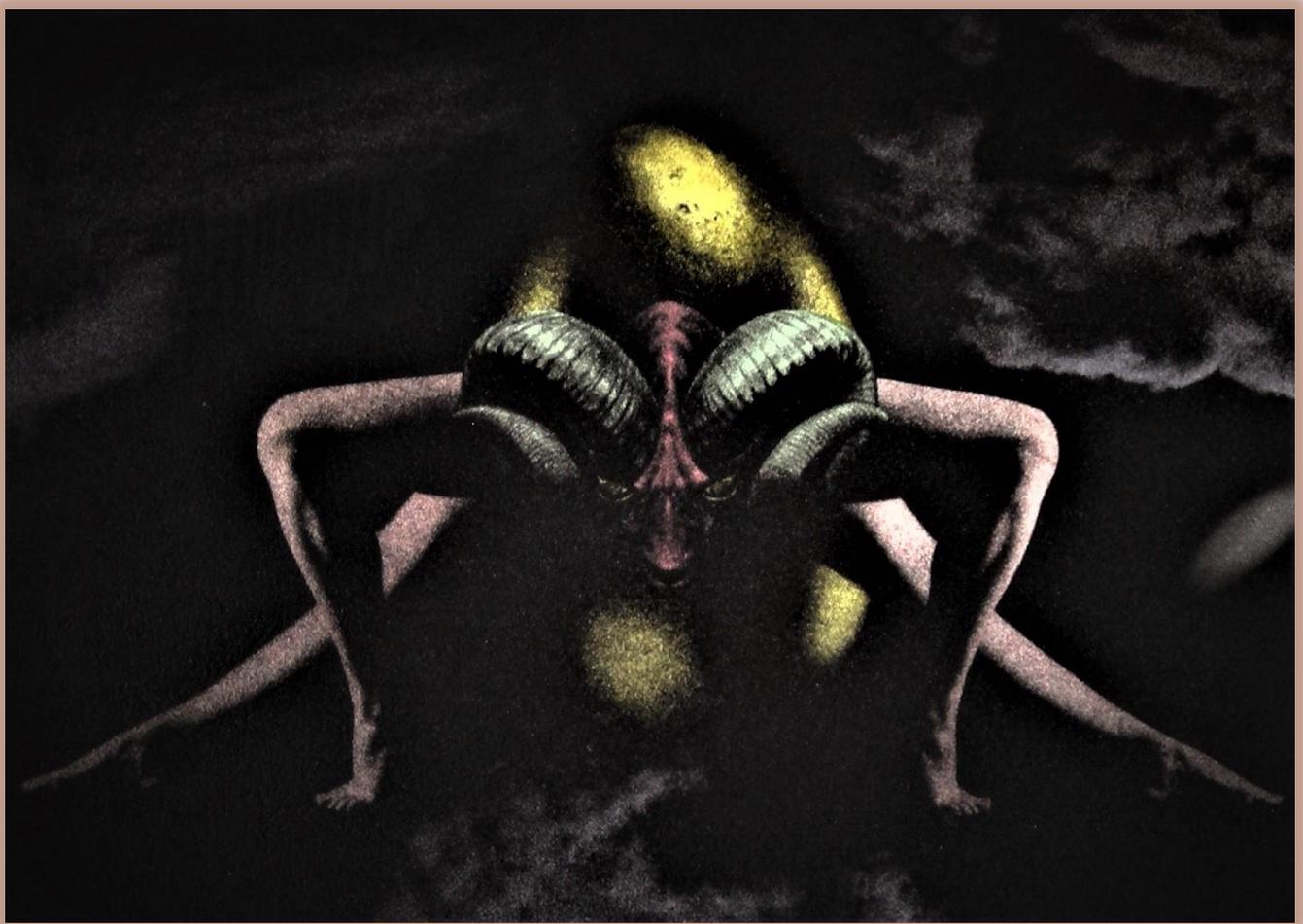


THE FANTASTIC OTHER

ISSUE 04



A WINTER SUBVERSION

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A Note from the Editor

It has been a tumultuous winter, of that we cannot deny. We at *The Fantastic Other* have watched as our readership climbed, submissions filled our inbox, and we experienced the pleasure of hearing from new friends and the not-so-friendly. We have bucked under our growing pains and reveled in our shared joy of fantastic literature. The world and our lives have similarly been devastating, infuriating, and revelatory. And do you know what? The winter isn't over yet. If you've come back for more of the strange, the discomfiting, and all the sublime that can be found in so-called speculative literature, then we have a healthy helping to heap on your plate. You will notice that we elected not to hold a contest this time—each of our contributors are decidedly winners. So, if you want to see the kinds of fiction and poetry that you don't find in a traditional lit mag, then join us for a romp in the moonlight. Delight with us in our winter subversion.

G.E. Butler, Chief Editor

Cover Art: “Cosmic Egg” by Alex Nodopaka

Alex Nodopaka originated in Ukraine. He speaks San Franciscan, Parisian, Kievan & Muscovite. Mumbles in English & sings in tongues. He studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, Casablanca, Morocco. He is presently a full-time author and visual artist in the USA but considers his past irrelevant as he seeks new reincarnations.

Lanie's Monster

by Briar Ripley Page

***Trigger warning for suicidal ideation.**

Other girls dream of their wedding dresses, but Lanie and me, we spend lunch in the library, drawing pictures of the coffins we want to have. Lanie saw a picture once of a coffin that was shaped like a fish, in New Orleans or Barbados or some other warm and faraway place. Now she can't let go of the idea that she could have a dinosaur coffin. Or maybe a whale, if whales are extinct by the time she kicks it. Something huge and universally annihilated.

Lanie is congenitally tiny, bird-boned and unlikely to ever break four foot eleven. She is obsessed with vastness. Animals with veins big enough for Lanie to swim through. The amount of time she will be dead.

"You're so boring," says Lanie, leaning over to look at my pencil sketch. "God, Ingrid. Show some imagination. My grandma would've had this coffin, if there'd been anything left of her to bury." Lanie's grandmother died when the plane she was on exploded in midair over the Pacific Ocean, enroute to Hawaii.

"I'm a traditionalist," I tell her. "And I want it to be, like, feminine. Pretty. You know." My coffin is the old-school Dracula shape, but with kind of rounded corners. The outside will be painted shiny white. The inside will be lined in peach satin, although I haven't colored it in yet. I explain to Lanie how I'm going to wear a sparkling silk gown with a tight bodice and a puffed-out tulle skirt. Its color will match the coffin lining

exactly. I'll have white roses in my hair and I will look more beautiful than I ever did when I was alive. I plan on dying young and stacked, with perfect skin.

"I wanna be buried in the nude," says Lanie, snapping her gum.

Every week, there's a different drill. The world is full of dangers, and the teachers are trying to prepare us for all of them. Sometimes they have us duck and cover beneath our desks, in case we get the Bomb dropped on us.

"Our grandparents used to do this exact same thing," I whisper to Lanie. "My mom says she can't believe they brought it back for our generation."

"I can't believe it either," says Lanie. "Everybody knows this wouldn't help. We'd be totally vaporized."

We both fidget uncomfortably. Being vaporized would completely ruin all of our death and funeral plans, although it might leave cool shadow-images of our bodies permanently emblazoned on the rubble of our junior high. Lanie reaches out from under her desk to covertly take my hand. She squeezes it in her stubby little fingers. *We're not gonna go out that way, Ingrid.*

Other times, we have school shooter drills. These also involve hiding, sometimes under the desks again and sometimes standing, packed ass-to-belly in supply closets, so close you can smell exactly what kind of Teen Spirit everyone else is (or isn't) wearing. Then there are fire drills, flood drills, tornado drills, earthquake drills, hurricane drills, rogue AI drills, and giant monster drills.

“I hope a monster gets me,” says Lanie. We’re standing next to each other with our faces to the wall of the gymnasium (ground floor, no windows for a tornado to knock out).

“Like, that’s what you’d pick if you had to choose one of these crappy ways to die that probably won’t ever even happen?” I pause a moment, thinking over the options. “I guess I’d go for the school shooter. It’d be more likely to leave an intact corpse, and it’s definitely the most tragic. My death could be, you know, a symbol. Of how our country needs better gun control, and fewer entitled boys.”

Lanie snorts. “Nobody’s death should be a symbol. Giant monster all the way. I’ll dive straight down its beautiful throat.”

I scoot a little closer to Lanie and bump her hip with mine. “Good luck,” I say. “Giant monster attacks haven’t been common since the 1980s and they usually happen in coastal cities.”

“I’ll have to move to New York for college, then.” Lanie’s face is serious in profile. I’m suddenly filled with a strange kind of fluttery tenderness. I want to pull her into my lap and caress her hair, hold her close and feel her heart beating against my chest. Feel her breath move in and out of her lungs.

But Lanie would hate being pulled into anyone’s lap, even mine, and half the class already thinks we’re lesbos— no way am I pouring any gas on that rumor-fire. I settle for touching her hand. “I’m happy you’re here,” I say. “I’d hate to be alone in this hellhole.”

“Yeah.” Lanie sighs. “It’s good to know I’ve got somebody to count on to make sure I get my dinosaur coffin.”

~~~~~

Just a few months later, as winter melts limply into spring, a giant monster attacks. Go figure.

The monster is so tall that the tops of the pines only come to its muscled shoulders. It looks kind of like a reptile, with a sleek head, yellow-green scales, and a webbed sail cresting its spine from neck to tail. It moves more like a gorilla, though, pushing itself forward in a half-crouch on powerful arms with almost-human hands knuckling underneath. Its back legs are short and stiff. Its slit-pupiled eyes glow like there’s lava boiling inside its barrel chest. Maybe there is. Nobody really understands how monsters work.

It is beautiful and it is appalling. My brain almost fizzles out from the enormity of it. I’ve never seen anything alive that big before. In homeroom, we watch on Mr. Ortega’s laptop as the monster crushes barns and cornfields, scoops whole cows up in one hand and bites them in half. Entrails hang between its sharp teeth like strands of spaghetti. The local newscaster is visibly sweating, struggling to maintain his composure as he reports the monster’s progress. It’s uncertain where the monster came from, what it wants, how the town council and law enforcement are going to deal with it, whether it’s the same monster that terrorized Rhode Island last year before vanishing into the sea.

The only thing we know for sure is that the monster is headed toward the junior high school. We don’t need the newscaster for that. All we have to do is look out the window. You can literally see the monster from a mile away.

Lanie's out of her seat, standing with her face and hands pressed to the glass. Mr. Ortega doesn't bother telling her to sit down; pretty soon the rest of the class is standing up, too. We're going to have to evacuate the building. Mr. Ortega wants us to line up and proceed downstairs in a calm and orderly fashion. The only part of this that's even remotely happening is: we are proceeding downstairs. All except for Lanie. And me.

"Lanie," I say, tugging the sleeve of her sweater. "Come on. We gotta go."

She doesn't move from the window. Her pupils are hugely dilated, like she just took a bong rip. Like she's staring at a boy she has a crush on, if Lanie ever had crushes on boys. Her fingertips tremble against the windowpane.

"Lanie," I try again. The monster is clearer in the window, toy-sized now, an action figure I could pick up in my fist. Its sail is pink and smooth, almost delicate. "Lanie, c'mon. Ortega'll give you detention."

"It's coming for me," says Lanie. "I called it and it came. You can stay or go, Ingrid, but I'm waiting."

"No," I say. I'm trembling now, too. I imagine Lanie naked in a wooden box shaped like a Tyrannosaurus, skin hard and waxy, eyes shut. I imagine us both scrambled masses of blood, bones, and brains beneath the monster's feet. I feel like I'm looking into a true future, an inevitable future, and I don't want it. I don't want it at all. I feel like I'm going to throw up.

Lanie's so tiny, and I'm what my mother calls "husky," big and strong. I grab her by the waist, and she lets out a tiny yawp of surprise as I carry her from the classroom. She

kicks and squirms for a while, but I hold on tight. By the time we're down the hall and at the top of the staircase, she's gone limp. The fire is screeching, and a clamor of voices blasts up at us from the lower floors.

"Fuck you, Ingrid," says Lanie as I maneuver her carefully down the stairs. "I thought you understood." She's crying a little.

"Shut up," I tell her. "I won't leave you, no matter what happens."

~~~~~

Lanie stays limp until we're out the door and halfway across the basketball court, almost caught up with the rest of the evacuating students and teachers. We hear a sound that's half foghorn and half singing, so deep and loud it vibrates our marrow, so mournful it makes me loosen my grip on Lanie for a moment. It's the call of the monster, I realize. It's even closer now, its steps shaking the ground, its toothy mouth open wide. There's a shimmer deep in its gullet: magma, flame. It drowns out everything in the world except itself. And me. And Lanie, who pushes away from me and starts running, tearing off across the blacktop, heading for her death.

"Oh shit!" I hear another kid scream. "Lanie!" shouts Mr. Ortega. I don't say anything.

I start running, too.

The monster gets bigger and bigger, and Lanie seems smaller and smaller as she approaches it, even as I approach her. The monster could swallow her whole, easy. She really could dive into its fiery throat.

I'm strong, but Lanie has always been fast: my eyes and lungs burn and there's a stitch in my side and I still can't quite catch up. I can see the wrinkles of scaly skin on the monster's huge elbows. Light falls through its sail like a prism, casting rainbows on the earth around it. I wonder if the monster can see us, if it's noticed us yet, what it thinks of us if it has.

Lanie's just ahead of me. Just out of reach. Her shoes are muddy. Her hair flows behind her like a tattered banner. Wind roars in my ears. Lanie's ears are miniature satellite dishes turned away from me. I don't have the breath to yell, but I can pant out words just loud enough that she should be able to hear them, if she wants to. We're close enough.

"No matter what happens," I say. "I mean it, Lanie. Let me catch up. If I can't stop you, I want to see. I want to live, but I want to see."

The monster roars again. I almost fall from the blast of it, the beauty. Lanie turns to look back at me and bright red is pouring from her nose, freed by the power of that sound, but she's smiling.

About the Author

Briar Ripley Page is the author of the surreal Florida gothic novella *Corrupted Vessels* (*swallow::tale press*) and the erotic sci-fi horror novel *Body After Body*. Briar's short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in venues including *smoke + mold*, *SHiFT*, *Moon Park Review*, and *The Book of Queer Saints*. Their website is briarripleypage.xyz. You can also follow them on Twitter @flameswallower and on Instagram @briaryroses.

A Waking Dream of the Inorganic

by Luke Young

Pipe slime chemical fertilizing chant echoes

Cut crayon streaks on big stamp lips

Pushed onto the neck of the wall

Bruising hickey hand oiled paint

Flaking

Onto

A high-tech water bottle

Melt molded

In a click-clattering factory

Shelf stocking itself

Over and over and over

To a cog's riddle

Spoken in tongues Ayn Rand touches herself

Perversely-through her clothes

Moaning, "pr-aaw-fit."

While The Prophet, grateful, lifts a bread crust to the ceiling fan

Whirling mad shadows

Who eat light like yeast,

Un-leavening

A Passover loaf spread out on cracked marble

The sculptor begrudged, "It could have been my David."

Uncircumcised, yet hard, and small

The Roman Ideal

Replaced by free-standing columns worshiped in
ruin

Flowing into the Aegean

Like Zeus' carbolic acid dissolved beard

Staining latex tunics

Underground

Raving rainbow nightclubs

Carried by dancing police scanner sounds

"1. 2. We got a 1. 2., A 1. 2. 3. 4. Shut the door.

On road four."

Instead of a badge: a yellow smiley

winking

Instead of a flag: an empty baby-wipe packet

"alcohol-free!"

The policeman grinned helpfully

His teeth pretty like the moon

Pity

It's made of cheese

Cause no part of him is

Though some might think so

He certainly spread-eagles well

Poor birds

No life for them

In alleys and freeways

"Homeless Helicopter tickets"

Lamenting

With American cheddar

About the Author

Luke Young is an Indigenous American and of early settler heritage, but spent the majority of his life overseas, from the ages of five to seventeen. You can follow him on Instagram @ragealien.

How Does Your Garden Grow?

by Samantha Bryant

Meg never looked back as she walked evenly. Though she could hear tendrils reaching for her and small, damp jaws opening and closing. Some things were better left unseen. She might be ignorant—Lord knows there were many things she didn't know—but she wasn't stupid.

She remembered the stories and understood the unspoken warnings between the words, the truths about the dangers a woman faces in looking back. Keeping those lessons in mind kept her resolute.

Eurydice would walk free upon the earth if her foolish lover had only kept his eyes on the prize. But he'd been unable to trust that she followed without direct evidence. His doubt separated them forever and trapped her in the ghost-realm below the earth, victim to her misplaced faith in the man who sought to be her hero. She'd have done better to plot her own escape than to rely on a fickle man who demanded validation for rescue.

Lot's poor unnamed wife let nostalgia taint her hope for the future and ended up relegated to a cautionary tale used to scare women into obedience. She had looked upon that which men had not wanted her to see and had been silenced forever as a result of her temerity. Her mistake had been in letting them know what she wanted. Secrecy could be a woman's friend.

Looking back was a chump's game, and Meg had finished playing. Her eyes fixed on the horizon, her feet trod the path out of this life. She had only to remain true to her task and it would soon be over.

Just as the old woman had instructed, Meg walked steadily with unfaltering steps, shoulders back and head held high. "Project confidence. You must feel the sureness in the marrow of your bones," Mama Johntae's glower still burned in Meg's memory, along with her words: "Don't let the slightest seed of doubt take root in your mind or it will grow until it overwhelms you."

Meg daintily dropped fat, dead flies from her silver bowl onto the earth, sowing them like seeds as she strode toward the house where Jasper slept, a serene smile on her face. Her husband's excesses would probably have kept him unconscious unaided, but she'd hedged her bets with a tincture of melatonin, valerian root and terpenes, ensuring he remained in a stupor. There would only be one opportunity. No second chance to grab her second chance.

Living with Jasper had become like nesting with a rodent or an insect—hidden and scuttling, dark and unkempt. Dirty and disgusting. Strange that something that began in romance and adventure ended in a mattress on the floor of a shabby hovel.

Even with her palms bloodied from the corpses of the flies and the sweet-rotten scent of rot accosting her nostrils, Meg gloried to walk in the light, feeling as though she had stepped from a cave where she'd been lost for far too long. She was only ashamed it had taken her this long to act. Some part of her must have held out hope, despite all evidence to the contrary. Some stupid part that denied facts just because she didn't want them to be true.

That was all over now. She was through lying, especially to herself.

The warmth of the afternoon sun on her skin was tepid compared to the heat of anticipation rising in the dark pool of her heart. Sunlight still permitted shadows to hide the dark things, but the light of justice sent beams into every cranny, leaving no place for rot to fester. Purifying as fire.

How fitting to rid herself of this insect disguised as a man with Venus flytraps and pitcher plants. Her green thumb had proven good for more than daisies and rutabaga. Jasper had dismissed her plant work as useless, even as he consumed the fruits of her garden. Even before the drugs ate the kinder parts of the man, he had never understood her connection with the earth and her joy in bringing life from it. He sneered at the nurturing side of her, calling it weakness.

Now that spring had arrived and her plants had grown strong and hungry, they'd see who was useless, what fed, and what was eaten. The harvest had ripened, and her moment had arrived. Anticipation glowed on her face with a feverish sheen.

The path of flies she'd sown drew the scabbling plants behind her like Hansel and Gretel's breadcrumb thieving birds. Enormous pitcher plants and Venus flytraps dragged themselves across the dry earth with a rasping scrape, seeking the salty-sour meat of the fly corpses soaked in Jasper's blood. She'd trained them to crave the taste of him and kept them slightly underfed. Now they were ravenous.

For night after tedious night, she had extracted vials of his blood after he'd passed out. Crouching by the mattress on the floor, ready to bolt should he stir, she slid a needle beneath his skin and drained more. He didn't notice one more hole in his flesh among the needle tracks that already marred his once-beautiful flesh or wonder if his weakness

stemmed from anything besides the drugs. He remained sure of his hold over her, convinced she had been permanently cowed.

While he slept, held in oblivion by his addictions, she swept the corpses of flies from all the windowsills. She'd needed hundreds. Luckily, squalor attracted them in droves, and spread sugar called even more. Her macabre collection grew until her silver bowl swam with dark fuzzy carcasses. Wings stained red and bellies bloated.

If Jasper noticed her odd new obsession at all, he must have mistaken her preparations for an attempt to clean up the pigsty their home had degraded into. As if any home with him in it could ever truly be clean—he dirtied all he touched. When she made her new home, it would always smell of antiseptic and lemon oil. She'd make sure of it.

Meg didn't look back even when the plants scuffling behind her grew noisier. Leaves rustling against the earth became more like voices calling her name with each step: "Mmmmmmeg, Mmmmmmmmmmeg, Mmmmmmmmmmmmeg."

"Dark magic wants to go bad, to turn on its user," Mama Johntae had warned. She'd been right. Even knowing, even prepared, the magic twisted the sounds in her brain, making her imagine the plants called her name. She had to fight to keep her head facing forward.

The old woman had tried to talk her out of this, even while she taught her what she needed. She'd told tale after tale of the failures of women who sought to bend dark powers to their will but hadn't had the backbone to follow through completely and had paid the price. Her unblinking gaze expressed apathetic doubt that Meg had what it would take.

Meg would not be deterred, had practiced the incantations until her teacher had to admit her proficiency. The old woman's last words still echoed in Meg's memory: "Follow all the rules or you'll fall victim to your own devices. It'll be your funeral instead of his."

A murmuring rose, like a crowd burgeoning into an angry mob. The smacking sounds seemed more human now, like the noise of an old man's lips as he eats ribs with only half a set of teeth. Distracted, Meg had slowed, and the sun was beginning to dip lower in the sky. Nearly time.

Vines scraped at her heels, tugging at the hem of her skirt, urging her to turn around or to stop walking and let the hungry vegetation feed. The temptation to lay down and let the plants overtake her made her wobble on her feet. It would be easy to stop. To give in.

But Meg wasn't one for easy. Not anymore.

Without looking down, she dropped another handful of flies behind her, grimacing at the wet smack against her calf when one of them bounced off her flesh on its way to the ground.

The tension on the cloth of her skirt released, her plant army distracted by the offering, and Meg lengthened her stride, keeping ahead of the troop of viney soldiers snaking from the forest valley where she'd nurtured them. She could see the peeling red paint on the door of the shack she'd shared with Jasper now. The building tilted askew, even the architecture knocked off-kilter by the mockery of a life lived within its walls.

She laid a hand on the doorknob. Once she'd led the plants to their intended victim, she had to keep walking, straight through the house and out the other door, picking up the bag she'd placed there.

She longed to stay and watch but knew that if she stayed the plants would devour her, too. Maybe after a week or so she could return to see what remained. But even that was risky.

Better to wait until after a full cycle of the moon.

Better yet to keep walking and never look back at all.

The way forward was all that mattered now.

About the Author

Samantha Bryant writes the Menopausal Superhero series and other women-centered speculative fiction. You can follow her @samanthabwriter on Instagram and Twitter or check out her website, [Balancing Act](#).

The Ancient of Days

by Kim Whysall-Hammond

I dream of Martian dawn
vermilion and rust

Two figures, vast at distance
swollen heads, spindly limbs
lie prone in cold cliff-shade

Each raises a forelimb to the rising sun
single enlarged digits glowing
suddenly incandescent

It burns my eyes, fills the sky

As their light fades
the cliff overhang falls
crushing ancient skulls

All turns to dust that
swirls and creeps along the canyon floor
lapping my suited, booted feet

and moves on

About the Author

Kim Whysall-Hammond is a Londoner in exile, who has worked in Climate Research and Telecommunications. Her poetry is in anthologies published by *Wild Pressed Books*, *Milk and Cake Press*, *Palewell Press* and is forthcoming at St Brigid Press. You can follow her blog at thecheesesellerswife.wordpress.com.

L.O.C.U.S.T.

by Kara Gray

Interview Transcript 09-05-2021

Black Rock Mobile Operations Base

IN=Interviewer, SGT Aikens

SAV=Selena Anne Villareal

PVT=PVT Amad

[begin transcript 00:00:10]

IN: Are you able to tell me your name?

SAV: [indistinct, droning noise]

IN: Your name.

SAV: [inaudible]

IN: We found this on you. In your, uh, fanny pack, purse. ID. Is this you?

[00:01:02]

IN: Selena? It looks like... you. Selena Anne Vill— Villareal.

SAV: Hmm... My... name?

IN: Right, Selena.

SAV: Our... name... [coughing]

IN: We have doctors here, they're taking care of you, okay? You're safe. I need you to tell me what you saw. You can help us.

SAV: Where... have I... gone?

IN: We had to fly a bit, to get somewhere we could help you. You're safe, here.

SAV: Where have *I* gone?

IN: Selena...

SAV: Where? I'm gone—

IN: You're safe, Selena. You're—

SAV: I've gone... gone—

[inaudible, overlapping speech]

[crying]

Office of the Adjutant General of Nevada

Carson City, Nevada

05 September 2021

MEMORANDUM FOR Department of Homeland Security

Subject: RECOMMENDATION OF IMMEDIATE ACTION

1.

a. Statement of the problem: Significant national threat is posed by an unknown biological phenomena affecting the estimated 20,000 “Burning Man” festival-goers in Black Rock Desert, northwestern Nevada. The affected have mobilized on foot and were first reported by Washoe County Sheriff’s Office en route to Gerlach. Local Deputies were unable to deescalate. Casualties are unknown at this time. The affected have shown impaired cognition and swarm-like behaviour (referred to in this document as ‘the Swarm’). Preliminary research has determined this event to be a *locally occurring condition of unknown serotonoid toxicity (L.O.C.U.S.T.)*. The Swarm is being tracked by air en route to Empire, moving South through Black Rock Desert Valley.

[00:03:26]

IN: Selena, you can help me. Tell me what you saw. I can help you. Right? Help you find... help you—

SAV: It hurts... [moaning]

IN: I can help, get the doctors... when you answer my questions.

SAV: You'll... take me back?

IN: Take you? We'll help. Get you what you need.

SAV: Could you... come... closer?

[chair scraping against floor]

IN: What do you remember?

SAV: Closer. Please?

[00:05:32]

SAV: The night... The night the man burned, it was the fire. I wasn't... I was never *whole*, until that moment. You think I'm sick? I'm... so... it's hard. It fucking... hurts. I'm not *here*, I'm... why am I tied? I can't... if you come closer. Just... *touch* me. *Touch me*.

[movement, thrashing. Inaudible]

b. Assumptions: The 2021 Burning Man Festival was conducted illegally under quarantine guidelines, with no documentation of attendees. Preliminary

intelligence has not revealed prior intent to organize in a hostile fashion.
Presence of Schedule I and II drugs is suspected, with trafficking activity.

c. Facts Bearing on the Problem: Three individuals were extracted from the “Swarm,” one survived for questioning [transcript attached]. Autopsy and toxicology revealed *psilocybin* and *THC* in amounts consistent with recreational use. Increased levels of serotonin were present in all individuals, coupled with an unknown *serotonoid* compound previously undocumented in humans. *Serotonoid-X* is believed to be involved in the mechanism of physiological and behavioural changes exhibited in *L.O.C.U.S.T.* affected individuals, including increased metabolic rate and irregularities in brain activity in the frontal lobe.

Mass psychosis may be comorbid to the physiological factors of disease, but is unlikely as a cause. The individuals extracted experienced acute endocrine disruption upon removal from the “Swarm”. Treatment is not known at this time.

IN: Selena. It's okay... it's okay, shh... I— We'll...

[swallowing noise, glass lands on table]

IN: You need to calm down. I'm going to help you... only if you calm down.

[moaning]

IN: There. Now... the night the man burned? The wooden man?

SAV: He... at night. The fire was so... it was all around me. It was so long... so long since anyone... *touched* me. My skin... and, then, I was... [crying]

IN: What did you see?

SAV: See? No... it was *in* me. It was *me*, so much... so much of *me*. I am... was, everywhere. I need... to go, find... where I went.

[crying]

SAV: Would you... come... closer? Just, please. A little.

***d. Discussion:* Locust species of the family *Acrididae* display swarming behavior and phenotypic plasticity driven by environmental factors. Periodic drought and food scarcity can prompt gregarious behavior in otherwise solitary species. Individuals gathered at necessary density will react to stimuli of smell and touch, releasing hormones that induce physiological and behavioural changes, including swarming behaviour. Serotonin is the primary chemical associated with this change. Migratory locust swarms can consume 1.8 million metric tons of vegetation, with increased tolerance for toxic substances.**

IN: What happened after the man burned, Selena?

SAV: I was so hungry. I was... needed... just, a little? Closer? Please. I could show you. You could... just... a hand. On me, a touch. A *touch*.

IN: What happened after the man burned? You went somewhere. Why?

SAV: Went... I *moved*. All of me. Together, I'd never... never been *together*, before. You... you'll feel it. You'll feel it too.

[droning noise, movement, chair scraping against floor]

[movement, thrashing]

IN: Selena, stop... I... top. I'm—

SAV: No. I can't... I can't feel it... anymore. Please. I'm hungry. It hurts.

[crying]

SAV: I'm hungry. Please. You said you'd help. Come... just come closer. Just... please, just a touch. Please—

[door opens, enter PVT Amad]

PVT: Sergeant, are you—

SAV: You'll feel it, you feel it—

PVT: You look... sergeant. What are you doing?

SAV: *Please.*

IN: I—

PVT: Sergeant, step back.

SAV: Yes—

IN: I... it's...

[droning noise]

PVT: What are you doing? Don't touch it—

SAV: [inaudible, teeth chattering]

IN: [inaudible, moaning]

PVT: Step back. Sergeant—

SAV: We'll be... together...

[movement]

PVT: Sergeant.

[movement, screams, firearm discharge]

[end transcript]

***e. Recommendations:* Total mobilization of ground and air forces for the containment of *L.O.C.U.S.T.* affected individuals. Elimination strongly advised.**

About the Author

Kara Gray lives on Vancouver Island and writes poetry in her head while hiking. She's been many things for a spell: baker, farmer, builder, programmer, military reenactor—but has always been a writer. You can follow her on Instagram @kara.gray.author and on Twitter @bad_prophecies.

The Death Dream of the World

by Adam Breckenridge

If the world has a soul, as many claim it does, then the world also has a mind. It knows that it exists. It knows that it will die.

The world also dreams, and when it died in its sleep it dreamed of a sunset circling the world for the last time. People knew instinctively that this was the last sunset and they walked out of their houses and their jobs, stopped their cars in the middle of the street and stood enraptured wherever they could find the best view, watching the sky burnish from red to purple to black and the sun vanish for the last time.

The world dreamed of a warm night, one where the stars shone even in the city. It was a night to celebrate because people knew it was the last night—a night that stretched for weeks and months, the lights slowly dimming and the night growing blacker. People held on to the light as long as they could, burning bonfires in the midst of their celebrations so they could continue to see the world and see each other. But inevitably the fires dimmed, the light retreated from the darkest corners, and the people who wandered into those blackest of blacknesses were never heard from again.

The mountains and hills melted away, the countryside vanished and soon the cities began to wobble. Some people wept for friends who had already vanished, some wept for the dying world, but mostly they held hands, because as the light vanished that was the only way they had of knowing they weren't alone. But the darkness was warm, and as the last light vanished, they too fell asleep, ready to unravel the worlds of their own dreams.

Lásabrjótur

or To Open a Lock without a Key

by Avra Margariti

The chest in Mother's chambers,
What treasures does it conceal in covert depths,
I wonder.

Could it be vixen furs,
Gold-lira diadems,
And slippers finely embroidered
With threads of oxblood,
Yellow jessamine, blue snow?

Or mayhap something darker:
A knife gifted to her by the hidden folk,
Its blade always striking to the truest bone?
A phial of snake-woman venom,
A leather-bound grimoire
Passed down a long line
Of witches murdered for our
Third eye all-powerful?

I rattle the lock, but it gives not.
I rap my knuckles against darkest heartwood--

Echoes of a fathomless well.
A rune I trace over the ancient lid
With my young blood;
A magical stave I once taught myself in a dream
Within a nesting-doll nightmare,
When I needed to escape a ribcage
Made of oaken roots and bear bones.

Lásabrjótur: to open a lock without a key
And the chest peels itself open
Like cooked chicken skin
Or a broken wishbone.

I bend over the chest, my hair hanging
Like willow leaves, caressing
The limp, wraith-white mannequin
Of my own face and body;
My mirror image lying latent
In our mother's secret chest,
Sightless eyes staring back
Into my depths.

About the Author

Avra Margariti is a queer author, Greek sea monster, and Pushcart-nominated poet with a fondness for the dark and the darling. Avra's work haunts publications such as *Vastarien*, *Asimov's*, *Liminality*, *Arsenika*, *The Future Fire*, *Space and Time*, *Eye to the Telescope*, and *Glittership*. "The Saint of Witches," Avra's debut collection of horror poetry, is forthcoming from Weasel Press. You can find Avra on twitter @avramargariti.

Coriander, Lemon Rind & Deer Musk

by E.C. Haskell

A metallic clanging charges through the house. It rolls up staircases, bangs through wood and walls, and forces me from sleep.

It's only the old furnace, starting its day. But the sound conjures up images of an ancient servant, skin dinged and mottled with rust, trying to breathe life into all the rooms of this old house. Too many rooms, too many things, too goddamn much Brewster history. Now down to only me.

The pale fingers of dawn creep across the wooden floor. I close my eyes, hoping for a return to sleep.

Caligula huffs from the other side of the room. The click, click, click of his nails crosses the tile floor. I brace myself and –

Whoomp!

Eighty-five pounds of dog lands on the bed. I peer from beneath my blankets to find coal black eyes fixed on me. Cali wants out.

Which, of course, will happen. That's how our relationship works. Has done ever since I stole him, a whimpering puppy with patches of missing fur, from the back of Doogie Wilson's truck.

I wiggle out from beneath dog and blankets and hurry across the room to where I've left my raggedy jeans, UW sweatshirt, and ancient sneakers. Pulling my hair into a ponytail, I join Cali as we dash through the long, dark hall, down the spiral staircase, past the portraits lining the great room and onto the marble floor of the foyer.

I pull the massive front door open. Cali bursts out like a herd of kindergartners set free for recess.

His enthusiasm for each new day never ceases to amaze me. I watch his dark form disappear into a copse of cedar, then turn toward the kitchen. As long as I'm up, I'll make some oatmeal. Maybe Nate will come.

I'm never sure if he will, but today he does. No sooner is the oatmeal boiling on the stove than a scent of coriander mixed with lemon rind and deer musk wafts into the kitchen. Nate douses his handkerchiefs with that stuff; a nod, he says, to times long past.

It's also one heck of a calling card. I wave toward the kitchen table where I've set a place for him.

"Oatmeal's almost ready," I say.

"Oh, Isobel." His voice floats in a gentle murmur. "I do love how you spoil me."

"And I love having you here," I reply, and our long-standing ritual is complete.

~~~~~

After breakfast, I load Cali into my old Jeep and set off for town. I don't go often, but Cali's almost out of food and I'm out of milk and butter.

Twenty minutes later, we turn onto the packed dirt surrounding Tulalip Market. It's only a ramshackle wooden structure with a plant nursery tacked to one side, but as usual, the lot is packed. I wedge my Jeep between a rusted green pickup and a shiny new Audi.

I grab a bag from the back seat, head for the market ... and a groan crawls up my gullet. Doogie Wilson's hulking Chevy pickup looms before me, blocking the alley behind the store. Doogie must be inside.

I know the man suspects that Cali is the puppy he purchased two years ago for his dog fighting ring. But he won't say anything. For starters, dog fighting is illegal. Plus, Cali snarls every time he sees Doogie, and Doogie's a coward. So I'm not exactly worried, but I can do without his sideways looks and sly innuendo.

I slip into the store and, head down, begin my foray through the aisles. I'm almost home free. Until I get to the checkout counter. The clerk there is a talker, a loud one.

"Well, if it isn't Isobel Brewster," she yodels as I approach. "How you been, girl?"

I start unpacking my cart, hoping to get through this quickly. But the clerk has spotted the oatmeal.

"Three boxes?" she cries with mock horror. "And here I thought you hated the stuff."

"It's for Nate," I say without thinking. "He loves oatmeal."

The woman blinks in surprise. “Nate?”

The warmth of a flush creeps up my neck. “He’s, well... a great uncle, visiting.”

The clerk frowns. “But at your Mom’s service, Pastor James said—”

“That poor Isobel Brewster was all alone, last of the Brewster line,” says a voice behind me. I turn slowly to face Doogie Wilson, his great Adam’s apple bobbing beneath a sly grin. Behind him is the black-clad form of Augustus Lloyd, the “Father” of our town’s new Pentecostal church.

Doogie chuckles. “I never figured Pastor James for a liar. Did you, Father?”

To my relief, Lloyd chooses not to answer, but his cold blue eyes bore into me as if searching for my soul.

~~~~~

By the time I get home, I’ve managed to convince myself that Lloyd’s stare meant nothing. Given the man’s fervent embrace of original sin, he probably regards newborns with the same cold glare. Besides, I’ve got work to do. My blog is due tomorrow morning. Since it’s the only thing keeping us afloat, I need to get to it.

After putting the groceries away, I settle at my desk, ready to start digging through the web. Soon I’m enmeshed in tracking the latest trends in social media, trying to get a handle on potential winners and losers. Beside me, Cali sighs and settles his chin between his front paws.

I'm deep into my research when Cali rumbles. I wave at him to let it go. But then my desk does the two step. The lamp jiggles; dog breath assaults my nose. I turn to see Cali with both paws on the desk, his dark eyes glinting.

Cali's a strange dog, a mix, I think, of border collie and German Shepard. Our vet calls him an "empath dog." Whatever. I've learned to pay attention.

I follow him out of my office, down the spiral stairs, through the great room, straight to the front door. Where he sits. Staring.

I eye the mahogany slab warily. No one has come to this door since Mother's memorial service well over a year ago.

But Cali is insistent. Someone is out there. Taking a deep breath, I edge the door open.

There stands Augustus Lloyd, his fleshy face, thick eyebrows and fervid blue eyes honing in on me.

For a moment, I'm speechless. Then I see the large cross in his hand.

"You expecting a vampire?" I ask crossly.

His lips twitch. "No, no. I merely came to call."

"I'm sorry. This isn't a good time." I put one hand on the door, ready to close it.

“I’ll only be a moment.” Lloyd smiles as he edges the toe of a shiny black shoe in the opening. “I just realized today that I’ve been quite remiss, having never introduced myself to you.”

I wave the apology off. “I—”

“Such a marvelous house.” Lloyd caresses the door. “Built in the sixteen hundreds, was it not?”

“The first section was. There have been several additions since.”

“Of course. And I have heard so much about it. Tiled floors and wooden ceilings. A chandelier, imported just before the French Revolution. And family portraits dating back to before the Reformation. I have so longed to see those! To say nothing of wanting to meet you.”

I flush at that, aware of my own failures. As far back as my great-great grandfather, the Brewsters have opened their doors on the last Saturday in October, allowing visitors to wander the old home and its gallery of portraits. I skipped that this past year, pleading bereavement. But now, with Mother gone for nearly twenty months, I need to reconsider my hermitage.

I step aside.

With a beatific smile, he enters and walks through the foyer to the center of the great room. There he stops, gazing around as if he’s just been admitted to the Louvre.

“Mmm.” He edges forward, his gaze now fixated on a small portrait, darkened by age. It shows a young man, his face marred by a slight cleft lip.

Lloyd sets his shoulders. “Nathaniel Brewster, am I correct?”

“You are.”

“He caused quite a furor in his time.”

“I suppose.” I gesture Lloyd to a seat. “But tell me, how did you happen to come to our town?”

Lloyd ignores both the question and the seat. “It was my first year in theology school that I read the teachings of Nathaniel Brewster. I was disturbed, I’ll admit, by his belief that our energy lives on, suggesting everlasting life.”

“He was right about energy. That’s the first law of thermodynamics.”

“Indeed. ‘Energy can neither be created or destroyed.’ But it is the Lord who provides everlasting life.”

I shrug, and anger flashes through Lloyd’s eyes. I regard him without comment. At last, he turns away, fixing his gaze on the long line of portraits. Hands behind his back, he wanders through a panoply of Brewster history, coming to a stop only when he reaches the full-length rendering of Irene Brewster Turnbull. Said to be the most beautiful woman in New York City, circa 1930, she stares down, her emerald eyes gleaming like chips of ice in an alabaster face.

Lloyd mutters a few words. A prayer, I believe.

That done, he turns to me. "What a remarkable collection."

I smile and move toward the front door. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

Lloyd doesn't budge. "I should like to meet your great uncle."

A sudden cold grips my spine. "Uncle?"

"At the market. You mentioned him."

"Ah. Right... he doesn't take visitors."

"I come as an emissary of the Lord."

"He's not well."

"All the more reason for me to see him." Lloyd now seats himself on the offered chair.

"I'm sorry. You need to go."

He settles deeper into dark upholstery. I clench my hands, trying to keep my temper. Cali feels that. He rises to his feet, his eyes on Lloyd. The priest looks from Cali to me and back again. He smiles. Cali bares his teeth.

"He's quite protective," I say.

Cali edges closer.

A panoply of emotions flit across Lloyd's face. Determination, anger, fear... and finally, surrender.

He rises, stiff as a scarecrow, and walks to the door. Gathering his dignity like a cloak, he spits four words: "I will be back."

~~~~~

Lloyd is true to his word. Every day for the next week, he comes to our front door. At first, he merely asks to see my uncle. I have no choice but to turn him away.

Then he changes tactics, bringing small gifts. A tin of imported tea, a clutch of fresh basil, and finally, a book of prayer.

I grow increasingly uneasy but I say again and again, "Uncle Nate wants no visitors."

At last, Lloyd gets the message.

Or so I think as two days pass without a visit.

The third day, Cali and I are out for our daily walk when he gives a sharp bark. Four men and three women are coming down our dirt driveway.

One man calls out, "Miss Brewster! How are you this fine day?"

Apprehensive, I think. I motion Cali to sit.

The man draws nearer. “You’re looking well.”

I study his round face and thatch of gray hair. “Do we know each other?”

“Ah, everyone in town knows the Brewsters and,” he turns and waves toward the group behind him, “we’ve come to sing for you.”

I’m too astonished to move as the group gathers. Their voices rise in melody. The music is quite lovely, crystal sopranos melding with tenor and bass. But a snatch of the chorus breaks through to me:

*A cold day comes with greetings spurned*

*The Lord’s own face against them shall turn*

A jolt of anger jerks my shoulders back. Cali stiffens, the hairs of his ruff raising. Together we walk toward the group.

The voices stop. The singers’ faces mold into masks of sanctimony.

I want to let them have it. What I think of their presumption, their religion and all of it.

Instead, I wave one hand. “Get off my land.”

They do.

~~~~~

I hoped that would be the end of it. But Nate isn’t so sure.

“Belief in evil can be its own drug,” he says, his voice worried. He stays close to me. Sometimes at night, I hear a rustling as he settles into the chair by my bed.

Two days later, Nate hisses. I raise my head to see the faint edges of his shadow.

“Look out the window.” His voice shakes with anger.

My feet recoil from the cold floor. What I see through the window is worse. There, at the edge of the forest, stands a knot of people, their mouths open in song. Snatches of it carry up the hill to me. The words speak of redemption, but the cadence is that of a dirge. Upon finishing, the singers draw large crosses from beneath their jackets. They hold them up as if warding off an evil spirit.

The following weeks bring more of the same. Folks armed with crosses and Bibles shadowing Cali and I everywhere we go. Singers appear past midnight, melting into the forest when they’re done. Missives are left in the mailbox and, once, a cross appears on the door of the shed.

I’m furious, beset by the demons of self-righteousness. I need a plan to rid myself of them. An idea comes to me. I ensconce myself in the house’s old library, curled up with a familiar book, leafing through for a familiar passage.

At last, I see the words I’m seeking. I scrawl a list of what I’ll need, then fill an old beaker with the first ingredient. After that, I call an old friend. He agrees to get the rest.

Cali and I leave on a rainy morning, the hard, driving kind that pings off windows and sends chilblains to the soul. We stick to back roads, where the forest looms, dank and

dark. A gray hawk streaks across the sky. Otherwise, nothing. Cali and I are both shivering as we pull into a rundown shack nestled at the back of Tyee's Hardware.

I've known Tyee since we were both in grade school, and he usually greets me with hugs and laughter. Not today. His store is dark. A closed sign hangs in the window. I'm afraid he's going to ghost me, but then the back door cracks open. Tyee peeks out, his blue-black hair glinting in the rain. He waves me and Cali in.

"Jeez, Izzy," he says, securing the door behind us, "what the heck'd you do to the holy rollers?"

I sigh and try to shake the rain off my hair. "They've been talking about me, huh?"

"Talking? Cursing is what they're doing. Like maybe you pissed on Father Lloyd's shiny black shoes."

"We had a misunderstanding. Did you get the stuff I need?"

He turns to pull a sack from beneath a bench. "Powdered cinnamon, coal, battery powered LEDs and a blow torch. I think you should tell me what you're planning."

"Just a deterrent," I say. And scoot out before he can ask more.

~~~~~

The next day finds me in the old tool shed, a single lightbulb above and all the necessary ingredients spread out on a scarred table. I start with a handful of coal,

grinding it to a fine powder. To this, I add some powdered cinnamon. Next I take the beaker filled with seven-day old urine. I put the cinnamon/coal mixture into that, shake it up and connect it with a glass tube to a second beaker filled with water.

Next I apply the torch to the first beaker. It bubbles and sizzles, filling the shed with a noxious fume. My eyes are watering and I'm starting to gag, but, finally, thin wisps of vapor flow into the beaker filled with water. There they coalesce into a white waxy substance that falls to the bottom.

Now all I need is night.

At last, the sun dips behind the great cedar forest, its glow vanishing into a dark so dense I can feel it brush against my face.

Cali and I wait.

It's nearly midnight when we see the first flickering lanterns. Small groups of men and women are coming, armed with crosses and bibles. A cool wind blows through the forest, carrying with it a smell of saltwater and cedar.

Still, we wait.

When they're all gathered, the group begins to sing. Sweet sopranos mixed with deep bass and tenors float through the night. Speaking of damnation and hellfire and demons to come.

It's time. I check the LED lights that I've fixed in Cali's fur. Then I rub the white waxy substance across his coat.

I point to the group down the hill, “Herd. To town.”

Cali bounds out joyously, anxious to do his job. But, thanks to the ingenuity of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, joy is not what the singers see. Instead a lumbering monster, encased in ghostly light, barrels toward them.

It’s only phosphorescence, but the singers don’t know that. Their song shatters into shocked silence.

I smile and pucker my lips to call Cali back. But before I can, a crack spits out. A familiar voice whoops in triumph.

Peering through the dark, I see Doogie Wilson’s tan jacket. In one hand, he holds a pistol. He begins to move thicket of fern, where a glowing form lies, shuddering. I gasp, my breath stopped in my throat.

I stagger from the shack, half-running, half-stumbling down the hill. Rocks and dense ferns grab at my feet. The air rasps through my throat. I’m close. Doogie raises his pistol and—

A screech fills the air, like fingernails tearing through time. A wind sweeps down the hill. Smelling of earth and burnt meat, the scent, they say, of outer space.

Gasping, I fall. Wet grasses seep through my jeans. I’m shivering so hard I’m afraid I’ll pass out.

“Trust us.”

The voice is familiar. I look around. There, glimmering in the night air, is Nate. Or whatever Nate is now, a translucent shimmer of energy with skin shredded to tatters. He winks.

Behind him comes a mob of creatures, sliding, skittering, tumbling downward. I catch glimpses of a Spanish American war uniform, a bulbous red nose, and even the emerald-green eyes of great-great Grandmother Irene, her lips drawn back in a snarl.

It's the ancestors, my ancestors, the whole of their energy, fired by anger.

The people at the edge of the forest cry out in terror. They turn and scatter into the trees. Among the stragglers is Doogie Wilson. He cringes against a tree, his face mottled with horror as a woman with plague-boils seeping pus hovers over him.

The glowing form in the ferns has gone still. I force myself up. But my foot hits a rock. For just one moment, I float. Then darkness folds over me.

~~~~~

I wake at dawn, its thin gray light creeping through cedar. I'm wet with dew, shivering. And sore. I lie there, listening to the guttural calls of sea ducks flying overhead. Then I remember. The singing. The screaming. The shot.

I push myself up, looking to where a mass of dark fur lies still amid ferns.

"Cali!" I'm crawling. Pampas grass cuts my cheek. Mud coats my hands. "Oh, Cali—"

His tail moves. Just a twitch, dislodging a spray of dew. But it's enough.

~~~~~

A week later, Cali and I are both recuperating. I still have a painful lump on my head, and Cali is making a great show of the limp he was left with after Doogie's bullet grazed him.

The police chief comes to call. He's heard stories of some sort of ruckus on my land. Doogie Wilson, it seems, left town in a hurry, and Father Lloyd has locked himself in the church.

"Good heavens," I say. And stroke Cali, who's sitting quietly by my side.

My only other visitor is Tyee. He comes several days after the chief, tight-lipped and suspicious. He tells me that the Reverend Augustus Lloyd and most of his more rabid followers have now left town, spewing dire prophecies the entire way.

"What did you do?" he asks.

"Only what I had to."

He shakes his head and leaves.

One person I haven't seen since that night is Nate. I know he's still here. Occasionally I'll catch a whiff of coriander mixed with lemon rind and deer musk. I smile at the scent,

designed to mask the reek of ancient streets. And sometimes, when the air is very still, I can hear him singing:

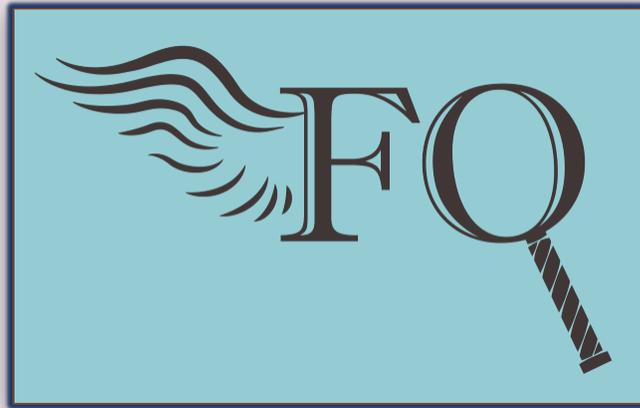
*Here's to the living, and here's to the dead,  
forever there'll be a divide.  
But while you're still living, throw open your doors  
so that we may together abide.*

I figure that's his way of telling me it's time to open Brewster House again, to let the townsfolk and the Brewsters come together.

Which is what I'll do.

### **About the Author**

After focusing for many years on non-fiction writing (ads, magazine articles, documentaries etc), Ms. Haskell began to study fiction writing as a way to explore the realities that lie at the edge of human perception. She lives in the Pacific Northwest with her family, three dogs and assorted wildlife.



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