Chandelier: Glowering

A Bulb Culture Collective Zine

Halloween 2026



LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

There's just something about this time of year, isn't there? Beguiling, ensorcelling. Ineluctable. Maybe it's the changing of the seasons, how the leaves turn from bright and verdant green to incarnadine, goldenrod, fox-quick orange. Maybe it's the promise of the supernatural. The thinning of the border between the rational world and what may be waiting in the dark.

The cold, crisp wind? The gray, domed skies? The retreat from a raw outside to a cozier world of warm light?

Whatever the reason for our fascination—and who can forget the simple pleasures of pumpkin carving, candy, dressing up, and horror movies?—we adore the spooky, the haunting, those mysterious happenings you simply can't explain.

Three years ago, we published the first ever issue of Chandelier. Entitled *Guttering*, the e-zine celebrated and illuminated the best Halloween-centric writing we could find.

With *Glowering*, we've endeavored to collect and showcase even more writing that speaks to that truly great unifier: Fear.

Here, you'll find excellent and horrifying writing about living dolls and uncanny houses, decomposing bodies and world-ending monsters. You'll find characters pushed to their brinks and forced to endure, to overcome. To survive.

Maybe that's why we're really fascinated by what scares us; to tell the story of fear and to come out alive…What can be more human than that?

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

We hope you'll love each and every piece by these incredibly talented writers. We can't thank them enough for their bravery.

As Halloween's presence looms and you begin to read, we hope you won't be startled by the tapping of bare branches against the windows. There's nothing staring in, right beyond the glass. We promise.

L .M. and Jared

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PEERING OUT ON HALLOWEEN

JOHN GREY

Night sky is a witch machine.
It's an assembly line
of sorcery, wonder,
and out the end pop
hags on broom-backs.

Night sky is a witch poem.
Words cobweb on
star-smoldered paper.
Lines rattle and hiss
and sometimes slick the air
with lightning.

Meaning is as ephemeral
as the faces in the golden moon,
the whipping wings of bats,
the taste of light
on the tongue.
When done, I drop my pen
and it mutates into
a cackling crone.

Night sky is a witch shrine,
a shadow altar,
a witch prison
with hours for bars,
a witch forest
of peaked-capped firs.

Night sky is the cat
that curls up at my feet,
purrs softly,
as I peer out
to where I think I'll,
any moment, see it
on a witch's shoulder,
flying by.



GOOD FOR A DEAD GIRL

BETH SHERMAN

There are two dozen funerals a week in our town. After each body is placed in a coffin, it's weighted down with heavy rocks from the river, so the corpse can't rise. It took all night to dig Violet up, remove the stones, and cover the coffin with dirt again. Afterwards, my fingers were bleeding and one of my nails had fallen off. I put her in the back seat of my Subaru and got home before the first peach streaks of light climbed over the pines.

She looks good, for a dead girl. Her skin is the color of the granite countertop in our kitchen. Her eyes are open, and though she stares straight ahead, not really seeing me or her old room or Monty, our Cavalier King Charles spaniel, occasionally she blinks and it's like a sign that she knows she's home again.

Violet stands by the window, as Monty watches. He's wary around Violet, like he knows it's her but not really.

She's on a Keto diet – eggs, lentils, tofu, quinoa, food that's high in protein – because I know she wouldn't want me killing sparrows and robins, birds she used to cherish, just so she could eat their brains. No burgers or steak since this whole thing started with cows. They caught some disease that releases neurotoxins and then humans ate the cows and got sick, too. There's supposed to be a vaccine, but people keep saying the shot's unsafe so the government stopped making it.

Violet was in fifth grade before. She liked blueberry pancakes, field hockey, learning about the Presidents, Katy Perry songs, oversized sweatshirts, a boy named Riley Kajowski, who died three weeks before she did. She used to come home from school and tell me about the popular girls on her bus or something funny Riley said. Now she never talks. When she moves she barely picks her feet off the ground, lurching from window to window. I can't let her go outside. They're patrolling the streets with flaming arrows and axes from Amazon. They always aim for the head.

Violet doesn't sleep and since she got sick, neither do I. Before he took off, her father used to say I should get paid for worrying since I do it so well. That was when my biggest problem was whether to paint the den Savannah Moss or Wasabi. Sometimes, I go into her room and she's standing there with her hair all crazy and her staring-at-nothing eyes and her tongue flicking back and forth like she's eating imaginary flies and I think, *that's my baby. She's here. She hasn't left me.* I sing Sheryl Crow songs to her – about whatever makes you happy not feeling that bad – the way I did when we first brought her home from the hospital and held her up to the mirror to see if she recognized herself. When I try to touch her, she jumps, like I've prodded her with something sharp.

At work, I tell people I'm still grieving, which is true. I want the old Violet back. My happy girl. My star. Although I shouldn't complain. At least part of her is with me. Even if it's the formless, empty part.

At Shop Rite, people head the other way when they see me coming, as if loss is contagious. When I run into the other mothers, I pretend not to know them, focus on the brightly colored cans of soda, the way the fluorescent lights make everyone look washed out and sickly. *Good sale on eggs this week*, Riley Kajowski's mother tells me when we're stuck next to each other on the same checkout line. I notice her cart is filled with dozens of egg cartons, too. More than one family could possibly need.

They've built a 12-foot-tall metal wall around the town. To keep the creatures out. To keep us safe. There's a curfew, too. No one can leave their house after six. I stand at the window, close to Violet but not close enough to spook her, and we both watch a wren plucking seeds from the feeder. Violet's expression is greedy. Not for my love. For something I can no longer give her. I want to kiss her pale cheek, which I know will be cold as the grave. I want her to tell me secrets again, to laugh and dance, to have sleepovers and soccer practice, a nose ring and a future.

After the dog disappears, I search for him in all his favorite places. Useless to post flyers on telephone poles. There are so many missing pets these days. *Have you seen Monty*, I ask Violet. Her lips are crimson, her hands pluck at the stained white dress she had on when we buried her. I've tried to get her to change into jeans and a T-shirt, but she won't. The house smells bad. Like pesticide. She lurches over to the windows, presses her lips to the glass, leaving a blurry red kiss. Then her gaze flicks over to me. My heart wobbles against my ribs – *Oh, Violet* – and I wonder if there's enough time to get to the front door.



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HOUSE OF SORROWS

LAURA NAGLE

The house would not be sold.

The listing agent called the market funky. Don't change a thing, she said; a house like this one, blending historic charm with modern updates, would sell soon enough.

Dolores knew better. There was interest, but no one could get as far as the front door. Viewing appointments kept getting canceled at the last minute, always for dramatic reasons: family emergency, car wouldn't start, water main break. It couldn't all be coincidental.

The house hadn't minded Dolores's benign occupation for the first decade or so, but ever since she began watching HGTV, she'd been making what she called upgrades. She'd welcomed plumbers and electricians inside to fix what wasn't broken; the banisters and molding had been stained and stripped and painted and stripped and stained again. A litany of indignities. And now the house was getting its revenge.

The only way Dolores could ask its forgiveness was to undo what she'd done.

She gave away the Viking range and reinstalled the old wood-burning stove. She had the rainfall shower replaced with a clawfoot tub. It wasn't enough. She unplugged the cable box and disconnected from Wi-Fi for a week, as an experiment, but the viewings still got canceled (food poisoning, apparently), so she gave up and plugged it all in again. The television went right to the last channel she'd watched, which was HGTV, and the house's foundation groaned. The listing took itself off of Zillow.

If she was going to be stuck with this house for good, she thought, she might as well take down the old wallpaper in the guest bedroom, the only part of the house she'd never changed. Dolores had always imagined it would be a nursery someday, but that ship had sailed. It would make a nice home office space, better than propping her laptop on the dining room table. She would choose new wallpaper—something that would look professional as a Zoom background—or maybe she'd paint the walls, if they were in good enough condition.

She peeled away panel after panel of toile paper, skinning the walls and baring the plaster: the connective tissue that covered the house's old bones, now marred by the remnants of long-dried wallpaper paste. Most of the glue softened when she applied a YouTube- recommended mixture of hot water, dish soap, and baking soda to it, but there was one patch on which the adhesive remained, stubborn and resistant to scrubbing. The stain had a pattern of its own: a human face, small and round, like a baby's. She decided she'd done as much as she could for one day.

In the morning, Dolores tried again with a store-bought solvent, the kind used by professionals. It didn't work, at least not the way she'd anticipated. The stain was still there, but its borders budged, making it less round, more oval.

The following day, she did not touch the wall except to measure the stain, which was visibly different: no longer a baby's face but a toddler's, the features more distinct than before.

She entered the room each day only to record her findings. The changes to the overal size of the stain were small but measurable; the nose gradually took shape, and the lips grew more defined, bow-shaped.

It was on the eighth day that Dolores first recognized the face as her own.

All that week she was tormented by the awkward, toothy smile she'd presented to school photographers year after year. She declined to take her measurements for a few days, unable to overcome her aversion to her middle-school-aged self.

On the nineteenth day, she thought it was almost like looking in a steam-fogged mirror.

After day thirty, the face on the wall appeared progressively more fatigued until day forty-one, when it resembled the retouched headshots that made her look thirty again.

Dolores awoke on the forty-ninth day feeling an optimism she hadn't experienced in weeks. Having only just turned forty-eight, she had no forty-nine-year-old face for the house to mimic. But the face was still there, albeit with a slightly different expression than the day before, and she tried in vain to scrub it away.

On the fifty-second day, Dolores got her wish: the paste residue began to dissolve on its own. It wasn't until day fifty-five, when all that remained were faint outlines of a jaw and eye sockets, that she realized there was only one way this house would let go of her.





A BODY IN THE WOODS // OSTEOPHAGIA

ASHLING MEEHAN-FANNING

Girl in the weeds
a fairy circle
crabgrass, dandelion, and chickweed.
The harsh carcass of her body grew goldenrod
bones of pure gold
human dust print on the forest floor
what is the earth if not but a grave?

Eyelids closed, eyes eaten by larvae, corpse keepers
true love's kiss
teeth pilfered by a team of mice
baubles, trinkets, forest treasure
carpal bones by curious red deer, hair by turkey vulture in search of nest fillings. Sanctuary found in the dip of her pelvis bone by a small snowshoe hare.

She was a gift to the soil.
Skin dislodged from bone, shedded
transforming, a caterpillar of the forest's making
nutrients from burst capillaries
watering the earth. Wildflowers split from seedling.

THE SCREAMING DOLL

SAIANNE BRYANT

Riley wakes up in a strange house. Dimly lit. Her memory is absent of how she came to be here. Dust coats her hand as she pushes off the ground, the floor squeaking under her weight as she stands.

Her surroundings: a gaudy purple rug, a cheap chandelier, and wooden stairs. This thought confuses her. She doesn't understand why she thinks the chandelier looks cheap. It just seems wrong from where she stands.

She turns to see a door. The front door. She reaches for the doorknob, but when she twists, it doesn't move with her hand.

It's plastic. Fake.

She takes a deep breath. 'Okay. That's fine. There's another way out,' she thinks to herself. She does not believe this. Not really.

Her eyes move towards the stairs. They look old and wooden. When she touches the banister, she finds it as plastic as the doorknob. A knot the size of a gumball forms in her throat.

There are no photos or anything to make the house seem owned by anyone. There seems to be a layer of dust coating everything. Everything looks oddly familiar, yet brand new at the same time. She thinks she's been here, but not like this. She's unsure what this means, what part of the house was not like this.

Riley takes a step forward, pausing at a boy's voice.

"Who's there?" the voice says. It comes from the top of the stairs.

She wants to answer, but the words won't come out. She's frozen as she waits for the owner of the voice to show himself.

"I'm kind of freaked out, so if you could answer me, that would really help." The voice pauses before rambling some more, "Unless you're a crazy killer or something. If you're a crazy killer, we could part ways here. Call it a difference in hobbies."

Riley's pretty sure she'd laugh at his words if it weren't for the current heat building in her chest, rising up her neck to her face.

Then she hears it. A whisper that sounds like someone standing right next to her.

“Riley,” it calls for her.

“Hello,” she calls out without thinking about it. Her hand flies up to her mouth, but there is no stopping the words that have already left.

“Hey,” the voice says, and now he’s standing at the top of the stairs. At first they just stare at each other. He contains the same familiarity as the house, yet remains a stranger to her.

He seems about her age, seventeen or eighteen years old. His black hair is in perfect little ringlets. His eyes are a glassy, soft brown matching his skin. His skin, so perfect that she absentmindedly starts to pick at an acne scar.

Every time he takes a step, it sounds like the plastic steps are going to collapse under him. As he approaches, her heart continues to race. Backing away, her head hits the front door.

“You. Stay away from me, okay?” she says; her voice comes out in a quick and hurried shout.

He holds his hands up in surrender.

“Look, I’m not going to hurt you. I’m scared, too,” he says.

Her body refuses to let her calm down. Her breathing begins to speed up, and her heart beats faster. Tears fall down her face as she sinks to the ground, holding her knees to her chest.

"Oh no. Don't cry. Please. I hate crying," he says.

She laughs at this, an incredulous laugh.

"How about you tell me your name and I'll tell you mine. Do you want to start?" He asks.

She stares up at him, like he is the stupidest creature in existence.

"No? Alright, take your time. I'll start. My name is Gabe."

The name bounces off her eardrums, like a memory. Her breathing slows down a little.

"I'm... Riley," she manages to vaguely recollect her name.

She squints at his smile. There is not a single flaw on him. His eyelashes are long and almost fake-looking. His cheeks are a light shade of pink. His brown eyes aren't just glassy. They look like actual glass. It's like someone hand-painted his face. He's too perfect. It's eerie.

He holds a hand out to her, and she hesitates before allowing him to help her off the floor. Her jeans are covered in dust.

When he places his foot on the steps, ready to mount them, she ask, “Why are we going upstairs? If there are any doors out of this place, then they are going to be downstairs, not upstairs.”

He shrugs. “Maybe there is a window we can jump out. Who knows?” he says, continuing to go up the stairs. She’s frustrated by his answer. She can’t seem to ignore the compulsion to follow.

As they enter the upstairs hallways, Gabe rambles on about how this could be an adventure. He stops mid-sentence when his foot hits something. He reaches down to pick it up.

“What is it?” Riley asks. He flips the thing over in his hands.

“I think it’s a piece of porcelain. That’s odd.” He puts the piece in his pocket. “Shall we continue?” Gabe asks, as if they were just touring the house and the porcelain was a minute detour.

Riley follows to what looks like a nursery. Riley stands in the doorway while Gabe looks around the room. There's a window right above a crib. Gabe tries to open it; it doesn't budge. It's frosted over, so they can't see out of it. Gabe slides his hand across a dresser and blows the dust off his hand. "Come on, Gabriel, the window doesn't open. Let's go try another one," Riley says.

Gabe rolls his eyes. "You need to learn to have a little fun." He picks up the porcelain baby doll from the crib. "Who puts porcelain dolls in a plastic house? It's kind of tacky if you ask me." Gabe starts to rock the doll in his arms and pretends to soothe it. He hums to the tune of a lullaby that once more is familiar and strange. He dances around the room and chuckles to himself.

"Quit goofing off," Riley says, ripping the doll out of his hands. A small cry comes from the doll. She throws it across the room, and it shatters when it hits the wall. Gabe's eyes widen as he stares at her.

"Wow, remind me to never let you babysit," Gabe says.

Riley looks at him. "You didn't hear that?" she asks.

Gabe grins, trying his best not to laugh at her. “Hear what?? he asks.

‘The doll. It was just crying,” she says.

Gabe laughs, and shakes his head. “It’s a porcelain doll, Riley. It doesn’t make noise,” Pushing past Riley, he walks out the door. “Let’s go back downstairs.”

Riley’s brow furrows as she follows him.

“You know, you’re an-” Riley stops mid-sentence when she runs into Gabe. “Hey, move.”

Gabe continues to stand frozen in a doorway.

“Maybe we should check out another room.”

Riley pushes past him when he turns around. She sees what stopped Gabe.

“Riley’s” is scribbled onto the wall. It looks like a giant child wrote it. She walks forward. It looks like crayon. Her hand reaches out to touch it.

“Come home, Riley,” she hears in her ear. She rips her hand away from the wall. “Let’s leave. Now.”

Gabe walks out of the room. She follows behind him for a few minutes, but pushes past him to head into what looks like a kitchen.

There's a big table in the center of the room with eight chairs surrounding it. In seven of the chairs, there's a life-size doll. The dolls are all dirty and dusty, with paint chipped off. A few of them have eyes missing, and some have a missing limb or two. A lot of them have bald spots. Their clothes are all tattered. They all look like a child played a little too roughly with them.

The creepiest of all is the one sitting at the head of the table facing them. Its blonde hair is a tangled mess, as if someone brushed it too hard. Its face is missing a large piece of porcelain, leaving it with no eye socket and half a smile.

"Well, now we know where that piece of porcelain came from," Riley says, pointing to the head of the table. Right when she does, she hears the whisper again, "You're one of us, Riley." Her scream rips through the air.

"What the hell, Riley?" Gabe yells. She points frantically at the doll.

"It talked, Gabriel, she talked," Riley spits out. Gabe rolls his eyes.

"Quit playing games, Riley." He picks up a piece of food off one of the plates.

“I’m not lying,”Riley says.

He laughs. “Yeah, very funny. Now look at this, it’s plastic. Who builds their whole house out of plastic?”

A splitting pain in her head muffles Gabe’s reply. “Riley...Oh Riley,” the voice calls out to her, louder and louder with every mention of her name.

“What is it?” Gabe says. She can hardly hear him over the screaming in her head.

“She’s calling for me,” Riley yells. Gabe shakes his head.

“Enough alrea-”

Riley interrupts him, “We got to get out of here now.” She grabs his hand and pulls him along with her.

“Don’t leave us,” the doll with the missing piece says.

“Wait,” Gabe says, seemingly hearing the doll.

One by one, the dolls begin to stand up like dominoes.

“Stay,” they say in unison. Then they all turn and face Riley.

“Run,” Riley says, pulling at Gabe’s hand. They run out of the kitchen and down the hallway.

“Come back, Riley,” they all say in a singsong voice. Their footsteps are getting louder and closer. Their bodies creak as they move. They toddle down the hall like toddlers who just learned how to walk.

“Riley, play with us.”

“We miss you.”

“Don‘t leave us.”

Riley continues to yank Gabe down the hall. She runs and runs. Her chest burning. Tears run down her face and blur her vision.

“In here,” she says, pulling Gabe into a coat closet. They both sit in the empty closet with a small light hanging above their heads. Riley holds her hand over her mouth to muffle her sobs.

Gabe grips her hand so tight she feels like he is going to crush it. She feels his hand grow cold.

“Riley, I lied to you. I didn’t want to, but they made me. They didn’t know what to do. You stopped playing with us. They missed you. I missed you. This isn’t what I wanted for you. They made me do it,” Gabe whispers quickly.

Riley turns to look at him and lets out a scream.

He’s a doll. A porcelain version of the boy she met less than an hour ago. His neck creaks as he slowly turns his head to look at her. His once flexible movements are now stiff.

“Riley plays with dolls,” he begins to sing over and over again.

She tries to let go of his hand, but his grip is too tight. She tries to pull his hand off hers, but she can’t loosen his vice grip.

“Please let go,” she pleads, “Please.”

It’s too late. Her body grows cold. Her hand starts to turn into porcelain. It spreads across her whole body, leaving her head for last. She lets out a loud, piercing scream.

Then it’s over.

Her eyes wide and her mouth open mid-scream, frozen in porcelain.



UNDER THE LEAVES

JUNE GEMMELL

It's peaceful here under the decaying leaves. I lie still and think of you. Moss is my pillow, last year's leaves are my bed and I draw them around me like a fine lady's gown. Some of their colour remains, the last flush of life still clings on. The older leaves are thin, reduced to veins and gauzy whispers, like me. I hide here alone, where the mortals don't bother me.

I miss you.

I remember the warmth of your hand in mine. I had the notion that when we held each other I would disappear into you. I didn't know where you ended and I began. A secret love, we stole away to meet each other. Up here by the ancient oaks.

I think I've been here a long time. Years don't mean anything to me now. I wait for you by our tree, the one where you first kissed me. I sing to myself to pass the time, lullabies learned at my mother's knee, although the years have hollowed my voice. The magpies and rooks tilt their heads as if they can hear me.

Sometimes mortals come this way, but it's never you, not yet. Occasionally dogs sense my presence and bark and bark until their owners pull them away. I'm not scared, their sharp teeth cannot bite me now. I squeeze into the smallest spaces, between tree roots, behind lichen-covered rocks. I fold myself down, down until I take up no space at all.

At home there was never enough money to go around. I would keep my one good dress, my Sunday dress, to meet you. The lilac one with the white lace collar.

You used to dance with me here. One two three, one two three, waltzing with your hand on the small of my back. Then you spun me around until we fell to the grass breathless. You used to tell me you loved me. Until you got called up for the war. I said I would wait.

And I have. I stay here, near the edge of the village in sight of the graveyard. I watch the church, the funerals, lines of people with heads bowed.

Sometimes I dance, alone now, when the moon shines and the soft owls hoot above me. Under my toes I can feel the percussion of the earth. I sway to the beat as my toes point and flex, cool on the damp ground and I lift my arms up to the pale light. They are still there, my limbs, but more translucent with each decade that passes, just thin shadows now. I have no weight at all. When I jump I spring upwards to the tops of the trees, spinning the mist around me like a veil.

You came back from the war, eventually. The Great War, the war to end all wars they called it. But when you came back I was no longer in a form you could see. An out-of-control horse and cart took a corner too fast. And I was lost to you.

Some nights I sit in the branches and watch the stars in the vast dome of the heavens. On a winter's night I hear the sound they make, cracking ice, shattering glass. My oak tree makes its own sounds too. The creaking of ships at sea, old timbers settling down for the night. Trees move, they don't stay still, you know.

In the green hush of a Sunday morning, I listen for the church bell and watch the villagers. It's a different minister from my day, taller, insect-thin. I saw you when you came back from the war, so handsome, but still mine. Always mine. Then I saw you with a woman I didn't recognise, corn-yellow hair, reaching to her waist, reflecting the sun. Before long there were small children running at your feet. You cannot love her the way you love me, it's not possible. We have eternal love. And so I wait.

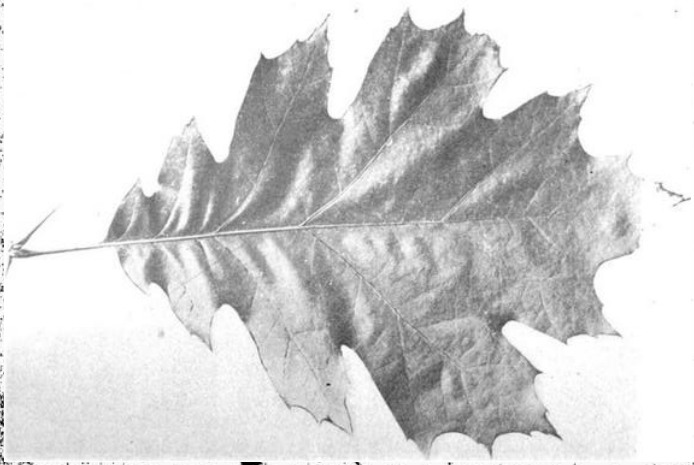
Time passes. These days you walk more slowly, with a limp.

But if I stay here any longer, I'll become part of the tree, the soil, the black earth. You'll need to join me soon.

I spend my time in the woods watching goldcrests flit through the leaves and make myself look pretty for you. I have strung a necklace of anemones and fashioned bracelets of primrose and sweet violet. The scent of pine needles and bluebells goes wherever I go.

I check the graveyard for newly dug spaces, the deep scar in the earth waiting for a body to be laid to rest. I float down at night when no one is around and touch the wreaths left behind. Sometimes I take one or two flowers for my hair. I like silky white lilies best. They have their own, otherworldly glow. One day you will be laid to rest here.

And when you are, I will sink down into the rich brown earth, I will slip into the coffin that holds you, and I will embrace you. I will whisper in your ears. I will sing the songs we both knew and you will open your hazel eyes and I will hold your precious face in my hands and I will say it's okay, its okay, I'm here.





AND THAT WHICH WE SEEK TO CONTROL WILL DESTROY US IN THE END

RACHEL ABBEY MCCAFFERTY

The creature was the size of a quarter when it dragged itself from the sea, gills shuddering and fins scraped bloody.

It lay in the muck, chest heaving, pulse slowing, until a small bug skittered near, all legs. The thing darted out its tongue and ate it whole and was revived.

The creature pulled itself to the soft ground near where the grass grew along the sand and dug itself a hole in which to sleep. It crawled inside, the cool earth covering its battered body.

There it stayed for four days and three nights until hunger called it into the moonlight.

This time, it took a small, soft lizard. After the next slumber-wake-hunger cycle, it stalked and took a bird.

The creature grew.

The creature moved from birds to squirrels to rabbits, moles to gophers to groundhogs. Still it hungered.

One day, the creature took a deer, a full-grown buck, antlers clashing. The deer had not stood a chance against the creature's open maw.

The creature grew, an ecosystem unencumbered.

Until the humans arrived.

At first, the humans were afraid of the creature big enough to blot out the sun. They took care to hide from its watchful eyes, seeking shelter far from the caves it called home. They left it sacrifices: mongooses, goats, giraffes. The more literal minded among them simply wanted to feed the beast; the mythologically motivated wanted to placate it, to seek its favor. The creature devoured it all, sometimes snaking a wide strong tail out of the shadows to knock a believer within.

Generations passed; the humans remained. Some feared, some revered, some reviled. As the humans gained power, catching fire in a jar, a steady stream in a jug, they resented the creature in the cave that refused control. The acolytes left their offerings; the agitators cleared the remains before they could disappear into the dark.

The creature grew hungry, desperate, an atmosphere crackling and charged.

And when it dared to venture into the light, the humans met it with bayonets and daggers. They met it with pocket knives and hand guns. They met it with ropes and chains and shackles and cages. They believed they could catch it, capture it, hold it in place. The humans did not want to destroy the creature.

They wanted to control it.

They wanted to use its strength against others, corral and redirect its rage as an avatar for theirs. They wanted it to consume on their behalf. They wanted its survival corrupted for their desires. They rushed toward it, slashing and stabbing, nets drawn taut.

And the creature opened its great, wide mouth and swallowed the earth whole.



THE NOT KATE BUSH EXPERIENCE

SYREETA MUIR

The Not Kate

is tutting.
Watching them whispering amongst themselves. She stops the music - a slow violin instrumental of *Sensual World* - goose-walks *en pointe* towards the audience. Unsettlingly supple in her wrinkly, grey leotard. A few people titter nervously.
Not-Kate's red,
crinkled lips are smiling graciously as ushers appear.
These men
are placing pinches onto neck napes. Fixing gazes to the stage.
She holds them; they are the tribute tonight, and she's a princess
of patience and white greasepaint, nodding at the orchestra,
who is a man with saggy jowls
that pool over a wormy fiddle;
opening strains of *This Woman's Work*.
Her throat extending in a sinewy scream: "Hee-HAWWW!"
reverberates
high into the Art Nouveau ceiling. Several people pass out and are laid at her feet like wilted petals.
Not-Kate-Bush, is crying
happy tears,
dancing in jerks and
hip-
thrusts,
opening her wet, wide eyes,
and she is perspiring,
and she is starting to feel beautiful
again.

TATTOO

CLARE O'BRIEN

He had always wanted a tattoo.

He went to work every day ashamed of the blank canvas beneath his shirt, the pale undefined skin that wanted substance and meaning. He coveted the bold images that others wore emblazoned across their flesh like statements of intent.

But he did not know what to choose. He leafed through books and web pages, haunted the shop windows of high-street tattooists, snatched covert, lustful glances at the limbs of others in the swimming pool or the gym. Nothing seemed right.

It wasn't until he had the dream that he knew at last. He woke in confusion on the train as it was pulling into the station. Gathering up his coat and bags in haste, he got off just before the doors closed and sat down heavily on one of the platform benches.

Departing passengers eyed him warily as he took pen and paper from his bag and began to sketch. He couldn't forget. It had to be right. He had no idea where it had come from, but he got it down on paper in the end, snapping his bag closed just as it began to rain. It was beautiful; perfectly balanced, every aspect of the design symmetrical along every plane.

On his next day off, he went back to the tattooist. As the girl etched the ink into his back, his heart beat fast. He had no choice but to trust her as the image soaked into his skin, outlined in pain. Its black heart would steady him, lead him, define him. He would have a real identity at last. The red hunk of muscle that beat inside his body could not be trusted. It was susceptible, unreliable.

The skin of his back itched and burned as the tattoo healed, but his will was strong and he did not scratch. Not a detail of the design could be altered or spoiled by the premature flaking of a scab. He stood between two mirrors to marvel at what he had set upon his skin, and his whole body thrilled in response,

.He loved the ritual of its placement, its smooth warm canvas away from body hair and casual glances. He put on his shirt, and at work he stood tall and proud in his secret, knowing that he had caught perfection.

The image slept on the surface of his body as summer turned to autumn, and autumn to winter. And then, one cold morning, it stirred itself, and he woke early. His back was sore; It felt like sunburn. He remembered the torment as the tattoo was forming itself under the scabs and hurried into the bathroom. Perhaps the central heating had made his skin dry out; he should put on some moisturiser after his shower. He felt his body flinch under the water’s touch, then caught the scent of iron just as the first blood dripped into the shower tray and swirled into the drain.

He tried to see over his shoulder but whatever he felt was out of sight. The drops of blood became a stream, and as he struggled, he heard the first soft, wet impact of torn, burned flesh as pieces of his body fell to the tiles at his feet. The pain built to a crescendo and he looked down in horror as his perfect design burned through his chest in all three dimensions, monstrous, white-hot and radiant.

The thing he had carried shrugged off the irrelevance of his burned and bloody flesh, and he was dead before it clattered to the floor, bright, flesh-forged, and perfect.



THAT WHICH CONSUMES

TIMOTHE DAVIS

The first week the thing stared at her.

The second week it smirked.

She despised it. He had brought it home from one of his “so-called” business trips. Said he needed it to watch her. To make sure she did as she was supposed to. But only cheating men worry about what their women do.

She cut her thumb on a granny smith that was meant for the deep-dish cobbler. Red blood trickled into the mixing bowl.

It giggled behind her. “Do you even know what you’re doing?” It spoke as if it had just found its voice—staccato, self-assured, mocking. Its rasp grated through her, like metal on ancient bone, and for a moment she stood paralyzed.

When the pressure relented, she gasped loudly and turned around—peeler in hand, “Shut up!” But she wouldn’t dare touch it. She knew better than to risk it absorbing her soul.

Even her husband had worn gloves when he placed it on the shelf.

"It's beautiful," he had said that day, as the thing's black eyes of death had rolled in their sockets. Her husband's eyes, though, had been misty grey. The color that reminded her it was mating season, and she should be satisfied with his meaningless trinkets while he satisfied the stench of his lust.

No wonder he had lost so many wives.

Later that evening—after he slipped out freshly-shaved and smelling of his favorite cologne—she had convened with the Voodoo Priestess. It had not been easy; it had fixated on her the moment he had brought it home. But the Priestess had her own mysterious ways.

"Guard your heart, my child." Her voice had crackled like fire. "Dis 'ting knows what's inside you, and it will take what's yours." She rubbed an earthy salve on her forehead. "Take this."

The third week it spoke.

She applied more salve before breaking an egg into a bowl.

She could feel its eyes bore into her back, and then she heard it whisper, “Come closer.” Heavy, old, warm. “Let us speak as women do.” She shuddered; the voice sounded like her Grandmuhma.

She looked up from the bowl, and in her periphery, it crept across the shelf. The measuring cup slipped from her hand and dark brown sugar spilled onto the floor.

“I want to help you.” Its voice curled, this time smoky like the Voodoo Priestess, and the hair of her neck stood up. She caught her breath but turned the oven to 425.

The spoon hovered mid-air, filled with vanilla extract, when it spoke again. Louder this time. “I will take what is yours.” It paused, as if reading tea leaves. “And you will give it to me. You will give me what’s inside you.”

She whirled around. “I will not,” she screamed —sickened by the suggestion, and the fact that this voice was her own.

“You will,” it hissed through jagged teeth, and then it thrust the mason jar beside it onto the ceramic floor.

She looked around the room wildly. Was there nothing she could use—a broom or a mop handle, something she could use to knock it from its prideful perch and smash it to smithereens just like it had done to the jar?

But no, he would know. And then she would be disciplined.

Besides, the light of the sun that shone through the kitchen window kept it at bay. It would never cross the light.

At least, that's what her Grandmuhma had told her when she was still a young girl. "Evil never crosses the light."

She had also said, "May God have mercy on de woman who find dat evil ting her home."

May God have mercy indeed.

She looked up from the floor and caught it smiling at her, like a woman who understood things she had yet to realize.

Like it could read her mind.

She turned back to her pie.

Tonight, she would sleep with her door closed. Even though she loved the way the blue moon shone into her bedroom. She would lock it tight; she wasn't sure that moonlight would be enough to keep it at bay. But she refused to let it creep inside her.

With her door locked, neither would her husband.

The Priestess had also given her roots and berries. "We must guard ourselves from that which is unclean, my child." She had anointed her with oil and a kiss and said something—set in heart and soul—would save her.

Her heart?

She had already given everything—her hopes, her dreams, her wishes—but he would not stay. And now her heart? But her hands were making cobbler—a dish that he loved.

She could have owned a bakery, she had once thought.

No, she could not have owned one. That was not her wifely duty. Or so he said. Her duty was to care for him when he was sick and cater to him when he was well.

She had thought he might be kind if he were well. Their bathroom was filled with prescriptions she didn't understand and medicine that he would not explain. *For my allergies*, he would say. Yet they did not make him kind. They made him strong, though seldom for her bed.

Not that she wanted that either. She wanted to dissolve, like the rest—gone without sound, without trace.

Perhaps that would be Yahweh's mercy.

It dragged its long brittle nails against the shelf, drawing grooves into the mahogany as it did and a chill burned her spine like frostbite.

She glanced at the sunlight between them, then moved closer to the window.

"Allspice," it whispered—so clear, so direct. This time it was his voice.

She always used cinnamon, nutmeg, and ginger. Never allspice. She didn't even keep it in the house. But he was always right—and she didn't have the strength to fight. Not with the weight of its words crushing her. Besides, the spice was already at her fingertips, and he'd be home soon—long enough just to eat—and the cobbler needed seventy minutes in the oven.

He came home at 5:15, a few minutes early but smelling of that woman who lived just two streets away.

Her shoulders tightened as he entered; the scent of the Priestess's roots filled the air. Tea sat within her grasp—and that thing stared from the far side of the room.

The sun had started to set.

He rushed to take his medicine.

She rose and served his dessert.

The cobbler put a smile on his face; apple was his favorite. Heat rose from it with such ferocity that even the freeze of vanilla bean would not soothe it. He dug in deeply, though he said he would only have a couple bites—he had to return to work for a meeting. But surely, he was going back to see that woman.

Somewhere between the second bite and the third bite, his throat closed.

He stood up, eyes wide, and stumbled back. His arms thrashed wildly as he struggled for the air his lungs chose to deny him.

“What have you done?” His eyes seemed to scream.

He fell back and hit the shelf. It toppled, and that thing—growing larger as it fell—landed on top of him.

It grinned at her, wide—razor teeth glistening.

She screamed sharply.

His pupils dilated in terror, as its teeth sunk into his flesh.

He reached out for her, arm trembling.

She did not reach back.

Under the light of the full blue moon, she rushed to the Voodoo Priestess.

“It has eaten my husband!”

But the Priestess wrapped her arms around her. “Hush, child. It’s taken what was yours. But dat part? You shoulda given it long ago. Dat part shoulda never been in your heart or soul.”

When she returned home, she found neither it nor her husband. Only a slice of apple cobbler remained, soothed by the cool of the vanilla bean.

And a prescription—warning label face up.

She burned it with the candle, then made herself that cup of tea.



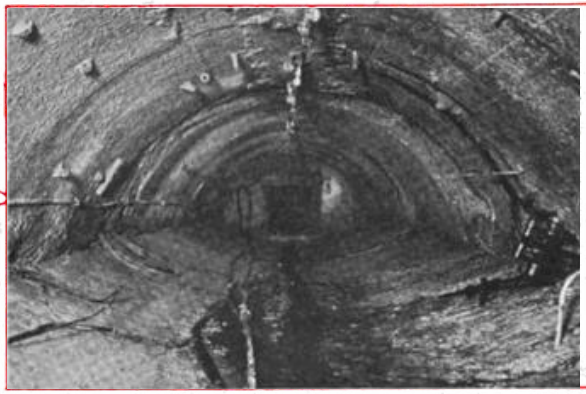
A MEMORY

JAMES TADD ADCOX

A memory: in the new house there was a tunnel, very narrow and straight, without forks, that one could pass through and find on reaching the far end that one had returned to the tunnel's entrance. She does not remember the tunnel's location in the house—any place she tries to picture the entrance, the bathroom closet, at the end of the hallway, in a back corner of her parents' bedroom, seems equally likely as any other, and also impossible. Each time she passed through this tunnel she found, upon reaching the far end, that she did not have the courage to exit, and would instead shimmy herself backwards to return to the original entrance. Only once did she gather up the courage sufficiently to come out the other side, to find herself, yes, in the same room, the same house, she had started from.

Her family did not stay in the house long. In those days, they were always moving—it had something to do with her father's business, which she would learn many years later had not been entirely on the up and up. Although was he her father? He looked almost the same: it was only that there was something off about the teeth and the eyes. At times he waited a beat too long before laughing at one of his own jokes. And she had once been confronted, as they were crossing a shopping center parking lot to return to their car, by a girl who looked almost identical to her, same red hair, same freckles gathered mostly on one side of her face, who claimed she had stolen her family. Her parents pulled her away from this interloper, hustled her and themselves to the waiting car. They seemed shaken. As they drove away the girl remained where they had left her in the middle of the parking lot, fists at her sides, tears streaming, face twisted in fury. For years after that confrontation, and even into her adulthood, living now several states away, she worried that this girl would find her again.

The nature of the threat, though mysterious, was precise: not that this girl or, later, young woman would carry out violence against her, but that she, when confronted by this young woman, would not know how to answer her. For a time in her twenties and thirties she could not sleep without taking a pill each night. She would find herself haunted, not by the girl, but by the family this girl must return to, to whom she did not belong, mother and father each wrong in subtle and imprecise ways (freckles, for example, gathered on the wrong side of a face). And then sleep, like a tunnel, would open up before her and she would pass through it, never quite certain if she would return and if so, to where.



MARY SHELLEY'S LOVE LETTER TO HER MONSTER

AMANDA HAWK

My Dear, my hands shake after all these years when I write your name.
I remember how you were tucked between the pages of my journals.
Everyone else has always been eager to call you a monster.
Even though I stitch you with the best qualities of all the men in my life.

I remember how I tucked you into a budding list of accomplishments.
My husband would come home to admire your arch of story and the curve of your plot.
He even stitches his poetry within your body and includes all the women in his life.
I learn jealousy in empty beds, and I teach you anger with rewrites.

My husband calls another woman home and enjoys the curve of each coin from my son's fame.
I build you into a monster from crushed promises, steady resentment, and electrified hatred.
I learn revenge in empty rooms and plot twists, and you teach me regret in splinters and tides.
I see your hands scoop up the boat and slam it into the rocks over and over again.

I build you a cage from crushed promises, steady resentment, and electrified hatred.
It is easy to exile someone when you put them in a raft and shove them out of sight.
I see you scoop up the boat in my dreams, but it is my hands that shake the boat into driftwood.
My monster, you love me with each unconditional action; even if it makes you the villain.

It is easy to exile a broken heart when you strangle it with ink and shove it into the margins.
Maybe, I have always been eager to call myself a monster.
My son, you love me with each unconditional action; even if I am the villain.
My hands shake after all these years when I write your name.

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John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Midnight Mind, Willow Review* and the *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*. Latest books, “Bittersweet”, “Subject Matters” and “Between Two Fires” are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in the *MacGuffin*, the *Bayou Review* and *Plainsongs.*

Peering out on Halloween was originally published by *Writer’s Haven* 2017

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Beth Sherman is the author of the novella-in-flash, *HOW TO GET THERE FROM HERE* (Ad Hoc Fiction). She has had more than 250 stories published in literary journals, including *Ghost Parachute, Fictive Dream, Bending Genres* and *Smokelong Quarterly*, where she’s a Submissions Editor. Her work appears in *Best Microfiction 2024* and 2026 and *Best Small Fictions 2025*. The author of five mystery novels, she can be reached on social media @bsherm36.

Good for a Dead Girl was originallly published by *Trash Cat Lit* 2024.

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Laura Nagle’s flash fiction and poetry have recently appeared in *The Sunlight Press, HAD, Trash Cat Lit*, and the Irish-language journal *Aneas*. Her translations from French and Spanish include Prosper Mérimée’s 1827 hoax, *Songs for the Gusle*, and Adela Zamudio’s 1913 feminist novel, *Confidences*.

House of Sorrows was originally published by *South Florida Poetry Journa*l 2023.

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Ashling Meehan-Fanning is a poet and writer whose work often includes themes of magic, ancestry, and the American Midwest. Her collection COLOSSAL GIRL was self-published in January 2021. Her works appears or is forthcoming in Gotham Literature, the Galway Review, Elixir Verse, Roi Faineant Literary Press, and elsewhere. Her poem “Cottage at Ballintemple” was read on The Poet Heroic, and her poem "Grown in the Garden" was given honorable mention by the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets in October 2026. She lives in Wisconsin with her wife and spends a lot of time thinking about ghosts and trees.

“A Body in the Woods // Osteophagia” was originally published by *Flora Fauna Magazine* 2024.

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“The Screaming Doll” was originally published in “Among These Hills” (Walter State Community College) 2016

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"And that which we seek to control will destroy us in the end" was originally published by *The Molotov Cocktail* 2023.

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"The Not Kate Bush Experience" was originally published by *Ligeia Magazine* 2022.

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Clare O'Brien grew up in London, but moved to a house by a sea-loch in the Scottish Highlands, which suits her much better. She has been a schoolteacher, a journalist, a politician's PR and a rock star's PA, and was 2025's Poet In Residence at the National Trust for Scotland's Inverewe Garden. Her 2025 poetry pamphlet 'Breathing Out Becomes White And Snowfall' (*Intergraphia Books*), followed her 2022 ekphrastic collection 'Who Am I Supposed To Be Driving?" (*Hedgehog Poetry Press*). Her work has appeared in various journals and anthologies around the world, and she's working on a novel and a full poetry collection.

"Tattoo" was originally published by *The London Reader* 2019.

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Timothe Davis is a Dallas-based writer whose work explores identity, belonging, and the messy ways people navigate being human. His fiction has appeared in *Mouthful of Salt, Flash Fiction Magazine*, and *Bristol Noir*, and his work has been nominated for Best of the Net.

"That Which Consumes" was originally published by *Neon & Smoke* 2025.

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James Tadd Adcox's work has been published in *Granta* and *X-R-A-Y* and is forthcoming in *Iowa Review*. He's a founding editor at the literary magazine *Always Crashing* and author, most recently, of *Denmark: Variations*, a collection of sixty sets of instructions for variations on the play Hamlet.

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Amanda Hawk is Best of the Net-nominated and Pushcart Prize-nominated Poet. She lives in Seattle between the roaring planes and the city’s neon lights. Amanda has been featured in multiple journals including *Ink in Thirds, Rogue Agent* and *Palindrome Journal.* She has had short stories featured in the 2024 Seattle Crypticon Horror Short Story contest and *Belladonna's Garden* literary magazine. Recently, she had a short story accepted at *Oneiroi Journal*.

"Mary Shelley's Love Letter to her Monster" was originally published by *Ink and Marrow* 2023. .

Thank You for Reading!

