



PASTEL PASTORAL

Fall 2022 / Issue 3

ISSUE THREE PASTORAL HAUNTING

Welcome to the official third issue of Pastel Pastoral. It has been almost two years since we started, and between issue one, the pop up, issue two and this issue, it has been a wonderful almost two years. Thank you to everyone who submits, all the writers in every issue, and to my wonderful partner, Rick.

Thank you for supporting Pastel Pastoral and our writer!

Please enjoy!

EIC Roxie G

Roxie G (She/They) is the current editor of Pastel Pastoral. Roxie is a queer non-binary femme writer, currently in North Carolina. When not reading submissions and working on their own writing, Roxie enjoys being outside! She loves hiking, exploring, and especially visiting the Blue Ridge, and Great Smoky National Park.

Cover photo by Rick Hollon

Cover design by Roxie Geering

Interior photos by Rick Hollon and Roxie Geering



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The Endless Night by Ilnaz Faizal

Ilnaz Faizal is a Malaysian girl who writes poetry, prose, and screenplays. She spends her time dreaming up and writing down scraps of new ideas that include fantasy, horror, and romance - most of which are never read by others. Find more of her writings on Twitter @Ilnaz_Faizal



As she walked, the wooden floorboards felt ice-cold, shooting pins and needles through the girl's feet - they began to hurt with every step taken as if she were barefoot on glaciers themselves. Yet the floors creaked and groaned with almost every step she took. Disturbed from their peaceful slumber with a heavy weight. Decaying, dying. She had to be careful. Silence was of the utmost importance. She knew not of any others who lived in the vast mansion. She assumed there was a cook or a maid of some sort. Surely, the man hadn't deliberately prepared two hot meals on purpose when he alone feasted at the long dining table. He must have alerted his helper of the unexpected guest, who then helped set another seat down and prepared another bowl of food, all before the girl came in. Maybe they were just shy. Or under strict orders to remain unseen? Yes, yes that must have been the reason.

The howling rain continued to rattle the windows. The glass violently shook against their iron grates. The savage storm showed no remorse and minimal signs of ending. There was no singular moment where the girl thought it would relent, no clarity of whether the indigo clouds would ever part and the full moon would shine again. The living had paused, and the hands of the countless number of clocks throughout the hallways spun and spun and spun, but they never brought the passing of time.

How long was the night? How had she gotten here?

She had left her home at dusk and arrived at the village a little after nightfall. Every bit of her regretted setting off now. It was probably more rational to have had a sibling accompany her, or to get one of the boys to do it instead. But alas, time was money, and if the village bakery did not receive their supply of wheat, the girl's family would have lost plenty of their weekly earnings. And so, as the eldest, and most daring child of them all, the girl had set off for the delivery. She should've stayed the night. She should've gotten a room, taken money out from the bakery's payment, and settled at an inn. She shouldn't have decided to journey back home in the dead of night. For now, she

was trapped in the antique mansion of a mysterious man.

The drizzling had begun just as the girl stepped foot outside of the village; that alone should've told her to turn back. But no. Droplets pricked her skin, her white dress and hooded cloak ever so often becoming stained with little dark dots of rain. The light plucks of water hitting the branches were more soothing than worrying. Melodious and calm, the pat-pat-pat of her shoes against the wet grass had alleviated the music of the forest.

But the tiny drops grew bigger, as the music of the rain matured from the melody it once was.

It had been painful to breathe, amongst the thick trees and globs of rain, yet her feet had suffered the greatest of them all. Not a crevice or thread untouched by water, her light shoes had quickly become weighted shackles. Every raise of a foot was harshly combated by gravity. There was a throbbing sensation in her chest, one that had made her breaths sharp, like daggers flying through her throat scraping her insides. Hands. There were hands - why were there hands?! Something had grabbed at her ankles. It kept her from running, their chilly grips.

But it's just the wind. She told herself

The music had died. The symphony of the forest had ceased, she realized. Or rather, there was no end. No muted ending, or hushed quieting of the rain's beats and the wind's humming. Instead, the melody had escalated. The vehement storm raged down and the girl was trapped. Running and running for what felt like eons. An endless sea of trees as she sprinted, but it was never-ending. Lost...lost...which way is home? There was no time to ponder, for she had to keep going.

But the forest got to her. Terror flowed from her brain and seeped through her body, her mind recalling terrible things in this hopeless situation.

These forests are dangerous. They take and they take, but they never return. Mischievous. Greedy. They take girls. Girls go missing in these woods. Never heard from again. The woods never return them.

And amidst her desperate sprint, the girl recalled a case of another who went missing in these very woods. She, too, was caught in the woods in the dead of night,

in a murderous storm. How beautiful she was, with her sparkling eyes and flowing blonde hair; her radiant glow that rivalled the sun's rays. What a shame though, that Gwendolyn Clyde's dazzling looks, nor her kind spirit was ever seen or heard of again. One night, on a stormy night much like this one, she vanished into thin air.

Where was she now? The hallways all looked the same. The girl wasn't entirely sure where she was going, her brain and her feet on two distant planets. She doubted every turn and corner she rounded, for each new path seemed identical to the last. Dark, high walls and several doors on either side, each one of them locked. Every sight she saw sent spiders crawling up and down her spine.

A loud bong of a grandfather clock startled her. She jumped out of her skin, breathing heavily. She couldn't make out where she was going, merely relying on the flashes of lightning that illuminated the mansion through the windows. Every so often, the girl would glimpse the mansion's true interior of ghoulish statues and macabre trinkets that decorated the tables. This whole place is creepy, she thought. But of course, the only thing that made this mansion even creepier was its eerie homeowner.

Hours ago, she had lifted a glass to her lips and taken small sips of...whatever the drink was. Cordial, she thought he said. She'd refused the wine. Her eyes never left the mysterious man seated opposite the long dinner table. He was carefree and calmly eating away at his steak. To her left, she watched the rain shower down the large ornate windows. The dining hall was devoid of light, save the few candles on the table. The man looked normal, she thought, yet barely able to make out his features. Her steak sat before her, succulent.

"Thank you for letting me into your home. It's beautiful." She said as the water from her drenched state seeped into the velvet chair.

"Oh no worries, my dear. I'd hate for any young woman to be trapped in the storm." His voice was gravelly, and his eyes gleamed oddly. "Rest assured you will have a bed to sleep in tonight."

"Thank you for your kindness." She answered.

Her steak sat untouched the whole meal.

Through the gigantic home, the man led her to her chambers. A surge of worry filled her body, screaming at her to get out. But where to? She had nowhere to go, other than the dark abyss outside. Ahead of her, she saw how the man had broad shoulders and long legs, yet his back was hunched over, almost like a twisted pipe. How could he see in the darkness? She tried to remember the path from the dining room, but the mansion was a labyrinth of endless twists and turns, she had no idea where she was. Every right turn felt like an introduction to an undiscovered hallway, and every left turn felt uncannily familiar as if they had already walked down before. The man stopped in front of a door at a dead end. The girl regarded, in suspicion, that there were no other doors nearby. He unlocked the door and they stepped into the richly furnished room. Equipped with a beautiful vanity, chair, and canopy bed.

“I shall take my leave now,” he said, “but I do ask that you remain here for the rest of the night.” He chuckled and stepped out the door, “Wouldn’t want you getting hurt or lost under my roof.”

The girl turned around and forced a smile, “Of course not, sir. I would hate to intrude.”

“I hope you sleep well.”

The entire night had led up to the girl’s current predicament. From her home to the village, the forest, and now the mansion. A pattern of being lost seemed to occur wherever she went. She hadn’t intended on breaking his rules, but as she tossed and turned in bed, restless, she found no other resolve than to go for a stroll to clear her mind. How foolish. The mansion dominated her senses, and she was defenseless in this grand labyrinth. The endless storm filled her ears, as she fumbled about in the cold darkness. Placing her hands flat on the walls to help steady herself, she bumped into tables and chairs, until she felt a doorframe. Her hands reached out, and her eyes strained to find the doorknob. Her clammy hands came into contact with the cold metal, and she shivered, before turning the handle, and the door, surprisingly, opened.

This hallway was unlike any other she had been in yet. The lights were on, for a change. The amber glow brought the space to life, like the gleaming, pulsing heartbeat of an otherwise lifeless home. The hall was endless and running on the floor was a plush, red carpet that stretched for miles. A warm and comforting contrast to the rough flooring the girl had endured through the rest of the house. She wiggled her toes, relishing in the fluffiness beneath her feet, venturing off into the hallway with quiet steps. There were no doors, no windows. Instead, the only remnants of the outer world were the several paintings miming mother nature’s invigorating life and heart through gentle brushstrokes and soft colour palettes. Marvelously fantastical paintings, each showcased in an ornamental frame.

The stillness of life was captured in the landscapes of fields and meadows, yet the grass and trees looked to sway in the breeze of the thinly detailed white wind. The tender reds, oranges, and yellows of the comforting sunrises and calming sunsets, across the horizons, over seas of sparkling water. Expertly crafted sceneries of gardens and beaches. The paintings of castles were so life-like, the girl mused how she could feel the stone roughly brush her fingertips from just the sight. The girl observed with glee, the beauty of the world in a single room. Who were the artists of these stunning creations? And how had they captured the life of the world in a single moment, unmoving yet moving at the same time?

Outside, the booming thunder cracked like whips. The girl jumped and was reminded of the real world that raged beyond the thick walls of the mansion. She placed a hand over her chest, willing her heartbeat to slow down. If time was frozen in the rest of the house, in this hall, it ceased to exist. The girl glanced over her shoulder and was surprised to find that she could no longer make out the end of the hallway from whence she came. The walls and carpet stretched on as far as the eye could see. She turned back around in confusion, wondering just how deep in she was.

Should she turn around and go back to her room? With no perception of time, she worried that the sun would soon rise, and her empty bed discovered. The man did politely ask her to not wander, and she didn’t want to be caught acting rude as a guest. What a hypocrite; not wanting to go against the rules, and yet

defying them anyways. She turned to leave, her rationality winning over her desires.

But a certain painting caught her eye.

A painting like none of the others that lived in the room. While the others were all scenery and landscapes, this painting was of a beautiful young woman. She sat in a large meadow of lush emerald grass. The sky was a bright baby blue, filled with puffy white clouds. In the far background, a tall stone tower with a single window at the very top. The woman was the main focus of the painting, her upper body occupying most of the space. Her white clothes almost blended into her pale skin, and her most striking feature was her sapphire eyes that leapt out of the painting. Her long, blonde hair flowed past her shoulders and to her waist, so soft you could almost touch it.

The girl moved closer to the painting, mesmerized. The woman looked so refined, with greater care taken in her than the rest of the painting. Up close, the girl could see that the painter had put an immense amount of detail into the woman. Each strand of her hair looked delicate and curly, and her bare arms were littered with freckles. The painted lady and her world beyond looked so realistic, as if the golden border that trapped her was a window and not a frame. The more the girl stared, the more she found herself hypnotized.

She stared for so long that her eyes began playing tricks on her. The leaves on the trees began rustling, the grass began leaning, and the woman's locks of hair, ever slowly, began to fall down her shoulders. The girl thought it funny how she had looked for so long that the impossible became reality. She stepped back, giggling, and rubbed her eyes.

But when she looked at the painting again, nothing changed.

The leaves, grass, and hair were all still moving.

The girl blinked, and blinked, but no change. She furiously rubbed at her eyes, forcing her mind to escape its daze. But now, when she looked again, even the clouds had begun moving from their places in the sky. She couldn't believe what she was seeing! Everything in the painting was moving and the woman! The woman...she...she was...

She's looking at me, the girl realized. Had she always been looking at me? Wasn't she looking to the side?

A roaring crack was heard all around, followed by deafening thunder. The girl shielded her ears from the booming noises. The lights of the hallway began flickering, off, on, off, on, as the hallway shook. Paintings rattled and the girl's feet tripped over themselves upon the unstable floor.

The flickering lights shrouded the room in flashing moments of darkness. The girl strained to see around her. But with nervous legs and squinting eyes, she gasped in disbelief at the sight before her. The woman in the painting was blinking! And moving! No! SHE WASN'T DREAMING!

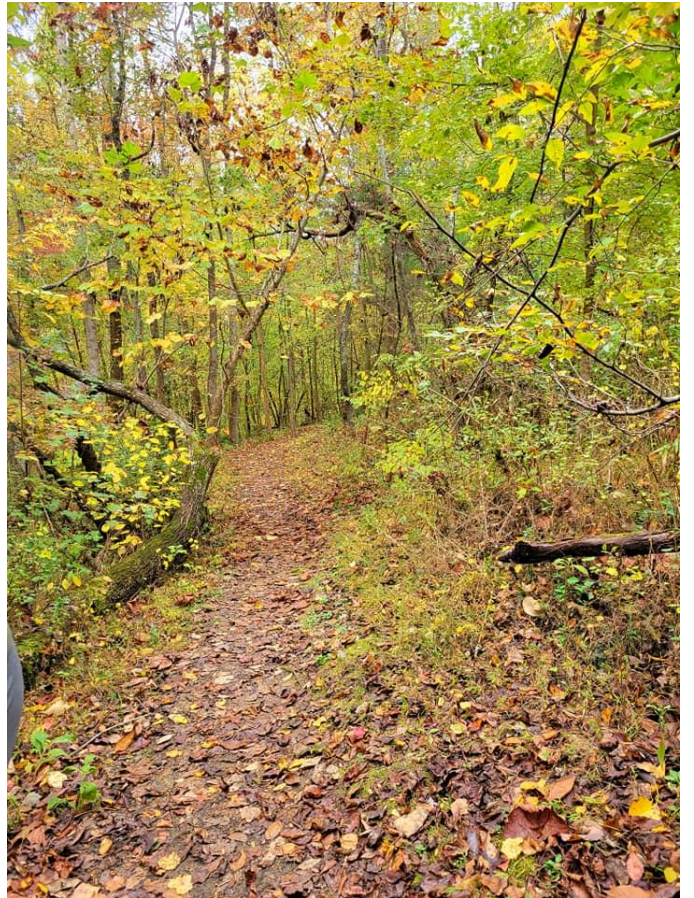
The room began violently rocking, and the girl fell flat on the floor. The painting menacingly towered over her, and she watched in horror, as she prayed to awake from this nightmare. The woman, her blonde hair, emerging from the painting! And her hand! It clutched the frame and...oh my god...her piercing eyes locked onto the girl. This can't be real...this can't be real...she's stepping out of the painting! No! Don't come any closer! NO!

The girl awoke in a simple wooden chair. She was in a large meadow on a bright sunny day. Behind her, was a tall stone tower. A golden frame magically suspended in mid-air stood before her. Like a window to another world, she watched as the woman in the painting stood where she stood, in the mansion hallway, arguing with the man. The girl attempted to move through the painting, but as if a strong glass pane separated the two worlds, she couldn't get through. She banged and yelled with all the strength in her body, but her voice died down to pathetic whimpers as she watched the blonde woman throw her a sympathetic glance, before leaving her view.

The man turned his attention to the girl, and she continued to pound her fists against the invisible glass.

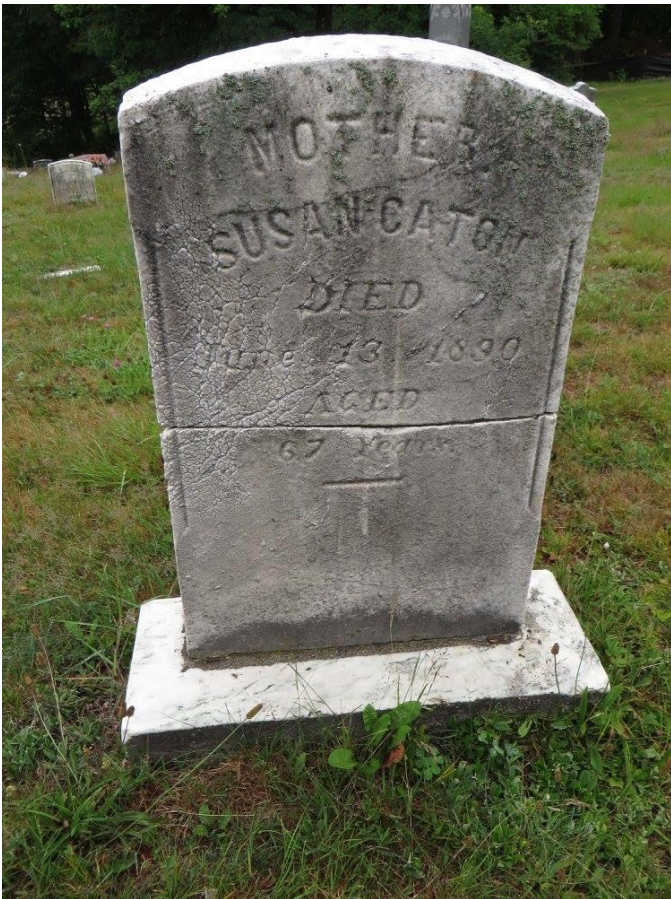
“Spare me your tantrum. I can’t hear a word you’re saying.” He said coolly. “You may not like the circumstances now, but you’ll learn to live here. Just as dear Gwen did.”

Hot tears rolled down her cheeks. His creepy smile left her petrified, and as he walked away, her fists falling uselessly by her sides, she wondered just how long that would be.



Dancer Summons by Katherine Quevedo

Katherine Quevedo was born and raised just outside of Portland, Oregon, where she works as an analyst and lives with her husband and two sons. “Dancer Summons” first appeared in *The Common Tongue Magazine*. Her other poetry has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the Rhysling Award and has appeared in *Pastel Pastoral*, *The Hyacinth Review*, and elsewhere. Her debut mini chapbook, *The Inca Weaver’s Tales*, is forthcoming from *Sword & Kettle Press*. When she isn’t writing, she enjoys belly dancing, watching movies, singing, playing old-school video games, and making spreadsheets. Find her at www.katherinequevedo.com.



Dancer Summons first appeared in issue #5 of *The Common Tongue Magazine* in October 2021.

Upon our fingers: jewel-eyed snake rings, gold
and silver chains, metallic gauntlets, stones
called “semi”-precious (precious as our bones!),
the weighty grace our dancer hands uphold.

Around our hips: a scarf or belt of coin
or sequin, beaded tassel fringe, a knot
to lock in place the slippery burden wrought
of lies we skirt or issues we adjoin.

Beneath our sandaled feet and painted toes:
you souls who rest in dirt or clay or sand.
We trample not your resting place; we stand
up taller from the spirit each bestows.

Arise, you slumb’ring specters! Come rejoin
your living sister-dancers—for you ought
to heed the selfsame slippery burden wrought
of lies we skirt or issues we adjoin.

Upheave yourselves. Reveal your moves of old,
your lissome, supple, ancient, swaying art.
Support us, brace us, help relieve in part
the weighty grace our dancer hands uphold.

Eventually we too will shed off all
this glamor, fabric, metal, bead, and stone.
We’ll shimmy out of precious skin and bone
'til summoned to unburden and enthrall.

The Face Stealer by Scott Quinn

Scott was born and raised in Central Scotland. He is a queer poet, and can be found in previous and forthcoming issues of *Palest Blue*, *Poetry Scotland* and *Poetry as Promised*, among others. He lives in Glasgow with his cat, Jess, and is usually found rambling on Twitter @scootoquinto



Sprinting.
Knees aching as bare feet
slam into rock.
Twigs break.
Weak under the thick heat,
thin spikes stab underfoot.

A small clearing,
no chance of respite.
The perimeter rustles,
blackness follows.

A jolting pain backstitches from the wound,
blurring the forest walls.
There it stands.
Smiling.
Human-like.
Staring with piercing eyes.

The face stealer.

It leaps.

The Silent Specter by Scrappy Whiteley

My preferred name is Scrappy Whiteley and I live in Annapolis, Md, where I currently work in education, although my dream is to pursue work in creative writing. I've been writing since I have learned to read and I've mostly been drawn to the short story and novel formats, although I will dabble and experiment in other forms in order to grow as a writer.



CW: brief mention of death

“You should be able to find everything you need,” said the proprietor, a man with no discernable age. He had one of those faces caught inside an immortal well, neither old nor young, his youth bouncing off his austere disposition. “The cottage may be small, but travelers quickly discover it suites their taste quite nicely.”

I was skeptical. The circular room differed from what I was accustomed to- a duplex suite with a spiral staircase stretching out to a balcony where I could observe the beautiful men and woman roaming the streets below. Instead of brightness, the walls were doused in a deep rouge, with an assortment of odd gilded- framed paintings hanging in too many places, crowding the space with their petulant eyes and disfigured grotesqueness. The sight of them sent a shiver down my spine, and I wished I could throw a veil over designs that may as well been taken from biblical passages. Yet the fireplace was a welcome sight, and I looked forward to resting my weary feet up near the crackling flames.

“Yes, this should suffice. I should only be here for a few days, and then I shall be gone.”

The proprietor stared unblinkingly at me, a strange smile curling up his thin lips. “May I ask what brings you on such a short visit?”

“A funny little matter,” I said casually, stretching my arms behind my head and removing the homburg, tossing it roughly onto the red velvet armchair sitting in the corner. Red. The amount of it was beginning to bring into me a sense of unease. “Apparently, it’s frowned upon to engage in a light-hearted affair with both your boss and your boss’s mistress. I suppose sooner or later the wife was bound to find out. A little vacation was in order, some breathing room needed to sort this all out. It will blow over soon enough.”

“So, you consider yourself a hedonist?” the proprietor asked without a hint of emotion, and suddenly I was alarmed by his blankness. It was strange, the way he was scrutinizing me with a beseeching gaze, as if he wanted me to confirm it wasn’t true.

I shrugged, if only to demonstrate I wasn’t a squirming kind of man. “I’d like to think of myself as indulger of all of life’s great pleasure, and what greater pleasure is there than all the wonderful bodies carved in God’s beautiful image?”

“I see. But no one is above God’s sanctity of moderation. To overindulge is to sin, and to sin is to condemn the rest of us to hell,” his judgment infuriated me, although I really shouldn’t have been surprised; the gold watch around his wrist bore a pious, and rather ominous, inscription around the face. *The wrath of God is coming.*

Ding-Dong. The bell of the grandfather clock shrieked furiously across the room, and I jumped, abashedly startled by the sudden noise. I turned back to give a proper retort to the proprietor, but he was gone, vanishing out into the decaying day.

“Good riddance,” I settled into my new lodging, taking my suitcase into the bedroom where a black canopy bed awaited. It was still too early to retire, so I left it unpacked, choosing to explore the grounds, or rather the patch of forest connecting to a slope leading to the shores of a beach. It was a curious combination-land and water meeting and converging at one point, bringing with them what the other lacked.

The cottage was simple in design, with an adjoining cellar standing off to the side, a shy child unwilling to greet a stranger. I vaguely hear the proprietor’s voice warning me not to go down there, but I brush it aside. This place and everything in and around it belonged to me for the next few days.

Cobwebs greeted me, and the steps creaked with each step I took. The door was locked, or at least pretended to be, for the lock came loose at the lightest touch, the rust turning it to ash. My curiosity, never known to have any limitations, carried me into the dark where the light switch on the wall failed to work. There was a tickling on my neck, the sensation of a lone finger dragging across my skin, but I knew it was only the wind, trying to guide me towards the corner

where a wine rack sat, well-stocked. “I was hoping I’d find you here,” I picked up a bottle and caress it the same way I would my lover. When I turned to leave, my elbow knocked into a shelf, and I heard some roll.

Clink, clink, smash. The glass broke, and a red smoke lifted into the air, filling my lungs. I coughed and wheezed, then looked down at my feet where it continued to swirl around a fragment containing a single word in fine script: wrath.

I spun around, clutching the wine bottle, when I saw her. A pale woman in a bleached sundress, her eyes equally white and daunting. She opened her mouth and screamed, but nothing came out. The floor shook beneath me, and I fled, my body running straight through her.

It must have been exhaustion. Yes, that was it; my mind was playing tricks on me. I head back inside, shaking my head of the images brought on by the smoke: a snarling beast with fangs dripping blood onto a golden chalice; a woman cackling loudly, stroking herself in a mirror, a giant pig sucking the air out of a room, leaving others to starve, a stampeding warthog destroying trees with its thick tusks, and a naked man lounging idly by with two naked servants brandishing their bodies lasciviously. Each came off the page of a musky book, a book I had seen in the foyer but was now gone. Instead, there was a record player in it’s place, sitting on a wobbly stool that I swear wasn’t there before.

It played all on it’s own, the voice scratchy yet sultry, luring me into a temptation I couldn’t resist. I uncork the bottle and take a mighty swig, the taste of blood hitting my mouth, but I didn’t care. My hips swayed as the darkness set in, the silver moon watching from above the wispy clouds my drunkenness revealing the heathen I embraced. My clothes were discarded, and I pictured their bodies against mine, their fingers crawling up and down my arms.

I swung once, and there she was. The pale woman in the bleached sundress, her mouth wide open but soundless. Yet the floor trembled violently, her lost voice suddenly found in the polished wood that suddenly seemed rotten, fossilized. I fled into my bedroom, closing the door with a resounding slam.

It must have been exhaustion. Yes, that was it; the silent specter wasn't real, just brought on by stress. What was there to be stressful about? I had earned this vacation, although perhaps in a dubious manner. Do I still have a job to go back to? Are the relationships I've worked to slither into been damaged irreparably? The wine made it difficult to think, to concentrate, so I fell onto the duvet, quickly succumbing to sleep.

Yet she was there, that awful, pale woman. I can still hear the record playing, and it skipped once, twice, three times before the same scratchy voice- once somewhat alluring but now disintegrating, decaying into something more monstrous-screamed: "GET... OUT!"

My eyes snapped open and her face hovered inches above mine, pale and stretched, the lines of her vocal cords popping, straining, yet nothing would escape her mouth. The frustration was palpable, and my bed frame shook, causing me to jump to my feet. "Leave me alone! I've done nothing, you hear me. Nothing!"

I flung a pillow, and it soared through the air, hitting the mirror hanging on the wall. It slid slowly to the left then downward, sinking into the floor. A single crack fractured the surface, and when I stared into it, it went across my face.

The night passed restlessly on, and as hard as I tried, I could not sleep. The pale, frigid woman would not depart, no matter where I went. I welcomed morning, and bright light seeped through the living room where I had finally collapsed on the velvety, blood-soaked rug.

I paused, my fingers coming up sticky. Whose blood is this? It can't be mine; I have no open wounds. Perhaps I had cut myself on the glass, for the wine bottle laid across from me, shattered. I don't remember that happening, and yet it must have. Where else could the blood have come from?

I decided to go for a walk, to clear my head despite the rumblings of hunger in my stomach. The wind greeted me haughtily, and I caught the breeze, inhaling the frost which transformed my lungs to icicles. There was a path on my left, and I take it, weaving through the stiffened trees which provided me no comfort. They stood with judgment, and their distrustful stares

burned the back of my neck, peeling through the layers of my skin one by one. "I didn't do anything!" I felt compelled to mutter.

The path sloped downward, winding past an old stone well, which I swore whispered to me, the voice cold and taunting. I shake it off and continue through the hollow woods until my feet touch the sand of a beach that didn't belong. The sand was a deathly grey, and spongy, too, almost as if at any moment it was going to reach and grab me, bringing me into a shallow grave.

The water lapped softly, eerily, yet I kept my gaze fixed, watching a spot where it swashed back and forth.

Her face rushed up at me, and I jumped, clamping my ears as she screamed even though no sound came out.

"Leave me alone!"

But she didn't. She stood off to the side, silent as ever, her bleached sundress stiff. I sighed. She was waiting for me. If I wanted her to leave, to give me the peace I've arguably earned from the mess of misunderstanding parties, I had better follow her. The pale woman led me down the neverending shoreline where a thin misty veil crept up, slithering like a snake across my field of vision. A bend appeared, and she vanished, and I wonder if I could turn back, finding a spot to lay and bask in the dull sun, dreaming my usual dreams of the body and all its sensual pleasures.

Before I could make a move, she reappeared, her mouth opened to scream but making no noise. Her fingers point to a bank, and I clambered over the dune, following the arrow.

Laying in the dry thicket, the bones sticking up at odd angles, was a skeleton.

I stumbled, gagging as the awful sight sent a river of bile up my throat. Was it hers? Was this what she was vying my attention to see? What did it mean? Why was I being stalked?

Laughter escaped my tongue as I realized how ridiculous it all was. "I've done nothing wrong," I tell the silent specter, who stared blankly ahead, her ghastly finger pointing at the body. I looked down and

noticed for the first time a watch, gold and glittery with that familiar inscription.

No, no, no! Surely I wasn't staring at the remains of the proprietor. I paced across the dunes, scratching my head, pulling at the tufts of sleek brown hair I was most proud of displaying, the thing that captivated woman and men alike, making me irresistible. The silent specter continued to point and shout soundlessly.

"What are you trying to tell me? No, you know what, I don't need to know!"

This wasn't why I came. In fact, I have quite forgotten why I came here in the first place. I was told I needed to get away, to let the flames die down before they decided what to do with me, and of course a vacation would have been perfect. This was no vacation. The screeching music. The blood. The pale woman. If I stay any longer, I will lose my mind.

I hurried away from the beach, my legs running the endless length with as much speed as they could manage. The mist surrounding me thickens, and a mirage of gray smothered me, its sweaty hands choking me around the throat. *I need to get out of here.*

Finally, I stumbled back into the cottage, rushing to grab the pieces of my carefree life in a suitcase that suddenly seemed disgusted by it. No matter. Whatever it was I faced back home I could manage. This place was not to my liking, sending too many shivers up my spine where there should be none.

I went and opened the door, intending to reach my small car waiting on the other side, when I was blocked by the immortal face of the proprietor.

"You... it can't be!" I sputtered, perplexed.

"Leaving so soon?" he blinked absently, his voice flat and his face a stone wall.

"Yes, well, I..." I stammered, trying to regain my composure. "I'm afraid this place didn't suite my tastes after all."

"Ah, I'm sorry to hear that. If you don't mind, I like to have all guests sign the book before they leave, just so I know you were here," he pulled out a worn, leather-bound guest book with yellowing pages, the same one

I had seen earlier in the foyer. A black pen sat on the cover, and I took it, willing to oblige this strange man if only so I could depart quicker.

I opened it to a blank page and hastily scribbled my name, not bothering with a review. As I went to close it, however, I noticed just how blank the voluminous book was.

"Where are all the others?" I barely finished my sentence when I gasped. My hand was disappearing. A tingling sensation shot up my arm, then it, too disappeared, spreading rapidly across my body.

"I believe you already met one," the proprietor clicked his teeth. "And thank goodness you took no heed of her warnings, as most never do. Once you take a step onto these grounds, it's already too late; your soul is mine. The world is bursting at the seams with too many sinners, and it needs to be cleansed."

I wanted to scream, but I no longer had a body to scream from; I was merely a silent specter, no longer able to feel, and doomed to watch myself float away, my soul captured in a rusty green bottle.

The proprietor walked me down into the cellar, taking a marker as he placed me on the shelf next to ones that I now saw read *sloth, envy, greed, gluttony.*

Mine was labeled *lust.*

Devil in the Door by Stephanie Henson

Stephanie lives with her family in Southeastern, Pennsylvania, but is originally from Central, New Jersey where she studied Communications at Rider University. She is back at Rider pursuing a Certificate in Publishing and Professional Writing. Her background is in Advertising/Marketing and most of her writing experience is through those professional roles. Writing and storytelling has been her passion for a long time. She has been published in print and online through various publications and has had several children's poems published by The Dirigible Balloon and Buzgaga Online, as well as the occasional "grown-up" piece. She also has a Children's Poetry book scheduled for release in 2023 with Experiments in Fiction, an independent publisher in the UK.

Stephanie enjoys reading, theatre, mindless web searching, Netflix binges, sunflowers, sports, and anything related to coffee!



CW: Devil

Moving around a lot as a kid was challenging.
We lived in small dilapidated houses, old historic houses,
dimly lit apartments, traditional
properties,
And one in particular, that I just knew was haunted.

It was an unassuming structure at first sight.
A brick front exterior, two story colonial, with a manicured
lawn,
On the end of a cul de sac.
We moved in on a steamy summer morning.

The house was one of the nicer ones we inhabited.
But when I entered my bedroom,
I could not ignore the creature in the texture of the wood
orientation of the closet.
Larger than my seven year old frame could process,
A devil's shadow looked like it had been hand carved
within the grains of the wood.

A fiery orange border outlined the ominous figure who
stared back at me with squinted eyes,
from my bed - which directly faced him.
His glare seemed to follow whenever I went in the room.

Screaming for my mom, summoning her to come
immediately,
Her reasoning was that my overactive imagination was
playing tricks on me,
but I knew better.
I think she did too but was too spiritual to ever admit it.
I saw what I saw and could never unsee it.

Noises from the room cast darkness over nighttime.
The air was always hot.
Nightmares plagued me.
I barely slept.

Mysterious visitors would come by the house at different
hours of the day,
Preaching the words of God and denouncing evil that
lurked within.
All the while, with this glaring, not so figment of
imagination, loomed over my room.
It was as if there was a push/pull dynamic within the house.
Like the witnesses knew we needed to be saved from the
devil in the door.

Scooby Doo nightlights did nothing but illuminate the
natural elements of the embedded being,
Highlighting features previously unnoticed,
Such as a long face and pointed profile.
Flickers of candles cast an eerie glare over nature's artwork
of the closet.

After a while we moved again and I left that door behind
and all that went with it.
But that wood lorn image was never fully gone, was it?
Branded in my psyche, all these years later,
I never quite forgot the scorching summer when I was
seven,
and shared a room with Satan trapped in the embossed
wood of my closet door.



The Gathering by D Larissa Peters

D Larissa Peters grew up in Indonesia and has been somewhat of a nomad. After meandering around the East Coast for more than 10 years, she moved to California—in the middle of a pandemic. This is only one of the many cities of residence in the last 40 years. Her poems have appeared in *Adelaide Magazine*, *Plum Tree Tavern*, *Rabid Oak*, *Pangolin Review*, *Corvus Review*, and *Louisville Review*.



We are stones, plucked
out of algae on the riverbanks (Ohio, Patapsco, the
Columbia ...) found
between shells along Maine's and Michigan's shores,
gathering
our hearts sing — a melody — to each other —
a melody through
the incense rising
up, uP, UP
caterpillar smoke.
Up to Orion's Belt reminding us
we're where and when and who we need to be.

Mushroom Summer by Chloe Pickard

Chloe Pickard is a speculative fiction writer based in Queensland, Australia. She loves folklore, ghosts, and the weird. Find her on Twitter at @chloerpickard or at chloerpickard.wordpress.com/



cw: abduction

It's two hours past sunrise when I enter the forest, passing red cedars and western hemlocks and towering Douglas firs. Pacific wrens warble from above. As I breathe in the cool air, scented with camphor and leaf rot, the knot between my shoulders loosens.

When I reach an intersection of trails, I choose one I haven't walked before. It's narrow, with little clusters of fat Porcini mushrooms growing either side. It's a shame no one else from the foraging group has the day free, but I'm not going to spend my week off waiting for them. I snap a picture and wish for a moment I could send it to Clara, but the impulse passes quickly. It hasn't been enough time. At least her voice doesn't still echo in my mind; *look how the light comes through the canopy, Liz.*

The trail shrinks until I'm walking slowly on a slim dirt line, ferns brushing my legs. This is all wrong. When did I last pass a marker? Unwelcome memories of the hikers who'd gone missing in this forest last autumn surface. I stop. A quick check of my phone shows four signal bars. I try a half-remembered breathing exercises from work-mandated wellbeing classes to clear the panic sticking in my throat. I've been walking in a straight line. All I need to do is turn and follow whatever *this* is back to the actual trail. If only those hikers had been so lucky. They'd never been found.

Ahead the trail ends into what looks like a clearing.

I know I should turn back and rejoin the actual trail as soon as I possibly can, but a mixture of confusion and curiosity keeps me in place, staring at the opening. As thin as this trail is, it's not just an animal path. People must have walked this way repeatedly to wear away the forest's usual leaf litter to bare earth. What's at the end? Justifications for taking a few steps more creep in. I'm not actually lost. The way back is clear. I'll just take a quick look.

When I see the clearing, I wonder if the trail was worn by foragers intent on the holy grail. Hanging white tendrils of bear's head tooth and orange shelves of chicken of the woods sprout from a rotting log. Puffballs dot bare patches of earth. A wide big leaf maple stands in the glade's centre, moss and parasitic

Dryad's saddle covering its bark. I move slowly across the damp ground, avoiding any leaf litter piles as not to disturb anything that might slither out. The birds are silent now. No insects either. When I move past the maple, there's a woman at the other end of the glade, the stark white of her dress incongruous with the woods' greens and browns.

As I come closer, I see she's standing dead centre in a wide ring of small mushrooms. "Good morning," I say, smiling.

She smiles back, wide-eyed. Her loose blonde hair is full of pink blossoms I don't recognise but can smell, roses and honey. She holds a wicker basket in the crook of one arm and when I stop about a foot away, I make out it's filled with mushrooms, their red caps scaled with white. Fly agaric. I hope she knows what she's doing, but it's not my business if she's gathering hallucinogens or taking pictures of herself while foraging.

"Isn't it beautiful?" she says, pointing to the ring, not looking away from me.

"Aren't they're great? I think they're fairy ring champignon." I step closer, bending down. Yes, they have the typical wide light brown caps and pale gills. Unusual for them not to grow on grass. She's lucky none of the dirt or leaf litter they've come through has caught in the sweeping lace hemline of her dress. Maybe she's just changed for a photoshoot, but there's no visible bags or equipment.

"Are you hunting?" she says.

"Oh no. Just foraging." I straighten up, looking her back in the face. Her eyes are blue, and so wide. Is she deliberately holding them open? It'd be painful to do it for so long.

Not wanting to meet her stare any longer, I look back to the fly agaric. Now I'm focusing they appear identical, and immaculately clean.

"Could you help me?" she says softly. I can feel her gaze still. The scent's developing a rotten undertone, like a bright bloom sprouting from a corpse.

"Are you okay?" God I hope so, because if she's having a bad response to something she's taken I don't

know how long it'll take for emergency services to arrive.

"Okay?" Her pleasant smile twists to show teeth for a moment, then returns. "I'm okay. Will you take a picture of me?" She gestures to the ring again. "There's room for two."

One photo wouldn't be so bad, if it stays at one. Any other time I'd take the picture, tell her I'd heard fairy ring champignon tasted sweet, maybe even try a few jokes. But the rot is filling my nose now, and that smile's not genuine.

"I'm sorry, I can't." I try my best 'I regret I am unable to assist further' smile for irate customers.

"Just one?"

"I have to meet someone." The glade feels airless now.

Her mouth thins. "You aren't."

I need to get out of here.

"Goodbye," I say, face burning.

Before I can see her reaction, I turn and hustle across the glade and back up the trail, sweat sticking my shirt to my back. The trail widens so slowly, and the fear I've somehow made another wrong turn constricts my heart until I burst back out onto the intersection. Without pausing, I walk back down towards the entrance. On yesterday's drive to the cabin, I'd spotted berry bushes growing along the roadside. I need open spaces for the rest of the day.

*

When it's too dark to pick blackberries, I sit scrolling through the foraging group page. No one's talking about a secret path or the glade, but most wouldn't give away such a bountiful spot. The more I read, the less inclined I am to try and write out what happened. I'll just sound like a careless idiot.

But even if I wasn't paying enough attention to where I was going, even if I'd still been frightened by my mistake, something was wrong with that woman. All day I'd dreaded looking up and seeing a white-clad figure coming towards me. At least unless she has a late-night check in, she isn't staying here. No light

comes from any other cabins, and the only car out there is mine.

Out the corner of my eye I glimpse movement. Something is rising out a crack in the floorboards; something like a thin brown worm with a bulbous head. It reaches straight up, stills for a moment, and then the brown head unfurls out into a cap.

I lean down to look at the mushroom, queasy with disbelief. More movement, and I turn my head. A curve of new mushrooms is emerging from the floor. They're making a ring-

I scabble off the couch, dropping my phone as I jump over the mushrooms. By the time I've spun around they've already closed. On the floor where it's fallen my phone's screen flickers, lock screen pixelating wildly, then goes black. The space within the ring brightens, and a pale hand emerges from an inward side, pointed nails scraping across the floor. It pauses above my phone, then snatches it up and pulls back out of sight.

I back away, scream caught in my mouth. The cabin floor writhes as mushrooms push up from the boards around me. I kick wildly at one close by and pain jolts through my foot as though I've tried to kick a wall.

I limp towards the door, jumping over half-formed rings, praying my bag with my car keys won't be swallowed up by a ring. Snatching it up, I throw the door open.

The woman stands at the bottom of the cabin's stairs. Her eyes aren't wide now, but they are so cold.

"My roots are everywhere," she says.

Mushrooms boil out the dirt at her feet, circling the cabin. The air around me thickens and warms, the reek of rot and sweet flowers fills my nose, a breeze stirs my hair. Something closes around my wrist.



The Hockomock by Suzanne Lavalée

Suzanne Lavalée (She/Her) is an eighteen year old writer based in a small town in New England. She is the co-founder of The Limelight Review, an online literary magazine for disabled & neurodivergent voices and can be found writing, listening to Lana Del Rey, or on social media: @suzannelwrites & IG: @suzanneofthebooks



old swamp stories and floating lights...
I've been in these trees,
mid afternoon on a summer day.
cold, dead, and dry- tilting in a slight breeze.
Ghosts they say and cults and murderers too-
I never believed this peaceful place
was home to rituals or voodoo.
But hundreds of years ago, they lost a war
like all great men in history.
They lost to the settlers approaching from the shore.
now their name and memory a ghost story
made of small-town lore.
It was always just an antique
forest to me.
But we leave and
let the spirits and cults to their
flames and their trees.

Millersburg by Laura Titzer

Laura is an avid tea drinker, hiker, rummaging cyclist, poetry/nonfiction writer and facilitator of possibilities residing on the Coast Salish lands of Seattle, Washington where she plays with her partner, cat, and ferrets. She regularly posts six word poems on Twitter and has been previously published in Streetcake, Gastropoda, Bureau of Complaints, Gastronomica, Kosmos, and is the author of “No Table Too Small”.



1.

At the ‘T’ in the road I find a small, white, pointed church as if god lives here anymore / Excavated memories unfurl like landlocked sails / Within deep pits of black rock I frantically etch back their existence / Chalky soot smears over my skin and the hereditary tree is summoned / Storied voices, seared and burned from father, marble bone and coal / From hope to integration as the ancestors sing.

2.

Vividly carved with engraver precision / A narrow black road winds me like thread / Searching for the house not seen / Before they were grandma and grandpa / They once stood under this Oak Tree existing along an age-old traversed line of confiscation / With thin hands they offer me lemonade / Kids play / Neighbors plan the next barn-raise in native tongue / I fill my hollow body with their souls until my skin rusts / Until fingers, ears, mouth, and nostrils illuminate their memoir.

3.

A white farmhouse stands / Its porch creeks with farm dust / Bones line the coal road / Lemonade glasses strewn about the carpet of the proud Oak Tree / But it has long since faded / Homes are mere scratches on carbon / Laughter and language haunt my eardrums / Grandma and grandpa solemnly smile / Here will be their homecoming.

Sacrament by Jordan Hirsch

Jordan Hirsch writes speculative fiction and poetry in Saint Paul, MN, where she lives with her husband and their two perfect cats. Her work has appeared with Apparition Literary Magazine, Daily Science Fiction, and other venues. Find her on Twitter: @jordanhirsch.



CW: grief

The sacred taste of cinnamon
bites my tongue. I bite it back,
refusing to let memories
waft in. An autumn wedding,

church and bride draped in
crimson, candles waning to their wicks,
and no one beside me. I have no memory
of this. I don't. I can't remember

my hand holding someone's hand
if you and the smell of hot cider
have been erased entirely. I have never
kissed a soul beneath a golden maple,

have never worn the fire down
to embers glowing on a thinning
face, have never waited
at your headstone for a whisper

that won't come. I don't feel
the cold beside me now, wrapped
in a blanket we never shared, one
I cannot part with because it still

smells like someone I cannot forget,
cardamom and musk. I do not lean into
the frigid indent next to me
on the bed. I do not feel your finger

tracing along my wrist as I sleep.
Had we been wed in my mother's church,
I would have carried sunflowers and
dried them later to sit on our bookshelf.

They are still a shade of faded yellow staring down at me.

The zipper on my wedding dress
has stuck since I first tried it on.
Here in the dark, with a draft
coming from nowhere,

it peels itself down my back,
and I step out of it, shivering,
and the faint smell of warm
spices circles around me.

Glass Eyes by Ashley Laino

Ashley Laino currently resides in Bangor, Pennsylvania with her variety of animals. Her other works include the psychological thriller "Forgotten Toys" and the YA Fantasy "A Storm of Magic." When she is not writing, she enjoys running, reading, and watching weird documentaries on Netflix.



CW: Death and frightening imagery

My grandmother used to tell me that you should never look a porcelain doll in the eyes. For those cold hard shells, with their dark insides, waited. They longed for someone to look deeply into their eyes so that they could snatch your body and leave your soul trapped behind those lifeless eyes.

When my grandmother passed away and left me to inherit the house, I was surprised. But I was even more startled when I visited the home and found the lone doll left on my grandmother's bed.

With its gleaming red hair curls and pristine pink dress, it was a jarring contrast to the dust and age of the rest of the house. But I tried to ignore it, figuring that in time I would throw it away with my grandmother's other knick-knacks and figurines.

But the doll did not care for being ignored. I swear, it followed me from room to room. When I slept, it was the first thing I saw when I awoke. I wept to family and friends in fear, but they all thought me mad.

In an act of desperation, I threw the doll into the old fireplace. As the smoke billowed around me, I watched with a smile as the doll's dress began to turn to ash. Gloating, I looked down into the doll's eyes. Suddenly, I felt heat curl around me, and I realized my grave mistake. For the one who was now trapped in the fire was me.

October (As You Are Walking Past a Graveyard) by Finn Rose

Finn Rose (he/she) is the pen name of a 25-year-old transmasculine poet, fiction writer and overall creative from Germany. His works primarily deal with profound loss, personal and global tragedy as well as the subsequent healing through reclaiming and reforming one's identity. You can follow Finn Rose on twitter @finnrosewrite

CW: graveyards



autumn arrives like a sickle in the field
it harvests, it cuts, it hungers
it dims the edges sepia a
vignette around your eyesight like a filter
and you cannot help but feel melancholy
seep in like steeping tea
like hanging clothes to dry in spider-basements

autumn arrives like a flower on the grave
it sits, it wilts, it sleeps
it folds its hands like a
prayer in a church of rough-barked trees
and you cannot help but wander in the
empty-branched forests
getting caught on brambles purposely

Self Portrait of the Flooding in Southern Illinois as Horror Movie Trailer by Michael VanCalbergh

Michael VanCalbergh currently lives in Normal, IL and works at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His first manuscript was recently a finalist for the National Poetry Series 2022 Competition. His work has previously appeared in Beaver Magazine, autoFocus Lit, Best New Poets 2021, and many other spaces



The land is Crayola green in late June.
Rows of neatly planted soy beans and corn
make a city driver along the highway go,
Nothing but Corn Country now.
The landscape finds it amusing.
A flash.

It starts to rain. A voice says,
It's been raining for weeks.
I've barely planted all my crop this year.
A different voice, wise, aged says,
There's something strange going on.
This rain is bound to release something...unnatural.

More rain. Water bubbles from the ground like a
burst pipe.
The water is clear, so clear.
It looks drinkable.
It spreads. It eats the soil.
Everything becomes rain.
The land is a lake.

Someone stands in the distance. It's still raining.
Survey of the damage. How will they survive?
A hand of mud and root shoots from the center, grabs
their ankle. They can't break free. Before they scream,
a face forms on the surface of the new lake.
It sounds like someone gurgling—*Help.*

The Annual Halloween Progressive Dinner by Maggie Nerz Iribarne

Maggie Nerz Iribarne is 53, living her writing dream in a yellow house in Syracuse, New York. She writes about teenagers, witches, the very old, bats, cats, priests/nuns, cleaning ladies, runaways, struggling teachers, and neighborhood ghosts, among many other things. She keeps a portfolio of her published work at <https://www.maggienerziribarne.com>.



CW: There is a reference to a child who died of cancer.

In the bathroom of the first party, the appetizer house, an orange candle burned on the windowsill, its weak flame struggling to survive. Lori, wine-buzz settling in, faced her blurry image in the mirror, eyes obscured by smeared black liner. A green plastic cup adorned with multicolored fish sat at the sink. A child's toothbrush poked from the top, blue toothpaste sticking to its bristles. Lori clung to the sides of the sink and sobbed.

"I was looking all over for you," Ted lied, as they exited. He clutched her arm in his usual caring/controlling way. "Where to next?" he asked, nodding at the other couples headed out to their dinner assignments.

"Evergreen. 271." Lori closed her eyes for a minute. She enjoyed the slap of numbing air.

The neighborhood glowed, its sidewalk lined with beckoning luminaria. Jack-o-lanterns observed from their porch places, chuckling with toothless smiles. "Jesus it's cold," Ted said through a clenched jaw, his breath hanging in a white puff. They trudged on in their standard tense silence.

"We're here. Put your happy face on, dear," he said, dropping her arm. They stood before an aged two story home.

How had she never noticed this house before, with its crooked shutters, peeling paint? It seemed like the only house in the entire neighborhood in disrepair, without decoration, with only broken pots, piles of wet, dead leaves, cracked steps leading to its front door.

"Just our luck," Ted said, knocking.

A gust of wind blew through, leaves rustled in its wake. Lori turned. Off in the wide side yard, a lush green tree stood in a spot of moonlight, contrasting with the deadening October trees.

"Wait. What is-" she began to say when the door creaked open. A yellow light streamed from the house, enveloping them in its tarnished gleam. An older man with death-white skin stared solemnly at them.

"Have you come for supper?"

"Er...yeah. It's a dinner party," Ted said edgily. In an instant a younger woman with the same skin and dark clothes appeared, invited them in.

"Hattie Lane," she said. "This is my father, Walter." Lori noted the mission style furniture and matching grandfather clock.

"This is lovely," she said. "Just the way these houses are supposed to look."

"Thank you," Hattie said. "Come and sit in our living room."

"Who else is coming?" Ted said.

"Others? Others are coming?" Walter looked with panicked eyes at his daughter.

"No, no, Daddy, just this nice couple, Lori and-" Hattie looked at Ted.

"Ted Gravely."

Hattie drifted out of the room.

Lori enjoyed the ticking clock and the soft cushion against her back. She breathed in deeply, relaxed her shoulders. Was she a child again? Was she home in Ohio? She felt the soft length of a purring cat against her leg, reached down to stroke it, but her hand was only suspended in air, petting emptiness. Ted and Walter sat awkwardly facing one another.

"How long have you guys lived here?" Ted asked.

Hattie drifted back to the sitting room. She carried a tray holding a steaming pot and china cups.

Lori straightened up in her chair. "Tea's just the thing on a cold night like this."

"I'll pass," Ted crossed his legs. "How long did you say?"

"Say what?" Walter asked.

"How long have you lived here?"

"We've always lived here," Hattie said, handing a floral china cup to Lori, "I was born in this house."

At that, Walter's face changed and he became agitated.

"Agnes!" he whispered urgently, clenching his right fist in his lap. Ted's knee bounced in discomfort.

"Mommy is still at the nursing home. We expect her to come home soon though. Daddy is anxious."

Hattie invited them into the dining room. The table was laid with white china plates laced with gold leaves and fall flowers. Silver serving bowls and platters carried roast chicken, vegetables, and potatoes. Lori spooned gravy over her dinner and tucked in, eating

until she found a perfect fullness. Ted's eyes glistened, glazed with gluttonous joy.

"Now, before we have dessert," Hattie said, "do you think your son would like to join us?"

"Our son-" Ted began.

"Our Robby- died- leukemia- last year," Lori said matter-of-factly, feeling a rush of relief.

"Would he like to ride his bike along our dark aisle?" Walter said.

"Yes, we'd love to have him here, if you'll allow him to join us. And you can come too, when you're ready," Hattie said. She reached a cold hand across the table to touch Lori's.

"Isn't it too-" Lori was going to say too cold, or was she going to say too late?

"We need to head to the dessert house. Now," Ted said, pushing his chair out to stand. "That was delicious and all, but-"

Lori turned back to say thank you and goodbye one last time.

"Goodbye! Goodbye!" Hattie and Walter waved as the door closed behind Lori and Ted. The lights blinked out. The broken shutters clanked in the autumn wind.
* * *

"I need a drink after that--" Ted said, rushing into the dessert house. Lori followed him inside, where once again the neighborhood crowd gathered, louder, drunker than before.

"Where were you two? You were assigned to our house for the dinner," Sally Slocum scolded. Ted rushed to the bar; a circle of men opened to receive him.

At the window, Lori pressed her forehead to the cold panes. How nice it must be, to live somewhere so long - like Hattie and Walter-to live with your mother's plates and recipes. How comforting, knowing for sure she will come back, soon.

The fleeting shadow of a moving bicycle cruised by in the darkness. Lori watched as long as she could, then moved toward the door.

She left quietly, without saying goodbye.