

NIGHTMARE



HORROR & DARK FANTASY

RACHAEL K. JONES
DAN STOUT
DAVID JANISCH
FRANCES NGO

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NIGHTMARE

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**FROM
THE
EDITOR**

Editorial: October 2023

Wendy N. Wagner | 765 words

Welcome to Issue #133 of *Nightmare Magazine*! And welcome to October and the wonderful Spooky Season—my very favorite time of year. I hope you are enjoying pumpkins in all their fabulous forms (be those edible, drinkable, or artistic), hugging horror novels close to your chest, and dreaming of ghoulies, ghosties, and things that go bump in the night. It's our time, horror people.

I have always thought of October as the cozy horror season. At what other time can a horror fan get away with admitting they love Disney movies? (I am so ready for a rewatch of *Something Wicked This Way Comes*.) It's the absolute best time for a party, too. I go all-out every year, decorating our whole house to a special theme and cooking scads of weird snacks. It's the way I tell my friends and family that I care about them.

And let's face it—we could all use a bit more care these days. It's not bad enough that we're dealing with the constant strain of climate change-induced disasters, with more and increasingly dangerous wildfires and storms: certain groups seem hell-bent on bringing ever more cruelty into the world. Large and very vocal swathes of humanity seem to have embraced hatred and stopped caring what might happen to other people.

Which is why this issue is the Caring Issue.

Both of our pieces of short fiction this month came into my hands via unusual routes. One was sent to me by a writer who has worked with us before at *Nightmare* and *Lightspeed* and who is also a volunteer at a very special writing program. One of her students had written a remarkable story, and she wanted us to read it. That student is David Janisch, whose story "The Cello in the Cell" is a powerful condemnation of the American prison system.

Our other short, "The Sound of Children Screaming," was written by my friend Rachael K. Jones, who has spent several years teaching special needs children. When Rachael started telling me about this story, which will resonate for anyone connected to America's public school system, I begged her to send it to us at *Nightmare*.

Both of these stories are beautiful, well-written pieces that shout about the way our society has simply stopped caring about certain populations of people. As allegories both delightful and painful to read, they do the kind of work that only speculative fiction can do, and I am honored to present them to you.

But the allegories and insights don't stop there! Dan Stout's flash story "Clown Town," while both nasty and brief, showcases the blindness of suburban life and the way it disconnects people from each other while consuming nature. Frances Ngo's poem "when you see the dead" addresses the horror of "snarge," a word coined to describe the birds inhaled by jet engines, but is beginning to be adopted as a term for animals killed in all kinds of collisions. Because what is more terrifying: that we kill over a million animals on our roads every day, or that we don't seem to care about it? And on the nonfiction side, independent film director JP Bradham joins us at the H Word to talk about how marketing has disconnected us from each other and trained us to consume more and more.

I knew all of these works had to go in our October issue—October, that most sacred and wonderful month for horror people!—because if there's one thing horror does exceptionally, it's connecting people and making them care. We care about zombies and apocalypses and monsters and all kinds of things that don't even exist. We look into the face of nasty, repulsive, scary stuff and set our hearts on the characters confronting them.

We're great carers, we horror people. (Unsure about that? Check out the Scares That Care charity at scaresthatcare.org, a horror fan-powered charity that has donated more than \$300,000 to sick women and children.) It's why I'm proud to be one.

So I hope your heart feels full when you settle down with this powerful issue. It's packed with all the great stuff I just mentioned *and* a wonderful interview with horror writer Keith Rosson, plus spotlight interviews with our short fiction writers. Plus, it's full of our staff's hard work and love.

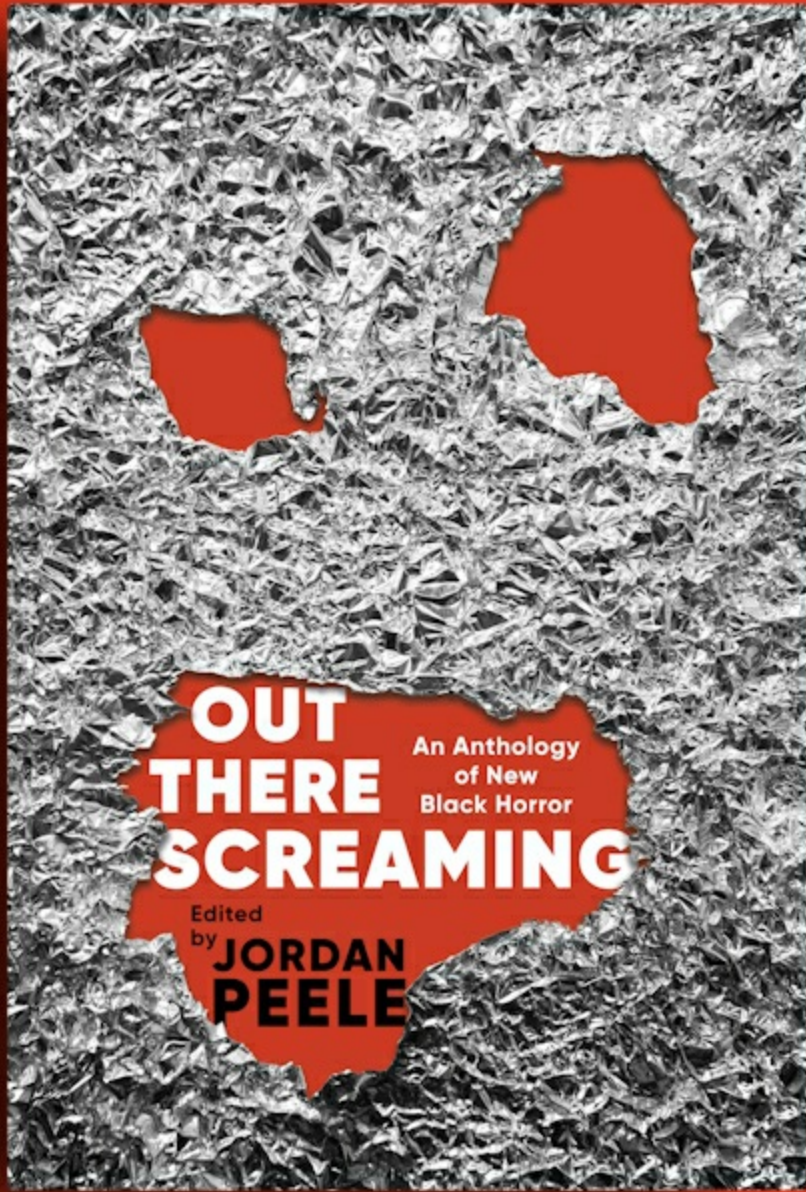
This issue might not be pumpkin-flavored, but I think it's just what your October calls for.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wendy N. Wagner is the author of *The Creek Girl*, forthcoming 2025 from Tor Nightfire, as well as the horror novel *The Deer Kings* and the gothic novella *The Secret Skin*. Previous work includes the SF thriller *An Oath of Dogs* and two novels for the Pathfinder Tales series. Her short fiction has been nominated for a Shirley Jackson award, and her short stories, poetry, and essays have appeared in more than sixty venues. A Locus award nominee for her editorial work here, she also serves as the managing/senior editor of *Lightspeed Magazine*, and previously served as the guest editor of our Queers Destroy Horror! special issue. She lives in Oregon with her very understanding family, two large cats, and a Muppet disguised as a dog.

FICTION



OCT 3RD 2023

The Sound of Children Screaming

Rachael K. Jones | 4607 words

CW: Gun violence, child death, child endangerment.

THE GUN

You know the one about the Gun. The Gun goes where it wants to. On Thursday morning just after recess, the Gun will walk through the front doors of Thurman Elementary, and it won't sign in at the front office or wear a visitor's badge.

The Gun does most of its damage in the first five minutes. The Gun doesn't care about lockdown drills, and it will not wait for the SWAT team to arrive. The Gun can chew through a door, a desk, a cinderblock wall, and kids don't wear those bulletproof backpacks during reading time.

Everyone has a right to a gun. Nothing can take that away from you. What you lack is a right to the lives of your children.

The Gun likes a game of hide-and-seek. The Gun will rove the grounds until someone stops it. The Gun has been here many times before.

The Gun is not working alone.

THE SHOOTER

He is never anyone special. Just a man exercising his right to a gun.

THE TEACHER

Michelle Dalton has taught fourth grade for nine years, long enough to know how the job yawns wider each year, collecting all the loose threads that society needs done but no one wants to pay for. Michelle has six figures in student loans and makes less than \$50,000 a year. She shares a rental house with two roommates and has a weekend job at Trek & Field selling athletic shoes to make ends meet. She does not get paid overtime, and the school district does not buy the art supplies. She is not entitled to bathroom breaks or a nonworking lunch, and she doesn't get paid for summers.

Michelle wears the armor of an elementary school teacher: an A-line dress in an ocean print, a blue cardigan to match. She bears no weapon but a sharp-edged teacher's tongue that cuts through noise like scissors.

Every teacher in Thurman Elementary will sense the Gun moments before it opens fire as a tense, drawn-out pause, an upset child drawing the breath to scream. They will not visibly panic, not with twenty-one pairs of eyes locked upon them for guidance. Michelle's body will act before her mind comprehends the threat.

It is Michelle's job to keep her students safe, just as it is her job to take the blame for whatever harm the Gun inflicts in the process.

THE PORTAL

You know about the Portal too, although not by that name. The Portal seeks the places where children hide. It stalked the air raid shelters in London during the Blitz. It lurked in underground cellars during the Cold War, crouched between the canned corn and rancid Crisco. It has fed itself in Italian orphanages and Australian residential schools, and it has only gotten hungrier.

The Portal has been exhibiting itself at gun shows recently, a gleaming bullet-proof vault in which to store kids when the shooter comes. The Portal has been installed in every classroom, funded by bake sales and cereal box tops, bought at the expense of pencils and math books and a music teacher.

The Portal is not wheelchair-accessible. The Portal is a failure of policy. The Portal was dressed up like a castle for Halloween. The Portal is not a reading nook.

There is nothing more necessary than the Portal. The Portal will keep the right children safe.

Whatever the Gun doesn't claim will get packed into the Portal like coats at the Lost and Found. The school has a ritual for it, a special alarm. The children, sensing something wrong in the *pop-pop-pop* coming from the gym, will obey uncomplainingly when Michelle shoos them in. Michelle will enter last, pulling the door shut behind them.

The Portal is dark and humid inside. There are no windows or lights to attract attention. It is the gap beneath the bed where the monsters hunt. The Portal's breath presses in around them, hot and stinking, as it swallows them down, down, down.

Time doesn't stop inside the Portal. It telescopes. The children strain their ears, listening for the classroom door. The popping sounds are approaching now. *Pop* and it passes the fourth grade art wall, *pop-pop-pop* at the water fountain, *pop* beside the mural of Rosa Parks, *pop-pop* and it has reached Ms. Dalton's door. The siren continues its wail. Someone is sobbing in the dark. Someone has to pee. Someone refused to hug his mom goodbye at dropoff today, and might never get the chance again.

When the Portal door opens, the Gun will be waiting.

But the children will not be in their classroom anymore.

THE MOUSE

Not like the mice that infest Thurman Elementary over the winter break. Not the wild ones that chew through the corners of the fun-size cracker bags, leaving cellophane confetti in the snack bin. Not like the class mouse, tame in her cage with soft white fur and blood-red eyes, who holds out her little paws to accept a sandwich crust.

This mouse has a gun: a copper blunderbuss with the end belled out like something out of Looney Tunes. His name is Sir Miles, and he has been hunting. He grooms the blood from between his claws like sticky jam as he considers the newcomers, a teacher and her eight students lined up like chessboard pawns.

It is his move.

He is quite large for a mouse, nearly knee-high. He makes a sweeping bow with his tricorne hat as he introduces himself. His accent is a lilting brogue. He has perfect manners and rides a Shetland pony. His charm, too, is a weapon, subtle and efficient, as he makes a plea that sounds a little too rehearsed, a flimflam man working over his newest marks.

He demands the things men with guns always demand. He asks for someone else to fight his wars. His people rely on a steady supply of children from the World Beyond who are kindhearted or brave or foolish enough to take up the magic crowns and wield the spells to make Sir Miles's enemies dead. He is very persuasive. His eyes shine with tears, and he clasps his little paws as he pleads his case.

The children, dazed in this strange new world, tear-streaked and shaken after the Portal's darkness, are mesmerized.

Mice are crepuscular, creatures of shadow and hidden intentions. They creep from their dens at sunset and feed all night long. They are averse to bright lights. Mice eat their own feces but lack the ability to vomit.

Sir Miles is full of shit. But he means business.

THE NEGOTIATION

Michelle also means business.

She isn't fooled by this Narnia shit, the soft black eyes or the twee little jacket. She doesn't trust a mouse with a gun. Anyone in possession of a gun has made a plan to use it.

But Dylan needs to pee, and Katie R. and Katie V. are sharing a coat in the drizzle, and it's almost time for lunch and they'll all need to eat. The kids are already eyeing the mouse like they'd like nothing better than to bury their faces in his warm, soft fur, and it's only getting worse as he unspools his sob story, his oil-drop eyes large with crocodile tears. If Michelle doesn't take charge, she'll lose control entirely.

"I'm sorry for your troubles, but we're not getting involved in your war," she says sharply, cutting off the mouse mid-sales pitch. The rain is steadily increasing its barrage, snapping against the shale like fireworks. "Is there somewhere we can go to wait out the storm?"

The mouse, steel-eyed, mounts his Shetland pony, settling in front of the corpse of the furred thing he just killed. He gives Michelle an unambiguous look of hate, like he has just spotted a particularly odious vermin. "Follow along," he says, and that predatory look submerges beneath his charm. "Castle Rowland is just beyond the rise."

Sir Miles keeps up a steady patter, dangling his problems like a pair of keys before a grabby toddler. Michelle knows his type, men who force you into a shared predicament to short circuit what your uneasy gut is screaming.

What did he kill just before they arrived, and why did he use his hands when he had a gun?

Michelle doesn't take her eyes off that gun as they follow the path behind the mouse. Everything in this world pierces. The dreary pines stab up at the gray sky, and the rain tattoos through her knit cardigan. She makes the children pair up and hold hands like they're making a bathroom trip.

Blood runs down the pony's hind leg, leaving sticky, dark hoofprints.

Michelle does not look back at the Portal. She keeps her eyes on the gun.

CASTLE ROWLAND

Every mouse on the parapets is armed.

The castle's walls are tall and pockmarked, and not one green thing grows in its courtyards. The mice have lined up gunnysacks for target practice. The volleys of gunfire blend with the pattering rain.

The idea of a castle is to protect the things you love by walling them in and daring your enemies to take them. A castle, like a school, is a locked-up box for precious things. Because of this property, castles were once the sites of war, and their names evoked the bloodshed. *Scarborough, Dover, Prudhoe, Kenilworth.*

In the distant future, castles will cease to be a symbol of war when governments find more

civilized ways to regulate what one person can take from another. Children will enter castles with delight when they have never learned to fear them.

Children will learn to fear their schools, though. The names will come to stand for another kind of warfare, the sites of battles waged and lost without the benefit of soldiers or a moat. *Columbine, Sandy Hook, Marjory Stoneman Douglas, Robb.*

THE POND

Castle Rowland also has a pond, long and low, graveled around its edges with strange ivory pebbles, jagged as teeth. The water shimmers in the rain as though it has swallowed down the sun.

The children want to get a better look, but Sir Miles hurries them along.

OTHER PEOPLE'S CHILDREN

Only eight came through the Portal. They are Li and Dylan and Nathan and Katie R. and Katie V. and Nevaeh and Caleb and Angelo. Most of them are nine years old, except for Katie V., who turned ten in September.

The other thirteen kids in Michelle's class—the *lucky ones*—yes, call them that—are still hiding in that dark closet, listening to the slamming doors, the pleading sobs of teachers, the shrieks of first-graders trapped in the bathroom, and then *pop-pop-pop*—the chalk-white silence left in the Gun's wake.

THE FEAST

The grand hall is smoky and low, and a roast much too big to be poultry turns on the spit. Portraits loom over the long refectory tables, paintings of human children, regal in velvet and bone-white crowns, their mouths turned down, somber and thoughtful.

Servant-mice in pale blue smocks scurry down the table rows and ply the children with delicacies. Katie V. gets a whole cake to herself, and Nathan eats lemon sorbet from a silver dish. It has been a very long walk, and they are too ravenous to resist. Even Michelle accepts a bowl of soup, though she dislikes the way that the mice seem prepared for their surprise guests. Like it was scheduled weeks ago, and everyone has rehearsed their roles.

As the mice shoo the humans from the table, they file past the roast. A feline skull leers back at Michelle, the clawed, furry paws still attached to the leg-bones.

THE PORTRAITS

None of the children in the portraits seem to make it past their teenage years. When Michelle asks Sir Miles about this, his whiskers twitch into a needle-toothed grin. "The magic of the crowns isn't for adults. Only children can wield them."

When she asks what happens when the children grow up, the mouse just laughs her off. "We send them home, naturally," he booms. "What else would we do? *Eat* them?"

AN INTERLUDE

Michelle cannot sleep that night. The eight sleeping children sigh and hum around the room—the

girls tucked into the grand four-poster bed, the boys burritoed in blankets on the rug before the crackling fireplace, and Michelle against the door to watch for intruders.

Castle Rowland feels more real than what happened to them at the school today. The alarm sounding, the *pop-pop-pop* in the hallway, the sobbing in the dark.

At that moment, instead of her family, Michelle had found herself thinking of her weekend job. How they had no protocol at Trek & Field for what to do if someone opened fire.

This strange castle, with its mice and portraits and ivory pond, has a logic stronger than the laws of reality. All her life, Michelle had thought she knew what she would do if the Gun came to her school, but the Gun doesn't care about the stories people tell themselves in their own heads.

A NOTE ABOUT SCHOOL SAFETY

We will not try to prevent the Gun. The Gun will accept no limitations. But we will try very hard not to offend the Gun. If you offend the Gun, it may decide to get personal.

Better to develop rituals against the Gun, to train the kids to block the door, hide in the closet, play dead on the rainbow carpet where they do calendar time and sing the morning song. Better to invest in metal detectors. Better to ring the playground with barbed wire, to hire off-duty police instead of another counselor.

You can have a special alarm for the Gun. You can make the teachers draw the blinds, lock the doors, take the long route every day to recess in the name of safety.

It doesn't matter if any of it works. The important thing is to have something to blame besides the Gun. Best to treat the Gun as a force of nature, rare as an earthquake, a freak tornado. Best to accept the Gun. It belongs here. It belongs everywhere. The Gun will always be with us.

If you try hard enough, maybe you can convince the Gun to shoot someone else's kid instead.

THE TOUR

"Perhaps the children would enjoy a tour of Castle Rowland," Sir Miles suggests at breakfast. "Unless you would prefer that I return you to your Portal?"

It is a threat, and Michelle knows it. This world exists in a moment suspended in time, the instant between breaths, with the Gun on the other side of the classroom door.

Nothing could be more dangerous than returning home, not even these predatory mice with their blunderbusses and their feud with the neighboring kingdom.

But then Sir Miles shows them the armory.

THE ARMORY

Gun racks hold row after row of blunderbusses, flintlocks, swords, and crossbows, sharp as a buckthorn thicket in winter. The children race through the rows of oiled metal, spitting out the gunpowder tang in their mouths and noses, until they find the eight glass cases at the back.

In each case rests a chalk-white crown. Their delicacy fascinates Michelle, like anatomical drawings of bird skeletons. The glass casing lifts off easily. When she picks up a crown, it has a soft texture like soapstone, only lighter. It is constructed from many fragments fitted together and polished smooth, except for some top bits that jut up, raw as broken teeth.

Angelo has taken a crown into his hands. His eyes slingshot between Sir Miles and Michelle, seeking their permission. "Can I, Ms. Dalton?"

“Go on,” Sir Miles encourages him. “Give it a try.”

“Angelo, wait—!” Michelle begins, fear gripping her voice so it squeaks.

But Angelo has already donned the crown. It fits like it was made for him. He stands a little taller, acclimating to the kingliness settling upon his shoulders.

“It’s true!” Angelo shouts, his brown eyes bright and happy. “It’s really magic! I can feel it!” He lifts his hands, and to Michelle’s horror, a dozen swords rise up from their racks like a cloud of startled pigeons.

POWERS

Every teacher knows the moment when they lose control of their classroom, and it usually begins with exuberance. Once, on a Friday before a long weekend, Katie V.’s dad brought in birthday cupcakes, half chocolate and half vanilla. It was raining, and nobody had been out for recess, and everyone wanted vanilla but there weren’t enough to go around. Then Katie V. started crying because she didn’t get the kind she wanted on her birthday, and Dylan squashed the unwanted cupcake on the floor, and then full-on chaos broke out, the kind that could only be stopped by flickering the light switch and making threats to cancel the afternoon movie.

The crowns are like those cupcakes. Every child grabs one despite Michelle’s attempts to stop them, and then there are a series of close calls when the swords and guns go clattering through the air, nearly beheading Caleb, who decides to retaliate. They call down fire and shadow. They scorch the stone walls black. Nevaeh freezes the air, pulling snow down inside the armory, and the other children run around catching snowflakes on their tongues.

Finally Sir Miles leads the children out to the courtyard, and Michelle follows behind, defeated and impotent, her voice hoarse, her right temple throbbing in the telltale sign of a migraine.

Michelle doesn’t blame them. She understands the source of their joy. Children rarely get to feel so powerful. Children spend their days being told what to do and where to go. They don’t get to decide how they dress or what they eat. They aren’t allowed to get angry or to dislike anyone, and if an aunt or grandpa wants a hug, the child will have to give it.

Children only hold power in their games, which is why they make up superheroes. They play at telekinesis and pyrokinesis and mind reading. Children use swings to learn to fly, or they use sticks as makeshift wands. But now that power is real.

“That’s enough,” Michelle tells Angelo as he sets a row of gunnysacks on fire. “Let’s go inside and have a break now.”

Gentle Angelo, who always volunteers to collect all the basketballs after recess, who always holds the door as they file out to the buses after school, glares up at Michelle. “You can’t make me,” he says.

He is right.

When some children grow up, they will buy themselves a gun so no one else can ever make them feel small again. They will not try to change how adults make children feel.

THE TRUTH

The refectory tables have been removed from the Great Hall for the occasion. The mice crowd in for the coronation, hundreds of them, packing the castle. Although they only rise to Michelle’s knees, they force her apart from the children through sheer numbers, pushing her out, cutting her off, until she

stands alone in the courtyard, the door to the hall slammed in her face.

It is gray and raining. Alone, Michelle wanders the grounds as the guard-mice eye her with open hostility. *What do they do when the children grow up?* But Michelle is already grown. The mice have no use for her now that they have pried her away from her students.

She finds herself drawn to the glimmering ivory pool and its sunlit glow in the dreary rain. Her shoes crunch on the strange, pointed gravel. The water swarms with koi, and beneath them, mounded like coral, are human skeletons, too many to count, ribcages and skulls and long, slim femurs buried in the finer knobbles of knucklebones and teeth. The fish nibble at bits of connective tissue clinging to the fresher skeletons. Some of the bones are broken, as though sawed open to lick out the marrow.

None of this surprises Michelle. She knew from the moment she held that crown, its soapstone texture, its unusually light weight. The bones of children fused together and polished smooth, a vessel for their collective power once they grew too old to be of other use, handed down to their successors to wield in turn.

The last of Michelle's hope slips away as she gazes into the pool. Her students' fate is a tale of two deaths. One at the hands of the mice, who have no love for these children beyond their utility in war. And the other through the Portal where the Gun awaits, rattling the classroom doorknob. Become the weapon, or its victim. Either way, they die.

And if they stay? If they flee? Who will wear those crowns next? Which classroom will the Gun seek out instead?

Someone will have to die. There is no one coming to help her. No one will stop the mice, the shooter, the cycle that returns them to this point, this pond, these children's bodies and their wordless accusation.

Teachers have always been left alone, dancing around the Gun, the Portal, the crowns of bone, trying to keep other people's children safe with donated art supplies and cardboard tubes saved up for Craft Day.

One thing is certain: Michelle will never tell her students about the bones. No child deserves to know how little the world regards them.

But there are other weapons she can give her students. Truths as powerful as any magic crown.

AGENCY

Into the Great Hall, then. Into the castle, where the mice are piping military tunes on ivory flutes as Sir Miles gives a speech. Michelle plunges into the thick of the cheering mice, forcing a path, though they scratch and tear at her legs and rip her dress to tatters. All those blunderbusses tip down and track her, the bells of deadly trumpets, as she approaches the dais, the eight little thrones, the children unrecognizably regal in rich, furred cloaks sewn from the dappled hides of calico cats.

"Wait," Michelle cries out in her sharp teacher's voice, projecting over the din. "Wait a moment. I have something to say."

Sir Miles stabs a clawed finger at Michelle, harpooning her with accusations. "See, your Majesties? Even now, she plots to depose you, to deprive you of your crowns. Strike her down with your power, or else give the command, and our soldiers will ensure she never troubles your reign again."

All eight faces turn to consider Michelle, frowning in displeasure. But she is no longer afraid. Unlike the mice, she loves these children. She bears the kind of love for them you can only have for children not your own, children freely given into your care day after day in the trust that you will

return them back again, imperceptibly older, until eventually they become old enough to live on their own.

And from that place, Michelle speaks to her students like she always has, giving them the knowledge of their own power and the strength to use it.

“Those crowns belong to you,” she tells her students. “Sir Miles is right about that. I won’t ask you to give them back. But you have a choice now. You can fight for the mice in their war if you want. Or we could go back home and help your friends. The choice is yours. Whatever you choose, I will help you.”

Sir Miles laughs, and the other mice echo him, certain in their victory. They have been plying these children with gifts and sweets and flattery, and don’t believe dowdy, buttoned-up Michelle can offer anything equally tempting. The children have been growing irritable during her speech, their faces pinched and unhappy. Li stands up. Nevaeh twitches her cloak aside to bare her hands.

“I know you’ll make the right choice,” Michelle tells them. “Whatever you do, Ms. Dalton loves you.”

Michelle stares into the gun barrels trained upon her. Nathan glowers down at the crowd. Katie R. has flushed the deep red that foretells a tantrum, and Nevaeh raises her hands. Michelle closes her eyes, giving herself to their judgment.

All eight children begin to scream.

And the sun answers.

BRIGHT LIGHTS

The sun sheds her gray robes and steps down into the Great Hall.

The heat is incredible. The blunderbusses bloom like daffodils and drop their seeds in molten pools of brass. All the shadows burn away. In the courtyard, the bone-pool hisses and steams as it boils off.

Mice cannot tolerate bright lights, nor can anything that has made a habit of feeding on children. The air is hazy with the char of singed fur.

Michelle should be charred too, but the eight children run to her and throw their arms around her waist, just like when the dismissal bell rings and they don’t want to say goodbye.

HOW IT ENDS

There is no happy ending when the Gun visits a school. Even if it takes no lives, it will rob every child and adult of the bone-thin illusion that bad things only happen to other people’s children, those who prepared less, prevented less, who failed to hire enough cops or install enough bulletproof glass, who didn’t run the backpacks through the metal detectors, people who deserved it somehow, who left a door propped open or a fence unrepaired. They will go to bed that night numb inside, neither scared nor angry, because it feels like slipping through a portal to a world where your hometown has become the legal hunting ground of angry men, and no one thought to warn you. Later, they will feel guilt and intense shame, like they should have done something differently, like they should have known the rules had changed that day and prepared accordingly, like they forgot their jacket when everyone knew it would rain.

The truth is that the Portal has been growing, fed by the Gun meal by meal, and it will swallow and swallow until every school lies in its belly slowly digesting in a glimmering pool of children’s

bones, until someone decides to stop it.

Michelle plunges through the Portal, the children lined up behind her like they're off to art class instead of facing their deaths. The Portal door bursts open upon the classroom at Thurman Elementary just as the doorknob turns, Michelle at the forefront and eight kids in crowns behind her, confronting the Gun with the bones of children, the bitter magic only children have the right to wield, asking the question that answers itself, damning the Gun with their bodies, their flesh, with the sound of children screaming.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachael K. Jones grew up in various cities across Europe and North America, picked up (and mostly forgot) six languages, an addiction to running, and a couple of degrees. Now she writes speculative fiction in Athens, Georgia, where she lives with her husband. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in dozens of venues, including *Shimmer*, *Lightspeed*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Strange Horizons*, *Escape Pod*, *PodCastle*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *InterGalactic Medicine Show*, *Clockwork Phoenix 5*, and *Daily Science Fiction*. She is a SFWA member and a secret android. Follow her on Twitter [@RachaelKJones](#).

[To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight](#)

Clown Town

Dan Stout | 632 words

CW: None.

I get up before dawn. Those pale-gray hours hold signs of unseen life: a trace of pungent spray, a flutter of wings, distant car doors slamming shut. Of course I attribute these to animals and early morning commuters. Sometimes I wonder if I'm wrong.

—DS

Evie knew the mantra: *location, location, location*. So while she'd paid more for the house than she'd hoped, she knew the neighborhood was worth it. Clown Town was a beautiful place to live, with pleasant homes and abundant wildlife—she often heard the honking of passing geese. But she'd rarely seen the town's namesakes.

Occasionally she caught a glimpse of a clown or two standing by the side of the road as she drove to the grocery. Of course they weren't real clowns, just people in costumes waving at traffic and spinning foam arrows that pointed the way to pizza parlors or thirty-minute oil changes. A quaint bit of local color, a remnant of the days when the city had been a winter resort for migrating circus folk. It wasn't something she dwelt on. Until an early morning jog and a wrong turn led her into a strip mall parking lot.

She bounced from leg to leg as she glanced around, trying to get her bearings. The lot was deserted. No stores were open and no shoppers waited in their cars. The striped blacktop was bare apart from a few wind-strewn plastic grocery bags and a single discarded refrigerator box. Evie pulled her phone out of its armband holster and swiped to the GPS. Before the map could refresh, a scraping sounded behind her. Evie froze, finger still pressed to the screen, the warm flush of her morning sweat turning clammy on the small of her back. All she'd heard was a hurried scraping, but somehow, deep in her mind, she knew exactly what that sound had been.

The scuffling of over-sized shoes.

Evie whirled. A train of brightly-garbed figures streamed from the refrigerator box, one after the other. Before she could react, they had her surrounded.

Clowns aren't dangerous, Evie told herself. Turning a slow circle, she took in the ring of painted smiles and cartoon tears. *This is some kind of flash mob. Or performance art.*

The lead clown, impossibly tall and dressed in a herringbone jacket over yellow suspenders, approached her with a Charlie Chaplin waddle. Drawing close, he bent down, shiny round red nose almost brushing hers. A curl from his wig fell loose, bright orange and bobbing in the morning breeze as he stared at her.

Unsure whether to make eye contact or look away, Evie focused on the curl and held her breath. Bits of half-remembered survival television shows danced through her head. *Play dead if you meet a bear. If you run into a mountain lion, puff out your chest and swing your arms overhead.* None of it useful here.

From the corner of her eye she saw the clown's hand glide down, coming to rest on the bicycle

horn mounted to his belt.

A belt and suspenders? she thought. *That's funny.* The corner of Evie's mouth lifted, the start of an unexpected, irrational smile. There was the briefest pause, just long enough for her smile to falter before a single, brassy honk broke the silence.

The pack responded, closing on her in a swirl of garish colors and greasepaint. Their chorus of answering honks filled the air, drowning out Evie's screams.

Just like geese, she thought. *They sound just like geese.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Stout lives in Columbus, Ohio, where he writes noir with a twist of magic and a disco chaser. A novelist and freelance game writer, his prize-winning fiction draws on travels throughout Europe, Asia, and the Pacific Rim as well as an employment history spanning everything from subpoena server to assistant well driller. Dan's stories have appeared in publications such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Nature*, and *Intergalactic Medicine Show*. He is the author of The Carter Archives, a series of noir fantasy novels from DAW Books. To say hello, visit him at www.DanStout.com.

The Cello in the Cell

David Janisch | 4800 words

CW: None.

TO: Andrew Thompson in Baltimore, Maryland
FROM: A music student in Stillwater, Minnesota
November 1, 2030

Dear Andy,

The day I was arrested, someone bought the winning Powerball lottery ticket that was worth 1.2 billion dollars. I remember dreaming what I would have done if I had won. You might not believe me, but I'm being serious here—I'd open up a phone book and randomly pick out a name, and give the person half of my winnings. This was my last daydream as a free man.

Just the thought of a complete stranger receiving all that money for no reason brought a smile to my face.

Of course, there is no such thing as a phone book anymore and Andy, I hate to tell you this, but I didn't win no lottery.

They are going to execute me tomorrow morning, and they gave me this evening to write a farewell to a loved one.

I decided to randomly pick out a name and write to that person. I've never been to Baltimore and I don't know anyone named Andrew Thompson, but I figured there is bound to be at least one Andrew Thompson in Baltimore. I'm sure the authorities will find you and give you this letter.

I'll begin at sentencing because that really is the first time I died. It's when one life ended and another began. Tomorrow will be my second and final death. But don't worry. This isn't a confession. I already confessed to the cello.

••••

I was sitting there next to the public defender. He was thirty-nine years old, but he looked much younger, healthy and in shape, and I didn't feel that way at all and so one of the first questions I asked him was what did he do for exercise. Looking back, that was a really strange question to ask. It had nothing to do with my case but I'm only telling you this now Andy because when you get arrested, you go into shock and you ask bizarre questions for no reason.

"I run in the evenings on the treadmill," he answered. That really is the only detail I remember of him. That and his kindness. He patted me on the shoulder the moment before the judge sentenced me and he didn't have to do that.

The judge asked me to stand.

I did.

"Bach's Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major," said the judge, and there was a pause, and then, acting as if he was granting me a type of mercy, added: "but only the prelude."

The public defender let out a barely perceptible groan. Then it was my turn to pat him on the shoulder.

It wasn't the music we'd been hoping for.

We thought maybe all I would be sentenced to was a guitar chord or maybe a scale on a flute. Or maybe the worst thing the judge would sentence me to would be “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” on the violin.

But Bach?

That meant I would be sent to a maximum-security prison.

When I arrived at my cell there, there was the cello . . . waiting. You would think they would have issued me the cello when they issued me my one set of baggy prison clothes but if they had, it would have been less dramatic. There was no desk. No pillow. No books. No paper to write on. No shelves.

Only a simple chair, a brown-varnished, stained cello with its bow, a mattress, and a cement floor.

I took a few steps towards the cello, held it, and then took a deep breath. For the moment, the wooden scent of the cello relaxed me. That hollow space within the cello was where notes lived, and I tried to breathe it all in. I figured it was the first step.

I knew nothing of music. They didn't teach music to people like me. But in that moment my mind was open to the possibility that I would master a language I never had the opportunity to hear, to really and completely hear.

I don't want you to think that this was a dark cell or that it was a dirty cell that never saw the light of day. It is a very modern prison. The cells are really small soundproof rooms. It is true that there was no window, but there was a single low voltage light bulb that never shut off.

All I had to do was play the prelude in Bach's Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major.

Andy, I'm not sure how old you are. You might be older than me, but just in case you are younger, much younger, you might not be aware of what a prison sentence used to be like. If a person committed a crime, then they'd be sentenced to a fixed amount of time—two years, five years, twenty years, and everything in between. In some cases, about ten percent of them, the length of time was much greater than twenty years—life. The person would die in prison.

Thus, the saying went that to serve a prison sentence was to do time.

Now, we say to serve a prison sentence is to do music.

That first night in the prison cell with the cello, I'll admit, I did what almost all prisoners do their first night. I talked to it. I told the cello my life story. Thinking that my honesty would somehow save me or make the cello easier to learn. I didn't try to play any music on it. Wouldn't even touch it because I was worried that I would break it. And besides, even though I knew this would not be the case, I thought that someone would give me a music lesson in the morning. Sort of as an orientation.

At some point, I must have stopped talking and fell asleep.

A short, efficient knock woke me up. I opened the door. An officer peeked his head in, looked at me, looked at the cello, and then said, “Very Good, Brian.”

And those were the same three words I heard every day for I don't know how many months.

Each time I heard them though, they always made me feel a little bit better about myself, my situation. It was as if I had just received a blessing from the officer. From the Department of Corrections. Even from the judge who sentenced me. Those three words let me know I was right on track.

After I heard those words the first time, I was all ready to start practicing, like I was pumped up, but yet, I didn't really know what Bach's Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major sounded like. I knew of it. Everyone knew of it. I didn't have to wait long.

The single light bulb in the cell started to flicker on and off. Deliberately. Then the locked door automatically opened. I walked out. All the cell doors had opened. There was a long line of incarcerated humans stepping out of their cells. Everybody looked at their feet as they walked. I was

surprised at how quiet everybody was. No one knew each other. All the bodies walking together could have all been one body. One long caterpillar. Then I looked at the tiers above and below me. Everybody walking silently.

Looking back on that first day, Andy—and now that it is my last day—I can honestly ask myself: Why were we so quiet?

Sure, we were instructed to be. First rule in a Bach prison is no communication between prisoners. Told if we made any noise or even a gesture, they'd take away our cello for a day, a week, a month.

Another reason was that everyone was really trying to focus on what they were about to hear. Get into a certain state of mind of pure receptivity.

We should have rebelled, even if the only form the rebellion took was in whispers. What did all that focusing and compliance really get us?

I found a seat in a large auditorium and looked around. Most of the incarcerated were staring very intently at the stage. Some had their eyes closed. The young and old alike fidgeted. No one's body was like the public defender's. Not exactly obese. They didn't feed us enough calories, but if anyone had had any type of muscular structure, the days in the cell wore it away. When I watched people sit down, there was an awkwardness to the physical movement. Spatial awareness had diminished. It was like people weren't comfortable in their own bodies, as if their bodies were no longer theirs. Afterwards I didn't notice any of it because I became it.

On the stage was a chair and a cello. Officers were walking up and down the aisles like ushers, but the opposite—ready to kick people out who made the slightest noise. Never before had I seen such a large number of officers as I did at the concerts.

An old man walked to the stage wearing a tuxedo and sat down. As he reached for the cello, the lights dimmed in increments, until it was completely black, and he started to play the prelude of Bach's Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major.

The sound filled the auditorium and bounced off the walls, causing a shift in everyone's presence. It was like the music shredded that first layer of prison off us. Every inmate automatically concentrated as hard as he could and this concentration was something that could be felt. It radiated from each of us. If you could take a cup and fill it with all the concentration in the room and drink it down, you would turn into some type of god.

In about three minutes it was over. It was the most beautiful sound I ever heard.

I realized why that particular suite and prelude were chosen. The energy, the hope, the uncertainty, the resolution.

Afterwards my brain felt different. Like everything had been reorganized in a different order, a divine order, an order that was missing from me, missing from all of us during the moments of crime, but this piece of music . . .

When the music was finished, the lights turned back on suddenly, not in increments. The old man was hesitant to leave. He looked across the room and tried to make eye contact with a few prisoners. The next evening, he would do the same, except he'd choose to look at different faces. It made me feel as if the old man was looking specifically for me, and I couldn't help but feel a little bit of love right at that moment, which I believe was his goal.

Then he walked off the stage and I became acutely aware of the silence that followed.

I went back to my cell and tried to play a note on the cello, but couldn't even get a single reasonable, clear sounding note. I told myself not to worry about it, and that I'd hear the same concert again tomorrow.

I fell asleep. A short, efficient knock. A guard peeked his head in, looked at me, looked at the cello, and said "Very Good, Brian."

Then a little bit later, the light bulb flickered. The walk to the concert. The concert. The euphoria. But then a crash. The despair of not even coming close to being able to play it.

Repeat.

A year went by.

I woke up one morning, and before I had even opened my eyes, I knew we had company. Still laying on the mattress, I turned my head and noticed an envelope on the floor that someone had slid underneath the door sometime during the night. When I picked it up, there was my name on the front, handwritten in calligraphy.

Andy, if you have never seen your name written in calligraphy, then you're really missing out on something. Everyone at least once in their lives deserves to see their name represented in such a way.

The calligraphy and the cello seemed to go well together. It was as if there was a conversation going on between them throughout the night that I was completely unaware of. That was my first thought. But my second thought was even more irrational: maybe someone from my long ago past had written me a long letter. Maybe this person even learned and studied calligraphy just so they could write me this letter.

I opened the letter and there was a single sentence on a single page.

It read:

You are invited to play Bach's Cello Suite No.1 in G Major in front of the parole board at noon.

I should have fucking known.

I'm sorry for the swearing, Andy, but I really had to add it just to show you my frustration. I hadn't learned one note of Bach. For the first week, I tried a couple times, but I didn't even know how to tune the instrument. And so I spent a year trying to sleep as much as I could.

And when I wasn't sleeping, I'd stare at the wall and try my hardest not to see the cello, but that was impossible. If my eyes were open, I couldn't position my face where my eyes would not see it, even if it was only from the comers. Maybe that is why for a life sentence, it is always the cello. I thought at first perhaps it was the richness and depth of the sound. A sound that needed to be restored to the very core of a person. But maybe it was only because they wanted a large instrument you could never not see.

Andy, I'm going to have to take a break. That Parole Board . . . I can't write about it at this moment. Give me an hour or two to calm down.

••••

Around 8:00ish now . . . probably . . .

I have no idea what time it is, Andy. This is the first night that the light bulb hasn't flickered and the cell didn't automatically open for the nightly prelude concert. And I'm missing it. I'm really missing Bach and I want to hurry and finish this letter so I can think more about the music. Before I know, it will be all over.

The Parole Board. I had to carry the cello to what seemed like the other side of the prison, into a room much smaller than where the concerts took place. There were three people dressed real conservative, real traditional, sitting at a table. An empty chair stood about ten paces in front of the table. Without anyone saying anything, I took a seat there, and I looked more closely at the Board

members. They all were in their upper fifties or lower sixties. I tried to see them clearly, but spending so much time in the cell weakened the eyes. Made it hard to see things from a distance because in the cell there is no distance. Their faces were blurry. The two men wore charcoal gray suits with black ties and the one woman wore a black dress with a white pearl necklace. I tried to take control of the situation.

“Which one of you knows calligraphy? Your handwriting is impeccable,” I said.

“We are music teachers. An intern was in charge of your invitation. A nice touch, isn’t it?” said one of the gray suits.

“You may proceed,” said the other gray suit.

I was shocked. The only words I heard from another human being for the last year was an officer saying: “Very Good, Brian,” and then this. I was expecting something more.

“So, I never had a music lesson,” I tried to explain.

The black dress interrupted me.

“What could you possibly mean? Have you not been listening to the prelude every evening? Isn’t that a music lesson? Three hundred and sixty-five lessons, to be exact,” she said.

I didn’t like how this was going and I stared down at the cello but that only frightened me more, so I stared at the white pearl necklace that I could barely see, and imagined that the pearls were prayer beads.

The silence in the room grew.

“Oh, you actually expect me to answer your question? I thought it was rhetorical,” I said to the black dress.

“We expect you to play Bach’s prelude, if you ever expect to be released from prison,” said the gray suit.

“You may begin at any time,” said the other gray suit.

You know what happened next, Andy?

I started laughing. It was both a sincere laugh and an uncomfortable laugh. They waited until I stopped.

Then I got serious.

“I see men every day at these concerts—” I started.

“We certainly hope you didn’t talk to any of them. Sharing such words can halt your individual progress toward transcendence,” said the black dress.

“That is such a big, pointless word,” I said, and then stopped speaking. I wasn’t helping my situation.

“From chaos into order and from that order into beauty. That is why Bach was chosen. Your mind was in complete chaos, and we can’t let you out if chaos still reigns in your brain,” said a gray suit.

“It’s very simple, Brian. By being able to play the prelude, you’ve giving proof that you have changed, and not only have changed, but will be the type of good that the world wants,” said the black dress.

“Needs,” the other gray suit clarified.

I knew what they were talking about. Even listening to Bach made me feel different, think different. I could only imagine that if I could play it, I would in fact be different. But the difficulty of the piece made it so unattainable.

Something else had been on my mind for months.

“I see the incarcerated in the audience at the concerts . . . they have a look of utter confusion. Like probably how I look. They don’t look like they are able to play any type of music.” I paused, but if I

didn't bring it up now, this might continue to haunt me. "Then some face who I'd seen for months is no longer there. It's like he disappeared. It's not only one person. Almost everyone eventually disappears. One day they're not there and they never return. I don't believe any of them could play the prelude and so I don't think they were released," I said.

"Is there a question you're trying to ask?" said the gray suit.

"Did you kill them?"

"Brian, you have nothing to worry about. You're making great progress," said the black dress.

It was really odd to hear that, considering they hadn't heard me play.

"Those others . . . the reason you don't see them is because they committed the unpardonable crime," said the gray suit.

"Which is?" I asked.

"It's not the policy to reveal what it is. We used to tell prisoners but then they'd commit it before even letting Bach into their hearts," said the other gray suit.

I wanted to leave the room ASAP. I didn't want them to hear how utterly and completely far behind I was.

"I think I just need more time," I said.

"That's the spirit!" said the black dress.

"Next year, then?" I asked.

"Absolutely. And if you feel ready, you always have the right to request a parole board meeting early. We're always looking forward to hearing an incarcerated person play Bach," said the gray suit.

Quickly, before they'd changed their minds, I walked out of there wishing the cello was a little bit lighter so I could walk the ten paces to the door faster.

The next year went by quite differently. Sleeping for a year is probably a normal response and I would add maybe even a necessary response. But that Parole Board meeting really . . .

Andy, I'm sorry. Gotta take another break. I want to finish this letter and everything, but it seems like I can actually hear the prelude play right now in the cell. It is the strangest thing.

••••

I'm back.

I started practicing the cello frequently. Even though I didn't have a clock or a watch, no natural light to mark the passage of time, no consistent time on when a brown paper bag of food would be delivered, and no consistent time when the officer would stop by, and I didn't exactly know when the concerts would take place. I knew they were daily. This they made clear in the beginning. And so I just made sure to practice the cello sometime in between the concerts, especially right afterwards. If I had been sitting in the cell or laying down for an extended period of time, I'd tell myself, "Okay, it is time to practice."

When I wasn't practicing, I was thinking about the past. I would actually make sounds on the cello with the bow in order to stop my mind. So this wasn't always even about the prelude. Sometimes I would make sounds to make my mind shut up. To make the images disappear. I told myself if I could play music then perhaps beautiful images would start to emerge.

Sometimes I tried to make beautiful images thinking that would then allow me to play music.

And the prelude of Bach's Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major is basically a scale, right? A complicated scale with some variance. And so I tried to play different notes in a sequence from low to high. Or from high to low.

And that, I was able to do.

But it didn't sound good, Andy. It never sounded good.

The problem was . . . the cello was never in tune. I had no idea. I used to think that the last prisoner who lived in the cell and used the cello was an asshole. Like I think he purposely left it out of tune. But he had nothing to do with it. He was probably just as lost as I was.

It's getting harder to write this letter. All I hear is the prelude now. There was so much more I wanted to say, but I don't want to mess with you. Build everything to a crescendo. That would be artificial. Yes, as you can probably guess, I did commit the unpardonable crime, but before we get to that, please do me a favor.

If you are ever in Seattle, and you are walking around the Capitol Hill neighborhood, a lot of nice shops, a lot of cool people to kick it with, if you ever see a guy named Louis, and you find out he's a visual artist and he's originally from Minnesota . . . If you see him, just walk on by. Ignore him.

You see Andy, I shouldn't even be sending this letter to you. It is him I should be writing this letter to. He was my best friend growing up, but once I went to prison, he never contacted me.

And so I send my last words to a complete stranger.

Okay, some time has gone by since that last sentence. I heard more of the prelude play in my head, and you know what? If you see that dude named Louis in Seattle or anywhere, who knows where he could be, but if you see a guy named Louis, just assume that he's my old friend. And instead of ignoring him, ask him how he's doing. Make sure there are some good people in his life and if there are not, then be a good person in his life.

Because of all the things I could be thinking about, it is him that's on my mind.

Or to be more specific, I'm thinking of his childhood home in Bayport. His mom was real proud that she owned a home but I don't think she could really afford it. It never seemed to be heated in the winter. So you know what Louis did when he was around eleven? I have no idea how he got hold of the paint, but he ended up painting all four walls in his bedroom as if it was one big desert.

Blue sky. Cactuses. Fat ones filled with water. Abundance. But also thin, dried-up ones with sharp needles. Purple flowers. A few lizards. Lots of sand, of course. It was real basic, and even though it wasn't realistic looking, it wasn't cartoony. Maybe that was because of the seriousness with which he took it, the esteem he had for it.

I look at the walls of my cell and it is as if they are painted the exact same way. This cell has become a desert, and the prelude is what made the sun rise, the cactus grow, the lizard egg crack. It also made the drought. You can hear the drought in the prelude. It happens after a couple minutes go by. It's as if the notes are saying that it might not rain again. But then the musical phrase in the beginning repeats but with more strength. All the rain comes gushing down. Flowers bloom. The prelude ends.

Does something come after the prelude? Does it constantly repeat? Or is death a never-ending rest note?

All I know are two things. I can't stop hearing Bach. And in the middle of winter, with the heat off, Louis would sit alone in his room until he started to sweat. That is how much he believed in his desert.

I have to force myself to write more words. I'm no longer thinking in words.

••••

Okay, what happened was this. I smashed it. Got sick of staring at the cello every day. Got sick of

every possible sound I was making on that damn thing. The day came when it just seemed to take up too much space. I didn't even think I was angry. But I gripped its neck with two hands and lifted it over my head and brought it down onto the cement floor as hard as I could. Then I stomped on it.

Before I was really aware of what happened, I heard a short, efficient knock on the cell.

An officer peeked in. Looked at me. Looked at what was left of the cello, and said, "Oh Brian. That is not good. Not good at all." Then he shut the door and walked away.

It was then I knew I had committed the unpardonable crime. There never was another concert for me. Sometime later, possibly only a few hours ago, an envelope slid underneath my door. On the front of it was my name. Typed. I opened it. It read:

You will be executed tomorrow at noon.

I missed the calligraphy. But not nearly as much as I missed the cello. Right after I smashed it, for a minute or two, I felt that if only I had the cello again, I would be able to play Bach's Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major. I just needed a couple more tries.

But quite quickly, I knew how utterly untrue that was. I'd never be able to play it, no matter how many daily concerts went by. None of us would ever be able to play it. I even think that a necessary string was missing—that's just a hunch, though.

We weren't meant to be able to. It was meant to be a death sentence without saying it directly. Back in the day, do you know how long it took to deny appeals? Years could go by. This was faster. If the prisoner wasn't released, well then, he shouldn't have smashed the instrument.

But enough. I'm not going to end this letter with a plea for music lessons, or symphonies to belong to, or the desire for sheet music to study.

No, I can hear the notes to the prelude too clearly to wish for anything like that. And now, in the desert, instead of a sun there is the moon. Please, if you get the chance, Andy, give my regards to Louis.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Janisch is a writer whose work is forthcoming to *Nightmare Magazine*. As a child, he loved to carry around a can of spinach believing if needed, it could turn him into Popeye.

[To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight](#)

POETRY

when you see the dead

Frances Ngo | 215 words

CW: Animal death.

I've often worked in natural history collections where it was my job to convert roadkill into museum specimens. So everyone who knew me (my sister, romantic partner, friends) would enthusiastically text me about dead animals they found! I wrote this poem in 2021 when I considered that even after someone breaks up with me, they'll probably see dead things and remember me from time to time.

—FN

I was an invocation—
spoken over

scatter-shot owl

pellets, fragments of bone;
I know you
must see me in the dead
fawn half-eaten,
scraped raw
by catamounts.
my name etched in shrew
jaws, small mammal skulls
found
toothless;
a dove's
full-chested keel

marooned

at the crosswalk.
I know you remember
the deftness of my
fingers

wire and wet,

threading life
into cotton-heart
birds,
hands reinventing

the cinch
mouth
of weasels.

in every dead thing now,

you must remember
my love
of such gifts

once-given.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Frances Ngo (she/her) is a multiracial Mexican-Chinese poet, artist, and zoologist. You'll find her roaming through fields, forests, and fens in search of birds and a good nature metaphor. Her illustrated poems have been published in *Lesbians Are Miracles*, the *Mobile Moon Co-Op Zine*, and Plumas Colectiva's *Vibe Radar*. Follow her work on Instagram @tiny_zoologist

BOOK EXCERPTS

Foreword to *Out There Screaming*

Jordan Peele | 771 words

The visionary writer and director of *Get Out*, *Us*, and *Nope*, and founder of Monkeypaw Productions, curates this groundbreaking anthology of all-new stories of Black horror, exploring not only the terrors of the supernatural but the chilling reality of injustice that haunts our nation.

A cop begins seeing huge, blinking eyes where the headlights of cars should be that tell him who to pull over. Two freedom riders take a bus ride that leaves them stranded on a lonely road in Alabama where several unsettling *some things* await them. A young girl dives into the depths of the Earth in search of the demon that killed her parents. These are just a few of the worlds of *Out There Screaming*, Jordan Peele's anthology of all-new horror stories by Black writers. Featuring an introduction by Peele and an all-star roster of beloved writers and new voices, *Out There Screaming* is a master class in horror, and—like his spine-chilling films—its stories prey on everything we think we know about our world . . . and redefine what it means to be afraid.

Featuring stories by: Erin E. Adams, Violet Allen, Lesley Nneka Arimah, Maurice Broaddus, Chesya Burke, P. Djèlí Clark, Ezra Clayton Daniels, Tananarive Due, Nalo Hopkinson, N. K. Jemisin, Justin C. Key, L. D. Lewis, Nnedi Okorafor, Tochi Onyebuchi, Rebecca Roanhorse, Nicole D. Sconiers, Rion Amilcar Scott, Terence Taylor, and Cadwell Turnbull.

***Out There Screaming: An Anthology of New Black Horror*
Available October 3 from Random House**

A number of years ago I became morbidly obsessed with the notion of the oubliette. For those who don't spend their nights reading about medieval torture practices, an oubliette was a dungeon shaped like a bottle with only a small covered opening at the top that barely let in any light. Prisoners would be thrown to the bottom of the pit, which was so narrow you couldn't even lie down, and left there for days. Perversely, these dungeons were often placed in parts of the castle specifically where a captive could smell delicious food being eaten or could hear the laughter of parties, while their screams would fall on deaf ears. When you did eventually expire, they didn't even bother retrieving your body. The elegant name for this horrifically simple contraption comes from the French word *oublier*, which means "to forget."

This became, in many ways, the foundation for the Sunken Place in *Get Out*, where, through pre-operation hypnosis and neurosurgery, Black people were sent to these psychological oubliettes. A place where you were stripped of all agency and left alone with your struggle. Where you could see life going on around you, but you were essentially a bystander—forgotten.

The details of the Sunken Place that you see in *Get Out* are bespoke to the character of Chris, and it's intended to be personal to him, not everyone. Chris's Sunken Place channels his deepest childhood trauma, the time when his mother was killed in an accident and he did nothing; instead he sat there watching television in fear. But I always imagined that everyone's Sunken Place would look dif-

ferent, a manifestation of our own personal horrors.

Chris's Sunken Place in many ways was also a reflection of my own personal Sunken Place, at least in how it looks. When I was a child, I would sit staring at a screen and desperately want to be on the other side. I view horror as catharsis through entertainment. It's a way to work through your deepest pain and fear—but for Black people that isn't possible, and for many decades *wasn't* possible, without the stories being told in the first place.

In this collection, nineteen brilliant Black authors give us their Sunken Places, their oubliettes. And I could not be more flattered and honored to have my name next to theirs. They come in many forms: dances with the Devil, fantasies of alternate realities, monsters real and imagined. They are raw imaginings of our deepest dreads and desires. And they will not be forgotten.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jordan Peele is an Oscar and Emmy Award-winning writer, producer, and director. His debut feature, *Get Out*, was released in 2017 to widespread acclaim, earning four Academy Award nominations, winning Best Original Screenplay for Peele. In 2019, Peele wrote, produced, and directed his second feature, *Us*, which instantly became a smash hit with audiences and critics alike, posting the largest box-office opening for an original horror movie ever. In the summer of 2022, Peele released his third feature, the sci-fi horror epic *Nope*, which also opened to number one at the box office. Also in 2022, Peele and Monkeypaw released the Henry Selick-directed stop-motion film *Wendell & Wild* for Netflix, which Peele co-wrote, produced, and provided a voice. Prior to *Get Out*, Peele was the co-creator of Comedy Central's *Key & Peele*. Across five seasons, the show's unique take on sketch comedy became a viral sensation online. In 2012, Peele formed his film and television company, Monkeypaw Productions, to champion unconventional storytelling through genre.

NONFICTION

These NIGHTMARE stories
give me such a fright.
Every dark tale is a gruesome delight.
But I'll not disassemble; I'll be forthright—
for I, your narrator,
have but one plight:

It is my dearest hope
that you just
might...



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The H Word: Reality Is a Nightmare

JP Bradham | 1177 words

Reality is a nightmare as it is, without ghosts, demons, or zombies.

It's not just the serial killers, either. There are societal issues that are even more impactful, more widespread, but oftentimes overlooked.

What about the evils of children working in sweatshops? Abuse of a spouse? The silent foe of depression and the looming threat of war? Climate change and the waste of natural resources while people are starving or lack access to a clean water source? Or what about displaced families in war-torn countries and governmental control of our bodies? And we didn't even touch upon the grip that the media has on our population, or how much power apps like Instagram and TikTok have over our mindsets. Our youth today are looking at these social media "stars" and want to be just like them, practically killing themselves trying.

And while we could talk at length about all of these, let's take the subject of "consumerism," for instance—and stay with me as I tell you some background information: I used to be in marketing.

I got into marketing as a shift of careers after college. It seemed like a nice idea at the time since I really hadn't figured out what I wanted to do, didn't end up pursuing what I went to college for in the first place, and I knew I wanted to do something creative. Something I could do that would combine my love of writing and my desire to have a sense of community.

At first, I enjoyed the work. It was a lot of simple work that came to me with ease: writing copy, social media management, web content, the works. I learned the ins-and-outs of how to sell products through words and pictures. And it was fun for me. Until it wasn't.

I don't know exactly the moment where it hit me, but I do know that it did, the realization that I was the person on the other side of the screen that could make people "swipe up" on whatever it was I was told needing swiping. I was responsible for those ads that I always saw myself, as a consumer, before it was my job. And it freaked me out a little, knowing that I now had that kind of influence on people. The same influence that had been exercised on me.

Now, I'm not saying that all material objects are horrible, bad, or that you should never buy anything, but what I am saying is there is a fine line between someone making a purchase because they feel something could improve their life and being made to believe that it's the only thing that will.

We see the lives that other people are living through our screens and are constantly fed messages that if we just had _____ we would be so much happier! But what happens when you buy that _____? Are you?

I worried about that concept from time to time, and it continued to grow, to fester.

My experience in marketing, the secrets I was privy to in understanding what controlled people to make purchases: It felt like a strange power I had and one I didn't really want anymore. I learned that everything within these ads and posts was designed to tap into that subconscious part of your mind to make you feel a sense of urgency in making that purchase right now. I learned that, by very design, social media apps were meant to mimic the addictive nature of a slot machine (ever notice how you scroll down to refresh your feed as a bunch of new shiny posts pop up?). And I learned that certain words and colors and fonts could change the way you felt about what you were seeing. Sounds scary, doesn't it?

What's more, I was suddenly hyper aware of it when it was happening to me. I would be scrolling on social media and something I mentioned yesterday would pop up on my phone. Maybe something I

had clicked once would now be plastered all over my feed. In the past, I might have fallen prey to that but now I know that this is all a ploy to not only get me to buy it but to make me believe that my life would be markedly improved by having it. That I needed to do it again and again to feel that sensation. And that level of power these companies hope to achieve is terrifying.

And then I realized that I could turn this into something. Something that would help other people see what I already knew—just how much control this type of messaging has over us. Just how much control corporations hope to have over us. And that's where the horror genre comes into play here.

Thus, my first short film project in the horror space was born with the aptly named title of "Consumed," with a premise surrounding the idea of consumerism and just how much control it has, especially in an ever-increasing digital world. And as in real life, the film explores the complicated layers that contribute to one's ability to be controlled—loss of a loved one, the inability to cope with depression, the need to feel happiness in an otherwise unhappy life. That magical rush you feel when you buy something new, when you get sent a special deal that saves you so much that you just can't miss. It's all designed to make you believe that you have to keep consuming. But what happens when you're no longer the consumer? What happens when you're the one being consumed? Just how dangerous could this get?

For the first time I felt like I could explore all the strange and non-linear ideas that I had come to see surrounding the negative side, the emotions stemming from my own experiences being on both sides of the coin.

I could put those strange concepts into something that was entertaining, while being able to speak to my own truth and one that would, most importantly, get people talking.

It's why I love the work that I do in horror. I can take these small thoughts about the observed evils in the world and turn them into something entirely absorbable through a dramatic reimagining—and oddly enough, that's something we find as human beings much more acceptable to face than the real-life horror story unfolding right in front of us.

I invite you, fellow horror lover, to take a look at your own life: what scares you? What do you see in the world that needs to be talked about more and why? Well, take that idea and turn it into something horrifying and get people having conversations around it. Through our individual voices we can remind people that there are horrors happening in our own lives and perhaps that may make us think a little differently about each other and the changes happening all around us in the future.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JP Bradham is an award winning female filmmaker and producer based out of Los Angeles. Always putting her work as a writer at the forefront of her passion for film, JP was a part of the first selected group of screenplay writers for the Sundance Co//ab Screenplay writing course, she has since completed a total of four programs under the Co//ab program and went on to receive continued mentorship with notable WGA writers over the past decade. With a passion for horror, JP continues to write, film and produce projects within the genre.

Interview: Keith Rosson

Gordon B. White | 4518 words

Keith Rosson is the author of the novels *Fever House*, *Smoke City*, *Road Seven*, and *The Mercy of the Tide* as well as the Shirley Jackson Award–winning story collection *Folk Songs for Trauma Surgeons*. He is also a legally blind illustrator and graphic designer for clients that include Green Day, Against Me!, and Warner Bros. His forthcoming novel, *The Devil by Name*, will be published by Random House in the summer of 2024. He lives in Portland, Oregon, with his partner and their two children.

Thank you for agreeing to do this interview! For those readers who might not yet be familiar with you, would you mind introducing yourself?

Hmmmm, starting with the vague stuff, huh? I’m a writer of stuff that sits firmly in that “mixed genre” category, meaning it’s a little bit of this, little bit of that. Little weird, little grimy, little spooky. Writing that’s usually run through the colander of what folks consider “literary fiction,” which to me generally means fiction where character is as important as plot.

We’re conducting this interview just days before your new novel *Fever House* comes out from Random House on August 15th, although this will run later. Ostensibly, we’re here to talk about that (ostensibly . . .), so give us your pitch!

Gaaah, the dreaded “pitch!” How to distill a 450-page, multi-POV book into a radio jingle? Okay, here we go. Two leg-breakers roll up to a Portland apartment to collect a debt for their boss. Rather than cash, they find a severed hand in a freezer, and it turns out proximity to the hand induces madness and a strident desire to commit violence. And it also turns out there are a great number of folks looking for the hand, not least of which is a brutal black-ops government agency named ARC that traffics in such things. One thing leads to another—turns out there are a number of powerful objects out there, not just a hand—and within a few hours, Portland is wracked in flames and the shit has truly hit the fan; the world stands on the precipice of disaster. Like I said, it’s tough to do a short pitch on a kaleidoscopic, sprawling, multi-POV novel, but that’s the quick rundown.

One thing that struck me about *Fever House* was how mobile it is. There’s a constant sense of movement and physical action that feels like a shift from other novels you’ve written. While they’ve all been expansive in their unique ways, this one hits the ground running and doesn’t stop. Was that a conscious change—did you set out to write something with a different momentum—or is it just the way that this story grew and developed?

It really happened organically. The first fifty pages or so—with tough guys Tim Reed and Hutch Holtz doing their rounds, collecting money—that’s taken nearly word for word from another novel I couldn’t get off the ground. That one was straight crime, nothing supernatural about it, and as a result, it felt flat. I struggle with *not* putting the weird stuff in. But once I was able to get Hutch and Tim in

proximity to this hand in *Fever House*, things took off pretty naturally. After a certain point, I recognized I was enmeshing readers in this wild mishmash of spy/horror/crime storylines, and none of those are particularly renowned for navel-gazing. I knew I needed to keep it as propulsive as possible. I greatly admire folks who can write genre stuff—and I include literary fiction in that—without putting a ghost or a monster or Joan of Arc’s reincarnated executioner in their stuff. I’m just not one of them.

Speaking of developing stories, can you walk us through your novel writing process? Some authors construct very detailed outlines to follow while others just dive in, finding the story and then shaping it up through multiple drafts. Which, if either, are you?

Never been a plotter, but if a book’s going well, the next few chapters or ideas kind of reveal themselves as I go. So I’ll be writing and then just make quick notes about what happens next as it comes to me. There are writers who write, like, *a draft*, slowly and patiently, and then just need to do a quick run-through and boom, their story’s done. I do not write like that. I write fast but I also probably take six to ten complete drafts, from the first word to the last page, before I’m remotely confident in showing a novel to anyone, and there’s usually a lot of missteps and cut material in between those drafts. But it’s also why I’d urge writers to keep their stuff and not toss it—you never know when something you’ve shelved for years will click and wind up turning into something. Hang onto that stuff.

While you’ve published several excellent novels and a Shirley Jackson Award-winning collection of short fiction with independent publishers like Meerkat Press, this is your first book with one of the giant publishers. How was it working with them in the lead up to the book’s release and how are you feeling right now on the cusp?

It is so different. Working with Tricia Reeks, who runs Meerkat, was way intimate. Just the two of us brainstorming, working stuff out. We’ve done four books together and there’s a tremendous amount of trust there, and we both hustled to get stuff done. Small and indie presses simply don’t have the same resources as a Big Five publisher, or even a bigger indie press, where jobs like marketing and editing can at least be divided between a few people. Those earlier books, it was just her and I, and Tricia works tirelessly for her writers and is always trying new ways to get their books out there. So going to a Big Five, where there is an *entire team* dedicated exclusively to getting your book into the world and handling blurbs and promotional materials and there’s a legal team and on and on—it’s way different. There’s a profound sense of gratitude and this notion like, “Are you sure this is okay? We’re going to send *all these* ARCs out to people, and if I come up with more ideas about where to send them, we can do it? You know ARCs cost a shit-ton of money, right?!?”

Like your prior novels, *Fever House* is structured around multiple point of view characters and we switch off between them as the plot moves forward. What is it about this form that draws you to it? Do you remember when you first became aware of it and what it has to offer?

I actually consider writing exclusively in multi-POV a bit of shortcoming. I have no problem

sustaining a single POV over a short story, but over the length of a novel? Tough. Something about a single character navigating a world, acting and reacting to events, all the minutiae necessary of an emotional arc, that's such a challenge. Multi-POV just feels organic and natural, and, honestly, easier. Writing a single-POV novel at some point is definitely on my bucket list, though.

Still thinking about the multiple POV approach, on a technical level, how do you handle writing the different characters as they weave through the plot? Do you write long sections of one character at a time, then divide and rearrange it into chapters while editing? Or do you hop from character to character as you write?

Definitely hop. Like I mentioned earlier, if things are cruising, the next plot-point will be revealed. Though sometimes I do have to consult a list of chapters and characters and be like, "Oh, Eddie the Man with Spaghetti for Arms hasn't had a chapter in a while, he needs some airtime soon." So then I try and tailor the next plot-point through EtMwSfA's point of view. That's just one of the knives balancing in the air when it comes to plotting a big novel. It's such a balancing act, and such an act of sustained *will*, I love the hell out of it.

I'm sure you've seen people refer to your work as "literary," so I wonder if you also think of it that way? Whether you agree or not, what's the part of it that you think compels people to put it into that bucket? (No peeking at my answer in the next question!)

I love literary fiction and think there's a strong element of it housed within my stuff, for sure. I also think a lot of writers and readers tend to look at fiction in a hierarchal way, with literary fiction kind of being upper-tier and more "serious" than genre fiction. I hate that distinction, personally. All this shit's on the same level, the sorrowful treatise on a dissolving marriage and a horror novel about were-Chihuahuas. That said, I think people tag my stuff with the "literary" marker because while there are numerous indicators of horror or the fantastic in my stuff, it's also very much rooted in that sense of character development, of playfulness and care regarding language.

For me, the "literary" nature of your work is strongest in that no matter how wild the plots get—and *Fever House* is probably the wildest—the focus is always on the characters and how they experience the world, rather than on just the events. There's a real empathy for each of those POV characters, and your books tend not to have "villains," although they do have plenty of people who are deeply, deeply flawed and have sometimes done terrible things. Even with the worst of them, however, you take the time to dig into them to find some relatable bit of humanity.

It feels like you have a great affection for your characters, even—maybe especially—for the broken ones. That said, were there any of the POV characters in *Fever House* or other books that you found particularly hard to write and find that humanity?

Ah, thanks, Gordon! And I didn't peek. I really appreciate all that—I don't really know how to write characters otherwise. Honestly, I find it significantly easier to write alcoholics and leg-breakers than I do, say, female characters, or children. Writing female-identifying characters is exponentially harder—it's out of my wheelhouse. And with kids, it's tough to sustain that highwire act of astute observation coupled with a thought process that might not be as finely tuned or quick as an adult's. So when I do write those characters, I spend a lot of time getting it right. A guy who gets paid fifty bucks to shatter someone's shin with a hammer, I could write that guy all day. Write that guy in my sleep. Katherine Moriarty in *Fever House* was really hard to write; due to previous trauma she'd experienced, she's essentially become agoraphobic, only leaving her apartment in short increments, in short distances, and even that is terrifying for her. That character was hard. Again, something outside of my lived experience. I treated Katherine and her arc with a lot of care. I hope I got it right.

Of all your books, only two absolute villains come to mind—David Lundy in *Fever House* and Vaughn Keller in *Road Seven*. Neither are POV characters, but both are men in high-ranking yet invisible government positions, unconstrained by morality, laws, or sometimes even “reality.” I'm sure it's just a coincidence that the really, really bad guys are government stooges, right?

I really do think there's only ten or maybe fifteen themes or ideas to communicate that can be distilled across all literature. Seriously. And one of those themes is that power corrupts. Both of those characters you mentioned think they're in the right, and will be absolutely unrelenting in doing what they need to do in order to get what they want. *They* don't think they're bad guys! Yet they're in positions of power and they brazenly abuse the hell out of that power. Hell, that's a distilled review of half my work right there: *Power Corrupts*.

I'd be remiss if I didn't point out that the richness of your stories isn't just in the deep insight into the characters, but the staggering wealth of concrete details, vivid descriptions, and fully developed histories of people and places. Your books are positively humming with life. How do you develop so much detail, how do you keep track of it, and, more importantly, how do you string it all together without getting overwhelmed?

Hell, I ought to ask you that, Gordon. Gordon of the upcoming collection, *Gordon B. White Is Creating Haunting Weird Horror(s)*; I think your work has that same richness to it. But the cruddy part is, I don't really know. That stuff you're talking about comes from the deep part of me that's tough to figure out internally, tough to even discern, much less decipher and put into words. We're getting into gut-level stuff, stuff that's borne from just writing for so long, putting so many words down so consistently over a matter of years. Writing, and writing a little well and a little automatically, just comes naturally after a while. The truth is, as a reader, I love those details, those side journeys, those fixations. But it just comes with writing a lot, you know? And then recognizing when the passages or the story itself begins to get too bogged down.

Along those lines, I'm very curious—how vivid is your visual imagination? For example, do you see the characters in full-color and in their scenes like a movie, then write down what you see?

Or do you have to go detail by detail, picturing one thing before you can get to the next?

Again, this is why I would struggle teaching fiction over any sustained amount of time—I have like three interesting things to say as far as my process, and the rest I got no clue. I think there are certain key things that I internally focus on, that come to me innately. Little details. A face, a stain on a cuff, a sharp odor. Other times you read through it, and it reads thin, so you go back and pepper some extra details in.

Going back to your characters, you have a knack for coming up with great names. In *Fever House* my favorites are Hutch Holtz—hired muscle who is every bit as ungainly and hard hitting as he sounds—and Nick Coffin—a resourceful kid who’s always just about one step away from finding himself in his namesake. How do you come up with the names? Do the names come early or late in the writing process, and does having the name change how you write (or re-write) the character?

Man, Hutch Holtz has haunted me for yeeeeeaaars. That guy was a character in at least one-and-a-half other failed novels, both of them crime novels. Honestly, I’ll do something like scroll through social media and look at names and then wait for something to click. Same with Nick, having a last name like Coffin felt like such a bold move that I felt a responsibility to put the kid through the wringer, you know? Names generally come first, or in the first draft, and can actually inform a lot of what happens in the story. If Nick Coffin gets punched in the mouth, it means something different than if Preston Goodsworth III gets punched in the mouth. Names can inform.

We talked earlier about formative influences on your style, but who are some of the authors working today that you enjoy reading? What are some recent books that have struck your fancy?

In crime fiction: Nick Harkaway’s *Titanium Noir*, Jordan Harper’s *She Rides Shotgun* and *Everybody Knows*, Patrick Hoffman’s *Every Man A Menace*, Lisa McInerney’s *The Glorious Heresies*, Percival Everett’s *Trees*, Tod Goldberg’s Gangsterland trilogy, and *The Mars Room* by Rachel Kushner, which I suppose isn’t technically a crime novel, though it’s set in prison and is centered around a murder and is enthralling from page one. For horror/weird shit: Andy Marino’s *It Rides a Pale Horse*, anything that Andy Davidson ever decides to do, Brian Evenson’s *Last Days*, Nathan Ballingrud’s stories, C.J. Tudor’s *Burning Girls*, Kelly Link forever. You, Gordon. Lucy Snyder and Hailey Piper write some beautifully twisted shit. Hilary Mantel’s *Beyond Black* remains the best, bleakest ghost story I’ve ever read.

In addition to being an author, you’ve also taught classes and workshops on writing, including ones on working with “magical realism” in fiction. Has teaching or guiding others changed how you understand or think about your craft?

Honestly, it’s shown me how *little* I know, or at least how much internalized knowledge I can dredge up and verbalize. Like I said, a lot of this stuff is just a matter of sitting down and pecking

things out; it's hard to distill that innate, personal experience into a lesson, you know? It's just something that becomes more natural the more you do it. I got enough key points to relay for a class a couple weeks long, I figure. But those teachers who can make stuff last over a semester or more, that's wild to me, way out of my wheelhouse. So much of this just comes down to: "This page isn't working. Why? Where did I lose the thread?" And just innately understanding that I can find it again, that I just have to backtrack and trust myself.

Speaking of craft, you have five novels out (by the time this runs) but only one short story collection, the Shirley Jackson Award-winning *Folk Songs for Trauma Surgeons*. Between novels and short stories, do you find one mode easier to work in than the other? Do you notice a difference in the kind of ideas that you develop into novels versus short stories?

I think truly outlandish stuff—like "Baby Jill," where the tooth fairy questions her immortality, or "The Lesser Horsemen," where three of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse get sent on a team-building cruise by God as a way of boosting their frayed morale—work in short, sustained bursts. Voice can sustain you a lot more in stories. It's like a sugar-burst, you're in, you're along for the ride. But riding just on voice over a novel, that'd be tough. So I don't know. The genesis for my novel *Road Seven* came from a pair of prompts in an old writing group. ("Unicorn poop" and "sex in a pumpkin patch," if you were wondering.) A whole book, just from that! And I guess a severed hand that drives people insane is a pretty weird idea in and of itself. But right now, I've written novels almost exclusively for the past few years, and I miss writing short stories quite a bit. It's been so long, I'm a little flinchy as to whether or not I can actually get them down anymore. I have another story collection that's pretty much ready to go, but it all depends on what the best move is as far as—gasp!—my career. Right now, folks are leaning into novels, and that's what my editor's leaning towards, so that's probably what I'll keep moving toward with.

I have to ask—do you have any interest in writing novellas? Or are you strictly an author of extremes?

I've got one that's been shopped around a bit—a cat burglar who inadvertently befriends the devil—but no takers so far. I generally seem to be inclined toward short stories or big books.

We mentioned the level of visual detail in your work, and so maybe it's no surprise you're also an awesome graphic designer. You've worked with a number of cool bands and have serious cred, including that you designed your own covers for your books with Meerkat Press. When you did both the writing and designing with Meerkat, did the covers come early or late in the process? Was it hard giving up that total control when working with a bigger publisher for *Fever House*?

Oh, covers were about the last thing we did, maybe even after flap copy. It was such a fun deal, coming up with those covers. The illustration of the crying executioner on the front of *Smoke City* was actually the initial thumbnail sketch, just enlarged, blown up. Fun little things like that, and the fact

that since there is a deaf character in *The Mercy of the Tide*, the word “MERCY” is spelled out in American Sign Language in the little glyphs on the cover. Letting go of the cover design was tough, but also a relief. I didn’t have to worry about it. And Ella Laytham, the *Fever House* cover designer, has done so much amazing work, I knew the book would be in capable hands. I think she came up with one of the most striking, vibrant, iconic covers I’ve seen in a long time.

Speaking of the differences between working with big and small press, what were some of the other differences you encountered? Do the differences bleed down into your day-to-day writing, or has that process stayed more or less the same?

I went over that a little bit, but I think it’s mostly the difference in resources. Infrastructure. Connections. Distribution. There are marketing folks. And publicity folks. Which are two different things, it turns out! There are editors and copy editors. There are cover designers and then graphics teams, who make promotional stuff. They’re all really good at their jobs, but that’s the big difference. Just the vast breadth of people working in service to your book is way different, and it makes me really honor small and indie presses, because most times it’s one, maybe two or three people “on staff” doing all of that. My writing process also looks a little different now because I’m aiming to publish a book a year. So now I’m in front of my computer a lot more, Monday through Friday, getting to fall into the morass of all this weird stuff I write. It’s become a job, which I’m tremendously grateful for and treating very seriously. Getting to write for a living, to raise a family off of it, is a tremendous gift, and I don’t want to blow it. But I still have to do ten damn edits on anything I write, so *that* hasn’t changed.

Going back to the stories, your books have all taken place in something close to the “real world”—there’s an America, a Portland, it’s the late twentieth/early twenty-first century—however, they seem to take place in different realities because big, world-level events in one novel don’t appear in another. *Fever House* is different, though, because it has a few winks towards characters and events in your last novel, *Road Seven*. Are these just Easter Eggs, or are you starting to build a more cohesive universe in your fiction? Are you looking at . . . sequels?

Well, here’s the thing—all my books are so insular, and the endings so world-affecting, that they can’t really cross-pollinate with each other. *The Mercy of the Tide* ends in a very specific way in the mid-1980s, a way that affects that entire world. *Smoke City*, there’s ghosts. *Road Seven* is the only self-contained novel of mine where crazy shit happens, but it’s relatively insular crazy shit. I love when authors slip those things in, it’s such a treasure when you can recognize little breadcrumbs from an author—a character from another story, an event that happened in another book that reverberates in this one. I’d love to write some stories that feature waaaay secondary characters from other novels or mine—the voice actor for the lasagna puppet in *Road Seven* getting rolled for money. Casper from *Smoke City* getting his show cancelled. Vaughn Keller sweating out a scotch hangover in front of a House Judiciary Committee hearing. I love that interconnectedness. And also, as I mentioned, the sequel to *Fever House*, titled *The Devil by Name*, will be published by Random House in summer of 2024. Like I said, lucky as hell.

Finally, what's coming up next for you? In addition to those projects already scheduled, is there anything new that you're working on and can share with our readers?

As I mentioned, I've got *The Devil by Name* coming out next year. I've got a 1970s vampire novel that's done, a current WIP that I'm tapping away at in between edits, which is a project I don't even want to talk about for fear of jinxing myself, and then a new story collection pretty much ready to go, with a nice mix of published and unreleased stuff. I'll fulfill my contract with Random House with this second *Fever House* book and then we'll see what way the wind blows. Hopefully, they'll want to keep working with me because this is an absolute blast.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Gordon B. White is a Seattle-based author of horror and/or weird fiction. He is a Shirley Jackson Award finalist, a Clarion West alum, and the author of *As Summer's Mask Slips and Other Disruptions*; *Rookfield*; and *And In Her Smile, The World* (with Rebecca J. Allred). Gordon's stories, reviews, and interviews have appeared in dozens of venues, including *The Best Horror of the Year Vol. 12*. You can find him online at gordonbwhite.com or on Twitter @GordonBWhite.

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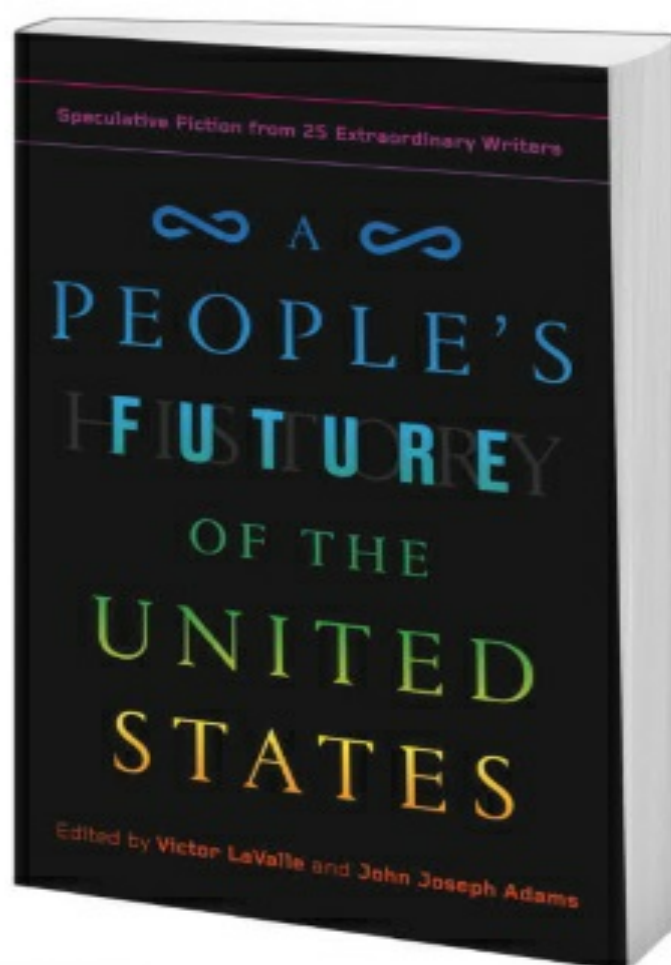
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ONE WORLD

Author Spotlight: Rachael K. Jones

Xander Odell | 1896 words

The best horror often blends the real with the fantastic in ways that twist the heart even as it leaves the soul to bleed. “The Sound of Children Screaming” is one such story for me. What can you tell us about the birth of this tiny slice of nightmare?

This story came to me while hiding under my desk in the dark on a Friday evening while the lockdown siren sounded at the school where I work. It was late-August hot, and I’d stayed late to do some prep for the next day when the sound of gunshots in the neighborhood interrupted the silence of the empty building. I sat there under my desk shaking, knowing it wasn’t a planned drill, not after 5:00 p.m. on a Friday. I began to imagine every other job I could have, how most workplaces don’t even have a whole plan and special alarm in case a shooter comes into their workplace. And, bizarrely, I realized that because it was after work hours, I wasn’t even getting paid for the privilege.

Eventually the police cleared the building and I went home, but I was still shaken up. I began to read everything I could about the intersection of school safety and school shootings, and what I found only made me angrier. How almost everything we do in the United States in the name of “prevention” doesn’t help when shootings happen. How these drills and precautions inflict trauma on students and burden teachers with blame when shootings actually happen. And how there’s a whole industry around selling expensive “solutions” to schools, solutions such as bulletproof panic rooms installed into already-small classrooms. I couldn’t get those images out of my head, those useless, expensive, hulking pods just sitting in the classroom, a constant reminder of how school-age children in America have become acceptable sacrifices to a gun culture run amok.

What would I do, I wondered, if my students and I stumbled into another world while hiding in that bulletproof closet during an actual shooting? Narnia-esque portal fantasies often have warlike underpinnings. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* was written in the shadow of the London Blitz, and reflects a fantasy of children already seeking refuge from war and violence. But what if the portal world were worse? And what would I do if the only alternative was taking them right back into the crisis we’d escaped?

But more than anything, I wanted to write a story on this topic that gave power back into the hands of the children at its center. I think we all remember the famous video clip that came out of the Uvalde, Texas shootings at Robb Elementary, of police standing around uselessly on tape beneath the caption, “The sound of children screaming has been removed.” Why was the screaming removed? Partly due to taste, but also because it’s powerful. I wanted to give these children the power of their voices back, the power to burn to the ground the whole system that made any of this possible.

I was drawn to both the poetry and the premise of the story—the snippets of narrative, the headings that are as much a part of the story as the prose, descriptions such as “the armor of an elementary school teacher” and “he grooms the blood from between his claws like sticky jam.” Did the story take this form with the first draft, or did it evolve organically through the revisions?

It took me months and months to write this story because at first I couldn’t figure out how to tell it.

When you open a story with a school shooting, it's hard to sustain the tension if you want to switch to a different set of events, as this story needed. I struggled with how to unfold the nested story in Sir Miles's world in a way that kept the story grounded in what I really wanted to highlight: the culture of violence that makes school shootings possible as a phenomenon.

I owe a debt of gratitude to *Nightmare Magazine's* brilliant editor Wendy Wagner, who advised me to consider all the possible stakeholders in the story, which allowed me to step back and see how the two nested stories contain identical players on parallel stages. Once the story's format came together, I drafted it almost in the form presented here, although every sentence left me wrung out emotionally. Each individual paragraph probably took an hour or more to write.

You work with school-aged children. What would you have said to those children on their thrones, crowns of bone upon their brows?

I have thought about this question a lot, because at my day job, I write adapted news stories for disabled children so they can access the same topics and conversations as their able-bodied peers. When the Robb Elementary shooting happened last year, I remember for the first time being completely stumped at how to write an adapted story on the topic. I wanted to reassure my students that they were safe, that their teachers would protect them, but I realized I couldn't honestly promise them safety. I knew that most of the violence happens in the first five minutes, before anyone is prepared, and that even the walls of the school wouldn't stop the kind of bullets these guns fire. The situation makes me feel hopeless and powerless, because we know from the example of other countries that the only real fix for gun violence is at a policy level that transcends anything a school can do.

But I don't want those children to feel hopeless. I want them to feel empowered. I want them to feel validated in all the emotions this topic brings up. So to them, I want to say: I'm really, really sorry you even have to worry about school shootings when growing up is hard enough on its own. You deserve so much better. But I love you. I'm here in it with you. I will advocate for you. And whatever happens, I will not let you face any of this alone.

Gaiman, Ellison, Due, Okorafor, and Delany have all spoken about the importance of writing angry and sometimes being horrific to protect the most fragile dreams. Why do you think it is important to write stories such as this? Is it equally important to read them?

I love this question, because I had the same thought while writing this story. More than anything, I wanted to talk out the story's themes with a trusted friend. But because the subject matter is so horrible, I had trouble finding anyone willing to sit with me and go as deep into the topic as I needed in order to pull out the story. Most of the people in my life are either parents, teachers, or both. School shootings aren't a fun intellectual exercise for me or anyone in these groups. It's an existential threat that strikes at the heart of everything most precious to us. We'd rather not think about things so far outside our control, like ignoring a very large spider in the room that stays hidden most of the time.

But stories like these are important because sometimes we need to take a good look at that spider. I work in a school. I don't have the privilege to put school shootings out of mind all the time. If push

came to shove, I'd absolutely die for my students, for other people's children, even though it is more than we should ask of someone who doesn't get hazard pay or combat training.

This is my reality, and the reality of the children I serve, who have even less say in the matter than their teachers. We have to look at the spider every day. We will be there for your children if the worst comes to pass, and we will give everything for them. Please face that fear with us. Keep us company. Make the horror more bearable by witnessing it with us. Don't close your eyes or turn your back on it.

I want to thank the people who didn't turn away as I worked through this story: Jason Jones, Nathaniel Lee, Sara Derrickson, Becky Miller, Wendy Wagner, and my writing group, the Dire Turtles. I promise my next story will be something soft and fluffy. Probably dinosaurs. Feathered dinosaurs.

On a much lighter note, what do you do to recharge your creative batteries? How do you keep the writing spark alive?

I operate less on inspiration and more on sheer doggedness and a robot-like devotion to my writing routine. I used to think I needed that feeling of inspiration to write well, but over the years, I've noticed that readers can't really seem to tell the difference between the stories where I poured out my heart and soul, and the ones where I sat in the chair and wrote for my designated time. I'm a big believer in the Pomodoro Method of writing for this reason. Apply butt to chair, apply hands to keyboard, and no checking your phone or wandering off to another internet tab until the timer goes off.

The other thing that helps a lot with my writing is . . . not writing! I think it's possible to spend too much time wandering through my mind-palace in search of a story, when for me, the best stories are things I trip on when moving through life. I love being a writer with a day job for this reason. My job gets me away from my screen and out into the world with interesting people, which often results in some of my best stories, including this one.

I've also begun to carve out regular hangout time with writer friends specifically around creative projects and talking about career stuff, both in person and online. If I'm feeling creatively stuck, sometimes it's more fun and energizing to talk with a friend about their projects. And for the same reason, I've been rediscovering the joy of workshops, especially when I can find one that I can fit around my day job.

What's next for Rachael K. Jones? What do readers have to look forward to in the coming months?

I've got a bunch of stories coming out in the near future, although I don't know the release dates for all of them at this moment. Check out *The Deadlands* this fall for a romantic story about falling in love with a bonsai tree. Over at *Flash Fiction Online*, I've got a piece pending about a guy who falls in love with himself at a transdimensional convention. I'm very excited about a couple of pieces coming out at *Small Wonders* and *Worlds of Possibility*, two newer flash fiction magazines that are already doing some really exciting work. And keep an eye out at *Lightspeed* for my forthcoming piece, "Five Views of the Planet Tartarus."

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Xander Odell lives in Washington state with their husband, sons, and an Albanian miniature moose disguised as a dog. Their work has appeared in such venues as *Jim Baen's Universe*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Crossed Genres*, *Pseudopod*, and *Cast of Wonders*. They are a Clarion West 2010 graduate, and an active member of the SFWA. Find out more at writerodell.com or follow them on Twitter at [@WriterOdell](https://twitter.com/WriterOdell).

Author Spotlight: David Janisch

Xander Odell | 636 words

“The Cello in the Cell” is as intricate as it is haunting. We often hear stories of incarcerated people and those on death row but seldom any that touch on their intimate thoughts as this story does. What can you tell us about the inspiration behind the words?

The first time I had the concept for the story was eight years ago on a walk to the chow hall in Stillwater prison. It was only a thought experiment, and my original drafts were in third person. But then more years went by. I became closer to people serving life sentences and more and more distant to people I had once known in society. Then when I revised it last fall, the whole language of the story changed when I put it in the form of a letter. It became more real. I was writing directly about my own isolation and the isolation of people I care about. It was no longer about music. The plot became secondary to this larger theme of what it’s like to be alone in prison.

For some the language of music comes easily, for others it is more of a struggle. The old man in the tuxedo struck me as a master linguist reaching out to his students in the hopes of redemption for their crimes. Why do you think he agreed to perform day after day for the prisoners?

Why would someone choose to teach meditation to prisoners on Friday nights or Saturday afternoons? Why would a visual artist visit a prison art room every Tuesday afternoon to talk to prisoners about their paintings, and discuss art and philosophy? Why would professional writers walk into a prison to teach writing on their weekday evenings? Or choose to mentor by mail and work with the same incarcerated writer for over five years?

The story needed a character invested in the wellbeing of the prisoners, but I didn’t realize it until the story was done and the cello player already had those qualities. (Though he was limited on what he could do by the system he worked under.) I think my mind naturally created the character because of all the volunteers that have helped me and so many others both now and during different seasons of my incarceration. Each volunteer might have their own reasons why working with incarcerated people is meaningful but maybe fundamentally it has to do with prisoners being humans, and like the rest of humanity, there is a need for them to be emotionally healthy and to develop both intellectually and artistically.

Music is also an inspiration, an escort from laughter to tears, from anger to joy and all stops in between. What bands or musicians tickle your inspiration? Do you have any favorite songs?

I love mellow music with lots of minor chords. Two songs I could put on repeat and listen to into eternity: “Clear Blue Eyes” by The Velvet Underground and the classic “Fade into You” by Mazzy Star. Recently, I’ve enjoyed listening to the new music of Bridgette Calls Me Baby, Big Thief, Cactus Blossoms, Trampled by Turtles, Lucinda Williams, and Angel Olsen.

This is your first professional publication. Where do you hope to go with your writing from here?

In November, an anthology I coedited titled *American Precarity: Parables of Exclusion* will be released. It was a three-and-a-half-year project that many people were involved with. My next long-term project is to turn a novella I wrote into a novel, and I plan on beginning that phase of writing when I'm released. In the meantime, I have several short stories I'm revising that continue dealing with incarceration in a speculative manner.



ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Xander Odell lives in Washington state with their husband, sons, and an Albanian miniature moose disguised as a dog. Their work has appeared in such venues as *Jim Baen's Universe*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Crossed Genres*, *Pseudopod*, and *Cast of Wonders*. They are a Clarion West 2010 graduate, and an active member of the SFWA. Find out more at writerodell.com or follow them on Twitter at [@WriterOdell](https://twitter.com/WriterOdell).

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Coming Attractions

The Editors | 129 words

Coming up in November, in *Nightmare* . . .

We have original short fiction from Sharang Biswas (“Waiting for Jonah”) and Woody Dismukes (“The Curse of the Boto Boy”). Our Horror Lab originals include a poem (“Awakening”) from Tiffany Morris and a flash story (“Whatever Takes Us”) from Aigner Loren Wilson.

We also have the latest installment of our column on horror, “The H Word,” plus author spotlights with our authors, and an entry in our de·crypt·ed review column.

It’s another great issue, so be sure to check it out. And while you’re at it, tell a friend about *Nightmare*.

Looking ahead beyond next month, we’ve got new fiction on the way from Lynette Hoag, Mark Galarrita, and Marisca Pichette.

Thanks for reading!

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The Editors

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The Editors

We already offer ebook subscriptions as a way of supporting the magazines, but we wanted to add an additional option to allow folks to support us, thus we've launched a Patreon (patreon.com/JohnJosephAdams).

TL;DR Version

If you enjoy *Fantasy*, *Nightmare*, and/or *Lightspeed*, our Patreon page is a way for you to help support those endeavors by chipping in a buck or more on a recurring basis. Your support will help us bring bigger and better (and more) projects into the world.

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There are no big companies supporting or funding our magazines, so they really rely on reader support. Though we offer the magazines online for free, we're able to fund them by selling ebook subscriptions or website advertising.

While we have a dedicated ebook subscriber base, the vast majority of our readers consume the magazine online for free. If just 10% of our website readers pledged just \$1 a month, the magazines would be doing *fantastically* well. So we thought it might be useful to have an option like Patreon for readers who maybe haven't considered supporting the magazine, or who maybe haven't because they don't have any desire to receive the ebook editions—or who would be glad to pay \$1 a month, but not \$3 (the cost of a monthly subscriber issue of *Lightspeed*).

Though *Fantasy*, *Nightmare*, and *Lightspeed* are separate entities, we decided to create a single “publisher” Patreon account because it seemed like it would be more efficient to manage just one account.

Basically, we wanted to create a crowdfunding page where, if you enjoy the work Adamant Press puts out, and you want to contribute a little something to help make it easier for us to produce more cool projects, then our Patreon is the place to do that.

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That URL again is patreon.com/JohnJosephAdams.

Thanks in advance for your time. We look forward to hopefully being able to make the magazines—and our other publishing endeavors—even better with the support of people like you.

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