douglas



POETRY FROM SOUM

Did Not See That Coming

Third generation witch, what a joke!
Nothing through the amber crystal ball
Nil scrying with the amethyst pendulum
Sixth sense clearly slept through it all
Zero tingling's in guts or any nether region
Jeez Atropos, a little warning here!
I'm so getting busted back to neophyte
The Supreme Priestess will not take this well

Might blame it on my fun distraction, maybe
Fun distraction watches my self-talk bemused
I gotta grow me some big ones
Warlock smirks, head back in the bedroom
Oh no my finely formed lover
Mine must be way bigger than yours
This is mum we're talking about
And her super healthy beloved familiar
Just died on my watch!

THE END

Who is Hazel?

Waking from a dream
He asks Basil, who is Hazel?
A hungry purr as he nips his fingers
3 weeks later, the name still lingers

Walking to work, a billboard advertising
Hazelnut chocolates, his favourite thing
9 on the dot, work carries him away
4 meetings, 5 calls, occupy his day
The 3pm meeting became a 3.33pm start
Meant he finished late, now his appetite to sate
He wonders, what's with all the 9's
And who is this Hazel?

Seated at 6.30pm alone he dines
Those synchronicity moments lost among the wines
A woman comes over
The new restaurant owner
His hand tingles when they engage
'Hello' she says 'my name is Sage'
She wonders why the man pales at his table
When she simply said 'Welcome to Wych Hazel'

THE END

Hunger

Samuel Best

The baby's cry wakes him, pulling him from the deep in an instant. How long has he been out? Steven checks his phone. Only a few hours. He looks to Claire, lying next to him. Her eyes are closed but he knows she'll be awake. That cry could wake the dead. It's his turn though so he steps out of bed, the wooden floor cold on the soles of his feet. His legs are heavy and slow, his head dizzy, but he operates on autopilot these days. The swing of the hammer, the fastening of the nappy.

The house is silent except for Ivy, who falls to a soft whimpering when Steven picks her up, up and puts the dummy back in her mouth. Using the torch on his phone, he weaves through the house — dodging piles of undone laundry and the pram, disassembled in the hallway — to the kitchen. He sets the phone on the worktop, the beam of light enough to allow him to work without disturbing Ivy too much, the moonlight lying like a heavy winter on the floor tiles. Ivy squirms in his arms, her face wrinkled with a discontent that threatens further tears. Steven knows he must act quickly.

Spooning baby formula into the bottle, Steven whispers the measurements out so he doesn't lose track. He shakes it, the plastic hot in his hand, though the rest of him is beginning to feel the cold creeping through the house. He holds Ivy closer and she cooies into him as if in response. He walks her and the bottle over to the sink, begins to run the bottle under the tap to cool, and that's when he hears it.

Shhfff.

A sudden shuffling sound, quiet and only lasting a second, but so out of place in the dark two a.m. kitchen that it may as well have been a scream.

Steven freezes, his hand holding the bottle still under the stream from the cold tap. Ivy looks up from the crook of his other arm. She doesn't look worried but he imagines how loud the beating of his heart must be to her. He scans around the kitchen but can't see any potential source of the sound.

He rocks his body slightly to soothe Ivy. As he reaches to turn the tap off he hears it again.

Shhfff.

A smooth, soft drag. Over in an instant, but enough to set Steven's mind racing. He grabs for his phone, casts the torch beam around and for a second he thinks he sees his own face, distorted horribly, at the kitchen window before he realises it's only him. The tired, drawn face of a new father; easily mistaken for a zombie pawing at the glass.

He turns his attention to the floor and halts the torch beam on the pile of cardboard by the back door. The car seat, the crib, the thousand nappies — they'd all been delivered with a mountain of cardboard packaging, now flat-packed and ready to be recycled. Steven realises a couple of pieces must have slipped and fallen. *Gravity at work, not the forces of evil*, he tells himself.

He returns to the sink and picks up the bottle of milk, trying to tell himself that just because he couldn't see any cardboard out of place that didn't mean some hadn't fallen. He and Ivy are halfway across the room on their way back to the bedroom when Steven hears a third sound. A loud sound, this time. A deep, harsh growl.

In an instant, his skin is ice. He has Ivy pressed tightly to his chest. Sometimes you hear a sound and imagine it's maybe a fox or a badger, but then sometimes something deep within tells you it is none of these things.

He imagines how he must look if anyone were to look in through the window: the torchlight illuminating him from the chest down, vulnerable with a baby and his hands full. He feels the thinness — the weakness — of his pyjama t-shirt, his boxer shorts, his bare feet. He is reminded of how fragile an infant baby is.



Steven lifts his phone up, raising the torchlight from the floor to the window. There's something out there. He knows it. He walks over and presses his phone to the glass. He stands, stunned for a second, before fumbling for the button to turn the light off. He finds it but in his terror, he drops the phone.

The kitchen falls back to darkness as the sound of the screen cracking cuts through the room. Steven holds his breath, burning in his chest as the seconds pass. He listens to the noise outside, hears it coming closer to the house. A heavy sound. A threatening sound. Steven wills Ivy to stay quiet but she starts to wriggle, the smell of fresh formula milk frustrating her hungry body. She tongues the dummy out of her mouth and it too falls to the floor. Steven bends quickly to pick it up, put it back before it's too late, but he can't feel it around and now it's too late.

Across the room, the back door handle slowly starts to turn. There's a loud, huffing breathing on the other side of the door. Something large. Something hungry. Ivy fusses but Steven can't move. He's frozen, trying to think if he locked up after he took the bin bags out earlier on. His memory has been shot since his sleep has been so poor and he can't recall.

The handle turns and he can't remember.

Steven can't think at all.

Ivy begins to cry.



Brackish
Julia Biggs

My earliest memory of her: a shadowy, ghostly figure treading the darkness like a swimmer, drawing the sheets over me gently as if she covered a sailor in silken waves. My lesson: her waters are moon-cold, clinging, flowing, heavy. They collect echoes.

Later, in undersea blurry blackness, I slipped into the strange world of rippled bodies and warped skin. Then suddenly I was being swallowed up, chest compressed, sand in my mouth. Another lesson: her ocean is deep and passionately savage.

I tried to teach myself to swim. For hours, I floated and looked: at her waterlogged caresses curved round me, putting forth shining scales. Her eerie silence always suggested an intensifying ache, a pressure beneath the surface.

I smiled when she loosened her hair, the tide lapping then frothing at my ankles, horrors brought onto land.

I knew from the first moment I saw her how I would sink, sink, sink and drown in her.

Bewitched
Renee Ng

We are stumbling
down to the lake, arms locked,
pale and sticky with honey and humanity.
The wind sings a reel
cajoling my body into the right steps.

*My friends are here, are they not?
These hands are their hands
These are their faces, reflected in my eyes.*

There is a rustling in the woods, a shifting
in the leaves
The stone has a face, or maybe it's a mirage
of moss and ivy. Maybe its a ghost
from a dream.
My friends are laughing.

*I do not know their names.
They are as faceless as the moon.*

We are in the water
which ripples with words abandoned by time.
Beneath my feet are all the forgotten things, sacrifices
for the waves to pick and break and drink and savour.
A penny, a bone, a pocket watch, a name—
The water takes them all.
My friends smile as the current caresses me.

*Are they my friends?
are
you?*

Bathwater

Robyn Perros

Content Warning
Self-harm, Sexual Violence, and Abortion

My youngest daughter grew up terrified of the sound water makes when you pull a plug out of the bathtub. That hollow, slurping vortex as it drains. If she was left alone in the bathroom with the sound, she would scream out for me, hands cupping her ears, the sides of her mouth stretched taut. **It's the Devil trying to suck me away with him**, she had told me once, an idea I assumed she must've picked up from some of the other kids at Sunday School. **It's only water**, I would say, shaking her by her little shoulders, **it's only water**.

When my daughter's hysterical episodes continued, her grandmother advised me to go and get her Christened. But I took her to the doctor instead. The doctor told me that the fear of loud noises and monsters was a natural part of childhood, just the nervous system maturing. While he shone a torch in her ears on the examining table, he said that those fears, like the fear of the sound water makes when you pull a plug out the bathtub, would simply disappear over time. I nodded, wanting desperately to believe that every fear from childhood would simply disappear over time. As my daughter skipped through the clinic parking lot with a Fizzpop in her mouth, I imagined all her childhood fears just finding new places to hide as her body grew bigger. The same way bathwater eventually just disguises itself in the sea.

When I arrive home at the end of my shifts at the mall, I climbed out of my cashier's uniform and ran a bath. Stretched out, glasses to the side, my ugly toes poking the mouth of the tap, this was the only part of my day where I got to swim inside myself. But even with the door closed, the light off, and

my face submerged underwater; motherhood always had a way of floating me back to the surface. My body, a lifeboat for all the drowning flying ants. During my bath time, my three, now teenage daughters would step into the bathroom to see me, they said. One by one, they would sit down on the closed toilet seat lid. Most times, they'd just sit there in the dark saying nothing. But other times, while their father sat in the living-room with the tv blaring, we exorcised our demons by candlelight.

grade 8 disco / a man / a bathroom stall / please call me / i'm like a bird nelly furtado / two hands around a mouth / purple / a father's friend / her fault / a bruise / a thigh / she didn't see his face / the devil wear's russian bear vodka / slit wrist lion razor / then he unclipped his belt buckle / don't tell father / what happened next / my fault / back-alley abortion / deformed / please god forgive me / strobe lights / polystyrene cup / then he unclipped his belt buckle / i'm like a bird nelly furtado / please call me / don't tell father / i'm gay / a uterus shaped like an hourglass / **and so are the days of our lives** said the foolish grandmother who spoke in tongues not knowing that god would never listen to a woman

Over the years, the bathroom became the place where my daughters and I scrubbed the crime scenes of all the women in our blood. This was our church, this was our prison.

Only later did I come to understand why my youngest daughter grew up terrified of the sound water makes when you pull a plug out of a bathtub, that hollow slurping vortex as it drains.

Why Do the Alley Cats Scream at Night?

Joshua Luke Cable

It feels like I have spent my life inside my bedroom, orbiting a tungsten bulb, dazed by LEDs screens. But when the sun sets and the day grows dim and quiet, the scope of my thought narrows into a contemplative zone, where it is easier to think about the strange ideas which stir me. I find that I am at my best in these hours; yet always when I'm on the precipice of some enriching thought, my eyelids grow too heavy to be held aloft any longer, and I am called to sleep.

Every night I reach for the rod which rolls down the blinds of my bedroom window, and every night I am struck by the atmospheric sight of the solitary lamppost beaming in the dark alley behind my terraced home. The alley itself practically belonged to the cats. By day, they'd bask in the faint Yorkshire sun atop shed roofs, and by night, they'd creep furtively across fences and over walls into gardens of paved stone. My area, like many post-industrial towns was comprised of dense grids of two-up, two-down terraced housing, each with a small back yard leading to an alley, which separates the back of one street from another. For the domestic cat this area should be perfect for them. And yet, recently in the twilight hours I have noticed an alarming sound. Which had made me wonder: why do the alley cats scream at night?

If only I could see what the cats can see in the dark back alleys of Barnsley, perhaps I'd be screaming too. But without their optical gifts, I could only speculate what was raising their hackles. A reasonable guess was that their feline cries may just be a prelude to mating, but the prospect of a stranger, more macabre answer excited me. Whatever the reason, their yowling in the late hours was a disturbing sound, and one that has led me to close the window of my bedroom many times.

One very late night a few weeks ago, long after my mother had gone to bed, the screaming was worse than ever. Their shrill sounds tore me away from



my desk, and I perched myself on my windowsill looking over the alley. Looking around at the neighbouring houses it appeared as if I was the last human awake. Not a single house light shone, only the lamppost. The night sky was unfathomably dark, but its distance instilled in me a sense of awe and mystery. In contrast to the dark alley below, which exuded a far more immediate sense of dread.

We are born with an innate fear of the dark, it's an ancient instinct, which metastases into childhood, where our burgeoning imaginations imbue the dark and its unknown contents with horrifying possibilities. The experience of adulthood discounts many of those imaginative possibilities. Til you no longer fear the monster under your bed, but the murderer outside your patio window. Ever since Prometheus stole fire from the Gods, and gave it to Man, we have been peeling back the unknown with successive waves of technology. Modernity has illuminated the world, yet deep shadows are cast, which contain the same instinctual fears; yet only some of the old threats survive. As a species, the unknown is perhaps our greatest fear, but fear is not our strongest emotion. No, I think our curiosity is stronger, otherwise we never would have left our painted caves and spread about the world as we have. Bare that in mind, when I say that I slipped into my flip flops and ventured out into the alley that night through our back garden gate.

By the time I was outside, the screaming had stopped, I could have returned to my room and gone to sleep. Equally, I thought, the absence of screams may have kept me awake with worry. What could make them

scream so, and then silence them? In one hand I gripped a large, jagged stone from our garden, and with the other I strafed the darkness with my phone torch. I concealed the stone out of potential embarrassment, I did not want to be seen skulking the alley, rock in hand like a Cro-Magnon throwback; neither did I want to be wholly unarmed if the worst were to happen. At that time, the alley was quiet save for the distant sounds of souped-up cars making the most of quiet roads, and the electric hum of the lamppost, which shone brightly to my left. "Pspspssps" I whispered along the alley, hoping to bring the cats out, but I couldn't see or hear them. I passed beneath the lamppost. Under its light the exposed skin on my hand felt a little warmer, but I think that was only in my imagination. The illusion of safety.

Further down the alley, I heard a sound. Like something clattering to the ground. I followed the noise to the broken gate of a neighbour's back yard. The sound appeared to have come from a dilapidated brick coal shed near the gate. The coal shed was close, and the house lights were off. I would not be seen trespassing, but I didn't relish the risk. I covered the light of my phone torch and crept past the broken gate. I crouched by the old coal shed where the sound was coming from and shone my light inside. I saw the usual things which get put away in winter, a set of folded chairs, a rusted Swingball set, a faded plastic push-car for kids, and so on. In the corner of the shed blinking in the light were a dozen set of eyes, a crowd of cats, of various breeds all huddled together. In their trembling terror they'd knocked an old trowel over.

They looked terrified of me; I tried to reassure them. I whispered a gentle "pspspsps" and reached my hand out to them, but they pulled back even further. I backed off too, sensing a claw swipe in my near future if I didn't. I noticed blood in their fur. It was fresh, but none of them seemed wounded. There was a clang in the alley, the cats fled in all directions, and I stumbled out into the alley after them where I was struck by the foul stench of sewage.

To my right, the alley stretched into pitch blackness, and to my left back toward the lamppost and my garden gate. That stench was awful, as I

looked behind me there was a different shade of darkness, my own moon spun shadow moving against the wall. The question I asked flashed before my eyes like text from a projector emanating from deep within my animal brain, "why do the alley cats scream at night?"

Of course, the cats were not terrified of me. I was frozen solid, so why was my shadow moving? Without pause I ran toward the light of the lamppost, to my shame I fell, but not because of my flip flops. Mid frantic stride the ground beneath my forward leg was gone, as if I had misjudged the place of the bottom step on my way down a staircase. My body slammed into the concrete, I released my grip on the rock; my fallen leg kicked out from the void it was hanging in and sprung me off the ground. Later, I would see how sore my knees and palms were, but in the moment, like the frightened ape I was, and feeling as if I was about to be overtaken, I ran to the lamppost and sheltered in the centre of the radiant circumference shone upon the ground.

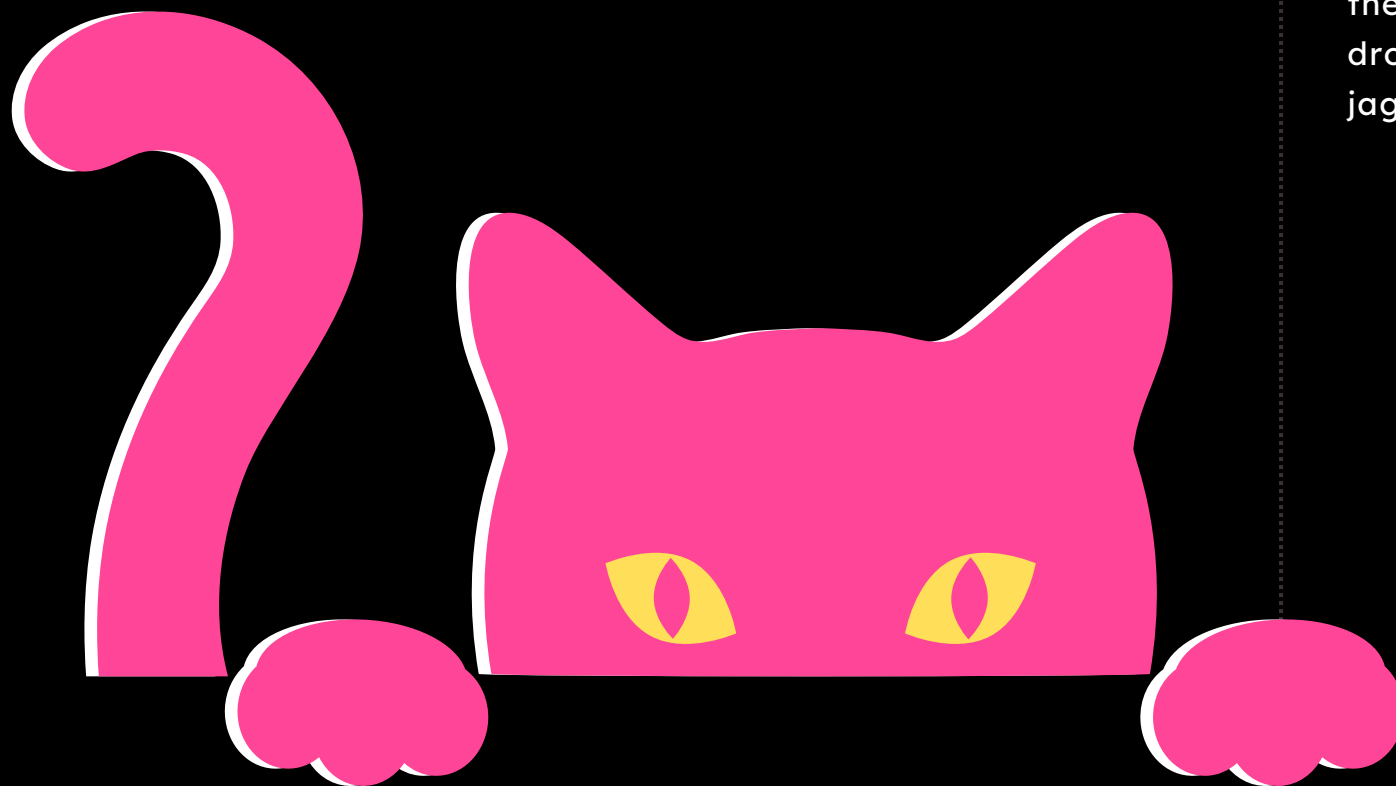
I pivoted on my heel and raised my clumsy guard up against the darkness; under the bright light my pupils dilated, and all detail was lost from the shadow. I could be seen, but I could not see, effectively, I was as blind and defenceless as a kitten. When it became clear that nothing was there, I fumbled for my phone torch and ran back to my home. I was kept awake that night by my adrenaline, with that smell of sewage affixed in my nostrils. The morning after I returned to the alley, curious and a little sore. I noticed several cats, I recognised a few from the night before. Some fled, others came closer when I beckoned them with a "pspspsps."

The inquisitive ones sniffed my outstretched hand and allowed me to pet them. If not for these cute cats, the alley was otherwise grim, but exceedingly normal, at least until I noticed the closed manhole cover. I could faintly smell the same foul sewage seeping through its cracks. Someone must have sealed it in the morning. I considered myself lucky that the open hole didn't swallow me up entirely, my fall was bad enough. A deep instinct told me to run from that grey abnormality in the dark. In the stark light of day, I felt foolish like adults do, but in my gut, I was thrilled to run.

It felt good to exercise that flight reflex that modernity had rendered almost vestigial from underuse.

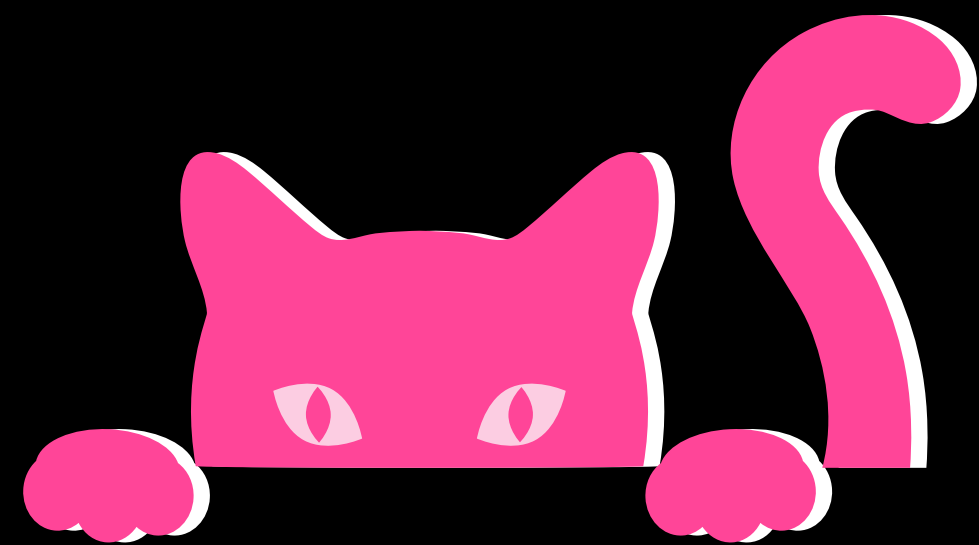
For a few weeks after the alley incident, I had been turning off lights in the house and navigating around in the dark, after my mother had gone to bed. I endured bashed shins and stubbed toes to see if the eye like a muscle can trained to be stronger, to see better in the dark? If the eye couldn't be improved, then the mind certainly could be made more resilient against the dark. I would not be rendered terrified by shadows again. With time, I grew better at discerning shape and depth in the dark, and revisiting the instinct to illuminate a room, to guarantee that I was truly alone, and safe in it. I channeled my newfound fascination for the dark into exploring beyond my home.

In the twilight hours I'd wander the streets, armed with a new understanding that most people, even the real bastards stay out of the dark. It is instinctual. If you were prepared to go against that instinct, you could walk freely where others would not follow. After all there were no wolves in England anymore, the predators are gone; only man is left, and they don't wander aimlessly through the dark. Their violent wills are more discerning.



Later that night I was walking through streets, when I heard that God awful sound. The screaming of cats which begun all this. I lingered in a narrow ginnel between houses and crouched quietly in the pitch blackness. Every move I made was deliberate. I smelt the sewage first, it took time to see the shapes and ascertain the finer details. I saw an open manhole cover, and a turned over bin with its contents spilled. A dead cat lifted high, its lifeblood glinting in the moonlight, spilling onto the elongated snout of a terrible thing, which meeped as it ate the cat. Its knees bent like a dog's, its body was tall and lean like a man's, and covered in cat scratches. Its fingers were long, and easily capable of prying open manhole covers. I froze again, not from indecision but a heightened sense of survival. By the sight of it I knew it could not outrun it or fight it. I stayed impossibly still as it devoured one poor cat after another. I watched and prayed it would not see, hear, smell or intuit I was here. I don't know how long I watched that macabre buffet, but eventually I awoke in the ginnel, and it was over, the thing was gone, the cats too, and the manhole covered as if It was never there, but the smell lingered.

It was dawn when I made it home on my exhausted legs, the chimney pots of the cascading rows of terraced house were silhouetted by the rising sun. I had made it through the night; "Never again," I thought. The darkness had hidden me sufficiently well, but I certainly was not its master. I reached for the key in my coat pocket, but there was something else, something I had dropped that night in the alley all those weeks before. I found the large and jagged stone placed inside my pocket.



The Blind Bride
Asun Álvarez

“O why have you sat me by this stone so cold?”
She asked her cruel husband, all blind, with a sigh.
“O why have you given me this flute to hold?”
But he stood and would not make reply.

The stone was no stone but the skull of her love,
The flute was carved out of his bone,
And she only knew when she heard the voice – “Sister!” –
Cry out in the pale moth’s drone.



One sentence works inspired by
Séance by Stephen Mackey.

COMPETITION WINNERS

“Where did you get this cane?” she asked, the fabric of the blindfold scratching uncomfortably over the bridge of her nose. “It feels like ivory, but it’s oddly light.”

Ba Seoighe

“Having found the blind woman stumbling through the forest, he gladly escorted her home; where, upon entry, she turned to look directly at him.”

Florence Hardy

“If only I’d known before I agreed to restore the painting, that to see her eyes would plunge me into madness so wicked, it would be the undoing of my entire life.”

Amber Marsh



Miss Eloise's Acid and Apothecary A.L. Davidson

Something had started haunting Miss Eloise's Acid and Apothecary down on the corner of Main Street, and it did not bode well for business. The quaint two-story building was, historically, bustling. The earthen-hued awning would shelter academics from the rain and the posies on the windowsill would wave at wandering souls going to and fro in the mornings.

Young witches, with their lace collars and chunky heeled boots, would traipse in with tattered hardbound books under their arms. They'd happily order the chamomile special and get to their studies, tarot cards splayed out over their tables and cat hair poking out from the seams of their clothes.

The local ghost hunting group, all clad in black with baseball caps and eager expressions, would discuss the next decrepit building to search for specters around coffee cake and espressos. Their camera equipment would be strewn about and laughter would echo out into the night air.

And the professors, oh the professors! With their murder mystery plans that onlookers were unable to discern fact from fiction, would sit quietly in the corner with their pipes and get lost in the thrill of bloodlust and revenge.

Miss Eloise took great pride in her shop. The acid, of course, came from the coffee. Coffee made from beans she plucked herself in the backyard. The apothecary, however, was the shining star of the little corner store. Potions and doodads, crystals and balms, any ailment or need you could conjure could be cured at Miss Eloise's. The wall of mushrooms and the dangling charms that twisted in the sunlight drowned the space in a calming aura. Everyone in the sleepy town loved Miss Eloise's shop.

Or, they did until something moved into the attic.

It started with a **thump** late into the evening as Miss Eloise spoke to the charming Professor Pyle about the new class project he aimed to unleash upon his unsuspecting students come Monday morning. A thump so loud it

caused his steady hand to tremble and the chamomile tea, with its wisps of yellow steam, rocked enough to spill over the side of the chipped teacup.

"Well, now, how uncouth," the professor said, aghast at the sudden disturbance.

Even Miss Eloise's poor bullfrogs, Wick and Willow, slunk down in the water of their case from the resounding noise above. After that day, the **thump-thump-thump** kept on coming at all hours, without warning, and the patrons began to dwindle. The place of peace no longer offered sanctuary from the bustle of the idyllic college town and Miss Eloise grew frustrated.

Late one rainy October evening, she simply had enough.

"Fiddlesticks! Broomsticks, candlesticks, and stick bugs!" she shouted.

"Miss Eloise, language!" Professor Pyle reminded.

Miss Eloise plopped down in the nearby armchair with a sigh, "I can't take that cursed thumping anymore."

"Why not get rid of it? Be it dead or alive, it shouldn't be a challenge for a well-rounded woman like yourself."

"My dear Professor, don't you think I've tried? Every time I open that darn attic door the house shifts and the room is wrong. I can't seem to pinpoint which of my many spaces it's hiding in. My intuition isn't sharp nowadays since I can't get a lick of sleep with that incessant noise! I've tried crystals, summoning circles, pendulums, even my dowsing rods, and I simply can't find it. I dove headfirst into my literature and even asked the paintings on the walls for help, but no one can find the darn thing. It feels like a horrible, **horrible** prank."

Professor Pyle set his hardback novel down and took long strides toward the staircase, "Then, let us fix it! The night is young, Miss Eloise, and the

hunt is on!”

Miss Eloise followed with a heavy sigh.

The duo ascended the creaky staircase up to the living quarters. The teetering stacks of books that lined the hall let out puffs of dust as they walked by. The grandfather clock chimed that midnight arrived. Moonlight cascaded in through the round window, the long shadow of the nearby tree that so rudely decided to grow in front of the shop crept across the floor. The shadow reached up like a hand and pointed to the attic hatch. It seemed the twisted old oak was also tired of the thumping.

Professor Pyle picked up his cane and hooked it into the handle. The ladder slid down and with it came a tumbling pile of freshly washed sheets. They danced over the railing down to the café below like freed spirits.

“Laundry room,” Miss Eloise sighed.

They listened but heard no thump.

The professor closed the hatch, waited for the spell to activate, and pulled once again.

Apples and oranges and pears rained down onto the second floor.

Miss Eloise picked up a shiny apple, “Fruit pantry.”

Still no thump.

They tried again. And again. And again, until the stairwell was full of papers and pasta, pillows and poppies, and Mrs. Penwick’s startled cat Pantyhose. Finally, they found the attic. A puff of dust was expelled as the room took a breath, it had been much too long since it was last opened. **Thump. Thump. Thump.** The unwelcome guest walked across the wood floor with heavy footsteps, but it remained hidden in the darkness.

An uneasy chill - a haunting one - seeped down into the Acid and Apothecary. It covered the quiet, peaceful home in darkness. Saturated the wood and blanketed the floorboards with ill-intent. Something wicked had woven itself into the shop.

The old friends looked at each other before Miss Eloise hoisted up her skirt and began climbing the ladder. She poked her head up into the space that housed many unused mannequins purchased when she fancied the idea of sewing. The hobby never came to fruition, so they stayed in the darkness under sheets for some unknown reason she now regretted. It was all too eerie and quite the waste of funds.

One of the sheets moved. The edge flipped up and returned to its resting place. Miss Eloise gasped and ducked down a bit. She kept her eyes on the attic and its shadows. With her darkly painted fingernails, she waved her companion up and entered the space. The duo crouched down and, hushing each other, crept forward.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

Miss Eloise turned her eyes to the back corner and pursed her lips. Each irritating thump was met with the click of her heels as she wandered through the maze of crates and covered mannequin bodies.

Twisting in and out of the convoluted labyrinth of her own design, they followed the quick-paced thumping. Footprints appeared across the dusty floor with a poof as each footfall made contact with the wooden panels. They



were inhuman, cloven, and powerful.

The witch and the professor weaved in and out of objects, tumbled around teetering boxes, and chased the apparition through the darkness. Even the moonlight that crept through the dust-laden windows could not illuminate the frame of this intruder. Miss Eloise did not appreciate the ill-intent and cold breeze it brought to her home.

It tossed items this way and that, giggling with a wicked tone that showcased an intelligent haunting. This otherworldly oddity was bound and determined to make her life a living hell and she would suffer through it no more.

As she skidded around a corner, she hoisted up the hemline of her ruffled skirt and stomped her heeled boot down onto the ground. The spell sewn into the side of her boot illuminated and the room came to a sudden halt. Gravity was torn from the space and every object became ripped from the ground. Mannequins twisted with weightlessness, the sheets warbled and waved as they hung in the moonlight. Boxes shot upward, chests burst open, and loose papers flittered about for the briefest of moments.

In the darkness, two deep eyes appeared, surrounded by a wave of dark energy. It rotated slowly, caught in the spell, but never let its eyes drift from the witch across the way. It held a wicked, Cheshire smile and a cane in its hands that was - most assuredly - the source of the incessant **thump**. Professor Pyle, lagging behind, veered around the corner and gasped at the ghastly sight. Miss Eloise set her hands on her hips and exhaled with a huff of agitation.

“That’s an unsightly beast if I’ve ever seen one,” Professor Pyle acknowledged.

“It’s one of those mischievous midsummer pranksters, probably got in through an open window during the solstice,” Miss Eloise groaned. “Blast that Shakespeare and his conjuring of these monstrosities!”

“People do love the trickster archetype. I’ve never seen one in person.”

The prankster laughed, giggled with such intensity that its head bobbed even with the pull of time and gravity being halted from its frame.

“They love to wiggle their way into homes and cause problems for the sake of being problematic because they find it funny!” Miss Eloise clapped her hands. “Begone, you!”

With a **puff**, the prankster was whisked away to elsewhere, anywhere else but her shop. She did not care where, so long as it wasn’t here. The floating objects slowly returned to their resting state and the attic was, finally, draped in silence. With exhausted steps, Miss Eloise approached the open window across the way and closed it to ensure no more problematic poltergeists or wandering will-o-wisps would find their way inside her home.

“It would seem your intuition was right, it was all just a horrible prank,” Professor Pyle said with a grin.

“And I would be remiss if I did not shout it to the heavens that I do not appreciate this kind of humor!” Miss Eloise chided, fist waved angrily at the skies above.

“And **I** would be remiss if I did not indulge in another cup of your chamomile special. Would you care to join me before this place once again becomes overwhelmed with chatter and patrons?”

Miss Eloise looked over her shoulder and grinned, “I would love nothing more.”

Hagstone Gemma Elliott

She arrives in the village by the sea to a set of rules tacked to the front door. "These are to keep people like you safe," the note says. The guide goes as follows:

- Collect little rocks and pile them up at the base of your door. This will allow others of your kind to easily identify you.
- Unknowing tourists (of which we welcome many in the warmer months) may steal one or two of your prettier stones. Only act if these are thrown through your window.
- When visiting a fellow sea witch, it is customary to take a gift of your best stone, stored in your pocket. We are inspired by offers in many ways.
- The stones with the holes at their weakest points are special. Use them to protect yourself and discover your true meaning.

The only issue is that she isn't a sea witch. She's an artist who has taken a last-minute long-term holiday let after a cancellation came up and a relationship ended. The person who should have taken the cottage had gotten ill - her Dubai-based landlord wrote in a brief introductory email. The keys are inside the fake rock at the door.

But, diligent as always, she collects the stones on her daily trips to paint the sea and stacks them up outside her door. Nobody else in the village seems to be doing this on the beach the only other combers are children collecting shells, driftwood and smoothed glass with their grandparents.

Eventually, a new neighbour invites her round for a barbecue with other months-long holidaymakers. She takes her best stone as a gift, one with the centre hollowed out, space for a finger to be poked through. Unable to find a break in conversation to give this present to her host and feeling weighed down with it in her pocket, she hands it to a passing toddler to play with.

She demonstrates the potential of the hole by shutting one eye and peering through. The child promptly throws the stone into the lit barbecue, sending sparks and part-cooked burgers flying amongst the new friends, and causing widespread panic. She enjoys this more than one should.

This is Going to Burn

Enda Mulholland

He could have gone home after that last run; it was late, he was tired and the small compartment beside the steering wheel where he kept his cash was full. Still, something told Felix to swing through the town on his way, just for one final check.

There were few others on the roads at this time of the night. He glanced at the clock on the dashboard; it was almost 3 AM. He doubted there was anyone left – the bars were closed now. But, it was payday weekend and the town had been busy.

He slowed as he drove over the bridge and the black waters of the river below towards the orange glow of the town. The doors of the bars were locked, and the streets were empty. There were remnants all over of those who'd been before; discarded pizza boxes and small piles of sick. A lone stiletto lay against the curb in front of the bank.

He pulled the car in but kept it running. He was certain there was no one left searching for a taxi, but there was a whisper in the back of his mind. Like an itch he couldn't scratch. Wait, it told him, **just wait one more minute.**

So he did.

And there he was, stumbling out from the alleyway beside the Butcher's. His feet dragged on the ground and stumbled over each other like a toddler learning to stand upright for the first time. His head was slumped to the side, with a mess of black hair hanging over his half-closed eyes. The poor lad was utterly stocious.

Felix looked away. It was too late for that kind of hassle. His car had gotten through the night vomit-free and he wanted to keep it that way. He flicked down his indicator and checked the road was clear in his mirror, but the itch returned somewhere in his skull and he thought back to the young man killed in Knockfolá a few months before. He'd stumbled

home drunk, stepped off the curb and fallen in front of a van. His head landed right in the path of the wheels. The casket was closed at the wake.

Exhaling deeply, Felix yanked the handbrake and jumped out of the car, going towards the young man who was now keeping himself upright against the window of the Butcher's. "Need a lift home?"

The young man managed to lift his head and nod. He was tall, with a slender torso and broad shoulders. Felix guessed he was most likely in his early twenties, but his pale face was boyish, clean-shaven and blemish free, except for the darkness under his eyes.

"Where you going?" Felix asked.

"Fomore Road," he managed to mumble.

Felix rubbed at his hairless scalp. Fomore road was in the opposite direction of home and it was a bad road at that; leading up the mountain, surrounded by woodland and littered with potholes and sunken dips. But it was a clear night at least with a light wind, free of frost and a bright full moon. "Have you got money on ye, son? I'm not making my way out there unless I know you can pay. Too late for that nonsense."

The young man reached into the pocket of his black coat and pulled out a fifty-pound note. That was all Felix needed to see.

He opened the backdoor of the car and let him fall in. "Seatbelt on," he said as he walked around to the driver's side and got in, knowing rightly the chances of the young man co-ordinating that manoeuvre were slim. As he pulled back out onto the road, he glanced in the mirror at the body stretched across the backseats. "Sit up, son," he said. "Don't be getting sick in there, you hear me? You feel like you're going to vomit let me know and I'll pull over."

The young man just mumbled as he sat upright and pressed his head on the headrest behind him.

The town fell away as Felix drove further into the night. Usually, his passengers were lively and boisterous in the backseat, gossiping and giggling about the night's events, or even fighting and bickering with each other. If the back was full, he usually had someone in the passenger seat beside him, filling the journey with mindless small talk. Regardless of who they were or how they were feeling, they were always loud. But not the young man. He just sat weary-eyed and stared out the window. Felix reached for the radio and turned up the volume, feeling comfortable enough to let the radio fill the silence, but it only gave back static, no matter what station he turned it to. "Everyone must be asleep," he joked, but the young man didn't respond.

Felix continued to glance at him, unable to look at the road for more than ten seconds before feeling the compulsion to catch another glimpse. His pale skin almost glowed against his black clothes, which were plain but fashionable, especially when it caught the moonlight coming in through the window. "Good night, then?" he asked.

"Fine," the young man said, his voice suddenly sounding much clearer.

"Although I suspect it may get better."

"Oh? You got someone waiting for you at home?" Felix said with a smirk. "Or maybe this isn't home you're going to? Somebody else's?"

The young man just smiled.

Felix couldn't help but notice the change in his demeanour. He didn't seem that drunk anymore, in fact, he looked perfectly sober. His black hair had been brushed out of his face and it swooped back over his forehead in perfect dark waves. He looked older now too, still with his boyish good looks, but there was a gleam in his eyes that seemed ancient.

"Fomore road," Felix said as the trees began to appear on either side of the car. "How far up it are you? I didn't think there were many houses past the old mill."

"It's quite a bit up."

As the treeline grew taller, the air in the car cooled. Felix reached for the heater and turned the knob up fully. "I used to hear stories about this road." "I like stories," the young man said, a smile curling on his lips, "do tell."

"Ah, sure you know yourself, ghost stories; tales about strange creatures coming out of the trees and bloodcurdling screams in the night."

"And you don't believe any of them?"

"I was a teenager in the seventies. If you heard a bloodcurdling scream in the middle of the night back then, chances were it had a very human explanation. And if you saw someone out in a place like this at this time, they were probably burying something they didn't want anyone to find; guns, bodies, you name it. You'd just turn the other way and pretend you didn't see anything."

"So you're a hard man to scare?"

"Son, you don't know scary until you've come upon an army checkpoint in the middle of the night by yourself."

"Perhaps," the young man said, sitting forward in his seat, close enough that Felix could feel his breath against his neck. "But I'd argue fear is too complex to be contained to one event, one experience. It lies on...oh what's that phrase everyone loves to use nowadays," he rubbed his temple and then smiled manically, showing two rows of perfect white teeth, "ah yes, a spectrum - fear lies on a spectrum. It has many flavours; each one comes with its own scent, its own taste and texture. But it's all delicious."

"What are you on about?" Felix asked, looking in the mirror. The backseat was empty. There was no one there. Even the air felt light, as though it had never been disturbed by another body in the car.

"Scared now?" the young man said from the passenger seat beside him.

Felix screamed, slamming his foot on the brake and sending the car into a spin. The front wheel hit a deep pothole in the road and the tyre burst. The vehicle screeched as it came to a skidding halt. Felix looked up gripping the steering wheel. Smoke and the scent of burnt rubber pushed their way through the heating vents. He was shaking. His heart pounded, stirring up the sharp pain he promised his wife he'd speak to the doctor about.

His eyes shifted in their sockets to his left. The seat was empty. The young man had gone. And he wasn't going to look for him.

He pushed down on the accelerator. The car jerked forward a few inches before it stopped moving completely. The engine revved as more smoke rose out into the trees around him. He wasn't going anywhere unless he changed the tyre. There was a spare in the boot, but that would mean having to get out. It was either that or sit and wait for whatever was coming his way next.

He stepped out slowly, wiping the sweat from his forehead. His mouth was dry and sour. He moved a few steps at a time, constantly turning his head in every direction. As he opened the boot, he grabbed the wrench from above the spare wheel and gripped it tight.

"Do you need a hand?" a voice said from behind him.

The young man stood tall and proud in the middle of the road with his hands in the pockets of his long coat. He was beautiful and horrifying under the moon.

Felix moved back towards the driver's side door, holding the wrench out in front of him and trying to keep his tears behind his eyes. "Stay back! Get away!"

The young man's smile stretched from ear to ear, "I thought you didn't scare easily?"

"What do you want?"

The young man walked towards him, swaying gently as he did like he was dancing to music that wasn't there. "Do you know what fear does to a person, Felix? Prolonged fear? It eats away at them; chews at their mind, their sanity, like a parasite, feasting and gorging itself until it kills its host. It's cruel and divine and it's happening to you."

Felix half-closed the door, standing behind it and pushing himself tight against the car. "What? I'm...I'm fine! Nothing's happening to me!"

"But it is," the young man said with a laugh.

"I'm not afraid!"

"Oh, you are, Felix. You've been living in fear since that night. Since you kicked that young man out of your car and left him there to wander drunkenly into the road to meet his end."

Felix couldn't hold the tears back any longer. "That wasn't my fault!"

"All that guilt and fear has been living inside you; churning your gut, feasting on your sanity and whispering in your ear; deceiving you, tricking you." The young man grabbed hold of the car door and yanked it open. "It called out to me, Felix. You wanted to go home tonight, back to your wife and your bed warm soft bed, but instead, you listened to that voice, and you came for me."

Felix swung the wrench into the air and brought it down hard against the young man, but he grabbed it and snapped it like a burnt match. He finally began to sob. "Are you going to kill me?"

"No," the young man whispered, "you're not dying tonight, old man. I'm going to open up your mind and lay it on a silver platter for all that madness to consume. I'm going to let it spew out of you and then I'm going to feed off it for years until your poor body can't take it any longer. Then you'll die." The whites of his already dark eyes were swallowed by shadows. He placed both of his hands against the man's bald head like he was cradling a crystal ball and then he smiled once more. "Now hold on. This is going to burn."

A Turn of the Cards

Mathew Gostelow

She cursed me when she read my cards that day.

Thanks to her gift, life held no surprises for Lily. So, when I got stumbling drunk and shouted that I was leaving - walking out on her, on our unborn child, leaving the carnny - her tears had no anger in them, just bitter disappointment. After she cried, Lily read for me. One last time. The cards turned. Ten of Diamonds. Queen of Hearts. Two of Spades. We talked them through, in her tent by the sideshow. Then she let me go.

Ten of Diamonds - Beginnings, Endings, Money

I was a barker. Best in the business, I always said. But that was a lie. Telling lies, that's what I'm good at. Being a barker is all about hiding the truth. "See nature's most twisted oddity," I would shout at the marks. "The two-headed baby." I'd never mention it's just a papier-mâché model. The sideshow did well on my watch because I had the spiel, the silver tongue, the right lie to tempt every punter. You see a tight-lipped, angry woman, you tell her "Ranjit the Fakir will pierce his tongue with a needle, before your eyes." She's here for the viciousness of it. You don't mention that Ranjit is really Richard, and the most Indian thing about him is the rubber in his fake tongue.

You see a grim, grey pair - the kind of couple who avoid each other's eye - and you tell them about "Alyona - just 21 and covered tip to toe in tattoos. A Living art gallery. This shy young beauty will reveal every inch of her intricate decoration for you, exclusively tonight." They both want that thrill, you can bet. Of course, Alyona is pushing 40 nowadays and keeps her bathing suit on throughout the show, but we don't want to spoil the illusion before you buy a ticket.

Concealing the truth from Lily came naturally - the truth that I was losing cards in every town

we visited, gambling cash that should have been for her and the baby.

Queen of Hearts - Relationships, Truth, A Woman

There was another woman, of course. I met her at the card spot in the last town but one. She had big, frightened eyes, like she needed saving. She was an escape. I could be someone else with her, someone different, someone good. She still wanted to believe my lies. Her company was like stepping out of the stifling sawdust-stink of the sideshow into a fresh, clear night, full of mystery and promise.

I kept seeing her. And when we moved the show, I brought her to a flaky guesthouse nearby, wasting more money. I think Lily knew. I never could keep anything from her. We didn't talk much anymore, but she heard the words I left unsaid just as clearly as the spiel I barked from the stage.

Two of Spades - Communication, Problems, Solutions

Eventually, I told Lily I was leaving. She cried, she read for me, she let me go. I shacked up in the guest house with the new woman. We drank. I told her lies, pretended I was someone good, and kind, and caring.

Then I woke up this morning and found I couldn't speak. Before, my silver tongue was everything. It was my livelihood, my armour. But now my patter's gone. My throat closes and a gasping croak is all I can muster. I can't tell the new woman I've changed my ways. I can't say I love her.

It's Lily's work, I feel it. She hexed my spiel when she read my cards that final time. In my heart, I know she hasn't stopped me talking. I could speak to the new woman if I wished. But the curse means I cannot tell a lie, so now I find I've nothing left to say at all.

* This story was created with the guidance of the oracle. To read more about how to use this (specifically tarot!) as a part of your writing process, click [here](#).



The Beast that Waits and Waits

Rachael Llewellyn

I am afraid that my sister will do me harm.

I think she has done harm, many times in fact, to a great number of people. Nobody in our village has witnessed her do this. I think if accusations were to be made, there would be few who would even suspect her. But I know it, I think I have always known. It is why I move my chair in front of my door at night. It is why I sit here awake in the dark.

There are nights I hear whispering; I hear the voice of my sister and something that is not my sister with her. Nights, I see her leave her room. I heard the click of the front door opening and closing. Once I rushed out and spied her from the kitchen window. She was walking towards the woods. I wanted to follow her; I was so sure I had moved to open the front door myself. But then suddenly it was morning, and I was in my bed asleep dressed in my shoes and cloak.

Something is wrong in our village and in my heart. I know that my sister is responsible.

It started with Mara, the Innkeeper's youngest child. She disappeared on a dark, moonless night several months ago. The men found her footprints in the mud outside her house. It looked as though she had climbed from her bedroom window and left her home of her own volition. The footprints wandered through the village and into the woods where she strayed from the path and into the thorny undergrowth. A day of heavy rain obscured her path and though the hunters searched for days, Mara was never recovered.

The second girl, Eliza, the Miller's lovely daughter, was seen before she vanished. It was the night of the harvest festival. Long after the wine was finished and the campfires burned out, a group of men spotted Eliza as she passed them by the well. She had not removed the crown of irises from her hair, and she wore only one shoe. They had thought her silly from the

dancing and the wine, and they paid her no mind as she followed the path that twisted out of the village. The next morning, she was gone. The hunters found tracks heading into the woods, further this time, but Eliza's trail ran cold.

A month ago, was Laurence, the pastor's pretty son. His mother found him in the kitchen, staring at the bright moon in the sky. She tried to rouse him back to bed, but he responded to her questions as if asleep though his eyes remained wide. He told her that a fox had been waiting outside his window, watching him and that he had been waiting for the moon to shine so brightly as to scare it away.

She dismissed his ramblings as dreams and returned to her bed. But in the morning Laurence was gone. He had left the front door open behind him and left without his shoes or cloak. The hunters found markings on the trees where he appeared to have stumbled and hit his head. Footprints to suggest he dawdled, back and forth at the edge of the village. After that, like Mara and Eliza, Laurence was just lost.

My sister and I took bread from our father's shop to the innkeeper when Mara went missing. She sat with her while she cried. She did the same when Eliza disappeared. She let the miller cling to her like a child as he howled out in misery. But as she comforted the pastor with her oh so sweet words, I noticed the flicker of a smile as the pastor took his head in his hands to weep.

But it is more than that. For I had known my sister to be jealous of Mara. The innkeeper and her husband had bought her fine dresses. Our father lives modestly. He does not buy his daughters fine clothes and trinkets.

She hated Eliza too. They had been close, the two of them would walk arm-in-arm, whispering and laughing. But then something soured between them. I never knew what. But Eliza had taken to sneering at my sister when they passed each other on the street, and she would exchange her whispers with other girls. My sister would not discuss what had happened. She held her head high and answered irritably if I pushed the matter further.

And Laurence had been a favourite of hers. She used to stay late to collect the prayer books at the end of Sunday service so she could linger in his presence a little longer. He never noticed, of course. He had grown up being observed and admired by all. Girls and boys were so keen to stand in the sunlight of his smile.

But as the weeks passed of him not noticing, eventually my sister stopped lingering around the chapel after service. She hardly looked his way at all. Not that he noticed that either. To Laurence, I doubt my sister registered on his existence at all. I said so to her once and a day later there were pins in my shoes, though she denied placing them there.

After Laurence disappeared, the pastor began urging our village not to let their young people out at night, to lock our doors and be vigilant of any strangers lurking in the woods. I believe the consensus among our parents is that a stranger is responsible. An unknown, sinister figure, luring children from the village into the woods for insidious purposes.

The younger children have since spent their free hours imagining this phantom. They claim to have seen him. A man with fire on his face. No, with long white hair and black eyes. Red eyes. No eyes. A man who speaks with the voice of a dog, a bird, a devil. The butcher's boy claims to have narrowly escaped this man while doing his morning errands. The doctor's twin daughters say that this man scratches at their window with his long, clawed nails.

Not one of them claims that the thing that wanders the village at night is small and slim with long golden hair, a comely face and dark eyes that burn bright. They claim to be alert, peering out of their windows in the gloomy darkness of the night, wary of some stranger. And yet not one of them has ever seen her.

The moon was full and bright in the sky last night. I had moved my chair against my door and armed myself with a pair of embroidery scissors. My sister left her room and stood outside my door all night. I called out and she laughed at me, laughed in a voice that was not hers. It was then I saw them at my window, out in the fog, Mara and Eliza and Laurence dancing in a circle around and around. I cried out and they vanished as quickly as they appeared, though out in the hall I heard the clatter of three sets of feet.

"Dear sister, when are you going to let me in?"

Dead Girls Need Therapy Too Ashtyn Layne

I pity the lips of the dead girls,
unable to attach their lips to
material desperation.
Unable to satisfy the oral fixation.

They come and go as they please.
Their own fluidity filling entire rooms
and buildings and
haunted carousels and when
the space I occupy seems more
like the oxygen around it,
how am I not to wish
to be one of them?

Not a single bruise from this life
has disappeared.
The scars of an autopsy unfinished,
performed by the ghost
of the one laying still.

Denial is not always avoidant.
Not always the passive dream held
by the midnight escapist.
No action is more present
than the denial of one's own death.

So the dead girls stand at the edge
just waiting
for somebody to finally find us.
Afraid of being seen,
yet still terrified
of being forgotten.

You Should Have Stayed Home Felicia Change

You should have known not to enter
a haunted house with people who
do not believe in ghosts they laugh
and joke while you thread lightly
down the hall avoiding mirrors
because you know what you'll see

They do not sense the lingering dead
don't feel breathing down their necks
notice the flickering lights or the
creaking floors or the shadows lurking
behind open and closed doors

But you feel them float in the walls
closing in and reaching out wanting you
to join them for your heart to stop and
your bones to break for you to die
and be reborn so you can stay

Creature, With Melissa Martini

Content Warning

Monsters, Mental Illness, Blood, Injury, Wounds, Suicide Mention, Apocalyptic Themes

I stopped at a Dunkin' Donuts for a coffee. In the parking lot, I leaned against my car and lit a cigarette, unintentionally scoping out my surroundings as I inhaled and held the smoke in my lungs. I breathed out through my nose. New Jersey parking lots always felt like this early in the morning: like an abandoned movie set haunted by hungover ghosts.

The walk from my car to the door wasn't far, but the windchill crept down my neck. Pinprick tingles wove through my body like I'd just been shocked by ice rather than electricity. Dunkin' Donuts had metal door handles, cold and moisture-slicked from last night's leftover fog. The inside was reminiscent of the backrooms, but I entered anyway. A lightbulb flickered behind the counter.

I ordered a large hot coffee from a girl whose sister I might've gone to high school with. I couldn't be sure and didn't care enough to ask. I considered a donut and decided to treat myself. Double chocolate. I debated buying one for my therapist but I didn't know what flavor she would like, so I made a mental note to ask her when I saw her. Which would've been in 12 minutes if I hadn't dropped my change and spent a handful of seconds picking it up, apologizing to the cashier, and fisting the coins into my front pocket. Instead, it was in 13.

I had visions of where my world was headed - disaster that would only come to fruition if I told someone about it. But I couldn't survive much longer keeping it inside. The visions manifested; each night when I slept, I lived another life. In that life, I told someone about it and New Jersey was nothing but a wasteland.

I told this to my therapist in simple terms. She listened with interest - genuine interest, I could tell, because she had a tendency to interrupt. Ask

clarifying questions. Make assumptions.

"These sound like what others would refer to as dreams," she said finally, thoughtful expressions animating her face as she considered what I'd shared.

"They're not dreams. They're periods of time in which I'm living a future version of my life that is the direct result of discussing said version of my life," I explained again.

"And in this 'future version of life,' New Jersey is..." she started, and I said it with her when she finished: "a wasteland."

"Yes, so technically, I've just destroyed the state by having this conversation with you. Congratulations, you're partly to blame for it, too!" I mockingly clapped my hands. She didn't laugh. It was obvious she didn't believe me, but I let her continue analyzing and taking notes.

"You're an INFJ," she declared, as if my admittance to being able to see the future was what told her that, not the "INFJ" pin on my backpack. It was next to a bi pride pin and a poorly sewn on patch depicting a chocolate frosted donut topped with rainbow sprinkles. It was sticking out its tongue. I realized at that moment: I no longer wanted to get her a donut. I just nodded. "The symbols you're seeing in your dreams may be linked to your anxieties about the future."

I didn't bother trying to convince her that I hadn't been anxious about the future until I first saw it. Lived it. Experienced it wholly. Embodied it. The therapy session wasn't fruitful and involved me trying to sell her on the possibility the spectral sewer rat in my visions wasn't representing my abusive ex-boyfriend: "...and what does this spectral sewer rat look like?"

I had been approached by the spectral sewer rat whilst camping out in an abandoned 7 Eleven. In the future, the world existed in quiet, toned down ticks of time, as if someone had turned its saturation down to half and its volume down to a quarter. I made a bed behind the counter using my coat

I'd developed a routine. As soon as I fell asleep and found myself waking up in the future, I followed three steps:

- 1. First, I found a safe place to sleep. Sometimes I was already in a safe location - future me knew how to take care of herself, so she often had better safe spots than present me. I was grateful for the nights she let me skip step 1.*
- 2. Next, food, which sometimes future me had packed in her bag. When that was the case, I tried to leave her as much as possible, and when I was on my own, I always searched for non-perishables for her.*
- 3. Last step, survive.*

Venturing into the store, I caught a chill, the brush of a ghostly touch on the back of my neck. The rat. Startled, I stumbled into the coffee station, long dried out, knocking over a stack of paper cups. Creatures like these only ever showed up on nights the temperature dropped.

The spectral sewer rat reminded me of the Rodents of Unusual Size, if R.O.U.S.'s were real but phantasmic and a faded newspaper gray with deep, bloodred eyes. It backed away, defensive, so I kneeled down to hold out my hand. It let out a throaty growl. Its teeth flared, expanding until they took up the majority of its head.

When it snapped at me, I fell back. It climbed on top of me, big enough to plant two sharp sets of claws on my shoulders. Warm blood pooled on either side of my head. The metallic odor was lost to the scent of sewage wafting off its body, translucent but maintaining substance. I struggled beneath it, thick strings of saliva dripping from its teeth to my cheeks. Releasing one of my shoulders to bite into my clavicle, it roughly flipped me over before pinning me from behind.

I relaxed into it, letting the weight of its body press me into the cool wooden planks beneath me. I closed my eyes and breathed, trying to remember this timeline couldn't kill me or it would cease to exist. The rat

shifted its weight and my clavicle ached into the floor, pulling a scream agony out of my throat. Through hazy blinks, I saw a horned creature approach us. It yanked the rat off of me and flung it across the room.

"Thank you," I said out of habit - the creature, with its poor posture, horns, and dragon-like wings, still appeared humanoid. It opened its mouth and let out a deep roar in the direction of the rat, ensuring it left the 7 Eleven before locking the doors. As the creature approached me, I noted its masculine features - charcoal gray skin blending into the world around us like a comic book with a sharp jawline and pointed horns and wingtips, gold eyes.

"Are you alright?" He asked, and future me's body calmed in his presence. She knew him. I knew him. I hesitated in my response, prompting: "...Are you not yourself self right now?"

"No, I suppose not," I replied, "But I know you're safe."

"I am," he wrapped strong arms around me and my body didn't tense up at the touch. His scent was familiar - white cedar, pine, and forest fires. "She told me about you."

I knew him to his core, second nature, because we were made of the same stardust, constellations forming monsters instead of god or goddesses. Abandoned by our mothers. Unloved by our loved ones. Cursed into night sky wastelands. It came back to me as if I was living both lives simultaneously for a moment - retaining my memories and future me's memories.

I landed in the wastelands in a pink stork swaddle rocket ship, wrapped around my adult body. It still smelled of cigarette smoke and salty beach air. Muggy with ash like the back of a shitty bar. Warm and moist like the space between two beach houses, pinned against the wall of one.

He flew over my basket and spotted me struggling, swooped down to retrieve me. We fought off glitching QR code wolves. Watercolor wooly mammoths. Oil pastel raccoons sketched on graph paper. They wanted us dead. If his tiger's eye gaze was sunshine desperate to peek through gray

clouds, their piercing red irises were acid rain.

In the 7 Eleven, I showed him to my makeshift bed and we settled in to address the hot, rosewood blood pouring out of my body. Wrapped us in his wings and held me close. I had the sense that I'd saved him in some detrimental way - a way I couldn't quite recall but needed to.

As if suicidal, the timeline consistently tried to kill me. But something always reigned it back in. Sometimes that was finally finding something to eat, and other times that was the Jersey Devil saving me from a spectral sewer rat in a 7 Eleven. When I woke up from that vision, I decided to tell someone about it. I made the appointment on my way to Dunkin' Donuts, scoring a last minute cancellation. Fate was on my side.

“So, now that you've told me about it, it has no use for you?” She spoke slowly, digesting each portion of her question as it came out of her mouth.

“Yeah. I'm pretty sure it was just trying to torment me enough to get me to talk.” I shrugged. “I have a feeling I'll be able to sleep easy tonight.”

Despite knowing where the future was headed now that I'd cemented it in place, I felt a sense of serenity. Because I knew I'd eventually meet him and we would hold our tongues out to catch black peppercorn snowflakes and build snowmen out of dusty gray snow just to button them up with thirteen dark chunks of coal.



Blackout Drunk Poem
Erica Leslie Weidner

and her arms
legs bare
long, dark hair.
future prediction
skills
are some kind of fortune-telling gimmick
I'm not here to have my fortune told,
neon sign
dark lipstick
she's sexy as hell.
lock eyes, and
it burns like fire.
Her words are soft and slippery;
Am I losing my mind,
transfixed by
her fiery burn

her platform heels,
dark purple lipstick
the dangerously weighted question:
she kisses me
my hands are tangled in her long, dark hair.
I never knew that this was a possible future.
But I
on edge
she looks at me with
worry
concerned eyes,
her honest,
while she
struts away from me,
I flinch away from it.
pain in my eyes.

About Our Authors

In Order Of Appearance

SOUM

SOUM (Screams of Unfettered Minds) is a collaboration of three women from New Zealand, who prefer their art and poetry to speak for them. This newly-formed trio describe their style as raw, unpolished, tongue-in-cheek, unapologetic, unfiltered, born from years of shadow-work and presented straight from the heart. They champion mental awareness and social issues and gain inspiration from the struggles of everyday people; the darker aspects of their physical, mental and spiritual battles.

They can be found on Twitter: @SOUMpoets and website: www.unfetterednfts.com

Samuel Best

Samuel Best's first novel, Shop Front, was described as "engaging, moving and fulfilling" and "genuinely shocking". He has published a number of short stories in the UK, America, and Europe - most recently with Ghost Orchid Press, The Wild Hunt, and Firewords - and he founded Octavius Magazine before running Aloe during the first COVID lockdown. When he is not writing he teaches English in the east end of Glasgow.

You can find him haunting social media @storiesbysamuel.

Julia Biggs

Julia Biggs is a writer and freelance art historian. She lives in Cambridge, UK. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Streetcake Magazine, Green Ink Poetry, The Primer, The Crow's Quill Magazine, Words & Whispers, Not Deer Magazine and Hungry Ghost Magazine. Her current research explores the delicious excesses of the Gothic mode.

Renee Ng

Renee is a Singaporean actress, writer and poet currently based in London, and her work frequently features themes and elements inspired by folklore, fairytales, mythology and the occult. She has been previously published by Wingless Dreamer, Celestite Poetry, and Acropolis Journal.

Robyn Perros

Robyn Perros is a South African writer, researcher, and multimedia artist. She holds a Master of Arts in Creative Writing from Rhodes University where she is currently a PhD scholar. Her work has been exhibited/published/presented in multiple spaces such as the KwaZulu Natal Society of the Arts, Open Plan Studio, Theotherroom, Symposium for Artistic Research in Analog Photography Helsinki 2022, University of Bath's Institutions & Death Conference 2022, Nature is Louder, Isele Magazine, Decolonial Passage, Mahala, Zigzag, and Ons Klyntji zine. Her PhD research is looking at online death practices in South Africa. She lives in Makhanda.

Follow her at robynperros.tumblr.com / Instagram @robynperros

Joshua Luke Cable

Joshua Luke Cable was born in Barnsley, South Yorkshire. He studied Filmmaking at the Northern Film School in Leeds. Whether it's a screenplay or a short story he has a penchant for working class narratives which encounter the weird tale. His works are heavily inspired by folk music and cosmic horror. Previously he has written for tabletop roleplaying games.

Asun Álvarez

Asun Álvarez is a writer and translator with an interest in language, history, mythology, and general nerdery. A graduate with distinction from the MA in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia and a published poet, she recently completed her first novel, a historical fantasy mystery set in 16th-century Ireland.

Website: asunalvarez.com

Twitter: AsunWrites

Amber Marsh

Born between Disney and Warner Bros. Studios, Amber Marsh is originally from Burbank, California, the "Media Capital of the World". She has a long and diverse background in performance and is an award-winning writer for her poetry, short stories and scripts. Amber has a Master's Degree, with distinction, in Television Fiction Writing from Glasgow Caledonian University. She currently lives in Birmingham, England.

A.L. Davidson

A.L. Davidson (she/they) is a writer who specializes in massive space operas and tiny disturbances. She writes stories about ghosts, grief, isolation, space exploration, eco-horror, queerness, and the human condition. They live with their cat, Jukebox, in Kansas City.

Website: <http://disturbancesbyalycia.weebly.com>

Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/AlyciaDavidsonAuthor>

Twitter: MayBMockingbird

TikTok and Instagram: MaybeMockingbird

Gemma Elliott

Gemma Elliott (she/her) lives in Glasgow, Scotland, and works in local government. She has most recently published short fiction in Neon, Crow & Cross Keys, and Truffle Magazine.

Gemma can be found on Twitter @drgemmaelliott.

Enda Mulholland

Enda Mulholland is a writer and teacher from Co. Derry in Northern Ireland. In December 2020 he graduated from Queen's University Belfast with his Master's in Creative Writing.

His work has been featured in Púca Magazine (Issue 1 - The Púca) and Paper Lanterns YA Literary Journal (Issue 7 - No Longer Us). He is currently working on his first short story anthology.

About Our Authors

In Order Of Appearance

Mathew Gostelow

Mathew Gostelow (he/him) is a dad, husband, and fledgling writer, living in Birmingham, UK. Some days he wakes early and writes strange tales. If you catch him staring into space, he is either thinking about Twin Peaks or cooked breakfasts. His stories and poems have been published by Lucent Dreaming, Janus Literary, The Ghastling, Ellipsis, Stanchion, Cutbow Quarterly, voidspace, and others. He was nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 2022 and has won prizes in contests run by Bag of Bones Press, Bear Creek Gazette, and Beagle North.

You can find him on Twitter: @MatGost.

Rachael Llewellyn

Rachael Llewellyn (she/her) is a novelist living in Wales. She has published two novels and a collection of short stories. Her short fiction has appeared in numerous anthologies and journals, including Haunted Words, Sword & Kettle Press and Polari Press. She is a PhD candidate at Swansea University, working on her thesis on trauma and memory in folktales.

Ashtyn Layne

Ashtyn Layne is a poet and punk rock enthusiast from Massachusetts. They published their first chapbook, Late Night Train Lights, under their previous name with Ibbetson Street Press in 2018, and have since featured work with publications such as Dream Noir, Cardinal Sins Journal, and Awakened Voices.

They can be found on twitter @projectashtyn.

Felicia Change

Felicia Change graduated with a BA in Creative Writing and a minor in Caffeine Consumption. Her work has been featured or is forthcoming in the YOU magazine, CommuterLit, Coffin Bell, and Havok. When she isn't carving stories of magic and mischief, she is traveling, exploring museums, or on the lookout for a dog to pet.

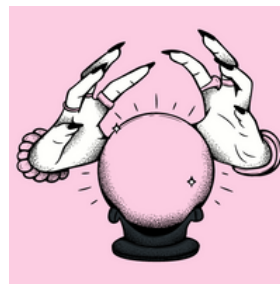
You can find her @feliciachange on socials.

Melissa Martini

Melissa Martini (she/her) is the Founder & EIC of Moss Puppy Magazine. A Capricorn from New Jersey, Melissa received her Master's in English with a focus in Creative Writing from Seton Hall University. Her debut chapbook, Faded Fur & Stripped Skin, was published by Bottlecap Press.

Erica Leslie Weidner

Erica Leslie Weidner is based in New York City. Her work has appeared in Decoded Pride Anthology and is forthcoming in Delicate Friend and Scrawl Place. She is currently in school to become a librarian, and she just started her first lit mag, **underscore_magazine**.



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