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a collection of  
countryside horror





**MIDDLE**

**OF**

**NOWHERE**

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**Ram photograph by Filip Filipov on Unsplash.**

# CONTENTS

## *POETRY & PROSE*

### *OLDE GODS*

Elizabeth Vegvary 5 - 7

### *STEWARDS OF THE LAND*

Jon Davies 8 - 20

### *THE WILLOW*

Rosa Canales 22 - 24

### *I FOUND A BODY DECOMPOSING*

#### *IN THE WOODS*

T.S. Moran 25 - 27

### *THE SIGHTING*

Jacob O'Sullivan 28 - 29

### *EDGE PLAY*

Gina Marie Bernard 30 - 40

### *ELDRITCH INSIGHT*

Bryan C. Laesch 41 - 45

### *THE THACKFORD BEAST*

Richard Daniels 48 - 58

### *QUANTUM MECHANICAL DAMNATION*

Leela Raj-Sankar 59 - 60

### *WRITER'S BLOCK*

Billy Craven 61 - 67

### *GRETEL*

Jem Henderson 68 - 69

### *GOOD DAUGHTER*

Alex Luceli Jiménez 71 - 80

### *ON THE EDGE*

Silk~ 81 - 83

### *SIMONSIDE HILLS*

Kate McCaughey 84 - 85

### *ART*

### *BENEATH THE STONES*

Geist 21

### *AN FÉAR GORTACH*

Adam Robert Martin 46 - 47

### *THE JERRY TREE*

John Pendred 70



A detailed topographic map of a region, likely in the Pacific Northwest, showing terrain contours, rivers, and various geographical features. The map is rendered in a light, faded style, serving as a background for the text. Key features include a large river system on the left, several mountain peaks, and various place names and labels.

# OLDE GODS

**ELIZABETH VEGVARY**

cw: difficult birth

Her voice is a conduit for pain. It is a human sound bawling out of her throat, evulsed from her heaving diaphragm. The seizing of her uterus is a convulsion contained within the bone hold of her pelvis; cramping and twisting, desirous of nothing more than to expel its contents.

If she had language, she would be bleating for her death.

The waves of agony drive her down to her front-legged knees. She folds forward, the geit supplicant, praying to a horned god she has not hitherto known existed. Her polled forehead presses into the clover she had just been nibbling. The inflorescence closed tight beneath the new moon, waiting impatiently for the dawn to unfurl and unroll each petal.

Over the weeks, her belly has grown turgid and distended. She is a beast, and her cognition is the burden of a sagging weight. Her udders swaying heavy, and two hearts beating inside one body.

Another plaintive cry and he is cast out of her. Arms and hands, head and shoulders, torso and hocks, then the still so soft cloven hooves. He falls earthward as the Angel of Light fell from Heaven, and the descent wakes him fully. His womb dreams dissipate in a spray of amniotic fluid, shit and blood. On the ground, he contorts, caul-swaddled, the world veiled.

She does not know that gods die and are reborn, but she does know the sound and smell of her own kind. This product of her wame spooks her,



unrecognized, and she bolts.

The birth cord stretches, it tugs the undelivered afterbirth from within her out. The tie snaps and breaks, and she is free. In less than a quarter of an hour, she will be far and away, asleep beneath the new moon. Innocent of responsibility to death. For her, there is only life. And then no life.

The newborn creature stretches out a hoof, a hand. With an animal instinct, he bites at the amnion, tears the sac open.

And he wails the world his arrival.



At first light, me and Dad got the shovels and buckets out of the shed and walked down to the feeding post to clean up the remains.

Bones were scattered around the post. The grass was patchy and sparse and the earth was stained red. Chunks of meat glistened in the pale morning light, steaming in the cold air. The stench was thick and gamey and made me want to gag.

Dad looked down at the remains. “This is still warm. It didn’t eat straight away.”

“Is that bad?”

He didn’t reply. He poked at the mess with his shovel, turning it over like the ashes of a bonfire. I caught a glimpse of a thigh bone in amongst a coil of innards. “It’s not eating as much,” he said. He sounded worried.

I thought back to last night, to the sounds that carried across the field to the farmhouse, the guttural, snorting noises as it fed. It had sounded as if it had eaten plenty. “Maybe it wasn’t hungry,” I said.

“It’s always hungry.” He looked out past the feeding post to the woods that sat beyond our field. The morning light couldn’t get through the thick branches and all I could see between the tree trunks were black shadows.

“Is something wrong with it?” I said.

Dad stared into the woods for a moment longer, and for a second, I thought he hadn’t heard, but then he turned back to me. The worry on his

face disappeared, and he smiled.

“It’s probably nothing,” he said. He ruffled my hair. “Come on, let’s get this cleaned up. You’ll be late for school.”

We shovelled the remains into the buckets and hosed down the feeding post and the surrounding ground as best we could. The post had sat at the bottom of our field for as long as I could remember. It was three foot high, as thick as a man’s leg, with a heavy metal ring bolted to the top. Its edges had been worn smooth by age and the weather. Its surface was covered in scratches – tiny marks from fingernails and deeper gouges from teeth.

There was a short length of rope attached to the metal ring. It was frayed and shredded and wet with blood and drool. I pulled it free and tossed it into one of the buckets.

We carried everything back up to the farm. We gave what it had left to the pigs.

I washed and got ready for school. I didn’t have breakfast. I wasn’t hungry. I never was, the morning after an offering.

..

School was a short walk across the fields and down the narrow lane that wound its way through the village. Along with the school, there was a shop and a church. It was everything we needed.

Only other kids from the village went to the school. I was in my final

year. I'd be sixteen next year and it was expected that I start work properly to support the village. It wasn't like other schools, where kids had to stay until they were eighteen. Our village wasn't like others.

Mrs Trent taught the final year. She was in her sixties and, like everyone else, had lived in the village all of her life. Like everyone else, she could trace her family history back to the start. History is important to us. My dad says we have to preserve the old ways.

Before the day's lessons began, Mrs Trent led us all in prayer.

We joined hands and closed our eyes, reciting the words we all knew by heart, giving thanks to the power that watched over us.

At the end of the prayer, we whispered the declaration and opened our eyes. Mrs Trent was looking straight at me. She smiled and gave me the smallest of nods, as if to say *thank you*.

..

Everyone in the village knows what my family do. My friends at school ask me questions about it sometimes, even though they know they'll get into trouble with Mrs Trent if she hears. They're curious about it, and maybe a little scared.

There's not really a name for what we do. Dad likes to call us stewards of the land. We've been doing it for years. It's something that's passed down from father to son. My granddad did it before my dad, and my great

granddad before that, and so on. It's in our blood. It's who we are.

"It's about doing what's right," Dad told me once. "For the village, for your neighbours. We look after each other. Not like *out there*."

Dad took me *out there*, once, to one of the cities, so I would know what it was like. So I would understand just how important it was to be a steward. So I would know just what we were protecting our way of life from.

I hated it. Everything was just... too much. Too much noise. Too much dirt, too many choking, poisonous smells. Too many hard faces. It felt like everyone was rushing, jostling, crashing together and then bouncing apart again.

"This is what they're like," Dad said. "This is what's coming for us. This is what we guard our way of life against. We don't choose to do it. We have to do it. Do you understand what I'm saying, son?"

I understood.

We do what we do so we won't be like them.

..

I don't know what it is, or how its power works, not exactly. All I know is that it lives in the woods, and that it's old, older than the village itself, as old as the land and fields and the hills.

And that it needs to be fed.

In return, it protects us. Watches over us. Helps us prosper, so we don't need anything from out there.

We take care of it, and it takes care of us. We need each other.

My family has made sure it's fed for as long as anyone can remember. Dad says it's because we're connected to it. There's something in our bloodline. We share a bond that can never be broken. "It's like us and our sheepdogs," he said.

I always wonder which of us is the dog and which is the master.

We feed it once every twenty nine days.

We're careful. We only take the kind of people that Dad says won't be missed. "They won't be missed because *out there*, no one cares," he told me. "No one belongs. They're disconnected and alone."

I'd never heard anything so sad.

The first time I went with Dad to get one, I cried afterwards. I kept asking him if there was something else we could do instead, like giving it goats or sheep. He told me that animals wouldn't work. It had to be a human. "It has to be a worthwhile offering," he said.

I couldn't stop crying. He gave me a hug and told me it was all right to feel that way. "That's part of being a steward. Doing difficult things, things that hurt, for the greater good."

..

We picked up the next offering on one of the A roads that run North to South, several miles away from the village. He was a hitchhiker. We never have any trouble picking them up. When they see me, it puts them at ease. Especially the women.

I offered him a drink from my flask. It had sweet tea inside. The sugar masks the taste of the herbs Mum collects from the edge of the woods at the bottom of our field.

He was asleep before he'd finished the first cup. We drove back to the farm, stripped him and tied him to the feeding post.

Dad cupped his hands to his mouth and gave out the call.

Something from the woods called back.

We walked back up to the house.

That night, I went to bed with my headphones on, listening to music. I didn't want to hear it feed this time.

..

The next day, at first light, we collected our things and went down to clean up.

As the feeding post came into view, we stopped. Dad dropped his shovel.

The hitchhiker was still alive.

He was moaning to himself. I couldn't make out the words. He



seemed like he was in shock. His thigh and belly had been gnawed and gaped open with red, wet wounds. He looked over at us but didn't seem to see us, his eyes blank and empty.

Dad looked worried. Worried, and a little sad, as if he was somehow expecting this. As if he knew that this day would come. He put his hands to his face and blew out a long, shaky breath and then turned to me.

“Go get the shotgun.”

I ran back to the house. I glanced back over my shoulder. I thought I saw something in the woods, something moving low to the ground, black against the dark shadows.

..

I helped Dad carry the hitchhiker's body to the shed. He picked up the axe he used to chop wood.

“Why didn't it take him?” I said.

“Just go back to the house,” Dad said, his voice cracking out like the back of his hand. “Get cleaned up and get to school.”

..

When I got home from school that day, I could hear voices coming from the living room. I crept up to the door and listened.

Mum was crying. Dad was talking to her, trying to keep his voice calm and soft. “We knew this was going to happen one day. It's the way

these things work.”

“It’s too soon,” Mum said, her voice breaking and disappearing under more sobs. “It’s too soon, too soon. It’s not fair. He’s too young.”

“It has to be done,” said Dad, his voice suddenly becoming firm. When he used that tone, it meant the end of the conversation. “It’s the way it is.”

Neither one of them spoke after that. The only sound was Mum’s muffled sobs.

I crept upstairs to my room.

..

Everyone knew it hadn’t eaten that month. No one said anything about it, even though they must have been scared, scared that it wouldn’t protect us anymore.

But they were more frightened to talk about it, as if talking about it would make their fears come true.

People, the adults, looked at me funny, when I passed them in the village. They’d still smile, still say hello, like they always did, but there was something in their eyes.

I didn’t know what it meant, but it frightened me too.

..

The next month, when it was time for another offering, Dad told me

that there was no need for me to go with him to find one this time. He said he already had one prepared.

He looked sad when he said it. But he still managed to smile and ruffle my hair.

..

That night, the night of the offering, we left the house to go down to the feeding post. Mum came to the back door with us, which she'd never done before. Her eyes were red. She'd been crying again and I didn't know why.

She stepped out of the house, as if to follow us. Dad waved her back. "It's not your place to be there," he said, his voice flat and hard.

She pushed past him and pulled me into a hug, squeezing me tight. "Just do what your dad tells you," she said, her voice tight and frightened in my ear.

Dad pulled her away. She looked at him for a long time, squeezed his hand and then ran back inside.

"Come on," Dad said, heading down to the bottom of the field. I thought I saw his eyes shine as he walked past.

When we got to the feeding post, there was no one there.

"Where's the offering?" I said.

Dad looked at me. "There's no offering. Not like there usually is, an-

yway.” He put his hand on my shoulder. “You have to be brave. You have to be a man, now. You have to do what’s right for the greater good. For the good of the village. Do you understand?”

I didn’t know what he meant, but I nodded.

“It’s stopped eating, son,” he said. “It won’t eat anymore, because it won’t eat from me. Over time, the connection that holds us together fades. It doesn’t last forever. Nothing in nature does. You can’t take these things for granted. Do you hear what I’m saying?”

I nodded.

“My time’s over,” he said. “It needs a new steward. It needs a new bond. It’s time, son. Time for you to take my place.”

His eyes were bright with tears. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen him cry. He hugged me then, and his tears were hot and wet against my cheek.

He took a deep breath and stepped away. He dried his eyes with the backs of his hands. “Call it,” he said, looking towards the dark woods. “Call it, just like I showed you.”

I cupped my hands to my mouth and let out the call, a series of guttural yelps and growls.

Moments later, my call was echoed, coming from deep in the woods.

Dad smiled. “That’s it. It hears you. It’s coming.”

The shadows between the trees shifted, and it came out of the woods towards us.

My breath stopped and a sick, liquid fire shot through my stomach.

“Don’t be scared,” said Dad. “It’s as natural as the earth. It loves us. That’s why it protects us.”

It made its way to us on all fours. It was dark and wretched, its body warped and terrible. Its teeth were needle sharp, its mouth impossibly wide. Its eyes glinted in the pale moonlight. Perhaps it had once been human, but there was nothing human left in the way it looked at me.

“Let it smell you,” said Dad, quietly. “Let it know you.”

It squatted on its haunches in front of me, sniffing at the air, making grunting and clicking noises at the back of its throat. It sniffed at my hand. Thick strings of drool dripped from its mouth and onto my fingers.

“That’s it,” Dad said. “Good lad. It’s taking to you. Make the call again... but quieter, slower, like you’re talking to it.”

My hands shaking, I placed them to my mouth and did as Dad told me. It watched me, its head cocked.

“That’s it,” said Dad again. “Can you feel it? The connection?”

I nodded. I could feel something between me and the thing at my feet. Something deep and familiar. Something that felt sickeningly comfortable.

Dad smiled. He stepped up to the feeding post and knelt down, and

held his hands together as if in prayer.

“No!”

“It has to be this way, son,” he said. “The old is always replaced by the new. That’s the way. Don’t you cry. *Don’t*. You have to show it you’re strong. You have to let it know it can trust you, let it know it can depend on you to do what needs to be done.” He looked at me. He didn’t look frightened. He looked at peace. “I love you, son. I’m proud of you. You’ll be a good steward. The best. You’ll keep us safe. You’ll keep our ways alive. Now... let what has to happen, happen.”

I stepped back, my vision blurring as I fought to hold back the tears.

It circled Dad, its jaw opening and closing. It looked at me, as if awaiting my command.

I made a clicking noise deep in my throat.



Beneath the Stones - Geist @geistart



**T H E  
WILLOW**

**ROSA CANALES**

This poem is inspired by Herta Müller's autobiographical short story collection,  
*Nadirs*, set in Ceausescu's communist ruled Romania.



The willow shakes her arms with the wind,  
Her turbulent limbs a cry that she, too, is violence,

In this cemetery, she bends to rake knuckles deep  
Into polished stone; she knows we hide more than bone

Under the speckled skin of land over which we tread—  
Careful with our loud words and with the heavy footprints

She scratches at with nails grown in May, sharpened  
In January; she sways forward with a desire to shred

This cultivated tranquility, to slash open the ground and uproot  
These ghosts. For them to grow with their hisses that fly up

And out with the cold, that settle as pinpricks of dew  
In the grass; she longs for their full hips and curves

To fill the cracks between her sharp bones, for them  
To snatch the last orange at the supermarket,

Chase with red lips the juice that runs cold against

Warm skin, and weave in and out between us

Like they do between the lines of poetry we clutch as a rosary

Under her branches, where we shiver against these drops

That prick our skin with whispers of what we killed

And then buried with this gentle field,

Its green fronds and the brittle tears

Of a willow who weeps only for silence.

A detailed topographic map of a region, likely in the Pacific Northwest, showing terrain contours, rivers, and various place names. The map is rendered in a light, faded style, serving as a background for the text. The text is centered in a black rectangular box.

# **I FOUND A BODY DECOMPOSING IN THE WOODS**

**T.S. MORAN**

cw: body horror, gender horror, decomposition of a body,

gender dysphoria, birth, parasites

I found a body decomposing in the woods and it was me and I was it. Its flaccid flesh sagged in folds of buttery fat. Its skin wrinkled like fine-pressed linen. Mealy-mouthed, maggot-infested. Her eyes were a glassy gray, glazed over with crusty flecks.

And as I stared at her, I could have sworn I saw her stomach rise and fall, almost as if she were taking her last shallow, shuddering breaths. I walked towards her, leather boots, worn to the bone, leaving imprints on the mossy forest floor. A stick snapped beneath me and her stomach burst, hissing like a deflating balloon.

Something oozed out of her, covered in blood and amniotic fluid, screeching wildly, shrilly. A parasite that had carved its way through her body. It withered away all at once, leaving nothing behind but dust and the not-quite-me from before I was really me.

Is this all that I'm good for? Is my only value in what I can create?

In the forest, in the darkness, cradled by the trees, I could not remember if this had already happened. Perhaps it was the future that would have awaited me had I not made myself anew. Either way, time passed me by in the blink of an eye as her own eyes dribbled out of her skull like a runny egg. Her hair thinned, unraveling in the wind. Picked apart by sparrows for their nests. Her skin loosened and relaxed finally, before falling off entirely. And then it was bones, and bones I could work with.

Her body—my body—sunk into the earth with every passing moment.

I would have to act fast, lest I be lost entirely.

I turned those bones over piece by piece, studying them fastidiously. I stretched the femur. The tibia too. I narrowed the hip bone and sloped the forehead. The elbows, shoulders, fingers, and thighs all changed as well. And when I was done crafting my frame, I fashioned myself new organs from the stones and sticks and fallen leaves of the forest, leaving no hollow spaces. From the dirt, my skin too was made anew.

And there I was. The air in the forest was crisp and cool. I could feel it in my nose, my throat, my chest, my lungs with every new breath. The wind stirred, leaves rustling. Just a whisper against now-cropped hair. Still new and itchy against the back of my neck. In time though, it will grow and I will grow and the forest will grow too until her lifeless form is nothing but a dream, a starting point.

When I awoke the next morning, I found I could not change my bones, but still I could change enough. I would create something new for myself, not because I had to or was expected to, but because I wanted to. And so I did.

I found a body in the woods, still alive, growing closer to the me I would choose to be.



You can't yet believe, even though you see it.

Farmers would've noticed by now.

It's more *silly* than *sinister*

in this tight southern landscape.

Do you remember how that snowflake landed on your girlfriend's arm  
as you climbed onto the tow-path from the bridge before Mytholmroyd?

The shape of it was too perfect,

too much like a snowflake,

surely the mood was set even then

for something like this to happen in a place such as this.

Think again to those stories you pooh-poohed

in those tabloids that your Grandma claimed

she only bought to line the budgie cage;

watch these stories realised, stalking the canal's far bank,

legs much too long to be common-or-garden,

until time leads you to an open fire and a peat-black stout,

a place to mull it over and to search

if anyone here's seen the same,

while outside, fields through which wander you now know not what

grow slowly whiter, and the sky slowly dark.



**EDGE  
PLAY**

**GINA MARIE BERNARD**



Her blood will be spilled; she has negotiated this with the client in advance. The young woman wiggles toes against the thick wool socks she wears inside her 1460s, neither of which is tied. She can trace through pressure points one lace as it snakes between the leather and her ankle to rest coiled beneath a heel. The temperature has dropped another ten degrees since she pulled off the highway, and her breath—blue and thin beneath the lone sclerotic light guarding this lot—is torn from her mouth by a truculent wind. Under her black riding jacket, she has on a hooded gray sweatshirt; she pulls its cowl over her head now with fingers numb from the four minutes she’s stood outside her truck.

“Where is this fucker?” she asks.

Headlights wink from an orchid horizon, her answer closing distance

Beaten, sure. But she never consented to hypothermia. Sullen, she turns her back and cups lighter to cigarette. Her rules purport order, and she recites them to herself again, as if in their enumeration they accord some protective dominion—which she accedes they do not—but along with the cigarette, serve wholly to arrest her trembling hands and bring her heart rate under control:

(1) Client passes initial Kik interview and Venmo’s \$500 non-refundable appointment fee; \$500 non-refundable activity fee due upon arrival.

(2) Before session commencement, the client agrees to be photo-

graphed with her—nuclear insurance against her turning up missing or dead.

(3) No fists to her face.

(4) No intentional compound fractures.

(5) No session will last longer than 120 seconds or continue if she should lose consciousness.

(6) Absolutely no kicking.

(7) Sexual contact is forbidden.

(8) Her safe word, if uttered, terminates the session—time is never prorated.

There are clubs, of course, for this nature of congress. Dungeons with monitors and “safer” play spaces. But this is not kink. It prowls the deep verdure beyond primal. It is truth pacing inside her, pulsing amber heat. It mewls in complaint. Snaps teeth. Rolls eyes. Circles until sated.

She’s become inured to the untold number who hunger to assist in her manifestation, yet remains in awe at the great distances they pilgrimage to lay hands upon her, and to the derelict and haunted tracts at which she finds herself shepherding such traffic—within a grove of naked alders rising from the ridge beyond a city landfill; inside an abandoned clapboard church, rusted playground apparatus quartered outside in shadow like armored behemoths from a dismembered epoch; behind a shuttered Indian

boarding school, austere headstones in its gated cemetery long since pushed untrue by frost heave. Tonight, she is parked along a lost stretch of nowhere nearly an hour beyond Laramie, Wyoming, upon the frozen and certain pale gravel of an untenanted weigh station.

She drags off her cigarette. Uses her palm to swipe at a runny nose. “What’s two minutes?” she asks against the wind.

It depends on the client. Men harboring secrets and those with clear-eyed fervor are the worst: the pastorate, junior college football players, swaggering sons who would wrest greatness from this, their America. Once, the assistant warden of a girls’ correctional facility in southeastern Montana had driven over eight hours to break her jaw with an illegal uppercut, before removing his heavy leather belt and buckle-whipping her until she passed out. She swam in red revolutions through coils of barbed wire until she awoke alone, her laugh fracturing a cobalt pre-dawn, black blood staining her teeth—the rupturing of her most recent miscarriage.

A rumbling on tonight’s ribbon of asphalt. The oncoming car enters a swale, headlights momentarily swallowed, but immediately visible again. Music blares from after-market speakers: KRQU 98.7—Vintage Vinyl. The client is driving much too fast. Maybe 80. The back tires lock and squelch and the sedan shudders to a stop one hundred yards beyond where the young woman stands shivering under fluorescent coruscation.

Idling. The consonance of high plains wind.

Tail lights wink and the car reverses course. Turns into the lot. Passes—its occupants peering out at her, unblinking. In addition to the driver, whose face is obscured by the raised cowl of a dark pullover, there are three people inside: in the passenger's seat, feet unshod despite the cold and perched by their heels above the glove compartment, slouches a woman who is at least 45, but in whose face is pinched a petulance of someone much younger; behind the driver, wearing a loose beanie over cinereous shoulder-length hair, sits a tattooed crone intent on the hand-rolled joint she hasps to her lips with a roach clip; and beside her, a young girl of eleven or twelve—her face moonlike in its wonder—leans into her window, fingers splayed across the glass like pallid exclamation points.

The driver reaches up and adjusts the rearview mirror. The girl has turned and now gazes at the young woman from out of the back window, her chin resting on small hands. Her lips move, responding to a comment or query. The car moves to the far edge of the lot, performs a y-turn, and returns. The young woman shields her eyes from the oncoming headlights. The driver parks directly behind the young woman's Silverado, but leaves the engine running.

The driver opens the door. Steps from the vehicle. Swings the door shut.

“You’re late,” the young woman says, breaking her gaze from the girl, who is now staring out from behind the front seat.

“Five hundred dollars surely bought me a few minutes,” the driver says, reaching up to remove her own hood. Wind lashes her black hair.

“Wait,” the young woman says, eyebrows knit in confusion. “You’re a chick.” She looks again to the car. “You’re all chicks.”

“Indeed,” the driver agrees.

“Chicks don’t do this,” the young woman protests.

“You certainly do.”

“Cute. Look, I interviewed a Frankie.”

The driver raises her chin. “Francesca.”

The last pigment bleeds from the west. “And these other bitches?”

“They are here to witness,” the driver says.

“Right,” the young woman says, taking one last pull off her cigarette. She flicks it—showers the dark with embers. Buries hands inside pockets. “Well, I’m sorry they rode all the way out here, but you wasted everyone’s time. There ain’t fuck-all happening tonight.”

“That remains to be seen,” the driver says.

“Is that so?”

“The longest way around is the shortest way home.”

“Look, bitch. I’m freezing my tits off. I got better things to do than to

stand here puzzling over some bullshit.”

“But that’s exactly what you’ll do,” the driver says. “I’ve already paid you five hundred dollars and have agreed to imburse you five hundred more. I intend to spend each and every cent. And for the record, my tits are just as cold as yours.”

The two women stare at one another. Inside the grumbling automobile, the front seat passenger adjusts the volume on Jefferson Airplane’s “White Rabbit.” The old woman’s arms plait the space above her head, an inscrutable conjuration.

“Fine. Take your best shot.”

“Yes, of course. But first, a proposition,” the driver says.

“Fuck that—I was clear in the rules.”

The driver offers both hands, palms forward. “This violates none of your edicts.”

“Well?” the young woman asks after several empty seconds.

“Your clothes.”

“The fuck?”

“I would very much like to wear your clothes.”

“Umm—no thanks, *Frank*. Jesus Christ!” The young woman turns and reaches for her door handle.

“One thousand dollars,” the driver says.

Somewhere deep within the gloaming, a coyote yammers. But it too might be the wind keening intimation.

“You’re serious,” the young woman says, turning again.

“Must we not dare to be?” the driver asks, and the young woman frowns. Something has been proffered. But it is caught in the wind, which is high and cavils and leaves no space for memory.

“I ain’t getting naked in front of her,” the young woman says instead, pointing a finger at the girl, still riveted in the backseat. She feels suddenly caught, a backyard possum under motion lights. Gilded in refuse.

“You may retain your underthings—bra and panties,” the driver says. One corner of her mouth curls, revealing a dimple.

They move to the space between the vehicles to undress, the young woman handing over each item of clothing only after the driver has carefully folded the preceding article upon the hood of her sedan. Gusts of wind blow grit from the tarmac. Soon, they face one another within the abrasive glare of headlights. At some point, the radio has been turned off. Inside, the three occupants look out upon them.

“You are immaculate,” the driver says, buttoning the young woman’s jeans. “Why do you insist on doing this?”

“This from the bitch who’s shelled out two thousand dollars,” the young woman says. She holds herself by the elbows, shivering.

“Insightful.”

“Let’s just get to it,” the young woman says.

The girl rolls her window down and climbs onto the roof of the car.

“Hello,” she says. She has a sucker in her mouth now, and rolls it from cheek to cheek with her tongue.

“Hi,” the young woman says.

“I like your socks,” the girl says.

“Thanks.”

“Do you want a Tootsie Pop?”

“Can you please tell her to get back inside,” the young woman asks the driver, who is just finishing pulling on the leather jacket.

“If you wish her to go inside, you are perfectly capable of asking her yourself,” the driver says. She pulls the sweatshirt cowl from underneath and adjusts the jacket.

“Can I ask you something,” the girl says to the young woman.

They stare at one another until the young woman shrugs.

“Why is there an Indian shooting his bow and arrow at a star?” the girl asks.

“Excuse me?”

“On the wrapper.” The girl holds a red Tootsie Pop wrapper out to the young woman. “Nonna says they used to give you a free sucker if your



wrapper had an Indian shooting the star, but when we stopped for gas tonight, I asked and the man said he didn't know anything about that."

"Neither do I," the young woman says.

"Weird," the girl says. "Well, good night." She climbs back into the sedan and rolls the window back up.

The young woman turns back to the driver, whose open hand already flashes in an arc toward her ear. The world is blank except for the lonesome droning of wind coming off the plains.

..

She is warm. The truck's fan rattles as it pushes hot air into the cabin. The radio is set to an AM station, and a man speaks of morning livestock prices. The young woman is lying across the bench, still clad in socks and underwear. She sits up. Puts fingers to her ear and gingerly feels along her cheek. There is a paper grocery bag next to the passenger door. Inside, folded neatly, are her jeans, sweatshirt, and jacket. There is also an envelope containing fifteen hundred dollars. She looks around the parking lot. Empty. She is reaching for the shift lever when she notices something red flapping beneath a wiper blade. She rolls down the window and reaches around the glass. She grips the steering wheel with her right hand and must lift her bottom from the seat, but she succeeds in trapping the paper between two fingers. She brings the wrapper inside.

“Check the glove compartment,” is written in a girl’s looping script on the back of the wrapper. “And check the other side of this wrapper!” The young woman turns it over; there is an Indian shooting his bow. The star sits along an edge, cut in half at the factory. Inside the glove compartment, the young woman finds a red Tootsie Pop. She twirls it between her palms before unwrapping it. Sure enough, there is more of the girl’s handwriting: “Try to love the one you’re in.” The young woman flips the wrapper over. There is no Indian, but she does find the other half of a star.

After a long while, she puts the sucker in her mouth and pulls out onto the highway. She drives toward Laramie, morning wind making easy work of her dust. And of the two wrappers she crumples and tosses out her window.

A topographic map of a region, likely in the Pacific Northwest, showing terrain contours, rivers, and various place names. A prominent black rectangular box is centered on the map, containing the title text in white. The map features labels such as 'KA-ME', 'TIRAVU', 'PLAISHI', 'PLAISHI BELT', 'SOLITAIRE BUTTE', and 'DIABLO BUTTE'.

# ELDRITCH INSIGHT

**BRYAN C. LAESCH**

This was how the man discovered what he was,  
For the Entity was committed to what It does;  
Due to the interference of the outer-interloper,  
It defiled the man's mind like a perverse groper.  
It exists far beyond the plane of Man  
Committing acts only a god can,  
Attempting to transform Man into Beast,  
Altering civility 'to a desire for violence and feast.

Little should we care about his future or past,  
Since every man's present could leave him aghast,  
Thy present course is every man's curse,  
Though thy curse can always be worse,  
For thine ability to take alternative form  
Is great indeed or may render thee a worm.  
No man lacks the ability of this one here,  
So this power renders us all a little queer.

But how is it that such a form is taken,  
That man's faith in himself or God is shaken?  
Surely the Entity calls upon a spirit prime,

Sharing genes with animals is no crime.

However that is not the case,

Man's nature is all the more base.

By magnifying desires and tempers foul,

Man's back bends as he begins to howl.

Desires for love and hate disorderly,

Turn a man from his mind soberly;

Thus he only resides in the physical coil,

And his soul escapes after great toil.

Now, no longer a man, but a monster be he,

He becomes a beast that all can see.

Thus learning to hate his neighbors all,

But this being still has further to fall.

As the beast begins to take control,

The greater vices the subhuman doth extol;

So in his craving for maiden's flesh,

Lust for another is borne a-fresh;

He dispenses of any honor due her dignity,

And hates and spurns proper masculinity.

He demeans her worth for his own pleasure,  
Reveling in sick depravity, his truest treasure.

But wherein his true madness lies,  
Love for himself easily dies;  
Realizing who he truly wants to kill,  
His sanity departs and he craves every ill.  
Self-loathing hath he always possessed,  
For he knew himself a beast, not unlike the rest—  
Knowing the facts well between him and animal,  
He knows he is the more damnable.

And so the Entity has finished Its work,  
Up in space—but created one to lurk;  
For who could say what rhyme or reason,  
To understand the Entity is treason;  
For if one could comprehend it,  
It would be the end of his spirit;  
Hence betraying his mother's race,  
The beast within he doth embrace.

And by embracing his vilest flaws,  
He takes on fur, fangs, and claws.  
Thus revealed is his true nature,  
And having cost evolution its wager  
The man's fate as a beast is sealed  
Damning him to wander forest and field.  
The man's form is born a-new  
And his days are his to rue.

# AN FÉAR GORTACH

**ADAM ROBERT MARTIN**  
**@art.of.lore**

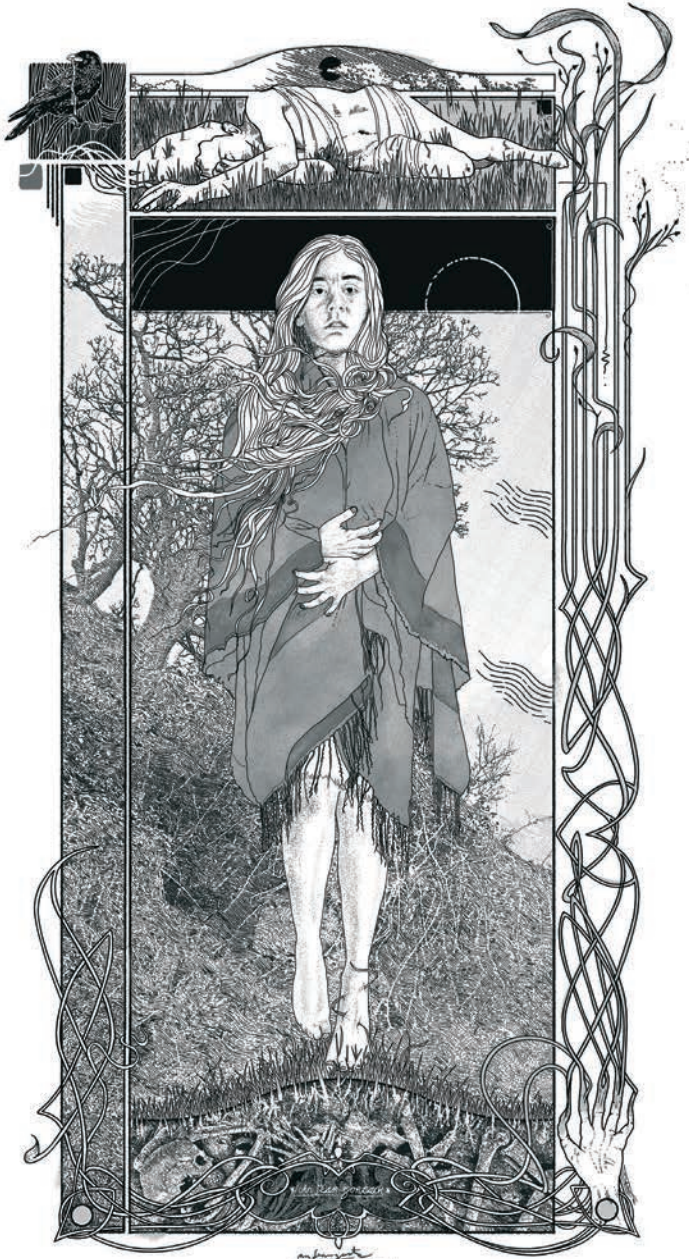
In Irish Foklore, 'An Féar Gortach' {The Hungry Grass} is a cursed patch of grass that causes an insatiable sense of hunger and weariness upon anyone who walks over it.

Thought to have originally arisen after the events of the Irish Famine between 1845 and 1851 in which a million died of poverty, starvation and agony with another 2 million fleeing the country.

The victims of the famine were thrown into mass graves. Over the top of these burial sites the grass grew and it was said to be cursed.

Some folks still carry a small piece of bread in their pockets when venturing into the countryside in case they step on the Hungry Grass.





*Walter Crane*



**T H E**  
**THACKFORD**  
**BEAST**

**RICHARD DANIELS**

Originally published in Occultaria of Albion.

The following piece of writing is taken from a part work series of magazines produced in the 80s and 90s. The publication was called The Occultaria of Albion and its chief aim was to explore the lesser known paranormal and preternatural occurrences from various locations across Great Britain. Recently I have been given access to the archive of this part work publication – by one of its original editors and creators. I thought that perhaps readers of this new publication from Ram Eye Press would find this excerpt of some interest, particularly if they were ever to find themselves exploring the environs of Thackford Reservoir...

### **Introduction**

The tremendous expansion of cities in the white heat of industrial revolution meant there was a vital need for clean water to be supplied to the new industrial centres; cities like Sheffield, Leeds and those in the East Midlands region had a particular thirst in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The solution to the problem came in the form of large civil engineering projects – valleys were dammed, rivers redirected, and reservoirs constructed. Like it or not, for many rural communities, change was coming and for an unfortunate handful of villages that change would take the form of complete obliteration.

This edition of OA examines the consequence of this annihilation for one such village. As will be revealed, geographic trauma of the land and the psychic trauma of those that dwell upon that land can manifest as something terrible, something abominable. Today the river Yap still flows, yet its course was altered, and the village of Thackford on Yap became submerged beneath a large, new reservoir with a surface area of nearly six hundred acres.

## **History**

The river Yap is a relatively small river which flows through the Upper Yap Valley, part of which lies in South Yorkshire as well as Derbyshire. It is far less known to today's ramblers and walkers compared with other areas of the Peak District – but is just as scenic, with rounded hills and limestone gorges and areas of broadleaved woods.

It was in 1902 that the construction of a dam and reservoir began. Before this, Thackford on Yap was an unremarkable village of around three hundred inhabitants. It appeared in the Domesday Book of 1086 as Thayke's Ford, meaning a crossing place on the land of a family named Thayke. The village church of St John was built in the early 15th century with adaptations and rebuilds many times during its five centuries of

existence.

The most notorious rector of St John's was probably the Reverend William Harold who served the civil parish from 1860 – 1869. Harold was an eccentric figure – often encouraging parishioners to bring livestock and pets with them to service. His sermons were theatrical, and he would frequently wave a sabre he claimed belonged to his father during the Napoleonic Wars. Reverend Harold felt that through his possession of the weapon it had become a sword of truth and light. For the most part his parishioners seemed to enjoy his eccentricities.

No doubt it was Harold's unusual character which prevented a theft and brought national news coverage to Thackford in 1863. Late one night in October, two thieves broke into the church intent on stealing whatever they could. The two men from Halifax had broken into several remote churches since September and had never been apprehended. As was usual they did not expect the vicar to be present, but Reverend Harold kept odd hours and would often work late into the night from a small desk in the vestry. Harold heard the two thieves and realised what was happening. Immediately he grabbed his Napoleonic sword of truth and confronted the intruders. One of the men attempted to wrestle with the vicar and lost two fingers for his troubles. The other, seeing the blood, made a run for it but was himself cut on his right leg and did not make it beyond the porch. At

dawn, a constable from nearby Lower Bradworth arrived to arrest the two men. Harold had tied them to the font and kept watch for several hours. The vicar was considered a hero both locally and nationally and for the rest of his time at St John's he would regularly incorporate the tale of his bravery into sermons. Upon his retirement in 1869 he bequeathed the sword to the church and the people of Thackford. For several years the sword was mounted upon a cork plinth opposite the font.

In 1899 part of the roof of St John's had to be repaired. It is thought that the sword and its plinth were moved into a storeroom behind the vestry and subsequently forgotten about. In 1902 construction of the reservoir began and the last service to be held at the church took place in early 1904. By then only a handful of residents were left in the village. It was in 1906 that St John's, along with the rest of Thackford on Yap, disappeared entirely beneath the surface of the new reservoir.

It was while the team of engineers and planners were in a boat on the reservoir inspecting their recently completed masterpiece that the head engineer, Thomas Keppel, noticed something in the water. As the boat drew nearer, they saw that the object appeared to be the handle of a sword. Gradually and, some were said to have remarked, just like Excalibur, the entire sword seemed to rise out of the water and remained floating, handle aloft. There was laughter from the engineers until Keppel stomped to the

side of the boat saying, 'get that bloody thing out of my reservoir.' Witnesses say he went to grab it but lost his balance and somehow fell out of the boat. Some claim that the engineer managed to impale himself on the sword, though several deny this was the case. Others tried to come to his rescue, but Keppel had disappeared beneath the surface never to be seen again.

Almost immediately the rumours began. Thomas Keppel was the man who had condemned Thackford on Yap. It could have been saved but Keppel would not hear of any changes and dismissed the village as an insignificant place not worth preserving. Many believed that the sword of truth and light had other ideas and had returned from the depths in order to take revenge. Even amongst the other engineers and the construction workers there was a belief that this might be the case. As far as many people from the Upper Yap Valley were concerned – Thackford Reservoir was cursed from its very beginning.

### **And What Rough Beast**

In 1971 Kenneth Yorke was working as a male model. He'd been modelling since the mid-sixties and found a lot of his work in swinging London, but by the start of the seventies he'd grown tired of it all and de-

cided to move back to his native Derby with dreams to set up a carpentry business using the money he'd saved. He didn't turn his back on modelling entirely – Ramsley, a knitwear company based in Nottingham, booked Ken regularly for shoots. It provided him with an income whilst getting his woodworking business off the ground.

The knitwear shoots were often done on location and one favourite spot used by photographer Dick Evison was Thackford on Yap. Dick spoke to us from his home in Spain:

'It was a great place to shoot. Back then you could go a whole day without seeing another person and there were always new spots to explore. Got some of my best shots at Thackford. I remember I'd often meet Ken in Sheffield, usually with Mandy Jacques as the other model, then the three of us would drive over in my Austin Maxi with the radio blasting all the way. It was always a jolly old time!'

On the morning of Wednesday 28th April 1971 whilst on a photoshoot for Ramsley, Ken Yorke had an encounter that would change his life. On that morning he came face to face with what became known as the Thackford Beast.

The three of them had arrived early at the reservoir – photographer Dick Evison, and models Ken Yorke and Mandy Jacques. They were joined shortly after by Vanessa Holland, an assistant at Ramsley who



brought with her several garments to be photographed during the day. The shoot went well, though they had gradually wandered deeper into the woods at the southern edge of the reservoir. ‘I remember it vividly even now,’ Evison reflected. ‘We were about to break for lunch. Ken pulled his jumper off and said he needed to relieve himself. He was wearing a red shirt and I made some joke about it sticking out in all that greenery, y’know – like a red rag or something. Ken laughed and said he’d catch us up. A minute later there was this terrible growling sound followed by Ken screaming. It was awful. I ran back but there was no sign of him. He’d vanished into the undergrowth. None of us knew what to do. We were all terrified.’

Ken Yorke did return, but not until several hours later – he wandered into the small police station of Lower Bradworth, six miles away. His clothes were torn, and he was covered in cuts and bruises. The beast had taken him, he kept muttering. The beast had taken him!

Over the next several weeks and months the full extent of Ken’s experience was revealed. A large, hairy beast had taken hold of Ken and dragged him away. Initially Ken claimed it to be like a bear or a large dog yet also capable of sustained bipedalism. He described its face as a sort of mix between a bear but with the eyes and upper skull of something more like an ape or a human. Ken said that at first the creature was aggressive,

swatting him about the undergrowth with its large, clawed front paws. Eventually when Ken had begun to drift in and out of consciousness the thing calmed down, took hold of Ken and took him back to what was some sort of nest or den made from fallen trees and foliage.

Perhaps the most striking thing was that Ken claimed the beast tried to communicate with him telepathically. Whilst lying in the creature's den, Ken says that he heard its voice in his mind – a voice comprised of grunts, clicks and bleeps, almost like a dolphin. Ken believed the creature offered him some sort of food comprised of various leaves and berries. Ken blacked out again and then next thing he remembered he was sat in the police station drinking a mug of tea.

Ken was changed profoundly by his encounter with the Thackford Beast. He gave up on modelling knitwear and ultimately gave up on his plans to become a carpenter. After a further eighteen months of research and preparations, he bought a piece of land on the edge of Lower Bradworth. From a nearby scrapyards, he purchased one of the large, tin buildings that were originally used during the construction of the reservoir. So it was that in the summer of 1973, the Thackford Beast Research Centre & Museum was opened to the public. The initial exhibits included photographs taken by Ken. He claimed to have found the nest where he had been taken. Other items included hair samples and scat which Ken

believed was produced by the beast.

In the beginning there was much derision for Ken's project and few visitors took it or Ken seriously. But visitors there were – providing a small income which allowed Ken to continue. By 1977 another shack was purchased as the research centre expanded. The Thackford Beast had begun to attract the interest of cryptozoologists from around the globe. Then, in 1980 a further sighting took place by an American tourist, a sixty-two-year-old lady by the name of Doris Starkey from Spokane, Washington. She knew nothing about the Thackford Beast or any of the previous sightings, yet her descriptions matched almost exactly with Ken's original abduction experience several years before. After what the cryptozoology community dubbed, the Starkey Event, far more credence was given to the beast – both nationally and internationally. In 1981 the popular ITV programme *This Nation* recorded an interview with Ken:

'I have always been utterly convinced that what I saw was real,' he told them. 'And all my research since then has only gone on to make me more certain that there is a beast out in the woods and hills of Thackford Valley. I believe the creature is a corruption of nature, something that should not have survived but for whatever reason it has. It is both natural and unnatural and I know that one day the truth shall be revealed. In the meantime, my museum and research centre are open six days a week for

anyone to come and learn the truth.’

By the early nineties interest in the Thackford Beast had waned – in part because of a lack of any new evidence or sightings. Ken Yorke continued to believe a creature was out there. He retired from active research in 1993 and sold the tin hut which had housed the museum for twenty years. Today the site is a tearoom. Ken makes chunky wooden coffee tables in his garage in Derby and sells them around the world. Occasionally he speaks at cryptid conventions and seminars.

A topographic map of a coastal region, likely the Pacific Northwest, serves as the background. The map shows contour lines, rivers, and various geographical features. A prominent black rectangular box is centered on the map, containing the title text in white. The map includes labels such as 'KAMA', 'S A', 'P', 'Tirav', 'Ka', 'Pla', 'P L A T B A', 'S H I', 'P L A N E T', and 'PLA'.

# **QUANTUM MECHANICAL DAMNATION**

**LEELA RAJ-SANKAR**

Originally published in Hecate Magazine.

the last time i was here i would've staked my life on  
you, sack of bones begging desperately to get free, bleeding  
teeth sunk into the bit & last time i was here you  
thought hell was just like this house, bigger on  
the inside; last time i was here we lived the  
same night on repeat mosquitoes on my knee swelling  
until they burst & last time i was here the  
spanish moss told me secrets when my tea went  
lukewarm—*do you know how difficult it is to eliminate  
all light from a room even if you black out board up  
nail shut all the windows* & i suddenly had a newfound respect  
for those cicadas the ones that stay underground for  
seventeen years; last time i was here you weren't alive  
not really you were blank-eyed & turning circles circles circles  
in the cloudy river i wish i didn't believe in ghosts because  
you're still three months younger than me but older than i'll  
ever be & i read somewhere that ghosts disrupt temporal  
directionality make time nonlinear cut open every half-healed  
scab but last time i was here you didn't want to eat me alive  
or at least you didn't say it out loud & look, maybe it'd be better if  
we thought of that house as a baptism instead of a mouth &  
well. you've done your time, i guess. me, i'm just surprised  
you lasted this long.

A detailed topographic map of a region, likely in the Pacific Northwest, showing terrain contours, rivers, and various geographical features. The map is rendered in a light, faded style, serving as a background for the text. Labels on the map include 'KA-ME', 'PLATEAU', 'SHI', 'TIRAVU', 'SOLITAIRE BUTTE', and 'PLATEAU'.

# **WRITER'S BLOCK**

**BILLY CRAVEN**

cw: abuse, torture.

Robert arose from his chair. He walked slowly to the window and surveyed the scene outside. Despite the late hour, the sun showed no sign of setting. The stretch in the evening was well and truly established and the landscape remained bathed in soft, warm light. A tractor was working out of earshot in a far off field, but apart from that the picture was one of unspoiled nature. It was what had attracted him to the property to begin with; peace and quiet and seclusion, the house an isolated incongruity in an endless tapestry of green fields separated by low stone walls. At night an occasional fox would trigger the sensor light in the yard as it prowled for unsuspecting prey, but other than that his days and nights were undisturbed.

He turned away from the outside world and reluctantly took his seat at the antique ebony writing desk. If he couldn't write a story in these surroundings he held out little hope for himself. Perhaps it was only his vanity that kept him returning to the chair. He stared at the blank page. It was his parents' fault really. Had he only undergone some sort of childhood trauma perhaps he would have something worthwhile to say, some reservoir of pain and suffering to let spill forth onto the page in a torrent of carefully crafted metaphors and similes.

But no.

He had been raised comfortably middle class—an only child, privately



educated, who never wanted for anything. He'd graduated from university, stumbled into a job with an insurance firm and in the blink of an eye his youth had vanished. He had reached middle-age unscathed and now here he was attempting to compose a short story for a competition on the theme of 'Pain' when in truth he had little or nothing to say on the matter. There had been the day his dog had died but he had been largely unaffected by the loss. And yes, both his parents were also dead but that seemed somehow inevitable rather than tragic. They'd had a good innings, as they say.

The clock on the wall read twenty past eight and seemed to frown at him and his lack of progress; its ticks sounding remarkably like tuts of disapproval. Perhaps he'd talk to Sophie. He always felt energised after speaking to her. Her dauntless spirit was inspiring at times, though she could be almost casually cruel towards him on other occasions. Perhaps he'd write her into the story—the feisty best friend character who punctuates moments of sentimentalism with her acerbic wit. She could even be the love interest—his perfect match hiding in plain sight. She'd certainly get a kick out of that. He smiled at the thought of her reaction to this proposition. It would probably lean more towards explosive than acerbic. But wasn't that what he liked about her? There were other, more attractive girls out there, more obvious matches for a man of his station, but it was Sophie's forthrightness, her sense of righteous indignation, her confidence

and self-possession that had drawn him to her. She could be headstrong and indignant and her tongue was sharp but she could never be accused of dishonesty. She kept it real, as young people used to say.

He stared at the blank page. The opening line was important—the famous hook he had heard so much about. Drop the reader in the middle of the action. Avoid cliches and descriptions of the weather at all costs.

Perhaps he would be better off with a laptop. Admittedly, pen and paper had a certain romantic appeal, but his fingers were more accustomed to a keyboard and so far all his pen had produced were lewd doodles that he had hurriedly destroyed lest they somehow find their way into the outside world and destroy his reputation. ‘Pain’. It was a terrible theme for a short story competition. It encouraged self-indulgence, self-pity and adolescent angst. He was determined to find a unique slant on the topic, something to separate him from the pack. Perhaps he could submit the blank page itself—an abstract art piece interrogating the sense of numbing, emptiness that can accompany a loss? Or maybe he could create a story from a collage of newspaper headlines and magazine articles like the serial killers in the movies, an anguished cry for help, a desire to be caught, the exquisite pain of a predator as it devours its prey?

No. At best he would look pretentious, at worst, unhinged.

He found himself standing by the window again staring at the two

small outbuildings in the yard below. Steeling himself for the task ahead he nodded solemnly before turning away abruptly and exiting the room. He walked swiftly down the stairs and outside through the utility room. He crossed the yard to the shed and pushed open the unlocked door. A selection of hand tools were neatly arranged on the wall. With a care bordering on reverence, he removed the electric cattle prod from its hook. The unassuming wand was a little over 12 inches in length with two copper nodes at the tip. He screwed the wand onto the rubber handle and squeezed the trigger. Sparks danced like malevolent angels on the heads of the copper pins. The device had been modified to increase the power while minimising scarring—high voltage, low current. Pain.

He left the shed and made his way to the second outbuilding. He removed the lock from the heavy chain which, once released, rattled angrily to the ground. He took the stiff, steel handle in two hands and forced it across. There was a moment of resistance before the door moved towards him, its hinges squeaking painfully as he pulled it open. The smell of urine and faeces assailed him and he turned away in disgust.

“Christ, Sophie, we’re going to have to do something about that smell,” he said through gritted teeth. “If it’s warm tomorrow I’ll get the hose, okay?”

Sophie made no response. She was seated on the floor at the back of

the room, her arms above her head, wrists in handcuffs, cuffs chained to the wall, her nightdress soiled, her legs a mass of dirt and bruises. Her face was barely visible beneath her matted hair but the eyes that peaked out between the strands burned with a hatred that was not lost on her captor. It brought a smile to his lips. He covered his nose and stepped inside.

“I’m sorry about this,” he said, raising the cattle prod. “I know you’ve been good and I know what I said last time but this is an exception. I just have an awful case of writer’s block and I need something to shock me out of it. Pardon the pun,” he smirked.

“Get away from me,” she growled as he moved towards her.

“Don’t be like that. If there was another way you know I’d take it. I’m not the bad guy here. I’m doing this because I have to, not because I want to. You know that, right?”

She raised her head and spat in his direction, her effort landing short. He offered her a sarcastic pout and a sympathetic head tilt. After all this time, she still had some fight in her. She lashed out with her bare legs as he took another step closer but he easily evaded her and now he was standing over her and the cattle prod was crackling menacingly and tears were rolling down her face.

..

Robert took his seat at the antique desk and cracked his knuckles with

satisfaction. The adrenaline had left him and he was relaxing in something akin to a postcoital cloud of contentment. One last exhilarated thrill shivered through his body as he picked up the pen and began to write:

### **PAIN**

*Like a cornered animal, Sophie flailed and squirmed at his approach. The handcuffs cut into her wrists and the chains on the wall rattled in panic. She howled in despair but there was no one around to hear her screams. There never was. Defiant as she appeared, her eyes pleaded with him for mercy, and he could tell that there was only a little fight left in her. He smiled as he raised the cattle prod . . .*



at the back of the garden under the apple tree where gnarling branches  
finger fat poison fruit, the hum of summer bees collect rose-scented pollen,  
witch-tricked in sweetness. small hands gathered the flush of rhubarb,  
maiden pink with shame, snapped off, leaf-whipped for immersion in  
crumble and custard, cinnamon for seasoning, sugar to make the stem  
sweet, sugar to make the children sweet, butter to grease them like fat  
little pigs, slipping out of the grasp of the giant. sunday lunch with gravy  
and puddings and then comes dessert. fee fi fo fum I smell the blood of an  
english woman, locked in the bathroom, hiding from the post sunday roast  
wrath, the old peculiar-fueled yorkshireman snarling, echoing the roar  
of the engines of the telly as me and my sister turn up the volume of the  
formula one while the crumble blackens in the oven



The Jerry Tree - John Pendred - @outsiderartist\_



The background of the entire cover is a detailed topographic map in a light, faded green color. The map shows various geographical features such as rivers, lakes, and landmasses. A prominent black rectangular box is centered on the map, containing the title in white, bold, sans-serif font. The title is split into two lines: "GOOD" on the top line and "DAUGHTER" on the bottom line. The letters are widely spaced and have a slightly distressed or hand-drawn appearance.

**GOOD  
DAUGHTER**

**ALEX LUCELI JIMÉNEZ**

Inés turned a corner on the winding road and almost clipped a tree going sixty miles-per-hour on the curve. Steadily she slowed her pace until she was trekking at half that speed. It was so dark she could only see the few feet that her headlights allowed her. Growing up, her mother had warned her about this backroad, the miles-long stretches of fields and farmland that led out of their little agricultural town and into the city forty minutes away.

“We don’t take that road,” her mother told her, jutting her chin towards the sign on the main highway. “That’s where the gangs dump bodies. There are no lights, either.” She turned her eyes towards the highway, and murmured, “We don’t take that road. Even in the day, we don’t take that road.”

Her mother said a lot of things. Most of them nonsense, some of them not nonsense, a lot of them hurtful. Her mother said so many things that Inés, grown tired of it, had packed up everything important to her in the middle of the night and left her mother’s house once and for all. Her mother was working a late night shift, and would be none the wiser until morning came. She and her mother were waitresses at the town’s only diner, and Inés had an early morning shift, but she wasn’t going to make it. From now on she wasn’t going to make any of her shifts. She was going to stay with her friend in the city. She wouldn’t have to listen to her mother

tell her that her waist was getting too big or that she was twenty-three, she shouldn't still have all that teenage acne. It had been nearing 1 a.m. when Inés drove her rickety old white Ford station wagon onto the highway, racing to get out of town, but there had been a four-car accident and what little traffic there was had been stopped. She had seen the sign announcing the backroad and heard her mother's voice in her head. *We don't take that road.* Inés had taken the exit, a surge of adrenaline tingling through her chest.

"Continue straight for twenty miles," announced her phone's GPS. Her grip on the steering wheel tightened. She didn't want to let herself fully think it, but maybe she was in over her head. She had been on this road only once, when her friend's mother drove them to a birthday party in the city. She had been eleven then, and it had been the middle of the day. Her friend had whispered that this road was home to *la Llorona*, the weeping woman who had killed her children. Then her friend's mother had shushed her, and told her not to invite that kind of energy into her life.

"And you're going to scare your friend," her friend's mother had said, and that was that.

*Don't invite that kind of energy into your life,* she told herself, and she was starting to zone out, eighteen miles left on this road, when the woman appeared in her headlights.

Inés braked just in time, maybe a foot away from the woman, who was in the dead center of the road. Bathed in the yellow light, her skin was ash white, her hair wild and long and black. She wore a wrinkled white cotton blouse and white cotton slacks, wrinkled like the folds of her aging, sunken face, and she was looking right at Inés with unblinking eyes, the willow trees lining this stretch of road blowing gently in the night breeze.

In all the commotion and the sudden stop, Inés had lurched forward in her seat, hard, her chest colliding with the steering wheel. Her car was too tightly packed for anything to have fallen over, thank goodness, and her mind focused on that fact before it focused on the woman, unmoving in front of her car. She kept the car in drive mode, foot pressed hard on the brake. She stared at the woman, and the woman stared at her. After what felt like forever, the woman slowly lifted her hand.

It took Inés a second to realize that the woman was waving at her. She didn't wave back, paralyzed in her seat. When the woman started making her way over to Inés' window, it didn't occur to Inés to drive away. Her head felt muddled, and as if in a trance, she lowered the window halfway when the woman tapped on it.

With the window open, Inés could see that the woman was crying, her dark eyes bloodshot and tears trickling down her white cheeks.

“Are you okay, ma'am?” Inés asked.

“I’m sorry if I startled you,” the woman said. Her voice was soft, and low. “I don’t know what to do. My daughter left me here.”

Inés frowned. “She left you here?”

“We had a fight,” said the woman. “She pulled over, and made me get out of the car. I’ve been here for a while.”

“And no one’s driven by?” That didn’t seem right to Inés. Maybe her mother had all sorts of notions about this road, but she knew that not everyone had those notions. To a lot of people, it was just a road.

“No one’s stopped,” the woman said. She gave Inés a watery smile. “I thought if I walked into the middle of the road, I could make someone stop. I was right.”

And more than a little foolish in this deep dark, but Inés didn’t say that.

“Unfortunately,” said Inés, “I can’t offer you a ride. My car’s packed, even the passenger seat.” She wouldn’t want to offer her a ride if she could, but she didn’t say that, either. She was feeling a little lightheaded now, her vision blurring at the edges. When her eyes flickered over to her hands still on the steering wheel, she thought that maybe she was trembling, but she couldn’t be sure.

“That’s all right,” said the woman. “Would you mind just waiting here for a while? I’m sure she’s coming back for me. She’s good, my daughter.

We just had a misunderstanding.”

“I guess,” said Inés, “but I’m kind of in a hurry.”

“At this hour?” The woman’s watery smile remained constant. “Where are you rushing at a time like this?”

“I’m going to see a friend,” said Inés, feeling defensive, “in the city.”

“At this hour?” the woman asked, again.

Inés shrugged, and the woman shook her head.

“It’s not my business, I know,” the woman said. “I’m sorry. It’s the mother in me. My daughter is young like you, and I hate to think of her driving on this road alone at night.”

“My mother would hate it, too,” said Inés, and the woman’s brows raised up a bit.

“Your mother doesn’t know you’re out here right now?”

“I’m an adult,” Inés said, and the woman nodded slowly.

“Of course,” said the woman. “You are. So is my daughter. She’s so grown now, my daughter. But a mother is always going to think that she knows best.”

Inés looked at her hands again, but it felt wrong to look away from the woman for too long. When she looked back, there was that constant smile.

“My mother definitely thinks she does,” said Inés, feeling weak. She let out a breathy sigh, and it left fog on the part of the car window she

hadn't let all the way down. Her frown grew deeper in response to the woman's watery smile, and she said, "Ma'am, can I maybe call someone for you? I really need to get going."

"No one would answer," said the woman, and Inés shook her head.

"I'm sure there has to be someone," said Inés.

"Just my daughter," said the woman, "but I'm sure she's coming back. *Mija*, I didn't catch your name."

The Spanish term of endearment took Inés by surprise. She didn't know why. Her mother was a pale Mexican, too. It was Inés that had turned out as dark brown as the father she knew only in a handful of pictures.

"I'm Inés," said Inés, and the woman didn't offer her name in return.

"Thank you, Inés," said the woman, "for waiting with me."

"Just for a few more minutes," said Inés, but it came out weakly. She added, "There are some houses further back on this road. Can't you see if anyone else can help you?"

"I need to stay here," said the woman, "so that my daughter can find me when she comes back for me."

Inés nodded. "I'm sorry I can't do more."

"It's just so nice to not be alone," the woman said. "I've been alone for so long."

Inés didn't know what to say. So she didn't say anything, just kept her wary eyes on the woman's wrinkled face and tapped at her steering wheel. She could hear the engine of her car humming, and crickets outside. She heard the leaves of the willows that enveloped this part of the road brushing against each other. The cold night air came in through the open window, and made her skin rise in goosebumps. Finally she cleared her throat, and said, "Ma'am, I need to get going."

"Won't you stay just a little longer?" the woman said, her eyes welling up with more tears. "It's so good not to be alone."

Inés shifted in her seat, and said, "I think you should walk to one of those houses further back, ma'am. I think you should call someone to pick you up. The police, maybe."

"And if my daughter comes back?"

"Respectfully, ma'am," Inés said, "it's possible that she may not be coming back."

The woman nodded, her face shiny and wet.

"She told me she hated me," said the woman, voice low. Inés had to strain to hear her words. "She told me I had ruined her life, and that she wished she had been born to a different mother. My good daughter, telling me such hateful things. Can you imagine that?"

Inés felt cold, and didn't say anything. She had fantasized often



enough about saying such things to her mother. In her daydreams she had screamed them at the top of her lungs, and made her mother hurt the way her mother made Inés hurt. But she would never dare say them. She wasn't brave enough. Never had been. Tonight was the bravest night of her life.

"I've always wanted what's best for my daughter," said the woman. "I've never done anything that wasn't in her best interest. I've looked out for her. I've kept her safe from the world. That's all a mother wants."

Inés thought about her mother's fits of rage, her mother's insistence that any of Inés' moods were personally victimizing her. Her mother's cold shoulder, how she claimed that Inés was wasting her life away. How she lived the same life as her mother, had been stuck in it for years, and how her mother resented her for never going further than she had gone. How Inés could ruin her mother's day with so much as a smile that wasn't wide enough for her liking, and the screaming and crying that would ensue.

"For her to have left you here," Inés said, "you must have done something pretty terrible."

And the woman—the woman smiled, right through her tears.

"Do you know what my daughter did when she pulled over, Inés?" Now the woman's smile had gone bigger, and her bloodshot eyes were blown wide. She raised her hands and started gripping at her throat, and Inés gasped to see that there was blood pouring out from a gash in the skin there.

“She pulled over,” the woman said, “and she slit my throat, and she left me here to die. My good daughter did that to me. My own good daughter. Would you do that to your mother, Inés?”

Whatever words Inés may have had were caught in her throat. The word *justice* rang through her mind. More than that—it sang. *Justice, justice, justice*. Without being fully aware of it she had raised her own hands to grasp at her own throat. Now the woman had thrown her head and bleeding throat back, and she was wailing, wailing into the empty night, and Inés was shaking and couldn’t look away from the woman, and then a car horn blaring broke her out of the trance.

She blinked, and looked into her rearview mirror. There was a large red truck behind her. She couldn’t see the driver well, but it looked like a man. After a few seconds of silence, the car horn blared again. When she looked to her side, the woman, moments ago standing there wailing, was gone. Inés stared at the empty space, then looked forward and jerked her foot off the brake. Her car jumped back to life, and she resumed her trek down the dark road.

Seconds later, Inés drove by the woman again, blood all over her white clothes. But there was another car behind her now, and if the driver could see the woman, he chose not to stop. This time, Inés did not stop either.



**ON  
THE  
EDGE**

**SILK~**

i enter myself  
through a clearing  
in the crackling  
thicket of memories  
to find what is left  
salvageable artifacts  
something even sacred  
like a loyal pet  
waiting to be rescued  
tail between its injured legs  
stench of abandoned hope  
whatever hasn't already  
been laid to rest  
and to survey the damage  
of another ravaged year  
still drowning  
in the sweet marrow  
of my brittle former selves  
holding still  
before taking flight  
listening for signs of life

bubbling to the surface  
holding my breath  
trying to see through  
the muddied slow-drift  
of days as i turn my head  
like a red-crowned crane  
amongst the smoldering reeds  
by the water's edge

The background is a detailed topographic map of the Simonside Hills area, showing contour lines, rivers, and various geographical features. A prominent black rectangular box is centered on the map, containing the title in white text. The map includes labels such as 'KAMC', 'SA', 'P', 'N', 'C', 'T', 'Tirav', 'Ka', 'Pla', 'PLA', 'BET', 'S H I', 'P L A T B A', 'S O L I T A I R E B U T T E', 'D I A M O N D B U T T E', and 'M A R S H'.

**SIMONSIDE  
HILLS**

**KATE McCAUGHEY**

The heather is dried and  
biting like the mess  
of metal on a scourer,  
but I love her anyway.

She reminds me of  
the reeds in the surrounding  
marshes; floating on the surface  
to onlookers, but planted  
firmly below.

Envious of her solidity,  
I crunch and squelch  
my way round the intestines,  
breaking ribs  
with my boots and  
picturing myself in the  
belly of the whale,  
swallowed entirely.

**Adam Robert Martin** is an Irish illustrator based on the Antrim coast with Scotland in view just over the water, working mainly within the realms of folklore and mythology. Find Adam on Instagram @art.of.lore

**Alex Luceli Jiménez** is a writer and middle school English teacher living in Soledad, CA. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Berkeley Fiction Review, Lunch Ticket, and Barren Magazine. She was born and raised in southern California. Visit her online at alexlucelijimenez.com.

**Billy Craven** is a teacher living in Dublin, Ireland. He has had poetry and short stories published in a variety of publications including Shooter Magazine, The Caterpillar and Paper Lanterns.

**Bryan C. Laesch** is the Omni-Genre Writer, despite some evidence to the contrary. He writes in (almost) every genre and has written in (almost) every style. His chief interest lies in Gothic horror as it allows him to combine genres to create something truly unique. Find Bryan on Instagram @bryanclaesch or his website/blog [www.bryanclaesch.com](http://www.bryanclaesch.com).

**Elizabeth Vegvary** lives and writes in the wooded foothills of the Cascade Mountain Range, reveling in those days and nights when the wind crashes through the treetops sounding just exactly like the sea.

**Geist** is an uncanny artist from deepest, scrumpiest Somerset with an addiction to all things folkloric and mythical. He also curates and prints Myth & Lore Zine which you can find at [www.geistart.bigcartel.com](http://www.geistart.bigcartel.com)

**Gina Marie Bernard** lives in Bemidji, Minnesota. Her daughters, Maddie and Parker, share her heart. Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net, Best Small Fictions, Best Micro-Fictions, and the Pushcart. She is completing her MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Arkansas, Monticello.

**Jacob O'Sullivan** grew up in Castletown, Isle of Man, in a haunted old watermill. He has had poems published in Manx Lit Fest, The Open Ear, and The North. He currently lives in Leith, Edinburgh, and recently went on a pilgrimage to visit The Wicker Man filming locations in Galloway. Socials: @JacobOsullivan

**Jem Henderson** is a queer poet from Leeds, UK with an MA in Creative Writing from York St. John University. They have been published in Civic Leicester's Black Lives Matter, Streetcake and recently won a Creative Future award for underrepresented writers. A book, Genderfux, including their work is due out in 2022 from Nine Pens. Their ramblings can be found on twitter @jem\_face.



**John Pendred** is an artist, writer and filmmaker who lives in the Fens. He likes time outdoors under blue skies and sunshine, cycling and exploring with the children. John's work can be found on Instagram at [outsiderartist\\_](#) and would love to hear from you.

**Jon Davies** writes poetry, horror and crime fiction. He lives in Lancashire and is grateful to have the countryside on his doorstep. When he's not writing, he's out walking the hills, reading, sketching, listening to 90s music, or doing judo. Find him on Twitter [@JonDaviesWriter](#).

**Kate McCaughey** (she/her) is a Northern-based poet currently completing her MA in York. She is most interested in human nature, and how we respond to ourselves and the radius of people and places around us. In her spare time she is an editor for Ergi Press, and can usually be found listening to queer guitar music and drinking a big cuppa. You can find her at [@kateallicemcc](#).

**Leela Raj-Sankar** is an Indian-American teenager from Arizona. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Rejection Letters, Brave Voices Magazine, and CLOVES Literary, among others. In her spare time, she can usually be found watching bad television or taking long naps. Say hi to her on Twitter [@sickgirlisms](#).

**Richard Daniels** is a writer, performer and podcaster. Along with the artist Melody Phelan-Clark, he has been unearthing and exploring the world of OA since early 2020. His work is for anyone who has a strong suspicion that beneath the veneer of the mundane there is a world that is much stranger - one that speaks to our deeper desires for fun, fear and the far-out. Due to this his thoughts are frequently monitored by higher intelligences from other dimensions, usually on Tuesdays. Find out more at [occultariaofalbion.com](#). Instagram: [@oa.richarddaniels](#)

**Rosa Canales** currently lives and writes in Hamburg, Germany. Her work has previously appeared in Rust and Moth, Kissing Dynamite Poetry, Lammergeier, The Sigma Tau Delta Review and others. You can find her on twitter at [@rosacan9](#).

**T.S. Moran** (he/they) has always had an affinity for the strange. He is a mid-west-based speculative fiction novelist, scriptwriter, and lifelong storyteller. Oakley can be found writing about the wild, weird, wretched, and wondrous or waxing poetic about the monstrous. Follow him on Twitter [@ts\\_writes](#)

**Silk~** Poet. Recent Publication Credits: Frogpond; Sublunary Review; Lothlorien Poetry Journal; Briefly Write Magazine, Inklette Magazine; Mycelium Magazine; Versification; Presence; Hyacinth Review; Paddler Press; Strukturriss; The Tide Rises, The Tide Falls; and Modern Haiku. Longlisted in the 2021 Frontier Digital Chapbook Contest. You can find Silk~ on Twitter at [@Silk73507704](#)

# EDITOR'S NOTE

Thank you for reading Middle of Nowhere!

I hope that you have enjoyed this first issue as much as I have enjoyed working on it. When I started Ram Eye I wanted to make a space for beautiful, moving, engaging horror stories, but I never for a second expected to receive so much fantastic work from such brilliant, talented creators. Working with them and getting to present their wonderful creations to you in this issue has been a true honour.

Thank you to all of the contributors for trusting me with their work. Thank you to everybody who submitted and made narrowing down the selection so difficult. Thank you to everyone who liked and shared on social media to get the word out about Ram Eye. And thanks again to you for reading!

This is only the beginning for Ram Eye. I have some big ideas for where to take the magazine next. You've been on a journey with us to the Middle of Nowhere - I hope you'll stick around to see where we go next!

Alex Bestwick  
Editor-in-Chief

For more information about Ram Eye, including to be kept up to date about new submission calls, please follow us @RamEyePress on Instagram and Twitter.



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**ROSA CANALES**

**T.S. MORAN**

**SILK~**

