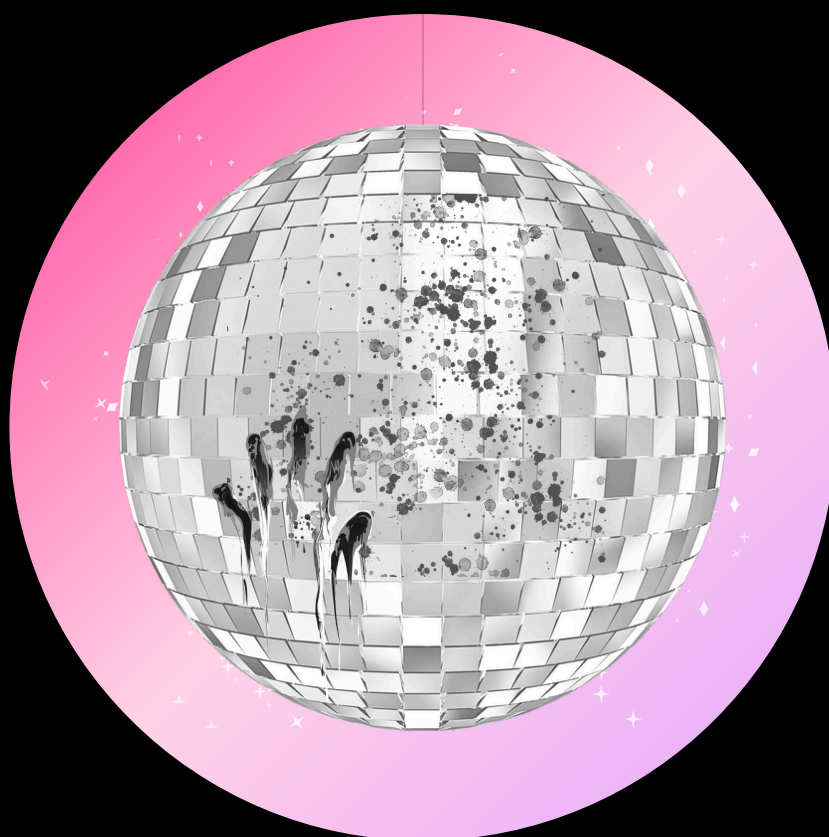


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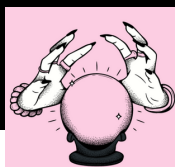
# DIVINATIONS MAGAZINE

FOR HORROR AUTHORS OF THE FUTURE



## DISCO

CHELSKI, RAFAL • DAVIDSON, A.L. • DATSYK, EV • GRIFFIN, NOLL •  
HUFKIE, M. L. • JACKSON, ESRA • JONES, ROBERT • LOGAN, SAM •  
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August 2024

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# DISCO

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## Editor's Letter

Dear Reader,

For the fourth issue of **Divinations Magazine**, we invite **you** to join the party.

**Disco**, is not only a celebration of the iconic era long-gone, but a descent into the feverish, surreal underbelly of the dancefloor. Imagine: a house party gone wrong, a night-club spiralling into chaos, a Carrie-inspired slasher. In this issue, the mirror ball's sparkle can quickly turn sinister.

We have gathered an eclectic mix of stories, poems, and essays that capture the essence of the above. This collection will transport you to a time when the dance floor was a sanctuary and the night was full of endless possibilities. Featuring the usual horrific twist, of course.

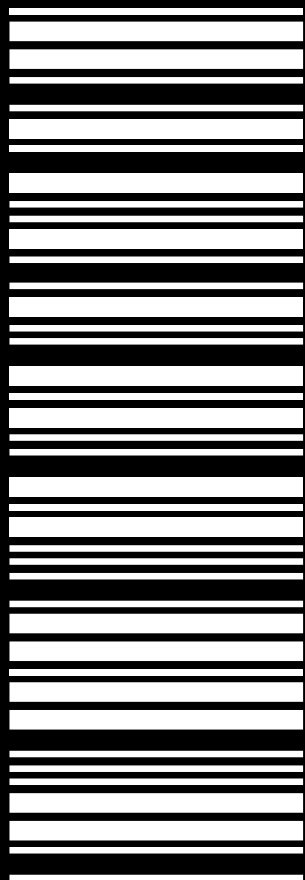
We are incredibly fortunate to feature contributions from a talented array of writers and artists who have brought their unique perspectives to the table. Each piece is a glittering gem, a fragment of the mirror ball that lights up our imagination. Special thanks go out to our dedicated **Editorial Team**. Their tireless efforts in curating, editing, and perfecting each piece have been instrumental in bringing this issue to life. It is their passion and commitment that ensure **Divinations Magazine** continues to shine.

As you flip through these pages, may you feel the energy, the excitement, and the unbridled joy that **disco** embodies... and maybe a little terror, too.

Stay Spooky,

*Amy M. Douglas*





A012123012

**Attendee**  
Noll Griffin

The shoes kept multiplying right at the front door, that wasn't  
Impossible to explain, someone might dance with heels in hand,  
Leave comfortable flats under the coat rack sagging under  
The weight of coats in the dead of summer. Even that,  
It's an outfit. It looks good. The cake on the kitchen counter  
Didn't always have those amber drops  
Like spilled shower gel on the regimented frosting tiles but  
I'm sure it's good, local honey perhaps,  
Who even brought that? She went into the bedroom but  
She already left, and brought herself back, and  
Her face in the bathroom that won't stop laughing.  
When I went downstairs I didn't expect to find  
Everyone I'd just met already, did I know  
The playlist wasn't chosen to be an atonal wave. That  
Conversation of humming syllables meant nothing,  
How was your, hello I haven't seen you in, have another,  
Never finished. The window we wanted to climb out of was brightest  
On the building's astonished facade, an infected wound between brick  
I knew I saw you all up there just a moment ago, I  
Don't know what I saw. I tried to dance and make it fine that everyone  
The glass pane swung open six floors up in a gasp,  
Spilling wings of white noise into the night.

## A Bloody Mess

Halle Preston

The Year Six disco, unlike those before it, was more than just a chance to wear your sister's eyeshadow and play duck-duck-goose in the dark. It was a chance to determine who was cool and who wasn't, before high school did the proper branding. Not showing up was considered uncool – turning up **wrong** was infinitely worse. And leaving early, everyone agreed, was just a bit sad.

And so, I had come, and so I stayed, in the unrecognisable hall whose waxed floorboards danced with colourful lights, and whose walls were stapled with stars snipped from shiny card. A DJ played last month's party tunes to muffle the shuffles and yawns and amens still lingering from that morning's assembly. In the canteen, on long tables which usually bore plastic trays and milk cartons, was spread a fruity, unnatural feast of sweets and juice drinks.

The night's theme was neon, so I had done what any eleven-year-old girl would do and slapped a whole tube of glowsticks onto my forearms. Paired with a tutu and legwarmers, I was radioactively radiant, or so Grandma had told me (without the radioactive part) as she sent me off to the car with Granddad.

However, my off-the-shoulder t-shirt emblazoned with the word GEEK wasn't such a hit with my fellow partygoers. My proudly displayed red flag had set off the bull. The bull wearing sticky lipgloss, a scrunchie, and a white camisole that just, like, effortlessly glowed under the UV. **Why didn't Grandma think of that?** I cursed, failing to pierce the plastic seal of my synthetic orange drink as Hayley and her herd approached.

"Nice top," she said. The snap of her chewing gum punctuated the sentence sharply as she scrutinised me with her uncomfortably blue eyes.

Her followers flanked her wearing less-exciting versions of the same outfit. Their dull stares couldn't cut like Hayley's, only act as stones to sharpen hers on. And when they all walked off, leaving me with those two uninspiring words, I could've sworn their laughter harmonised.

I lurked by the climbing apparatus, sipping my drink through a too-thin

straw. Josh Matthews was chewing sweets nearby, and after verifying with a few nervous glances that I was there – neither a ghost nor a trick of the eye – he awkwardly approached. He started asking me questions like "so you like reading?" (I did) and "weren't you on the girl's football team last year?" (I wasn't). I quickly got bored of this and retreated to the bathroom to reapply my invisible lip balm.

Camping in the end cubicle with my trainers up on the toilet seat, I heard the door bashed open.

"—looking stupid and not saying anything back. Plus, her top! People haven't worn that stuff for at least a year, seriously."

Hayley and co. either didn't know or didn't mind that there was someone listening. Probably the latter.

"Well, she does live with her grandparents," one of them – judging by the apathetic mumble, it was Roisin – offered. "Old fashioned taste?"

I pulled a face of approval at her dig, thinking maybe she should have been leading this whole operation, when the other one piped up.

"Did you hear that when her parents died, there was blood allll over the back garden, and they had to like, hosepipe it down afterwards? On the jet setting!"

I rolled my eyes. Not true. Well, not **entirely** true – it had been the cone setting, I believe. Anyway, I was dismayed to realise that the story was still the buzz of the town despite happening nearly five years ago (I mean, talk about old-fashioned taste!) and even now people couldn't get their facts straight.

"Everyone's heard that, Jasmin," Hayley snapped.

"Just saying, probably that's why she's weird. Like, if I saw all that blood, I'd fully throw up all over myself."

"No, she's always been weird. Like, in nursery, she made a wasp sting me – I swear I already told you this."

There was a clatter at the sinks, and I figured Hayley had finished

touching up her mascara, or perhaps applying bite and sting relief to the little twinkle of a scar on the back of her neck. Roisin responded.

“I still don’t get how you can make a wasp–”

“She just **did**, alright? And you know what, my mum used to speak to her mum sometimes, and she said the lot of them were right freaks. So, I don’t care if they spontaneously combusted. In fact, they probably bloody exploded themselves.”

“Hayley!” Jasmin gasped.

An insectile buzz emanated from the LED strips overhead.

“I don’t think they actually–” Roisin tried to comment, before the bathroom dropped into darkness.

A shriek erupted from all three girls as they poured outside, running back toward the hall as Jasmin exclaimed “I told you those toilets are haunted!” I waved a hand above my head to trigger the motion sensor. Even as the lights flickered back on, I was rummaging in my bag for the green marker I’d been using to sign people’s shirts in the last week of school. I used it to scrawl, in big, defiant letters on the cubicle door, the first thing I thought of:

#### GET LOST HAYLEY THOMPSON

Weak, but it would at least make her snort when she read it, and her annoyed snort was very ugly. As I left the stall, I started to think I should have written something stronger, like **HAYLEY THOMPSON EATS SHIT** or **I HOPE YOU SPONTANEOUSLY COMBUST HAYLEY THOMPSON**, and then I saw my face in the mirror.

Bleeding again. I sighed, pulling a wad of paper towels from the dispenser and stuffing them into my face. Staring at my reflection, at the tissue getting wetter and redder, an unpleasant, sick feeling gushed out of me.

I hadn’t thought I’d cared about Hayley. Whatever she and her friends did to me, even embarrassing me in front of the whole class, they could barely get a reaction. I had already seen and felt so much that I was basically emotionally clingfilmed: the hurt and shame rolled right off me, and everything and everyone was obscured by a plasticky sheen.

But it wasn’t what she’d said about me that had pierced the film. Clearly, she hadn’t been taught as I had not to speak ill of the dead – because you never know who’ll hear you, or what they can do.

I flushed the bloody paper, the rush of water shushing me conspiratorially as I stepped outside. The corridor I had walked all day had become, by night, darker and twistier than a serpent’s belly. I stood there disoriented until Josh Matthews was rushing toward me with his index finger in his mouth. Flushing pink, he stopped to explain himself.

“Cut myself on the apparatus. It’s bleeding like mad.”

He showcased the wound, almost proudly, as I stepped closer.

“Oh, don’t touch it, it’s uh–”

I grabbed his finger.

“Right... okay.”

He didn’t protest further, but seeing he was uncomfortable, I lowered my eyes. I felt the blood slick on my palm and squeezed, suddenly, almost a reflex.

“Ow!” he yelped, leaping back with the big eyes and skinny, taut limbs of a prey animal. It dawned on me that situations like this might be why people thought me strange. But when he looked down at his finger and saw the flow had stopped, his shoulders relaxed.

“What was that?” he asked.

“It’s just a trick my mum taught me,” I revealed, and as I found myself doing whenever I mentioned my parents, I forced a smile, to scare the shadow of Death away. My smile was supposedly freakish (too many teeth, not enough lips, I’d overheard Hayley saying in the changing rooms), but Josh didn’t seem too disturbed by it.

“Oh, well... thanks?”

Still, he scuttled off to run it under the tap anyway, either not believing it was healed, or keen to scrub the girl germs from his skin.

I didn't mind him, I supposed as I skirted past the other pupils, all absorbed in some game, to secure the quiet front corner, behind the speakers and beyond the splatter radius of the garish disco lights. I hadn't noticed, though, that the door leading under the stage was wide open next to me, and so when its buzzing yellow bulb was yanked into life, the light swarmed out, startling and stinging my eyes.

The stairs looked enticingly easy to descend, slide-smooth in the shadow, not a splinter to be seen. Even so, I'd decided I wouldn't be going down even before Hayley showed up.

"What've you been doing down there?" she interrogated, peering downstairs. "Let me guess... hiding? Stealing?"

A garishly red drink sloshed about in her hand. It almost looked too viscous to be juice.

"Oh! Or maybe your mate Josh is down there too?"

I said nothing, just looked at the liquid, pictured it seeping into soil, slithering between paving stones. She could never know. None of them could. Except me.

"Aww, but you two would be **so** cute together," she told me with a vicious smile, her oversweet tone turning my stomach. "No, really."

Extracting no response, she huffed, hopping down the first couple of steps.

"Sorry, but I might have to tell Miss Flaherty I caught you messing about under the stage."

This should have worried me. Miss Flaherty loved Hayley about as much as she disliked me. However, I remained calm even as Hayley descended further, eyes shining with mischief and malice as she passed into the light.

"Oh my God!" she shouted when she reached the bottom, channelling her overbaked performance as the Fairy Godmother in that year's production of Cinderella, but thankfully more distant. "It's a right mess down here."

I heard a box tip, the contents clattering out, though from above it was

as hushed as sand spilling from a bucket. I knew if she told on me, they'd believe her. Unfortunate things seemed to happen to, around, because of me. While Hayley capitalised on my misfortune, most of it was down to me, whether I was trying or not.

I knew she was still talking, still destroying, but I didn't get a chance to hear the rest. Because though I hadn't reached out, the door was closing. And though I hadn't slid the latch across, it was locked.

And though I was far, far away from the dangling cord which worked the bulb, the sliver of light under the door was extinguished.

**Weird**, I thought, I felt, as I watched this. But not weird in the bad way they always used it.

If Hayley screamed, if she clawed her way back up the stairs, if she pounded against the door, or if she didn't, I wouldn't know. The DJ had launched into a song everyone but me seemed to love, and the sound of the singalong drowned everything out. When I bumped into Roisin and Jasmin on my way back toward the canteen, I could hardly tell what they were saying.

"Have you seen Hayley?" one asked.

"We've lost her," the other added.

I noticed Roisin's watery eyes, darting around bug-like, and the ragged edge of Jasmin's fingernails as she tucked her hair behind both ears. Without her between them, they were just two kids my age, and for that moment, that was all I was to them too.

"Sorry, I've not."

"What's up with your face?" Jasmin asked with a frown. I reached up to touch my chin, and my fingers came away dripping crimson. Not waiting for an answer, the two of them pushed past me to resume their search.

This time, I let the blood flow freely. I stuck my hand in my bag and fished around for coins. Twenty pence, two tens, a five...

Enough for a fairy cake, I reckoned, licking my top lip clean.

## Hispanic at the Disco

F. Malanoche

A cool, fall wind blew through the streets of Milwaukee, leaving Giselle's bell bottoms flapping in the breeze about her delicate ankles. The line outside The Purple Flamingo Club was filled with a range of people dressed up for '70s night. The electric blue neon light illuminated a four-story tall purple flamingo that decorated the facade of the building. Her boyfriend, Uriel, tried to flatten his afro wig to his head, but the wind took it away. Giselle only hoped the wind would take that hideous fake mustache of his as well. None of her friend's boyfriends dressed as silly as hers. There were times she thought his childishness was a bit much.

The bouncer, a muscle-clad, bald man in a black t-shirt one size too small, waved Giselle and her friends past. Through the beams of light bouncing off of the disco ball, humans moved chaotically in waves of flesh and limbs. Heavy bass thumped and pulsated through Giselle and her breath quickened. She had wanted to go to a nightclub ever since her friends Fatima and Ellie first talked about it, but the toughest person she had to convince was her boyfriend, Uriel. He wasn't keen on dancing or people but he relented for her. Now in the thumping beats and sprawling rays of light cutting through languishing shadow, Giselle pulled Uriel along through couples dressed in anachronistic clothing. Fatima and Ellie followed suit with their boyfriends toward the middle of the dance floor.

A jangly guitar riff began to play as Giselle shook her hips to the rhythm. The bass line kicked in; KC and The Sunshine Band's "I'm Your Boogie Man" was in full swing. Giselle raised her slender arms above her head and let the music flow through her. She couldn't tell if what she felt was her heartbeat or the pulsating music. Fatima's low-cut top left little to the imagination as she shook her body. Ellie grinned as she swayed; the lights bounced off her sequined dress. Giselle felt like she was truly living. She laughed to herself as she watched Ellie and Fatima's boyfriends awkwardly shift from knee to knee while standing behind their respective girls.

Uriel's warm hands found placement on Giselle's hips. It felt comfortable feeling his form on her back. The other guys in the group followed suit, creating a small, tight circle for the girls to dance in. As the song changed to another, Giselle backed her butt into Uriel so she could slap the floor with her hands and drag her palms up her legs until she was upright. Uriel backed

up with his hands on her waist, pulling her along with him. The group shifted with her, recreating the small dance circle once more. Ellie and Fatima grinned as they continued to dance. Giselle tried to focus on enjoying dancing with her friends.

Uriel began to jerk mechanically from left to right. Giselle turned around to face him. He looked put upon as a guy to Uriel's right swayed his shoulders, backing into Uriel's arm. To his left, a petite girl in a metallic, magenta mini dress grabbed her knees and ground her ass into Uriel's left knee. Giselle wanted him to have a good time. That would show her how much he wanted her. She grabbed his hair and pulled him down to her so her mouth was close to his ear. "I need to find a bathroom. Come with me," she shouted—the nightclub's whisper. She kept her delicate hand on his shoulder as he walked through the crowd.

Halfway toward the entrance, Uriel paused. Giselle bumped into him. She peeked around him. A skinny guy in a pink shirt planked above a girl on her back on the dance floor. He was mid-thrust when a long-haired guy in purple dancing nearby tripped over Pink Shirt. Long Hair bounced up, his fists balled in front of his face. Pink Shirt climbed off his dance partner and began swinging at Long Hair. Uriel held his hands out, shielding Giselle from what might happen.

Giselle smirked at him. His arms were stringy; his biceps were fledgling. She loved his boyish charm. He would most likely get injured trying to defend her.

Pink shirt landed a body blow, and nearby dancers stepped back to avoid a wild haymaker he threw. Long Hair took the hit to his ribs as he grabbed Pink Shirt by the collar and pulled the shirt half over his opponent's face. Pink Shirt wrapped his arms around Long Hair's waist. Long Hair clasped both hands above his head and brought them down hard on Pink Shirt's back. As he raised his hands once more, two muscled bouncers intervened, each grabbing one of the fighters and hauling them out the front door.

Uriel looked back and asked Giselle if she was okay.

"I think I see the sign for the bathroom!" she shouted and pointed toward a red door near the entrance. Giselle followed him to the bathroom door. "Can you get us some water?!"

Uriel nodded and headed toward the bar.

Red stall doors stood stark against the black tiled floor of the women's room. Two girls squeezed together for a selfie in front of the sink. They puckered their lips at the filter of an unlit cigarette as they posed for the picture. The flash went off, and the girls tossed the cigarette in the trash as they walked out. Giselle took a minute to take a breath away from the crowd. The heat and claustrophobia of the dance floor overwhelmed her. She pulled her puffer out of her pocket and sucked the medicine into her mouth. As far as ailments went, asthma wasn't the worst thing to have, but she didn't like advertising that she had it. She pocketed her inhaler and adjusted her hair in the mirror.

On the counter, sat two silver trays. One contained a pile of cigarettes in various brand packs. The other tray contained a collection of perfumes. Feeling the sweat on her body, Giselle examined the names on the bottles and sniffed the spritzers as she inspected them. One smelled like rain. Another smelled like grain alcohol. Neither impressed her. She picked up a small sampler tube filled with orange liquid that smelled like a warm summer's day. The name on it read *Circe*. She sprayed her wrist twice and rubbed the dampened skin on her other wrist and along her neck. The scent enveloped her. No matter what happened, she felt she could enjoy the rest of her night.

When she exited the bathroom, she walked through the half-illuminated outlines of couples toward the bar. Halfway across the dance floor, the crowd made a small clearing. Opposite her stood Uriel with two water bottles in hand. He looked at her and flashed a smile that made her feel completely seen. That look made her fall for him. Only, as she looked at him, his countenance transformed. His brows scrunched. He looked past her. Giselle turned to see the men had stopped dancing. Though their counterparts tried to get their attention, the men had their eyes locked on Giselle. A hunger crept into their eyes, one licked his lips at her.

Uriel walked up alongside her and handed her a bottle of water. As she took it, a hook cut across Uriel's face. He reeled back. The outline of a man kicked at Uriel's head, sending blood spattering across the dance floor. A guy dressed as John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever* launched himself at Uriel, knocking him to the floor.

"Get off of him!" Giselle screamed. The chorus of *It's Raining Men* kicked

in over the speakers as three more men added to the dog pile on her boyfriend. The violence became a display of animalistic machismo. Women, in their half-hearted disco costumes, rushed in and tried pulling their boyfriends away with little luck.

One man with a ponytail got up from the pile, walked toward Giselle, and caressed her cheek with the back of his hand as he smirked at her, until a fist struck him across his face. Men on the floor scrambled toward him, grabbing at his ankles. A man in a denim vest grabbed Ponytail by the hair and yanked him to the ground. Giselle looked over to where Uriel had fallen. He was covered in blood. He wasn't moving. She wanted to go to him. In the pile before her, men pounded on one another. Blood splattered her bell bottoms. From the pile, one hand reached out for her before others pulled it back down. Horrified, Giselle ran for the exit.

A squad car pulled up to the club as she exited. The driver emerged from the car. Giselle ran toward him and sobbed into his chest. The officer patted her on the back and reassured her. "It's gonna be okay. Everything will be alright. I will keep you safe."

Giselle felt the rhythm of the officer's deep breathing through his coat. It calmed her.

"Hey," shouted the officer's partner. Giselle and the officer looked over at him. The shorter cop had a large can of pepper spray drawn on the officer next to her. "I will take care of her!"

The taller officer drew his service weapon and leveled it at his partner.

There was a hiss followed by a bang.

All went dark for Giselle.



### 308 Metres of Jerry

Robert Jones

It started, as these things do, in a dim room where dust motes pirouetted in the slant of afternoon light. The place smelled of worn leather and faintly of sandalwood. A man named Gerald – Jerry to his pals, of whom there were precisely none – sat slumped in an oversized armchair whose upholstery bore the pattern of some unnameable tropical flora. At his side, a gleaming turntable spun, hypnotic in its silence until a stylus of ruby-tipped diamond met vinyl.

Jerry's head tilted with the opening chords: a metronomic twitch calibrated to the precise ache of the harmonies. There was a tension in the slack of his jaw, in the stillness of a hand half-raised towards the turntable as if poised to catch notes as they escaped. It was, he thought to himself, pure gold. Leaning closer, he bobbed his head to the bassline, one greasy lock of hair flopping over eyes gone wide with disco fever.

There was a hitch in the music.

Something yielded with the faint, moist sound of separation. A thread of pink – a mischievous tendril – peeked up from Jerry's index finger. A hangnail, he realised, caught between the needle and the groove. The thread of skin traced a tightening spiral towards the record's centre. It was an almost pleasant burn. A peculiar hum beneath the croon.

Enraptured, Jerry watched the skin curl away from his finger. Each rotation of the record tugged at him further, unravelling him spool-like. Flesh gave way to glistening sinew; then, the faintest gleam of white. Whorl by whorl, he went – down into the heart of the music.

Soon, all that remained was a pale digit bobbing in time, and an LP etched with the final, silent scream of a man pulled bodily into a three-minute pop song.

### Speak "Easy"

Abby Thatcher

Crowded and hot, betrayal envelops the room, which spins itself to the music, dancing along with a moment that no god could replicate. Booths sit devoid of humans, already filled with the voices of hundreds, learning to love at once, in the form of lost coats and sticky stains.

A woman, as textured as the room she's in, wrapped in cling-wrap and foil from the counter, crams herself between voices, enough to sit comfortably and anticipate the bitter end.

A man, once familiar and now strangely foreign, cuts through the sound and crowd to find himself in her presence, slinking through the heat and smell. This was his idea, she must remember. A drink drowns the thought, ice cold yet warmth-filling, yummy and strangely salty on the tongue.

Dancing seems the only option, yet he persists.



## Glitter Gore

### Rafal Chelski

Julien hugged himself close as he sat bare-assed on the dirty, concrete floor. Moments ago, Floyd and his three mates ambushed him on the way home from school. They dragged him off the footpath into the abandoned weatherboard, stripped him naked and flung him down a flight of rotting wooden stairs into the basement. They locked him in, cackling as they left.

Julien stared into the darkest parts of the cellar. It wasn't the chill, mouldy air causing him to shudder. It was the sentient creviced ball that rolled from the shadows, gliding towards him. It twinkled in the light, beaming in from the single window that illuminated the dank space.

The window is what he would use to escape. **Get up! Get out!** His mind screamed but no limb would obey. The ball stopped, two small steps away. It pulsed a brilliant, star-bright glow before he heard the sound, 'Hello.'

**Did it just fucking speak?**

The noise, the word, it both perplexed and relinquished him from the grip of fear. In all the horrors he had ever watched, not once did the monster have a conversation with its prey.

"Ugh, hi?" Julien said, feeling foolish for talking to a disco ball. Although, it was fleshy and well... alive!

**"Why did those boys hurt you?"** The ball's voice hummed.

Julien wasn't sure how to respond. There was no reason. They were assholes. Bored assholes. He was easy pickings.

"Because they're a bunch of dicks," he answered.

The ball flashed in a multitude of colours. **"Humorous,"** it said, **"Perhaps you require assistance?"**

Like he hadn't tried to get help. **Boys will be boys, growing pains, harmless fun,** were just some of the expressions used by teachers to dismiss his accusations. One time Floyd poured milk over him while he was taking a

dump. They recorded and uploaded it to TikTok with the caption: **Milkin' a seven-day load... MOOO!**

What that viral video failed to show was Floyd caving his head in against the sink when Julien tried to defend himself. He stayed awake with a splitting migraine for 48 hours fearing that, if he were to sleep, he'd never wake again.

"No one gives a fuck about me. No one can help."

**"I can make them disappear."**

Julien knew he should be terrified. Yet he was transfixed. He couldn't trust the other kids, teachers or any adult. They ignored and let him down. Yet the ball listened and understood. As strange as it sounded that was comfort enough to trust. Especially now, when he felt at his lowest, most vulnerable.

"How?"

**"Bring them to me."**

Julien wanted to speak, but his words caught in the back of his throat. **I can't, can I? Then again, they might end up killing me, even by accident or on purpose.**

**Deadpool, Red Hood,** and certain arcs of **Batman** would agree with him... Could he live with himself knowing he could have prevented the worst?

The ball gyrated. Its creviced exterior began to shift, forming an opening that shimmered as though the stars were playing chase. Sensing what needed to be done, Julien reached his hand into the shifting chasm of the ball and began to weep. A fire consumed his entire body. The room erupted with a searing white light and he fell back to slam his head against the concrete floor. Darkness.

Julien woke to the sound of a lock clicking open. He felt groggy and hung over as he sat upright. He peered into the darkest depths of the basement, but there was no sign of the disco ball.

Uneasy footsteps creaked through the basement. He looked over to find one of Floyd's mates, Jeremy, standing on the bottom step, staring at him

with his hands pocketed and a guilty expression on his face.

“Go home, fuck head. I ain’t doing time if you die,” he turned on his heel and walked back up the stairs. Between the planks of wood, Julien watched an amber light glow hot before dying back to black. The ball was still there.

“Hey, asshole!” Julien shouted, “bet you would like prison. Get fucked as much as you dream of at night.”

Jeremy leapt back down into the basement. He crashed onto the concrete floor, wrapped his hands around Julien’s throat and began to squeeze the life out of him. The choke ended as soon as it began. The hands were torn away from his throat. Julien heard Jeremy scream as he was sucked into the shadows. Bones snapped and flesh minced as though it were blitzed in a blender.

He sat there in the musty space as silence enveloped him. Silver-speckled blood swept from the shadows like a stream to pool around his feet. He smiled and began to laugh. Tears fell down his cheeks. He felt shock and guilt, but also something more overpowering than it had any right to be; an end to his torture, an end to his misery, an end to Floyd and his two remaining mates.



With their headphones on the teens bobbed, weaved, head banged in the cryptic silence, among the raggedy ghost curtains and glowing jack-o-lanterns. They listened to classic artists—A-Ha, Tina Turner, Arrowsmith—which Julien had included in the playlist for their silent disco, in the abandoned house.

Two weeks of planning culminated in this moment. Word had spread about Jeremy’s disappearance. Julien had laid low, missing classes to steal alcohol from delivery vans, curate the playlist, decorate the interior and invite people over on [Snapchat](#), which had proven to be the most challenging task. Many thought he was a creep at first, inviting them to party at a condemned property over a fake account. Only after sending shots of the classrooms did they trust he was one of their own. He kept his actual identity a secret.

Floyd stepped into the silent raucous of the living room. He pushed through the mosh pit of shifting bodies with both Max and Kevin in tow.

Julien, locked in his sights.

Floyd gripped Julien by his shirt. “Missed you in class. Fuck you hiding?”

He hadn’t planned for the suspicion but knew how to take advantage of it.

“Been skipping with Jeremy.”

“Bullshit!” Floyd scoffed, “he’s probs up in Sydney with his dad.”

“Yea, nah. He’s down where you threw me.”

Floyd grinned. Max snickered. Julien turned to study Kevin, his best friend in primary school. In seventh grade, Kevin outed him on Snapchat to the school by screenshotting the convo that included ‘I think I have feelings for you’ and a baited dick pic. Back then, even now, as always he was emotionless. He sipped from the bottle of Corona, pushed his Beats on and joined the silent chaos in the living room.

“Fuck, he’s down there with a fag like you?”

“Came back for the stacks of 80s Playboys. He’s tweaking right now.”

Floyd shifted his gaze to the basement door. He threw Julien aside in the empty cavity of what used to be a kitchen. Then he opened the door and shouted down into the darkness. Max peeked over Floyd’s shoulder, balancing on his toes.

Julien made sure there were no eyes on him. He rushed the pair, and rammed into Max’s back with his forearm to topple both assholes crashing down the stairs into the basement.

Are they dead?

Floyd groaned.

Come on. Shit!



What if...

A crimson light expanded in the darkness.

“What the—AGH!”

Julien shut the door to muffle Floyd and Max’s screams. They cried in terror, yet he was the only one to hear them in the crowd of oblivious, headphone-wearing dancing teens. Their voices quickly ceased into the snapping of bone, churning of blood, then nothing.

Julien slunk to the ground. He heard the shuffling of feet and the occasional cry of joy alongside his heart attempting to blast out of his chest. Floyd and Max were gone. He searched the empty kitchen in a daze of disbelief. Most of the alcohol and snacks he had stowed in the area were ransacked. He spied a partially open bottle of whiskey, popped the cap as tears skimmed his cheeks and drank.



Julien’s headset blasted **Killer’s Eyes** as he took a sip from his half-empty bottle of whiskey, while stumbling in a sway over the smoke-fogged dance floor. Was he a killer? He made the deal but did not commit the deed. Killers are evil, but his motives were just. Morally. Legally? Who care? Now one remained, though the worst were gone. The disco was an alibi. Over fifty people who could vouch for him if anyone did snoop into their disappearance. Without bodies they could never prove he shook hands with death and offered up their souls.

Julien felt the alcohol take effect. Neon-purple lights beamed across the dance floor. They strobed rhythmically out of beat to his song, but still elevated his high – a spinning rush of relief mellowed by the calm of a drink. He took another sip.

Kevin appeared in front of him among the mosh pit of bodies. In his stupor, Julien assumed they had been accidentally mashed together when Kevin forced his tongue down his throat. They devoured each other with crossing tongues and greedy hands before pulling away. Kevin winked as Julien blushed out a smile of disbelief. He then pulled both of their headphones off.

“I’m sorry. About all of it,” Kevin whispered, “The snap sent around school. Floyd did it. Didn’t want him to out me. I... I couldn’t so I... fuck, I’m sorry. I fucked it all—”

Julien silenced Kevin with his lips. They then slid their headsets back on, synched them together and swayed in each other’s embrace to Led Zeppelin’s Stairway to Heaven. Tonight had already been a night of many firsts, and it seemed a lot more were to **cum** if it played out the way he now hoped it would.

Kevin puffed on a joint and blew the smoke upwards. He then buried his face into Julien’s chest. His hair smelt like anti-dandruff shampoo and weed. Smiling, Julien looked up to see the lights reflect the shimmering disco ball. The warmth of Kevin’s breath instantly iced as dread ran through his body.

Jesus Christ, no!

The small mirror panels on the disco ball began to shift. They swirled to open a chasm of starless depths, from which a single tentacle slithered out.

Please don’t.

Curious... you asked me to take the pain away.

You did.

There were four pains. I removed three.

You’ll cause me more pain if you take him.

Julien watched the tentacle slide down to rest its suckers on Kevin’s shoulder.

Please. It wasn’t his fault.

He continued to slow dance, hoping the moment would return to bliss and none would be the wiser.

I must remove your pain.

Take someone else.

How quickly you condemn without knowing.

Knowing what?

Circumstance. The why of it all.

You can't cause me pain. That wasn't our deal.

True. But do you consider the pain you have caused, Julien?

Floyd, Max, Jeremy. They were vile. They needed to go. But their families... he had never even considered them. He shook his head to centre his thoughts.

No! You can't cause me pain!

Very well. Though, I must keep my promise. Are you certain?

Yes.

Truly?

Leave us alone!

Julien felt the dreaded despair wash over him. He wanted it all to go away.

Oh no, Julien...

The disco ball shattered above the mosh pit. Shards of glass and glitter, crimson and shimmering as though the sparkles were screaming, rained down upon the silent dancing teens as thousands of tentacles exploded like a starburst above them.

I will remove the pain. All of it.



## Mood Belt

Sam Logan

I was in ninth grade the first time my head was shoved into a toilet. My soaked hair swirled like a soft-serve ice cream. Mean girls who never wasted a chance to torture me all through high school. I hadn't thought about my bullies in years but my therapist made me talk about them. I can still remember the tingling sensation behind my eyes when the water flowed up my nose. The foul taste of fecal grime and watered down piss always lingered in my mouth the rest of the day no matter how many times I brushed my teeth. Therapy has reignited my rage towards my tormentors. Sure, I've matured since high school. I'm much more comfortable in my skin, confident and self-assured; but that doesn't mean those girls are off the hook. Forgive and forget? Fuck that noise.



I wasn't in the market for anything in particular when I spent an afternoon hopping from antique shop to antique shop. That is, until I laid my eyes on a vintage 1975 MCA Records belt buckle. The brass rectangle had etched leaves along the perimeter and "MCA" at the bottom. Its center was an oval shape with a light blue sky and a partial rainbow that ended in a few white puffy clouds. It was the best five bucks I ever spent in my life.

It was not an average belt buckle. I mean, not just its design, but it was otherworldly. I know how fucking stupid that sounds but hear me out: I was stood up for a blind date and the brass heated up. I thought it was my imagination at first, but I felt the warmth radiate through the denim of my jeans, like a sunburn puts off heat. My disappointment from the ruined night was forgotten about and the heat dissipated just as quickly.

I was passed over for a promotion at work to a much less qualified nitwit who clearly didn't deserve it. He had only been with the company for a few months, but of course his uncle was middle management. My supervisor didn't even have the decency to tell me in person. My phone dinged on a Friday night and a company-wide email blast delivered the bad news. I was

wearing the belt buckle, and it shot out a flash of sparks and fragments of fire, like an M80 firecracker. The discharge shattered the full-length mirror I was standing in front of as I got ready for a night out at the club. The violent crack and explosion of glass was alarming until I realized the belt was the source of the event. The buckle manifested a physical representation of the emotions of whoever possesses it, like a mood ring but with **Care Bears** vibes and the abilities of **Captain Planet and the Planeteers**. I tested this theory in private and wore the belt around the house whenever I could, and it responded anytime I felt an intense emotion. I practiced through trial and error to heighten or lower its output through controlling my inner feelings. It took a long time to understand and control its capabilities, but it was worth it.



I'm bopping down the street with a Walkman at my hip and the Skatt Bros in my ears. It's disco night baby! Now this is therapy. I'm practicing self-care and taking myself out on a date.

My Doc Martens splash in puddles, and my chunky, brass belt buckle reflects neon lights from bail bonds storefronts and strip clubs. It's a seedy part of town, but I don't mind. My leather jacket has spiked shoulders, like the Legion of Doom, a professional wrestling tag team duo. People tend to leave me alone. I'm dressed for dark disco even though it's all about the classics tonight. I flip my purple, shoulder-length hair to shake off the droplets of rain and head into the discothèque located within the basement of an industrial warehouse.



I drop my jacket off at the coat check and immediately dance-hop along the edge of the crowd and to the bar. I order a drink and take a first sip of a refreshing gin and tonic, the biting lime-tart a familiar taste. The club is packed with an eclectic, sweaty mob of people. My spirit is already buoyed from the depressed state that last week's therapy session had left me in. The pulsing sounds of Kool and the Gang never fails to kick off an evening on

the right foot.

Celebrate good times, c'mon!

I shuffle, shake, and spin in feverish intensity underneath the mirror ball for the next couple of hours, refilling my drink once. Bubbles float and shimmer above the dance floor. The strobing neon lights and fog from the smoke machine hammer my senses, along with an aromatic assault of sweat, perfumes, and alcohol.

Some drunk girl slams an elbow into my back.

"Sorry!" she squeals.

It's a group of about ten women wearing matching outfits. Bachelorette parties are the absolute fucking worst. The one who bumped into me is wearing a sash that says "Bride to Be". I recognize her instantly even though it's been ten years since we graduated high school. She's my tormentor and nemesis.

"Your name is Stephanie right?" I ask over the blaring music.

"Uhh yeah, do I know you?" Stephanie replies.

"It's me, Taylor. You used to give me swirlies in high school," I reply.

Stephanie looks a little rough around the edges. The dark bags under her eyes are enough luggage for a weekend getaway. Her bright make-up is not enough to hide the dull skin beneath its layers. The glow of teenage youthfulness is long gone. We are too young for these changes to be because of age alone. I give her a chance to apologize and atone for past transgressions.

A moment passes. I almost think I see a sparkle of recognition in her eyes, like a wayward piece of glitter confetti that catches the light for just a moment before its shine is lost to a shadow.

"I'm sorry I don't remember you. I'm getting married!" Stephanie shrieks with enthusiasm and turns back to her friends. The conversation is clearly over from her perspective.

I'm not sure what I expected but total obliviousness was not it. I can feel the belt buckle heating up through my banana-yellow pants and the skin beneath my waistband warms up. My face flushes a bright pink as wrath flares from deep within my chest. I take a few deep breaths to regain my composure.

I track Stephanie and her pack of acolytes as they groove, hustle, and dance. I recognize a few other women in the group but can't place their names. I let the rage build up inside of me thinking back to all the humiliation I experienced as a vulnerable adolescent just trying to survive.

Each act of bullying or insult seared into my brain, like a cattle brand that leaves a scarred impression even after it's healed.

I waited for what seemed like an eternity until Stephanie was positioned right underneath the giant mirror ball that hangs above the middle of the dance floor. A myriad of bright colors streak in all directions as laser lights bounce off the rotating shiny sphere. I break out in a slick sweat as I consider my actions. My clammy hands tremble at my sides. There is still time to turn the other cheek and walk away before anyone gets hurt. The kernel of doubt pops into a newfound resolve to stop running and stand up for myself once and for all. I press forward and hope this will give me the closure that therapy has yet to provide.

Ah, ha, ha, ha, stayin' alive, stayin' alive

My chest inflates and deflates as I take deep breaths and focus on the worst memories, like missing out on prom because I didn't think I was good enough to attend; Or, when I walked home from school soaking wet for the umpteenth time and Mom or Dad were too distracted with their own problems to give me more than a passing comment.

I take off my belt and use the leather strap to guard against the heat emanating from the brass buckle. I hold it in front of me like a **Mighty Morphin Power Ranger**, harnessing the object's other dimensional powers. I channel all my pent-up rage and release it in a streak of white-hot lightning that hits the chain link that connects the mirror ball to the ceiling. It plummets through the air and crashes on Stephanie's shoulder. The mirror ball shatters into a million pieces as glints of light flash off the silver fragments. I was aiming for her head and hoped to cave her skull in like a busted pinata. Instead, Stephanie's flesh is sliced open and the bone-white of her clavicle is exposed and almost glows. The sizable gash splits the skin into a flap that reveals a sectional view of ligaments, tendons, and muscles like a bunch of red licorice strands. She writhes and whimpers on the ground in pain.

Chaos erupts on the dance floor. People scatter like cockroaches scuttling

toward darkness when exposed to light, including Stephanie's bridal party which leaves her wounded and stranded.

"You still don't remember me?" I ask Stephanie, giving her one last chance to save herself and apologize.

"Of course I do, you freak!" Stephanie yells in return as she attempts to flip the skin flap back in place and apply pressure to slow the bleeding. "Did you really think I'd acknowledge your existence? That I'd actually apologize? You are still a scuzzy slop bucket. Even after all these years you still smell like a dirty toilet." Some things never change.

I'm staring down at Stephanie as her shoulder gushes bright, cherry-red blood making the dance floor slick. I hold the belt buckle right in front of her face and scream like a banshee. A bolt of blazing electricity leaps from the buckle and makes contact with Stephanie's forehead. Her maw gapes open; her tongue lolls to the side. Her eyes roll back into her head as cooked brain sludge leaks out her nose and twin spurts of blood launch from her ears. She involuntarily twitches before stillness overcomes her body.

A slow smile creeps onto my face. I turn away from the carnage and lose myself in the fleeing crowd. I exit through a side door and into the night as the music still pounds from within.

Burn, baby, burn, Disco Inferno.

## The School of Magic and Divinations' Annual Freshmen Ball

A.L. Davidson

There was one night that Miss Eloise loved above all other nights in the bustling college town of Broochport. Tonight was that night, and she was elated to see the grand ballroom of the prestigious School of Magic and Divinations so full of young bodies. The annual incoming freshmen ball was always a sight to behold; the elaborate decorations, the decadent food, the way the will-o-the-wisps hung on the chandelier to light the ancient wicks, it was all so magical!

But she found herself pouting when she realized not a single soul—living or dead—was dancing! The music was less than enthusiastic and she could sense a wave of... what was it... boredom? **yes!** boredom! roll over the students. They were always a bit awkward, but this was abysmal!

Nothing the chaperones did seemed to brighten the low energy; the shy spirits, woeful werewolves, and vapid vamps seemed to have trudged into the ballroom with their fashionable suits and sparkling gowns. It lingered like a bad omen, and she was utterly dismayed to see such a delightful night be so downtrodden. Her initial belief was that someone hexed the school, but no matter how high or low she and the other adults searched, not a single ward or sigil seemed out of place.

"This is such a shame! Young people these days, I swear," Professor Pyle said with a hearty scoff as he sipped his pixie punch.

"Indeed! The living have no life in them and the dead are dreadfully dreary, it's like all of the energy has been sucked out of the school!" Miss Eloise replied, saddened.

"It's real odd," Zeb—Broochport's self-proclaimed paranormal expert—replied with pursed lips and a musing tone. He fiddled with his 'ghost-friendly, ghost-capturing' (patent pending) camera that he offered to use to film the event for the school's promotional campaigns. But he felt as if it would be a waste of battery to record any of the disaster unfurling before them.

Miss Eloise grabbed the ruffly fabric of her ballgown and huffed as she began making her way down the stairs to rectify the problem, urging the annoyed Professor Pyle to follow. They made their way to the beautifully designed ballroom floor and shooed away the many students

who were standing around like grave markers. She worried if they lingered there too long the cemetery moss would wander in and cling to them thinking a new home had been built for them.

With a flourish, she clapped her hands. The bejeweled bangle around her wrist bounced and the room was suddenly awash with dancing lights of autumnal colors. She stomped her foot and the sigil sewn into the sole of her high-heeled shoe ignited. A quartet of zombie musicians appeared on the stage in their finest suits with boney instruments in hand. They began playing some funky tunes as the magical Miss Eloise snapped and pointed to the sky. A disco ball appeared, dangling from the center of the massive chandelier, and a swarm of ghosts burst into the ballroom and began circling the sparkling orb, causing it to spin round and round and round.

The orange and yellow lights caught the twinkling edges of the disco ball and turned the once dreary ballroom into an electrically retro dance floor. Miss Eloise thrust her hand out, asking for Professor Pyle—who was already loosening his tie—to take her hand and boogie down alongside her.

Some of the students began laughing. A few of them, seeing the sheer enjoyment on the face of the stern teacher and the beloved coffee shop owner, felt their postmortem-stiff bodies begin to loosen. Professor Papadopoulos—a massive gorgon, father to the sneaky twins that ran the police force in the magical monster-haven known as Wylder Wood, and notorious grump on campus—could not help but bounce his snakes to the familiar tune. The werewolves began to howl and a few of the students began bopping along to the beat.

After watching Miss Eloise and Professor Pyle hustle, sliding their bodies across the floor with fingers pointed and hips swaying, the mood in the ballroom lifted. The awkward supernaturals and cautious cryptids found their footing and filled the dance floor. The once-somber September evening was filled with laughter, and groovy steps. The start of a magical new year was christened under the glistening lights of a disco ball.



## Paradise Alley

Ev Datsyk

There is no virtue in Paradise Alley. It's exactly why Jas likes it. She has sheltered here while meteors plummet and sought refuge here while the fae collect teeth. She has celebrated the Night of Spores here, and sweat out blood fever here. And she has lied here, to herself and everyone else.

It's inevitable. A Paradise night starts with pretence. This is really fun. Then laughter. Mocking the heavenheaded girls who wander in to find Hell is empty and the devils are here. Then thirst. Buying hellebores shots of poison. Kissing them. Every intimacy projected a thousandfold from the mirrorball. More lies. I don't usually do this. A crescendo in confetti and bile. The beat is slow and heavy. It ripples across the room visibly, like a stone through the glassy surface of a lake.

Moonbeams bruise her face: stains of pale green, nightbloom, and lilac. Dashed with glitter, Jas steps towards the throng, already snaking her arms to the music. The mirrored discs on her dress skirt catch light from around the room. She's colourless and every colour.

A boy eyes her up and down—neither predatory nor kind. The shape of his head is exaggerated with gel. His hair swerves harshly around two short, twisted horns, and there is a glaring highlight in his dark fringe; under the strobe, Jas can't tell what colour it is. Jas makes out a smattering of pale shapes on his forehead. A clan brand.

Her fathers warned her against clan people, and she's never forsaken their warning.

She shakes her head at him, her hips still swaying, "Not interested."

"No one is," he calls back, flashing a sly smile before disappearing into the pulsing dark.

When Jas leans against the bar counter, signalling for another drink, a girl with blackhole eyes and gold hoops in her locs leans into her. Jas's gaze flickers away in a last-minute flare of self-preservation.

In the corner of her eye, the girl smiles. Fanged, "What time do you think it is?"

No. Her heart stutters. Not time.

She hesitates before reaching for the phone in her clutch, but the girl snatches Jas's wrist before she can get there. "Don't look. Guess."

There are no windows. There are no clocks. There is no such thing as last call. Without the moon's wax and wane, without the tick of the great bell tower, there is no conceivable answer. Another thing Jas loves about Paradise Alley.

Jas's answer is prickly, "Do you have somewhere to be?" A typical brusqueness for her, someone who has never been nice enough for the heavenheads. Anyone who finds her charming only wants to swallow her. She glares at the girl's chin and watches as her sharp canines disappear behind her lipstick.

"No, I'm right where I'm supposed to be."

Jas shoots back her drink, and the poison burns. Coils in her stomach like a sun-warmed snake. Can someone really waste their time in a timeless place? Unsmiling, she steps closer. The girl's skin smells like smoke.

"Dance with me," Jas commands.

When they're sweat-damp from dancing and have fairy dust in hard-to-reach places, the girl invites her home. Jas doesn't go. She doesn't hook up with blackhole girls. Too risky. Besides, if she goes to bed with someone, she will be closer to waking up, closer to tomorrow. To—

"Goodnight, then," the blackhole girl says.

"Must be," Jas answers, already turning away.

She jolts awake, shocked by the sudden onslaught of dreaming, dizzy at its abrupt end. In the bathroom, the lights are still and bright white. Elbows against marble, the counter supports her entire weight. She must have blacked out for a split second. The automatic sink in front of her is still running.

What time is it?

Vision swimming, her reflection shows snow on her cheek. Her silver eye makeup has blurred into her temple. Her lips are naked. She stripped them

bare in someone's mouth. Her hair is a wild animal, feral curls spangled with shimmering dust and pastel shrapnel. Her dress's mirrors mirror the mirror and trap her in endless tunnels.

Sick from trying to focus, she stumbles back into the nonsense.

Her hips sway back and forth, and it's the clan boy from earlier, watching her again. His gaze sweeps her lazily.

"Still not interested," she slurs, brushes past.

At the bar, she drinks her poison, a single shot down the gullet. Behind her, a voice: "What time do you think it is?"

Jas is too drunk for quirkiness, neediness, verbal foreplay, or irony.

"I thought you went home," Jas crosses her arms as she turns. Her dress cuts into her warm, sticky skin. Again—drunk, not yet stupid—she doesn't meet the blackhole girl's gaze, but she can make out the downturned corners of her frown.

"I'm not whoever you think I am," the girl answers. One corner of her mouth lifts into a fanged smirk. "But I could be."

It plants a seed of wrongness under her skin.

Another thing Jas doesn't have interest in: faux-cutesy mind games.

"No thanks," she knocks the blackhole girl dismissively with her shoulder as she passes.

She dissolves into the organic muss of the dancefloor. Hands flit over her body, brief and sleek as eels. Someone tugs her into their hips and she answers by leaning into their bones. She thinks about turning around. Decides against it, embraces the seduction of not knowing. Jas winds her arms backwards, sussing out the shape of her companion by touch alone. Curvy. Sturdy. Against her palms a skintight dress that feels like the slippery shell of an olive. In answer, a touch climbs the rungs of her ribs, cupping her breasts. She casts a passive glance down.

Soft, ivory wrists attached to stubby fingers, haired with short quills.

She bites her lip. She wants to touch them badly. She loves nothing more

than something that can hurt her.

I should wear white.

The world fades around her 'til she sees nothing but the blur of sharp points through her lashes.

"Shit!" She teeters back from the bathroom counter, the fluorescent lights overhead blinding. Her ankle caves in from the surprise, and she cries out again. The automatic sink in front of her is still running. She attempts to wipe the coke off her cheek. It lingers, a streak against her blush. Blacked out twice in a night.

Time to go. The thought is a distant echo, a suggestion whispered from the other end of a long tunnel.

No, she can't.

Jas wonders what happened to the person with the quills. No sight of them here.

When she steps back into the chaos, the clan boy is there. She can see, in the limbo between the bathroom bright and disco lights, that the streak in his hair is absinthe green.

She scowls, "Are you following me or something?"

"No. I just wanted to check in."

"Get lost," acid tosses in her belly as she charges into the fray.

Spurred by anger, when she dances, she dances ferociously. She hopes he sees her, and she hopes he thinks she doesn't care that he's watching. At the bar, she orders two arsenics, and the second goes down as foul as the first. Her stomach turns, and she suppresses a burp, afraid she might puke if anything comes up.

"What time do you think it is?"

She whips around. Her eyes catch the blackhole girl's, and she drifts powerlessly into the spin. The room grows quiet. Pressure builds between her ears. Summoning the last of her drunken will, Jas wrenches her gaze free.

Shaking her head, she scoffs, "Leave me alone."

"Wow, fuck you too?"

Stumbling a little as she huffs away, she ping-pongs off-kilter from person to person on the dancefloor. Just when the dizziness is about to overwhelm her, she's caught in the snow-white arms of a dancer with red eyes, their scalp hairless but quilled.

"Hi again," Jas says breathlessly. She has a feeling she knows what comes next.

"Do I know you?" they ask, their smile forgiving.

Summer in her bones. Wrongness in full bloom.

"SHIT!" Her hands miss the counter that's saved her before. Jas flails for balance, catching herself before she knocks all her teeth out. She grips the edge for salvation.

White powder on her cheek, silver eyeshadow, bare lips.

Not again.

Have to go. It's too much now. She staggers through the club, past the clan boy, the blackhole girl and porcupine dancer, and the queue. Away to the star-ravaged night. The alley is grubby with cigarette butts and empty hamburger wrappers. The rancid, cool air shocks her system. She gasps it in. Relief until she remembers what awaits her: a black dress hanging on her bedroom door.

Jas steadies herself on the brick wall beside her, grime wedging into her heartline.

His voice: I don't want a funeral. None of those black outfits.

How had she agreed to this?

She slumps. Her dress mirrors deep shadows and grease.

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

She wakes crashing to the floor, crying out as her tailbone cracks on tile.

Wincing, she pulls herself up, and there she is under bright lights. Silver-stained and coke-smeared. Her pulse furious. Her pupils massive.

Can't show up like this—

The clan boy outside the bathroom smirks while Jas sulks. "I thought you left."

Frustration prickles behind her eyes. She doesn't want him to hear defeat in her voice, but it trickles in anyway. "I tried."

"Funny. I thought you'd be happier."

Her gut twists, "Why would I be?" The pale brands on his skin are clearer now: the loopings of infinity, the triangle of a pendulum. The doomsday clock. Her dads—dad—would kill her. Jas's voice rises against the thunderous beat, "What did you do to me?"

He answers almost tenderly, "Do you remember why you came out tonight?"

She feels it then. A sifting, as if her memories are granular and drizzling through the waist of an hourglass. Slow. Fragmented.

Morning breaking. Her hand reaching for the nightstand. Picking up her phone thinking, Gary never calls me.

His greeting: It's over, my dear.

Knowing it would be eventually. Knowing he was sick for a long time. Knowing that a blackhound was nipping at his heels. Knowing angels were visiting his bedside to take his wishes down. Knowing he'd been coached on last words.

Jas shakes the memory, "Get out," venom rises in her throat and burns. Her voice gains the growly edge of her people and other beasts, "If they found out you're weaselling in heads—"

He shows her his palms, barricading himself behind raised hands, "Whoa, whoa. Nothing like that."

Jas remembers hanging up and not crying. Because she'd cried herself dry at the airport, watching a raunchy comedy movie, making a sandwich. Waiting.

“You’ve trapped me.”

The clan boy barks out an incredulous laugh, “No I fucking didn’t.”

“I know you did. I...” I have somewhere to be.

“Babygirl, I didn’t trap you. You trapped you.”

Panic flushes Jas pink; the strobe lights wash it away. “I can’t do that. That’s your—” the words are thick with derision, “—Clan shit.”

She catches a flash of eyeshine above his sneer. “Time’s taking cues from you. I can’t help that you’ve set it off.”

Her gaoler is mocking her. Her throat thickens with begging, “Don’t you have other things to do?”

“Oh, I’m not stuck here. I’m timeless. It’s complicated,” he shrugs, “This is all you.”

Not believing him, Jas summons her firmest conviction, “Stop messing with my head.” Even though it tempts her to stay here beneath the swaying lights and hard beats. To never put on that dress and to never read her eulogy and it’s horrible, isn’t it, to bury your hero? “You’re keeping me from saying goodbye. It’s torture.” Tears catch in her lashes. “Please. I need to go.”

“You don’t want to.”

“I do.”

Her own lie can’t fool her.

She jolts awake.

## Danse Macabre

M.L. Hufkie

### Ward Zero

“Nurse!”

She turned her attention to where the voice was coming from, armed with the artificial smile she'd adopted ever since starting her new job two weeks ago. The doctor was stomping towards her, a heavy scowl on his forehead. He was attractive in an old-fashioned sort of way. Cleft-chinned, tall, broad-shouldered, his dark hair neatly slicked back. He could be charming if not for his curmudgeonly demeanour, which often seemed to take centre stage.

“I need you in Ward Zero. The woman in 1518 has broken free of her bloody straitjacket and I cannot seem to find any orderlies. Where the hell is everybody?”

She wanted to tell him that the staff hadn't gone missing. They were simply having lunch, but there was no point. The pompous idiot couldn't even be bothered to call her by her name.

The stench of excrement wafted from a room further down the hall and she recoiled.

“Come!”

The doctor had started walking back the way he came and shouted his demand over his shoulder. *If I could roll my eyes out loud*, she thought. By the time they reached room 1518 the young woman had already managed to sever her full-body straitjacket and was dancing around her room, eyes closed, entranced, moaning along to a tune only she could hear.

“Grab her arms, Nurse!”

She did as she was told, expecting the woman to fight her, as most patients did, but she only opened her eyes and smiled sadly, shaking her head. Taking hold of the young woman's arms, she forced them behind her back, as the doctor brought forth a syringe, injecting her with one deft,

swift movement of his hand. It didn't take long for the drugs to take effect and less than two minutes later the girl drifted off to wherever.

“Call the idiots in the basement and request a new jacket, right now. The dancing girl hasn't broken free for a while, but we need to make sure it doesn't happen again.”

She left the room, leaving the doctor behind. *The dancing girl*. She had heard some nurses refer to the inhabitant of 1518 as that but had never asked why. She made the call and returned to the girl's room, peeking through the heavy glass panel in the door. The doctor was still there, his hands in his pockets, tears streaming down his face...

### Anna

They think I cannot hear them. But I can. They think I am crazy, disturbed, mentally unstable, whatever descriptions they like throwing at people who behave differently. “I am not.”

They think I am an imbecile, when it is they who are the idiots. There's nothing wrong with my ears. I can hear fine. There is also nothing wrong with my brain. *The dancing girl!* What an insult! Bloody unimaginative philistines! My mind is not broken. It is my body that has failed me. Ironic way of putting it, *I know*. From a choreographer's point of view, I am a wunderkind, a moving genius, an anomaly. But let me start from the beginning.

My mother often says she knew I was a dancer by the time I was a month old, and she saw my excitement at watching a ballet troupe on TV. According to her, I looked at the television awestruck and unblinking my baby face serious as I concentrated on a rendition of *The Dying Swan*. She decided forthwith that my suggested name of Sarah, after my grandmother would be abandoned and that she would give me a name that as she put it “would determine your future.” And so the following week as she registered by birth I was christened Anna, after the legendary prima ballerina, Anna Pavlova. Her decision was solidified as the perfect one when she walked into the bedroom that same day to find me in my cradle lying on my back with my little legs elevated, tiny toes pointed. According to her, as soon as I was able to walk I attempted to position myself en pointe.



Perhaps it was my father's rejection of her. A married man who had kept his marital status from her and denied us both when she informed him of her pregnancy. Or perhaps it was the strained relationship she had with her own parents. Whatever it was, my mother poured everything into me. My grandparents, though aloof and somewhat disappointed by their ignominious daughter, supported us financially, and thus I was able to go to one of the best ballet schools in the city.

By the time I was 12, I was top of my class. With the support of my tutors, teachers and the head of the school I danced in various on-stage performances. Even my grandparents started taking note. At 17, I was chosen as prima ballerina in performances taking me from Paris, Milan, Berlin, Cape Town, New York and St Petersburg.

Despite my mother's upper-middle-class upbringing, she had the soul of a socialist, hating anything superfluous. Upon her insistence, I started teaching ballet classes to less privileged students three times a week. When I think about it now, I realise how sheltered and naive I had been. I believed if I did the right thing and tried to be as good a person as possible, only good would come from it. I was wrong, and I was soon to find out just how wrong I was.

### Ward Zero

She moved away from the door before the Doctor could catch a glimpse of her, hurrying down the hallway. The doctor was in tears. Why?

Later as she sat in the cafeteria eating an egg sandwich, she had the overwhelming feeling of being watched. She wasn't surprised when she looked up, and found the doctor lingering in the doorway staring at her. His face didn't carry its usual haughty expression. He looked defeated.

"Three years. That's how long she's been here. They diagnosed her with schizophrenia, but that's nonsense."

The Nurse swallowed, not sure what to say.

"When they brought her in, I had just started working here. I remember the day. She had been sedated by her family physician, her mother in tears. She couldn't stop, you see."

“Couldn’t stop what doctor?”

“Dancing. When they brought her, she had been dancing for eighteen hours. Her heart was under strain. It was like she was possessed.”

Anna

Those shoes! Those godforsaken shoes. I saw them in the window display of an antique shop one Saturday afternoon walking back from teaching.

Frau Troffea’s, it was called, the name in gold lettering on a chain-linked board. How beautiful they were! The perfect shade of pink satin, daintily displayed resting against an old wooden chest. The most exquisite ballet shoes I had ever seen.

I walked in browsing, stalling. I didn’t need any new shoes. I had several pairs, too many to count. Something about those shoes beckoned me. I walked through the door, aiming for the display. The place reeked of decay. I didn’t see a soul.

“They say those shoes were once worn by Anna Pavlova herself.”

I spun around, stifling a low scream. Where the woman had come from I couldn’t say, but a tall, blonde woman was stood behind me. Her heterochromatic eyes seemed to look right through me. One a fresh hazel, the other startlingly blue. Before I could respond, she walked over the ledge to the display and placed the shoes in my hand.

“You should have them.”

Later that night I sat on my bed looking at them. They were light as a feather and smelled brand new. That night I dreamt about a woman dancing in an open field. Alone, she danced as though bewitched. She was wearing what appeared to be 16th-century peasant clothing. When she turned to face me, I saw her eyes: one hazel, one blue. I woke up with a start, thirsty and confused, my legs heavy. Swinging my feet onto the floor, I stared in shock at my feet. I was wearing the shoes.

Ward Zero

“I didn’t know who she was at first. It was only later that I realised. I watched some of her past performances. What a dancer! Even I could see that she was a marvel. That grace, those light-footed glides, her beautiful face shining with radiance. When she came in she’d broken both her feet twice. Painful reconstruction had been done on them, yet she could not stop dancing. It was like she was under a spell. That is why we keep her in a straitjacket and sedated.” The doctor’s voice came out raspy and laboured, like he hadn’t spoken that much in days. When he finally stopped talking, a heavy silence infiltrated the room, the ticking of the clock and his breathing the only sound filling the space.

Anna

I can hear the music. That morning when I rose after the dream to find those shoes on my feet, I instinctively knew that my life would no longer be my own. I was right.

After that things got stranger. When attempting to practise wearing my usual shoes a terrible fatigue would take hold of me. I would feel dizzy, sleepy, unable to move no matter how ready I was.. This carried on for days, until, out of frustration, I reached for the antique shoes.

And then, *voilà*; a phantasmagorical performance would follow, my dancing intense and crazed. Grotesquely amazing.

I started recording myself, and posting my performances on YouTube. The responses to my genius were unparalleled. I reached 6000 followers in less than two days. My popularity grew. Each practice was more intense than the previous one. My feet looked awful, yet I felt no pain. I was numb to it. My only thoughts were to try more steps, dancing from one corner of the room to the other, the music in my head, loud and overpowering. *Danse Macabre* by Charles-Camille Saint-Saëns.

My mother cancelled all my performances when she discovered me passed out in the studio. I had been dancing for 18 hours. Dehydrated, my feet broken, my leotard sticking to a sweaty body that was rail thin. Her horror when she realised I hadn’t noticed my damaged feet, that the opaque cloud of time meant nothing to me. And her scream when she leaned in, took my

face in her hands and asked sotto voce, as though afraid we would be heard, "Your eyes, what's wrong with your eyes?"

Rummaging in her handbag she grabbed a compact, positioning it in front of my face. My eyes had changed colour, one hazel, the other blue.

Meanwhile, the phone on the tripod kept buzzing with comments on my live videos. My mother snatched it, reading some of them, her voice heavy with fear, confusion and horror.

She's a genius! It's like she's from another planet!

I've been watching her for 3 hours now, this is CRAZY!

Are you guys seeing this?! WTF! Who's that blonde woman standing in the corner?! Do ya'll see her? Creepy shit!

My mother threw the phone across the room where it smashed into the wall.

I don't know how long I've been here, or how long I'll remain here. I now my mother attempted to destroy the shoes. She'd set them on fire, she'd cut them into pieces. Both times she'd find them back in my room, at the foot of my bed, immaculate. Her last resort was to return them to the store. When she got there, instead of Frau Troffea's she found a pharmacy. One that, according to the owner, had been there 40 years. Consulting city planners didn't help, nor did driving all over the city. Everywhere she looked a dead end.

That's what I know, only that and the fact that I spend my days sitting by the window staring out. Observing people as they come and go, staff, patients, and visitors toing and froing in this dance of life. I don't know much anymore, my head is always filled with that cursed music that won't leave me be. I know this, though. I cannot stop dancing. Not now, not tomorrow, perhaps never. But I will die trying.

## Like Fireflies

Esra Jackson

It started in his fingertips.

Through the technicolor fog  
of bubblegum sweat and sweet liquor,  
I saw them glow,  
like pink fireflies

steady with the beat of the bash,  
the saccharine bass wafting along  
the current of collective breath  
and want

he swayed his half-naked hips  
and with each dip,  
the glow hardened

silky beat turned brash

fingertips flashing

figure jutting and frantic

a warning

as he raised bony arms to the ceiling  
in praise  
devoting himself to the night  
the pulse of pleasure  
the rancid mass of glittering bodies  
that joined him,

everyone in their paradise comas  
slipping  
between  
each other  
like gears  
in some fucked-up party machine

it was impossible  
and bewitching

it was  
a neon ritual  
for the faithless



## Strawberry Wine

Selma Tabti

The band disappeared, and you're not here.  
Maroon bespattered on my ribs,  
Strawberry juice on your lips;  
Your love splattered, my dear.

Is it a case of apocalypse ?  
I swear, I thought I could fix it.  
I gave you all my love,  
all my tears.  
Mirrorball reflecting my deepest fears,  
Why is everything so explosive ?

Stop bleeding on me !  
Can you not see that everyone's watching ?  
Come and dance with me.  
Can you not hear the music playing ?  
Can you not hear them cheering ?  
You wanted to be part of the bourgeoisie !

You told me you loved me, why are you dying now ?  
Are you too weak to feel my love ?  
Answer !

Stop bleeding on me !  
It's not enough for me, for them !  
They want you to dance again.  
Please, now perform !  
Play a role ! Play your part !  
Do something, stop dying !

Let's collapse once again.  
please.  
I'm begging you now.  
stop bleeding.  
You're making it worse  
No one's even watching.

Stop.

I've never said I wanted to see crimson on you.  
I'd rather see you blush  
No— not a bruise !  
Let me touch you again  
May I caress your cheek — no !  
Stop bleeding !

Why don't you want me to love you ?  
Can you not see that I'm doing my best for you,  
even when my prom dress is covered in you ?

Please, let my adoration veil you.  
I love you, can you not see it ?  
Tears shouldn't be wine,  
I shouldn't be drunk on them.

I didn't want to love the pain,  
to mark my love into your veins,  
You didn't have to sacrifice yourself,  
in order for me to love myself.

Being the poet, and not the muse,  
is that the price I should pay ?  
Being the lover, and being used,  
is that why my world is turning gray ?

I've tried to love you,  
to splash my paint on top of your skin  
I've tried to cover your sin,  
and let you pretend to be brand-new.

No, I'm sorry.  
Stop trying to stretch yourself for me.  
Can you not see the ruby  
flowing out of your epidermis ?

Stop bleeding,  
it's not the same as crying,  
not the same as loving.

## Aglaeca

### Hayden Robinson

Moonlight flares in through the long glass window in the hall. The dance floor looks like a battlefield. Limbs scatter the corners; internal organs pile up; the empty faces of my classmates stare into nothing, their mouths opened wide in their last moments of life. Every inch of the place is stained with the blood of everyone who fell victim to my friend. At least, the monster who **was** my friend.

There are three of us left now, hiding underneath a table covered with a thin cloth. Aaron, the small brown-haired boy sporting a black tuxedo, wheezes in one breath after another. Tammy, a blonde stout girl in a dirtied pink dress and long messy hair, sits curled up in a ball. I peer at my white buttoned shirt and beige trousers. The glitter on my yellow nails twinkles into my sight, as I examine myself for injuries. Earlier in the night, Briana painted them for me at my house. I sniff, holding back a choked sob.

Turning back, I see that the monster named Briana stands several feet away. Underneath the disco ball that glitters starlight, Briana gnaws and slurps at the body of the tallest, strongest rugby player at our school. His name is—was—David and he had stepped up to challenge the beast. Briana's canine fangs tear into his flesh as if it were paper. He was always cocky.

She raises her enlarged head. I gaze in awe at the sheer size of her. She has grown at least four feet taller and her body swells with veiny muscles. Black hair sprawls over her back, legs, arms, and the rest of her naked body. Her blue dress ripped off when she transformed. Her green eyes shine like marbles under the disco lights. Blood drips from the torn skin hanging from her jaw. The sight makes me welcome the tears blurring my vision.

Behind her, the double doors into the hall are sealed shut. The metal pole, once used to open the blinds, is twisted around the handles.

**What happened, Briana? Why did you turn into that ... that thing?**

"What are we going to do?" Aaron asks in his quietest voice.

I shrug and answer, "I don't know."

Aaron's brow lowers, full of accusation. "It's your fault anyway, bringing **her** along."

I give him my own disapproving look. "Briana is my friend. Er—**was** my friend. And I wanted her here."

Tammy snorts. We look at her as she lets out a frightened laugh.

"Whatever," Tammy whispers harshly. "You just felt bad for what you said about her. You didn't even give her anything to wear. **I** had to provide that."

I want to tell Tammy that she's wrong, but her words flood my mind with memories.

Briana had missed school for several days. No one knew what was happening with her, not even her parents. I tried to text her, call her, video chat her, everything. No response. My worry turned to anger at being ignored. I started to talk behind her back. I told everyone at school how clingy Briana was, how overly sensitive she was, how much of a **spastic** she was.

That last one is the one Briana overheard.

I run my fingers through my hair, my jaw tensing up. Weeks had gone by before Briana would speak to me again. When she did, I apologised several times, all of which she just silently nodded to. The anger in her eyes screamed out at me. In the end, I offered to take her to the school disco. She accepted. When my mum dropped us off, everything seemed to be going well. Briana even danced with me on the floor, a Vimto in her hand, and she was smiling so much that I started to smile too.

Then the popular girl, Helen, started talking shit. She laughed at Briana, threw snacks at Briana, and told Briana to go home because no one wanted her there.

I watched Briana move away from the dance floor up to the long window. The moonlight flowed over her, seeming to embrace her. She screamed. Everyone watched her distort violently, her bones snapping and reshaping; she grew larger, tearing out of her dress. Her fangs grew long and horrific, closer to those of a wolf than a person.

And now here she is, morphed into this unearthly monster.

Crawling to the other side of the table, I catch a glimpse of a stairway leading to the balcony at the far end of the hall. I had taken it several times when I was helping to pull up the disco ball and tie it to the ceiling. It wasn't hardwired, just a cheap ball hanging by a cheap rope.

An idea hits me.

I turn to Aaron and Tammy and tell them my plan. They take it all in and give slow, nervous nods.

We spring into action. The other two rush from under the table, making a dash for the stairway. I stay behind, looking right at Briana. Part of my plan is to distract her long enough for them to reach the balcony. I'm not sure if this will work at all, but I have hope. At best, I will bring my friend back to who she was. But at worst, it means putting her down.

Briana sits on all fours, waiting patiently for me, I suppose. She resembles a giant scruffy dog waiting for its treat.

Taking a long, quivering breath, I step forward. I keep my chin pressed against my chest, eyes on the floor. My mum, who works at a veterinarian, told me that bowing my head and avoiding eye contact with a wild animal is a sign of respect. I don't want to think of Briana as a wild animal, but it is difficult not to.

As I draw nearer, I begin to wonder if my plan would actually work. There's no guarantee that Tammy and Aaron would make it to the balcony and there is less chance of Briana staying in place if she thought something was up. She could pounce at any moment. I pull my eyes up ever so slightly, seeing the blood, gore and chaos around me. In one move, Briana turned an amazing night into a day in hell.

Why aren't you looking at me?

I stop, confused.

Look at me!

I snap my head up. Briana is still sitting patiently, but with a snarling

face, her large mouth shining with rows of sharp teeth. The disco ball above her reflects the sinister moon, glimmering like joyful fairy lights against the gruesome scene.

"Did you speak?" I ask.

The beast, no longer snarling, nods her head. *This is the way I talk, if I want to.*

I nod, not daring to ask how this is possible or why. This is a good sign anyway. It means Briana is still there. I can hold onto hope a little longer.

"Briana," I say, "what is this about? How are you able to, well—" I gesture at her presence. "—turn into that?"

The beast blinks. *It's a family curse. Always had it.*

I hear a squeaking sound. Aaron is up at the balcony, gripping hold of the rope. I am still hoping to finish this conversation.

"You transformed and killed everyone. Killed people, Briana."

*So what? They were all monsters anyway.*


"But that doesn't mean—"

*And you're a monster too.* Briana snarls again. *You said stuff about me, isolated me, made me feel like an outsider. How are you any different?*

"If that's true," I say, "why did you let me live? Why did you leave Aaron and Tammy alive too?"

The beast looks at the floor, and for a moment, the Briana I know comes back—the shy, kind, insecure friend. *Because you three were nice to me. And I want to believe you guys like me. I want you to know how I feel.*

This answer stumps me for a moment, wondering what she means by us being nice to her. Then it hits me. Tammy had provided Briana with a dress, of course, but there was also Aaron. He had given Briana some money for lunch when she had forgotten her own; it may have been that he pitied her after seeing her meltdown outside our English classroom, but he did that.



As for me, Briana slept over at my house once. We talked about things that hurt us the most. She felt like an outsider because she was not a party person like everyone else. She also said she felt pain so much of the time, and that on the worst nights, that pain became intense, that fear of not belonging became overwhelming, and she just can't hold it in anymore. I held her close that night, stroking her hair and telling her it was all okay. I didn't mind. She was—is—my friend and I care for her deeply.

On the sparkling dance floor, Briana and I face each other. Her snarls soften and eyes widen. She lifts herself up, and seeing this wolf-like creature standing tall as a human would is so strange. I smile, glad she's coming round.

Then the disco ball falls fast from the ceiling. The ball smashes on top of Briana. Pieces splinter and fly from her head and her back, spreading across the floor. Briana grunts before collapsing to the ground with a great **thwomp**.

I blink, murmuring one word over and over again: "No, no, no, no."

Aaron and Tammy rush to my side. Tammy looks at Briana and throws her hand to her mouth. Aaron puts his hands on his hips, pleased with this result. I continue to mutter 'no' over and over. We make our way to Briana. She is so still, I could swear we have killed her. But she is still breathing; she sounds like a snorting pig as she lets out deep huffs of air.

Kneeling down, I reach out to see if she is truly knocked out.

Briana's teeth snap open and plunge into my arm. I scream. The fangs pierce through my skin, stabbing into my nerves.

I pull away and scramble far from Briana, screaming from the pain. I hurl downward by the window where the moonlight beams in, where Briana stood just before she transformed.

Before I know it, my bones are twisting, my skin bloats and my legs stretch. Hair spikes out of me like a million needles. My nails grow as long and sharp as knives. Hot tears fill my eyes and my screams turn into animalistic growls. My fangs grow long and vicious, barely fitting into my mouth. Briana stands tall, looking pitiful. Tammy and Aaron watch in horror.

Briana's tone is almost sorrowful. **Now you know what it feels like.**

The monster inside me roars.

## Cocoon

Maxine Sophia Wolff

I catch a glimpse of her across the club. Sharp-eyed, hungry, a mask obscuring her mouth like a mayfly. Strobe lights throw shimmering technicolor across the ground between us, while on stage the performer wails into their microphone with a shifting face. A snout while in portrait, but human while in profile. Girls fresh from the school blocks chant rhythmic lyrics as they flock around the stage. A woman with filed teeth howls, three sharp notes of **ow ow ow!**

I dance. I drink cheap beer. I feel people press behind me, their bloated bodies swelling. The singer wails, ethereal amidst smoke and electricity, an icon of our city. Thump thump thump goes a heartbeat behind me. Then I find myself the counterpart to a cutting woman with fish gills. She takes my waist in her hands and leans in.

**Do I let her kiss me?**

(Circle one)

**Yes / No**

When urine collects in my bladder, I push my way through the thick crowd towards the bathrooms. But a voice to my right speaks.

“Hey.”

It’s the stranger I made eye contact with earlier, the owner of those two sharp eyes, features still wreathed behind a veil of black.

I smile back, wordless. Then off comes the mask to reveal her face—a shimmering thing, almost luminous in the shifting dark.

**Does my gut tell me to trust her?**

(Circle one)

**Yes / No**

“Pretty good show, yeah?” The stranger asks as I give her a quick scan. Nice boots, an expensive silver necklace. Her gaze burns me back as I stare.

“My name is Alistere,” she introduces.

The line moves upwards one body. Deeper in, I hear girls laughing.

“Drinks are so expensive. Let me order you something after this. Anything you want. Money’s no issue.”

The look on her face insists that I should be impressed.

“Oh?” I raise my voice. This makes her smile, her lips like two lizard tails molting.

“I’m a defense contractor up in the high ward. Big money.”

A beat goes by.

“Mostly shipment processing and validation—making sure packages are sent to the right place. I’m not designing anything myself. Boring, I guess.”

“Boring.”

“But I’m getting my bones just like anyone else. A lot of circles don’t really have room for me when they hear what I do. You could say I’m a lone wolf.”

“Sure.”

“Here’s the thing. If it wasn’t me, it would be someone else. I mean, it’s not like I’m the one firing the weapons. It’s not like I’m the one who started the war.” The stranger explains, eyes gleaming as they size me. “I like you,” she insists, “You don’t judge—you roll with the punches.”

Something in my gut tightens. Her crystal eyes become two drills boring into me.

“Thanks,” I say, awkward. By now the line has moved up further, and we are in the bathroom. Down the way, I spot an empty stall. I give the stranger a terse smile and then abscond.

**Does her face stay with me as I leave?**

(Circle one)

Yes / No

Inside the stall, I pee. Zipping open my purse, I rifle through its contents like a surgeon searching for something to extract: dark green lipstick, a wallet of rolled ones, a silver butterfly knife. I find my prize—a small vial of summer spice, which I tap onto the back of my hand and inhale.

Crackling clarity finds me—pries my skull plates apart and saturates the wet mess underneath.

I wipe myself, flush the toilet, and push out.

At the sink, Alistere is waiting. She lathers her soapy hands repeatedly until she sees me, then turns on the faucet to rinse.

“You again.” She teases. My head reels from the spice, and the image of her face kaleidoscopes in glowing tessellations.

I greet her back. The music from outside grows louder, angelic croons rising like a swell before a wave.

“I’d like you to meet someone,” Alistere says suddenly.

“What?”

“If you don’t mind leaving the club for a minute.”

I shake my head. “There’s no reentry.”

“They’ll never know we left. I know a secret way.”

**Does her voice pull at something deep inside of me? Does it override all my base instincts?**  
(Circle one)

Yes / No

I follow her from the bathroom to a side hallway, suddenly spellbound. I watch as she feels around the carpet until she finds a hidden latch. She tugs it and the floor swings up to reveal a steel manhole cover. She wastes no time sliding down the rungs, inviting me after with a gesture.

**Do I follow her? Do I even have a choice?**

(Circle one)

Yes / No

The tunnels stretch like wheel spokes around me, seemingly infinite, filled to the brim with busyness. There are people all around. Alistere leads me through it all, navigating this loose maze of masked figures and whispered deals. At one intersection, a man with blades strapped to every inch of his body staggers past, leaving a snail trail of blood behind him.

“Where are we?” I ask.

**Does her lack of response unnerve me? Yes / No (Circle one)**

Further in, pig carcasses split at the belly furnish long tables. Six shirtless men stand hunched over them, eating with their faces. Along the far wall, naked dancers gyrate in locked cages, as businessmen dip dollar bills into bowls of barbeque sauce and stick them onto their skin through the bars.

“What is this place?” I ask Alistere again.

She smiles. “A tunnel system. Old service passageways the government built to hold out during the long protests. A sort of underbelly, I guess. It’s more for pleasure than business, now, but its function as a gathering space remains the same. Filled to the brim with the beating blood of our beautiful empire.”

I look at the businessmen and their barbeque ladies.

“Mybra-Auros,” she exalts, exhaling. “What a city we live in. Have you ever been to the high ward?”

“No,” I say.

Is this a lie?  
(Circle one)

Yes / No

“Well, that’s a shame. It’s beautiful: golden and green, with the cathedral of law at its center, with all those shimmering spires.” A pause finds the conversation as she maneuvers us past a crowded corner. “I was an intern there for two years. Both my parents served in the military wing. Before that, my father was a veteran, and my mother was a nurse. They both fought in farside wars and brought riches back with them. You know the saying: War is good for money, and money’s good for me. I guess you could call it nepotism, how I got the job, but I was really good at it. A year in, nobody even cared who my parents were. I ran the rat race fast. Cut corners, costs. I think that’s how the party boss noticed me.”

She says the words party boss as if they were a spell.

“He introduced himself. Stopped me as I was walking to the gardens. I don’t think I could have stopped myself even if I knew.”

“Knew what?”

The stranger ignores the question.

“We became close. He took me to all sorts of places in the high ward. We went to the Kulem Library and got lost in its endless towers. We went to the gardens of Gardesh, and the palace of Uche. He showed me the secret entrances to these old tunnels. Taught me everything I know. I thought he loved me.”

“Did he not?”

A sad flicker of a smile, then stoic lips.

“No. He did not.”

Do I understand what she means?  
(Circle one)

Yes / No

“What happened?”

“Well,” she says tersely. “It doesn’t matter. He got me my new defense job, much higher pay. Technically, I guess, I still work for him. I’m working for him now.”

More pigs hang from hooks down the hallway. Fresh plates of meat, raw and steaming, pile up one after the next in front of a table of masked men—they devour it, their skinny fingers gripping the flesh. At the table, one figure stands out, five feet taller than his peers.

Does my heart stop?  
(Circle one)

Yes / No

Alistere’s eyes freeze me from my frenzy. She stands beside the table and gestures to the tall man.

“Boss,” she says, extending a hand towards me in introduction, her voice a poisonous singsong drawl. “This is Dominia. The one I’ve been telling you about. I believe she will suit your needs well.”

My stomach recoils instantly.

Dominia. My name.

Had I given her my name?  
(Circle one)

Yes / No

I hear his step before I see him move; a heavy lumber. The party boss rises from the crowd, a ten-foot scarecrow of sinew, all hidden behind a sheet-metal mask.

Hello, lovely. He booms, his voice a phantom projection.

I take a staggering step backwards, but Alistere is behind me to stop that retreat.

Do I fall into her arms? Do I try to run, and she grabs me? Don't bother answering.

"I'm sorry it had to come to this," she says, floating towards me like a wraith, two inches off the ground. The smooth curve of her face meets mine, and our lips lock.

I cannot move.

And then she pulls back—my gut drops. Everything is falling away from me.

She leads me by a limp hand down to the meat hooks, where the pigs hang, only now I can see that they are not pigs. Not pigs at all. They hang half-flayed, faces removed, just smooth sheets of red.

"I knew from the moment I met you," Alistere says, splaying her palm over her face and gripping down. "I knew that you were special. Beautiful. You're lucky I found you when I did. Who knows who else could have snatched you?"

And then Alistere's hand, still held taught over her face, grips down and lifts. Her skin splits away from the muscle, her lips, a zipper undone.

I stare at the bleeding tapestry that remains, and simple clarity finds me. My muscles roar back alive.

I have only seconds to act.

I kick Alistere in her knee, buckling it. She cries out in pain and stumbles. Then, like a whirlwind, I turn around and run. But the party boss blocks my way. He swells up over me, a psychic tidal wave, every pore of his body a black hole.

A bite, a claw, a slash with the switchblade in my purse gets me past him. But that horrifying mask—his sheet metal mask, stays with me as a run.

Is Alistere following me?  
(Circle one)

Yes / No

I hound back the way I came and launch myself against the ladder, throwing the manhole open from underneath and exploding back into the now-empty club. Daylight streams through the closed doors.

Somehow, hours have passed. My own momentum trips me, but I keep running, and then blow the double doors down into the low ward of the city.

Is she letting me go? Is this all part of her plan?  
(Circle one)

Yes / No

Warm, sharp sunlight burns the scum from my skin. Different skin from the skin I started with. My adrenaline spikes and then it dives.

I collapse on the street beside a storm drain, from which I hear chatter and the frantic sounds of men searching.

Is this how it happened?  
(Circle one)

Yes / No



## Pretty Things Never Die

### Jordan Mallory

Everyone in Peakin knew the story. In 1984, Bobby Simmons allegedly butchered three freshman girls on the last day of his senior year. He swore he was innocent up until his final breath in that electric chair. Of course, the townspeople shamed his parents, and they moved out of Texas altogether. How could they stay in town with the whispers in church or the looks of pity coming from every corner of the Piggly Wiggly?

Forty years later, the “Massacre Mansion” is the best place for local kids to get up to no good. Just like tonight.

“Truth or dare?”

Molly didn’t care to know the answer. She didn’t even want to be there. Not that her wants or needs mattered; they never did in this group. It was Jillie Kane’s world, and she was simply living in it.

Earlier that night, they’d pulled the oldest trick in the book: telling each parent they were sleeping at the others. Then, with two water bottles filled with vodka stolen from their parent’s liquor cabinet and Diet Coke as a chaser, they piled into the bed of Bradley Hart’s beat-up ‘71 Chevy with Allianna Chase *literally* chasing behind them. She’d decided at the last minute to join in the debauchery.

Bradley drove through the quiet streets, blowing every stop sign along the way, smoking with his partner-in-crime, Keaton Dwells, in the passenger seat. Thriving off male attention as usual, Jillie danced to the music blaring through the speakers with the bottle in her hand as if his truck had turned into a nightclub.

A true testament to their dynamic, Allianna desperately copied every move Jillie made to try and get Keaton’s attention. Molly sat, distressed, hoping they wouldn’t get caught with two of the “hottest” seniors in school. Technically, though, they weren’t seniors anymore. Graduation came and went that afternoon— for them, it was time to celebrate.

“Dare,” Jillie answered quickly.

They all sat in the candlelit living room of Massacre Mansion, surrounded by half the school gyrating and grinding, doing their best to ignore the creepiness and let the drunkenness take over. Molly couldn’t get over it, though. Since they’d walked in, it felt like she was being watched. But every time she looked over her shoulder, nothing was there.

Keaton smirked, “I dare you to take Bradley up to one of the bedrooms and do him.”

He wasn’t serious. He couldn’t be. Jillie’s eyes narrowed at him—she liked to have a good time, but she wasn’t easy. Bradley laughed and tightened his grip around her waist. She wasn’t having it.

Her attempts to escape his grasp were slightly clumsy; she’d finished most of the first water bottle herself. She got there, though, eventually.

“You’re both pigs,” she angrily pointed at them before staggering away.

As always, Allianna and Molly followed, weaving between bodies, carelessly throwing themselves around, clearly fueled by alcohol and fake teenage rebellion. The smell of nicotine, marijuana, and sweat made Molly sick to her stomach. Why did people go to parties in the first place? This wasn’t fun.

“*Them*,” she heard a whisper. She felt a chill, and she stopped in her tracks. “*Them*.”

Frantically, Molly turned around. The music got louder, as did the heartbeat in her ears. The words managed to break through. Over and over again. Menacingly.

“*Them. Them. Them.*”

She looked over her shoulder and saw three girls standing at the top of the stairs. Their eyes were on her, never shifting and never blinking. The hair on her arms stood up, and she kept trying to get herself to move. She couldn’t.

“Molly! Come here!” Allianna’s frantic voice finally made her look away.

When she looked back, they were gone.

That was it. She had to get out of there and wasn't leaving without the others. Molly rushed towards her friend, leaning against the wall by the bathroom door. She sighed and looked at Allianna.

"What could she possibly be doing in there? There's no running water," she knocked. They all knew the golden rule of Massacre Mansion. Need to pee? Vomit? Take it outside.

On the other side, Jillie sat in the dirt and grime beside the empty toilet and clutched onto the bowl. Mascara-stained tears were streaming down her face. They first started from the embarrassment, then fell faster as the alcohol eventually caught up to her.

She ignored the pounding on the door at first.

When it wouldn't let up, she yelled, "Go away, Allianna! God! You're so fucking annoying all the fucking time!"

Did she mean that? Maybe. It was most likely the mortification of realizing all Bradley saw in her was a whiney, needy girl like she saw in Allianna sometimes. Now, *that* was humbling.

Jillie pushed herself up, roughly wiping the stains from her face. She refused to give them the satisfaction of seeing her sad, drunk, and pathetic. Jillie fixed her hair in the cracked mirror, tucking her tight black curls behind her ears. Then, she faked a smile into the reflection.

It faded when she noticed another reflection behind her—a pale woman with wild red locks and too much blue eyeshadow. Petrified, Jillie tried to scream, but a hand that resembled sandpaper covered her mouth. Rough and wrinkly, it burnt as it scratched against her lips. She let out another muffled scream, clawing at the arm around her. But, it was no use. The grip was tight. *Suffocating*. Jillie's nails dug in deeper, ripping the skin from the other girl's knuckles. A black tar oozed into a sloppy, horrifying mess down the front of her dress into a puddle on the floor.

Jillie had to fight back. Reaching around on the sink for anything she could find, she realized there was nothing to use as a weapon—damn, this abandoned bathroom! The squeaky grind of the faucet handle echoed against the walls; a foul-smelling, crimson sludge poured out violently. This couldn't be happening.

As breathing became more and more difficult, she felt lightheadedness set in. The world was spinning, and her throat was burning from trying to scream. Her eyes were glued to the sink basin as it filled with the mysterious mud; she gagged as the smell intensified.

"You're so pretty," the girl purred into her ear.

Then, in the final assault on her body and dignity, her head was forced under.

Desperate for air, Jillie's instincts kicked in, and she took a deep breath. Muck immediately filled her nose and mouth, swimming down her windpipe to fill her lungs. She tried to fight again, but whoever this was had her overpowered. Screaming only made it worse, causing it to fill every crevice of her. She choked and sputtered. Then nothing. Her limp body fell to the floor.

"Jillie, seriously? Can you please stop being a drama queen for five seconds?" Molly had enough.

"*Them...*"

The voice rang again; she looked around. No one else seemed phased. Was this all in her head? Her eyes again scanned over the other partygoers in the living room. They were still dancing, oblivious. Almost ominously oblivious.

Allianna had already fled into the backyard. Jillie's words stung her, and she needed to be alone. As Molly looked around, she realized *maybe* that was the best idea. Something wasn't right here. That grew *ever* more apparent as the dark room around her suddenly began to glow a *soft purple*.

The dancing slowed as the music pulsated; Molly could feel the vibration through the rotting floorboards. A brunette in a leather jacket stood in the center. She smiled, causing tingles to move through Molly's body from her fingertips to her ears. Her chest tightened. It wasn't nerves but another feeling she couldn't quite describe.

Without warning, her feet pulled her towards the girl. As she passed through the crowded makeshift dance floor once more, she noticed their faces. They were frozen in smiles, too. Like they were made of stone, their

eyes were black. Still, their bodies moved in smooth, warped motion. They paid no mind to her as she brushed shoulders with them on her way. It should have been unsettling, but Molly couldn't think of anything other than the girl on the other end of the room. Her beauty hypnotized Molly; the glitter surrounding her was beckoning her in.

Molly had no idea who she was, but she wanted to, especially as the girl began to move her own hips. Steady. Tempting. Tantalizing. Her body wasn't moving in time with the music. It was as if she were dancing to a song only she could hear. How that was even possible, Molly couldn't fathom. The one blaring through the stereo had gotten so loud the whole house was shaking now. Dangerously. The few photos left up of the Simmons family crashed to the ground, and glass shattered everywhere.

The dancing around her never stopped. Neither did she. She couldn't. The girl's stare captured her. Her hands found Molly's hips, urging her to dance alongside her. Molly smiled back, succumbing to her wishes. Their bodies pressed together, and she lost her breath. Her eyes stayed on the others. They were so blue. So beautiful, like a dazzling pool she wanted to dive into.

"I've been waiting for you," the girl whispered in her ear.

It was the same voice she'd been hearing over and over again. That was both comforting and haunting at the same time. But she couldn't break free. So, she danced, forgetting the troubles around her.

Meanwhile, Allianna couldn't. Trouble had followed her outside as she sat on the rusted swing set. Tears streamed gently down her face; the frigid summer night breeze dried them almost immediately.

"Don't cry," A voice like bells spoke beside her.

She looked to her left. The girl was beautiful, blonde, and doe-eyed.

Allianna didn't answer, so the girl continued, "You're too pretty to cry."

"No, I'm not," Allianna's doubts were always so loud in her head.

Her gaze went back to the grass. She heard the rattle of the chains beside her, and the girl was gone. She looked up at the window near the backdoor into the house, furrowing her brow in confusion. The house was

empty. Where did everyone go?

Standing slowly, she took the first step towards the house to investigate when the rattling returned. The chain from the swing wrapped tightly around Allianna's neck. She tried to shout, but the more she struggled, the tighter it became. Blood spilled rapidly, and when she coughed, more lurched from her mouth and the growing wounds. Her skin ached terribly, and it felt like the chains were ripping through her. Her body rose from the ground; the chain pulled her up higher and higher until her neck snapped.

"Them..."

This time, the words came from behind Molly. It shook her free from her trance. As swiftly as they appeared, the lights above disappeared, and the sparkles dimmed. The guests all stood solid in their places.

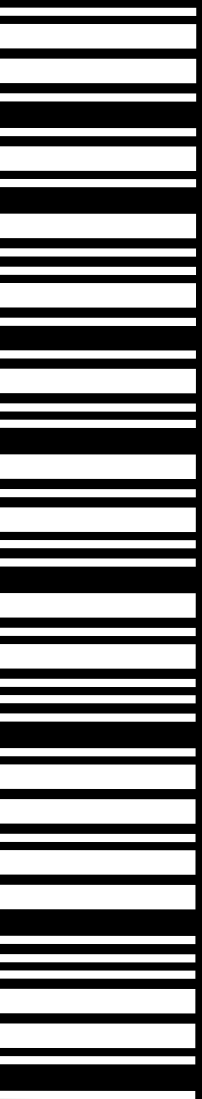
Molly turned to face the girl; her eyes were no longer peaceful. They were terrifying.

Before Molly could run, the girl grabbed her by the wrist and dragged her up the stairs. She pleaded for help to each body they passed. They never budged. The two reached the top in a flash, overlooking the entire scene—statues on the dance floor. Molly's back was pressed against the railing.

"You're so pretty," the girl stroked her cheek. The tenderness contradicted the malicious look on her face.

It was the last thing Molly saw before tumbling over. Her classmates' shrieks overpowered the sound of every bone in her body crunching as she hit the ground. When they looked up, there were Keaton and Bradley. Framed, standing in front of the wall that read:

**PRETTY THINGS NEVER DIE.**



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## Tips for Surviving a Party

S.C. Williams

Find the bathroom door that locks.

(After he leans in  
and asks to buy you a drink  
after the blood has swelled  
to the surface  
where his teeth met your flesh  
wait until he turns his back  
to dissolve into the crowd  
and fall in with the shadows.  
Match your footsteps  
with the thumping pulse of the music.)

Clean yourself up.

(Splash water on your face  
and wash his whisky-sour breath  
off your skin.  
Press the paper towel to your wound  
to soak up the blood.  
Try to forget the feeling  
of his claws snagging in your hair.  
When a warm clot  
rises in your throat  
expel it immediately.)

Find a weapon.

(Don't be reckless—  
take your jacket  
and wrap it around your fist.  
Use the screams bellowing  
from the dancefloor  
to cover the sound  
of the mirror shattering.  
Snag a jagged shard  
careful to calm your trembling  
so you don't pierce your own flesh.  
Aim your weapon at the door  
when the handle rattles.)

Summon the animal rage in your bones.

(You already know how to do that  
don't you?)

## **About Our Authors**

### *In Alphabetical Order*

#### **Abby Thatcher**

Abby thatcher is a poet who only cares about the midwest and its treatment of the rodent order. She is working on a bachelors in Creative Writing at Purdue and previous publications include The Oak Leaves and Fright Night

#### **A.L. Davidson**

A.L. Davidson (she/they) is a disabled, queer author who specializes in cozy genre-blending web novels and tales of haunting horror romance. She writes stories about ghosts, grief, isolation, space exploration, eco-horror, queerness, and the human condition.

They have penned several short stories that have been featured in various lit mags and anthologies, and have been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, the Indie Ink and Queer Indie Awards, and the BBNYAs. They are best known for their eco-horror romance novella ""When The Rain Begins To Burn"", the ""R-PNZL: A Futuristic Fairytale"" series, and their collection of web novels.

#### **Esra Jackson**

Esra Jackson is currently an undergraduate at the University of Missouri in Columbia studying English and Art. Their poems have been published in EPIC Literary Magazine, where he now serves as editor-in-chief, and LITERATURE EMITTING DIODES, a project under Partial Press. They love sweet potatoes and all things horror and sci-fi.

#### **Ev Datsyk**

Ev Datsyk is a second-generation settler living on the land known today as Canada. She primarily writes short stories and is passionate about genre-bending, dramatic irony, and questionable puns. When not writing, she can be found reading in coffee shops, scarfing down baked goods, or rolling cat hair off her black clothes. You can find her on Twitter/X and Instagram at @evdatsyk.

#### **F. Malanoche**

F. Malanoche writes, under the cover of night, hoping to bring authentic and odd Latino stories into the world. He teaches English in the Midwest, has a wonderful wife, and a sweet vinyl collection. His writing has been published in Demonic Workplaces and Darkness 101: Lessons Were Learned. Disturb Ink Books will be publishing his work in their anthologies Escape and Lurk. You can follow him on his Facebook page.

#### **Halle Preston**

Halle is an English Literature graduate and avid short story writer. She's a fan of all things spooky, from Gothic tales to cheesy slashers to survival horror games. On the lighter side, she loves the outdoors, crocheting, and her silly cat Elmo!

#### **Hayden Robinson**

Hayden Robinson is an autistic British writer and poet. He writes in a variety of genres, mainly in horror and poetry. His themes often focus on overcoming trauma, neurodivergence and humanity. His work has appeared in various publications, including HNDL, Re-Route Magazine, Diverge Magazine, Colour Theory, and HorrorScope Volumes 3 and 4, and Divinations Magazine. He currently lives in Decatur, GA with his wife, their dog and their two cats.

#### **Jordan Mallory**

#### **Maxine Sophia Wolff**

My work has appeared before in semi-pro magazines such as Fusion Fragment and Seize the Press. I also make video games. I am a transgender woman.

#### **M.L. Hufkie**

M.L. Hufkie was born in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1984 during the country's last desperate years of Apartheid. Growing-up during a period of dramatic change and plagued by political unrest left a profound impact on her. Writing with a minority voice in the UK, her aim is to challenge dominant narratives. Reading and creative writing are her life-long passions, and she has an interest in politics, religion, social identity and the occult.

#### **Noll Griffin**

Noll Griffin is a visual artist, writer, and musician based in Berlin, Germany. His poetry has appeared in The Purposeful Mayonnaise, The Wild Word, and Reap Thrill among others and his first chapbook titled "Tourist Info" is available through Alien Buddha Press.

#### **Rafal Chelski**

Rafal Chelski is a queer scribbler, and publishing professional living in Melbourne, Australia. His work focuses on the strange, otherworldly and fantastically absurd. You can follow him across socials via @d\_raff\_c.

#### **Robert Jones**

Robert Jones has a BA in English Literature and Film Studies. He is currently pursuing an MSc in Computer Science. His work has been featured in Animation Studies journal.

#### **Sam Logan**

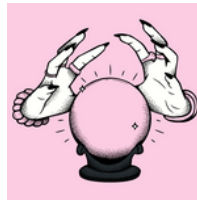
Sam (he/him) emerged in 1984 from the depths of the Chesapeake Bay off the Maryland shore. He somehow made it to Oregon where he is a university professor and somehow convinced someone to let him teach a course about body horror. Sam Lives with his partner, kiddo, and Dune the dog.

#### **S.C. Williams**

S. C. Williams (she/her) lives in Indiana with her spouse and rowdy puppy and works in the circulation department of her local library. Her writing has previously appeared in The Crow's Quill. She is also a general editor for the online youth-led literary magazine The Renaissance Review.

#### **Selma Tabti**

Selma holds a French BA in Modern Literature and has completed her third year of undergraduate studies at Royal Holloway, University of London. She is currently pursuing a master's degree in Publishing at her home university in Southern France. Spending a year in England gave her the confidence to submit her writing in English and create her own literary magazine. She now hopes to enter the publishing world.



**DIVINATIONS MAGAZINE**