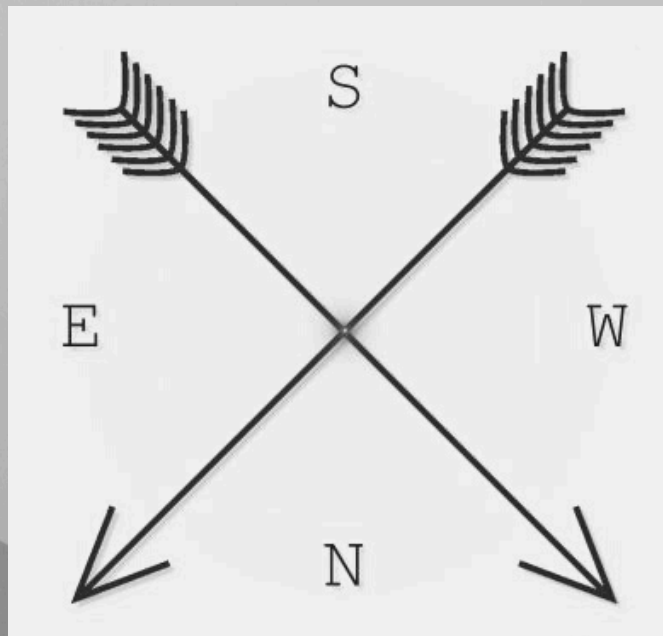


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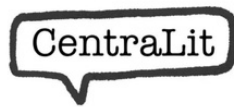
**SUPPORTING THE LITERARY
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ABOUT THE EDITORS



Brittani Miller is a pharmacy technician, full-time student, and cancer survivor from Centralia, IL. Having grown up in the midst of “Potter Mania” she is an avid fantasy reader and began pursuing writing as a dream career from a young age.

Her work has appeared in *The Alchemist Review*, *Chronically Lit*, *Metamorphoses*, and *Pink Panther Magazine*. As of Fall 2022, she will be an MFA Student at Lindenwood University.



Lauren Stengel is a writer and mother of two. She is a full-time student at Southern Illinois University Carbondale where she is completing her MA in English literature with a focus on transatlantic Gothic in the long nineteenth century. While literary criticism is her primary focus, she also

enjoys writing short fiction and poetry. Her work has appeared in *Areo Magazine* and *Grassroots*. She currently resides in Carbondale, Illinois.



FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Readers,

Two years ago, Brittani & I stood in our blue caps and gowns knowing that we were doing *something*--something good. I was going off to SIUC to finish my bachelor's, and Brittani would be working on her BA closer to home. We were already doing some open mics, hoping to provide a space for people like us to get together and share our stories. Really, all of this stems from that--wanting to share stories.

Brittani, the brains behind this whole endeavor, had the crazy idea to start a magazine. Neither of us, of course, knew what we were doing. But a wise man--a mentor to us both--used to always say that the key to success was to "fake it til you make it," so that's what we're doing. But we're doing *something*. And that something is good.

From our mutual desire to share our stories, we've created a new one. Brittani and I are so thankful to each and every one of you that have been a part of our stories, old and new. We have both certainly been blessed. We hope you enjoy the first issue of *CentraLit*.

Here's to many more to come.

Lauren & Brittani



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Interview with Tyson Hanks

CentralLit had the opportunity to sit down with author and Sandoval, Illinois native, Tyson Hanks. Hanks, who currently resides in Florida, is the author of *Greetings from Barker Marsh* and the recently released *Head Wounds*. In the following interview, Tyson shares his love of the horror genre and his experience growing up in South Central Illinois.

This interview has been edited for clarity and readability. The full interview is available on CentralLit's website.

CentralLit [CL]: How did growing up in the area impact your writing?

Tyson Hanks [TH]: I am so glad that you brought that up because, you know, in that particular area, it's not something that a lot of kids probably aspire to do when they grow up. I always, I always loved reading. You know, in English classes in school, I always loved when we would get a

creative writing assignment or something. I really got into that. And I always did well, I'm one of those guys who loved English classes, and I always got A's in every English class I took. And math was like my kryptonite. Now, where I'm going with this is, as a kid, I actually grew up in Sandoval, and you talk about not a lot to do, and not a lot around Central Illinois—there's even less to do around Sandoval. And, you know, I hate to say that I didn't get any support from teachers, but just nobody was really stoking that artistic fire for me. I mean, in that area, you either grew up to be a farmer or you moved away and did something else. So, you know, I was convinced at a young age that I wanted to go into some kind of law enforcement. I did a year at Kaskaskia College on a music scholarship. So, at least I had enough artistic bone left in me that I was able to play music and pay for the first couple years of college. But in that time, I even went so far as to join the military. Because, again, law enforcement was what I wanted to do. I wound up spending over a year in Bagdad. That was in '03. When I got back, my mother and my girlfriend at the time, who is now my wife of 15 years, they didn't want me to pursue a career in law enforcement or the military. So, of all things I went into marketing. That's what I got my bachelor's degree in. Still wasn't doing any creative writing, still had no idea that I wanted to be a writer. I was working for a Fortune 50 company, and quite frankly, I hated it. I was stuck in what I call middle-management hell. I was reporting to people I really didn't see eye-to-eye with. I had 30 people reporting to me that didn't see eye-to-eye with me. I dreaded going to work every day. And then in 2014, my wife and I took a vacation down to Miami. And it just so happened that it was a really rainy day, couldn't go to the beach, couldn't go to the pool, there was nothing to do besides lay around the room.



Tyson Hanks, author of *Head Wounds* and *Greetings From Barker Marsh*

My wife was sound asleep, so I didn't want to turn the TV on or make any noise. So, I happened to have a yellow legal pad with me, and I started scribbling out a short story. And I thought what the hell, you know, I've been reading a lot about this, specifically horror magazines that you can submit stuff to, and I thought maybe I'll give this a shot. So, over the course of that trip, I finished the story at that hotel, and submitted it when I got back. And the first magazine that I submitted it to I got a rejection, which I kind of expected. The second magazine that I submitted it to, however, accepted it, and I was over the moon.

CL: Your books are in the horror genre, what made you want to write horror?

TH: Reading horror. There's tons of books out there. And even Stephen King, you know, his fantastic book *On Writing*—his advice is we have to write every day. I don't subscribe to that advice as much because I mean, sometimes it's hard to write every day. I think for me, the more important advice is read every day. And Stephen King says in the book, if you don't have time to read, you don't have time to write. And I think to answer your question how I got into writing horror is I was a huge fan of horror fiction—first horror films. I'm lucky enough being here in the sort of Orlando area that we get some fantastic horror conventions that come through every year when there's not a global pandemic going on. And, you know, I've met horror celebrities, I've given them copies of my book, signed copies of them. Just for example, you know, my title *Greetings from Barker Marsh*. That was my homage to Clive Barker. And two years ago, I got to meet him and signed a copy of *Barker Marsh* to him. And he was so humble and so sweet and wanted to know how my sales were, you know, like, it was like two authors talking. And here I am about to freak out. Because, you know, one of the pillars of modern fiction is interested in a book that I wrote, and frankly, titled after him, but I guess that's where my motivation and passion comes from just being a fan of the horror genre. I like being scared. And I love scaring people even more.

CL: What is it about horror that you're so drawn to? Did you like it as a kid? And what types of horror? Monster stuff? Psychological horror? A mixture?

TH: If you want me to nail down a specific sub-genre of horror, I'm a child of the '80s. I am a slasher fan through and through, *Friday the 13th* all the way! That's the kind of stuff that I watched as a kid—way too young. I had parents that did not do a great job of shielding me from stuff. On a Friday, they would give me a \$10 bill before I went to school and say, "Hey, ride your bike to the video store on your way home and stock up for the for the weekend." And I would, man, I'd have stacks of VHS tapes and bags on each handlebar and ride back and it would be *Friday the 13th* and *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Pet Sematary*. When that came out I watched it, I was seven years old, and scarred me. It was 30 years before I watched it again. Zelda killed me. But so anyway, I like all types of horror. As a young kid, you know, between babysitters and parents that didn't really shield me from that stuff, I was constantly watching it. And then as far as R.L. Stein books go, I mean, I was never a *Goosebumps* kid, but I did read a lot of the *Fear Street* stuff which is a little more darker, gory, or bloodier, more violent, I think than the *Goosebumps* stuff. So, I read a lot of that. And then I guess my first Stephen King novel was *Christine*, and I read that probably in seventh, maybe eighth grade. So, why do I like being scared? What do I like doing this? It's an answer I know that other people have shared. But for me, it's a cathartic release. It's a safe place. I would rather go and watch a scary, horrible movie for 90 to 120 minutes, then turn on CNN, especially last year [2020], you know what I mean? You know, you can go you can get your adrenaline up, you can put your mind in the mind of the victims that you're seeing, get chased around the woods on TV and feel that rush, and then when it's over, you know, it's fine. You're fine. You're safe. You know what I mean? I think that's why I like to do it. And then there's just as far as writing it, you know, there's an awful side of me that just loves

to see how far I can push things. And, you know, I love it when people tell me they had to sleep with the lights on. When I wrote *Greetings from Barker Marsh*, you know, I changed names of places and people and stuff. But that's mostly Sandoval. I took some creative liberty, about certain things. One of the settings was a basement under the school behind the Catholic church that I went to. The school doesn't have a basement, but I wrote it as having a basement because I wrote some pretty creepy ass scenes underneath there. And my uncle told me that after he had read the book, he had to drop something off in the school, you know, and so they gave him the key. And he said that he almost had a panic attack. He walked in and it like hit him where he was. He started thinking about the book. He's like, "Tyson, I broke out sweats. I couldn't breathe, every little noise I would hear. I just like, threw what I needed to in the classroom, and then just hauled ass to the front door without looking behind me, because I just knew that something was gonna be there." So, I love getting those kinds of reactions out of people, you know what I mean? That's, that's why I do it.

CL: Being a horror writer, we have to know, do you have a favorite monster?

TH: It's hard to pick a favorite, but if I had to pick just one, I'm a bit of a purist, so classic monsters, I would go with the Creature from the Black Lagoon. I've always had loved diving and the idea of underwater. I mean, Jaws, that type of thing. And even when I was a kid and started watching the classic Universal movies, I mean, everybody knew about *Dracula*. Everybody knew about *Frankenstein* and *The Wolfman*. And don't get me wrong. I love werewolves, and Frankenstein's monster and vampires. But there's something about the Creature from the Black Lagoon, where, and this is a theme that kind of holds true through a lot of horror is, you know, is he the monster or is he the victim? You know, here's a guy that's living in the Amazon, not bothering anybody, you know, and here's a bunch of white dudes that show up, you know, want to do all this geological surveying and messing with his environment, you know, and kind of happens every day, you know what I mean? And he just decides that he's going to do something about it, you know, and even at a young age, that sort of resonated with me.

CL: What is the best writing advice you have ever received? What is the best advice you can offer to our readers?

TH: Well, I think we already touched on the importance of reading. Because I think naturally, if you haven't been at this for very long, eventually you'll develop your own style. And it'll be fairly distinct. But until that happens, whether you like it or not, and plagiarism is a hard, harsh word, but you'll find yourself mimicking the style of the people that you read. I mean, I am by no means comparing myself to Stephen King, but I've had people tell me that your style, you know, what you do is very reminiscent of Stephen King, and it's no surprise because that's what I'm going for. You know what I mean? So, I think my advice to people that are just getting into this is, you know, read. Read the way you want to write. Find authors that have the style that you would like to have and read those books and make notes and see what they do, and you catch yourself reading a line and you'll stop and you'll smile and you'll say, "Oh, man, that's so good." And we've all done that, right? Where it takes you out of the moment and you're like, "Ah, what a good line." And eventually, what you'll find is that you'll do that while you're writing. You'll write something and you'll say, "Damn, that's such a good line." So, that's one piece of advice just as far as sitting down and getting the work done.

CL: Finally, what can you share with us about your new book, *Head Wounds*, without spoiling it?

TH: Well, kind of in a nutshell, my philosophy behind releasing it is this: As I said, I got a couple of new shows that I'll be at in a couple of months. And the thing about these shows is I've managed to develop a little fan base here in the area, but as much as people love me and love the stuff I write, they're only going to buy my book once. So, if I don't have anything new the following year, they may come by and say hi and give me a high five, but they're not going to buy a book that they bought last year. When what I call convention season, which is pretty much October for horror writers, when that comes around, I better have new material, or I'm not going to make any money, you know. So, I knew I needed something. And frankly, I hadn't been working on a lot of fiction work this year [2021] because the freelance stuff has had me so busy. But what I did have was the rights back to all these stories that I released when I was just getting started. So what *Head Wounds* is, is basically five or six, I think, short stories that have previously been published in other magazines or other collections, as well

as a few stories that have never seen the light of day that I've just always kind of set on the back burner and I polished and finished up. And then mainly what I guess I'm most proud of and also most scared of is I've also got half a dozen or so poems in the book. I've never published any of my poetry, so we'll see how that goes. And then I think I've even got a screenplay for like a 15-minute film. It's about 15 pages. I've got that toward the end of the book, too, because several years ago, I entered that in a horror film contest, and it wound up being a semifinalist. I didn't win the screenplay contest, but I was, I think, one of the top three, which was great and fun. But, you know, I haven't made the movie yet. It's just kind of sitting there. So, I thought, this might be fun, too. It's a cool story. So, I'll throw that out there for the reader. So that's what *Head Wounds* is, a collection of old stuff, new stuff, and it'll be interesting to folks that have read my stuff through the years, you know, to kind of see how I've progressed, you'll see how the early me was, and then the more recent stuff, and hopefully I've gotten better somewhere in between.

Head Wounds is available now on Amazon.

Tyson Hanks is the author of multiple short stories that have been published in numerous collections, including the WWI horror anthology *Kneeling in the Silver Light*, *The Dark and Stormy Night*, *Sanitarium Magazine*, and *Ghosts, Goblins, Murder & Madness: Twenty Tales of Halloween*. His debut novel, *Greetings from Barker Marsh*, was published in 2016. Tyson is an Army veteran and currently lives in Florida where he works as a freelance writer.

You can follow Tyson at:

Website: www.tysonhankswrites.com

Facebook: Author Tyson Hanks

Twitter: @TysonAuthor



ESSAYS



"I THOUGHT ABOUT ALL THE LIVING THAT HE WOULD MISS,
ABOUT ALL THE HAPPINESS THAT HE WOULD NEVER KNOW,
ABOUT ALL THE THINGS THAT HE WOULD NEVER DO. I
THOUGHT HOW, IF HE HAD KNOWN THAT DAY WAS THE LAST
DAY, THE END OF MAGIC, HOW HE WOULD HAVE WRUNG FROM
IT EVERY DROP OF LIVING, EVERY DROP OF JOY."

MIKE WARDEN

THE END OF MAGIC

MIKE WARDEN

"A 31-year-old Alton man died in a car accident early Sunday morning in the 200 block of 7th Street in St. Louis. The victim was identified as Tony Roberts. The St Louis County Coroner's Office pronounced the victim dead at the scene at 11:13 p.m. Other details were not immediately available."

The sudden death of a friend has a strange effect on me. It makes me want to reach out and claim something that perhaps I never owned, that perhaps I never earned. It makes me want to speak to the father, the mother, the sister, the brother of the dead, to ask strange questions, to say the words that will open a door, that will elicit a response that will assure me that I had some place in the life of those who have gone, in their hearts, in their remembrances. It makes me want to be comforted as well as to comfort. It makes me want to hold onto something in this world where we can hold onto nothing. It makes me want to take unto myself forever the knowledge that something that I cherished was real and true. It makes me want to hear those words that are unspeakable and to know something that is unknowable. But, of course, I don't. I can't. There are no words and there is no answer.

I heard the news in the late afternoon. Tony was my friend Alicia's son. I had known him since he was a boy. And so, he was something like a son. And he was also my friend. We had worked together for a few years at the agency. He took another job and on his last day he came into my office to say goodbye. Although we would see each other again from time to time, we would not do so on a daily basis. We would never again meet in the hall. We would not linger on the patio to catch up on things. It would be different, and we both knew it.

The last time that I saw him, the last place that I spoke to him, was at an all-night diner downtown. On the evening of the day that I heard the news, I went back there, back to the diner. I don't know what I expected to discover there, maybe nothing. Maybe I just wanted a place to go and think about him, even a place with a tenuous connection. It was a Sunday night, and the place was quiet. And again, I took a seat at the counter and ordered coffee. And I turned toward the place where I thought that he had been. He was not there. And I experienced, once again, that strange sensation that, perhaps, we all know—that unbelief that the dead are gone and yet, impossibly, the places that they knew remain, unchanged. How is it that at such times the seasons still turn and the world still goes on?

I sat in the diner for a long time remembering. I remembered how wild and bright he had been, as wild as the north wind that had breathed upon the windows on the evening of his death, as bright as the ice that had shone in the branches of the trees and on the streets that night. And I thought again of how he had been like a son. And a verse of scripture from somewhere in Genesis came to me: "Surely you are my bone and my flesh."

I knew that I would remember him as the years passed, that I would pause at times to think of the moments that we had shared, to remember the briefness of his days and wonder what he might have done if he had lived. I knew that I would remember his death, how and when it had happened, how I had looked out my window when I had heard of it as if it had all been a mistake and I might see his living figure on the street. I would remember coming back to this place where I had last seen him, to a lonely diner in the middle of the night, as if to look for him. I knew that all things remain somewhere in the fabric of memory and that it would all come back to me at odd moments, unexpectedly, the way that we look up, startled, as a cloud passes across the sun. And I knew that such things have happened or will happen to us all and that, at such times, there are no words for what we feel. There are no words and no one to whom we can turn and speak of it all, no words to make them understand. No words.

"THE SUDDEN DEATH OF A FRIEND HAS A STRANGE EFFECT ON ME. IT MAKES ME WANT TO REACH OUT AND CLAIM SOMETHING THAT PERHAPS I NEVER OWNED, THAT PERHAPS I NEVER EARNED. IT MAKES ME WANT TO SPEAK TO THE FATHER, THE MOTHER, THE SISTER, THE BROTHER OF THE DEAD, TO ASK STRANGE QUESTIONS, TO SAY THE WORDS THAT WILL OPEN A DOOR, THAT WILL ELICIT A RESPONSE THAT WILL ASSURE ME THAT I HAD SOME PLACE IN THE LIFE OF THOSE WHO HAVE GONE, IN THEIR HEARTS, IN THEIR REMEMBRANCES."

I looked around me again. He was not there and yet, again, it seemed that something of him remained. And I remembered how spirited and reckless he had been, how he would climb into his car and drive, roaring, into the darkness as if he were invulnerable, as if there were no end to his tomorrows, as if he would never die. But as the hours passed, other things came back to me, forgotten things. I had remembered that he was reckless, but I had forgotten that he was vulnerable. I had forgotten how he could enter a room and draw others to him, could make them laugh, could make the time spent with him seem magical. I had forgotten that there was something in him that could not be quenched, something that was like faith, something that was like a flame. I had forgotten the dreams that he had reached for and what he had wanted in this world. But as the hours passed, they all came back to me. And I thought about all the living that he would miss, about all the happiness that he would never know, about all the things that he would never do. I thought how, if he had known that day was the last day, the end of magic, how he would have wrung from it every drop of living, every drop of joy. And I imagined the stillness of his features in death, emptied of the joys that used to linger there.

Had I told him that he was my friend, I wondered? Had I told him that he was like my son? Had I told all my dead that I loved them? And had I told the living? I thought of all those things that I had never spoken of, of all that I had not said, could not say, to those who are all around me, of all that they had never known but to whom it might mean everything?

Once, long ago, in a fisherman's cottage on the island of Corfu, Lawrence Durrell wrote these words: "The dead do not care. It is the living who might be spared if we could query the message which lies buried in the heart of all human experience."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Warden is a retired worker in the health care field. Besides creative writing, he also enjoys reading, photography, travel and meeting new friends from other cultures and backgrounds.



EXCURSIONS: SEPTEMBER

CLINT STEVENS

*There are those who, attracted by grass,
flowers, mountains, and waters, flow into the buddha way.
—Dogen, “On the Endeavor of the Way”*

What is this? This earth, a pearl in atmosphere, swirling around the sun in the arm of a vast galaxy, our milky way. So it has been for time beyond knowing, and what is it made of, all these transformations? Who knows what. Yet here, walking this field this morning, I know it is here.

What is this grass? Is it little bluestem or broomsedge? I can't tell. And then I think what is, after all, species? Moments of time in the great Way. A moment of time that we call a plant, a grass. It is not a thing but a reaching out into and from other things. The grass is made of soil, and it is made of water, and it is made of the sun, and it is made of my breath, and I am made by its breath, and we go on breathing together.

In the path into the woods, the path rush is made by my walking; it is not separate from my walking, for it loves the hard, compacted soil where nothing else can grow. The duckweed is made by calm, clean water, and it makes calm, clean water. The shield lichen on the tree, though we call it one thing, is actually algae living inside a fungus, each making the other. Our own bodies are like this, depending on and feeding the bacteria inside us and upon us. The putty root orchid, one of the few plants in southern Illinois that photosynthesize during the winter (look for its crinkly gray-green leaf with parallel veins this winter): its seeds lack an endosperm, so each “seed” must land on just the right patch of mycelium, which will provide the nutrients the orchid needs to grow; the orchid in turn gives the fungus access to the benefits of photosynthesis. Many trees, like the cottonwood, develop light-weight seeds with tufts of fibers that allow them to float on the breeze to new habitats. Oaks, quite differently, have developed bushy-tailed rodents to transport their acorns far and wide.

Ecologists call this mutualism. The Buddhadharma calls it dependent origination: the origin of one thing depends on another, and therefore nothing exists absolutely in and of itself. Each is made by myriad relationships. Endless and ongoing interdependence. All things depend upon and interpenetrate with all other things. Everything makes everything else. Everything becomes everything else. There is, then, no self (except as an idea) that can be lifted from this matrix anymore than a fish can live without water. In the long ago, creeping and crawling and flying things made flowers. And flowers made them. And they go on making each other today. The quick eye and sharp talon of the hawk has made the rabbit what it is--fast and keen and quick to multiply. The cosmos is a dance in which the dancers are the dance. So Yeats writes at the end of “Among Schoolchildren”:

O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

There is no separate self, but there is activity. And activity, we may say, is selfing. And selfing is a gem of infinite facets. Dogen writes in “The Body-and-Mind Study of the Way” that “this human body, undivided by self and others, is the entire world of the ten directions.” Similarly, in “Undivided Activity,” he seems to anticipate the language of microbiology by telling us that “there are innumerable beings in yourself.” Is your self today what it was yesterday? We know the answer is always yes and no. And where does your body end? The lettuce you eat, which will become your flesh, was made of the body of your ancestors. And all these were made of and by the sun and the wind and the seasons. “This is, because that is. This is not, because that is not. This ceases to be, because that ceases to be,” so goes Siddhartha Gautama’s famous explanation of dependent origination. And so goes it all, together and undivided endlessly.

Observe this closely, see it for yourself, and carry with you each day Whitman’s lovely meditation on grass in *Song of Myself*, which ends:

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

*The quotations from Dogen are taken from *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, edited by Kazuaki Tanahashi, 2012.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clint Stevens lives and writes outside of Centralia, IL.



FICTION

"THE VOICE WAS GRATING LIKE THE GRANITE DOOR OF A
TOMB. IT WAS COLD LIKE STALE AIR, WITH AN EMOTIONLESS
CADENCE THAT HAD SOME SOMBER SERENITY TO IT."

VLADIMIR VALCHEV

NOLI TIMERE MESSOREM

VLADIMIR VALCHEV

3/12/2021

Early mornings were his favorite, but a part of him yearned for more rest. He felt light—were he a dandelion, the winds could have scattered him in all directions. Lucidly, he tried to refocus his attention to the thinnest and longest hairs behind his ears, to imagine the gentle caress of the wind over his jet-black fur. With groggy eyes, he tried to sneak a peek of his surroundings.

He could not. His eyelids were heavy—something tremendous weighted on them like a burden. Maybe he could shake it off with one of his legendary stretches, he thought. Maybe he was still asleep.

YOU ARE NOT ASLEEP, an echo insisted.

It should have startled him. It should have jump-started his heart and sent shivers down his spine—whatever it was, he was going to make for the safety of the couch and then he was going to be okay. It was all going to be okay. Instead, he remained prostrate and still. Why wasn't he scared? He used to be so good at it.

A tiny hand ran its fingers through his fur and gave him a pat on the back. It was neither soft nor loving. Something about it defied all promise of emotion, just like the echoing voice somehow defied punctuation. It parted the darkness of his slumber like a veil, and the oddest thing greeted him with an expressionless face.

Rabbit skulls were difficult to look at because they lacked anything that was supposed to look like a rabbit. The skull glared at him with orbits filled with wandering flames of blue, and its yellowed maxillary incisors made his muzzle look like a beak, or like the claw of a sun-bleached crab. The lack of ears or fur was also unnerving, to say the least. The thing scrunched up its face, devoid of physiognomy. It pawed at its white whiskers for a second, then pulled back the black hood to reveal the rest of its features. Its other hand held a tiny scythe whose blade still had tiny flecks of hay stuck to it.

YOU MUST SURELY BE OVERWHELMED, it said. BELIEF IS NOT SOMETHING OUR KIND DOES. WHEN ONE DOOR CLOSES, THE FLOODGATES OF IT ALL WASH OVER US. IT IS TOO MUCH. OF COURSE, I EXIST BECAUSE THEY BELIEVE I SHOULD. SO HERE I AM.

The voice was grating like the granite door of a tomb. It was cold like stale air, with an emotionless cadence that had some somber serenity to it. It paused for effect, then pointed at the void with a milky phalanx.

AND SO ARE THEY, it added while slicing through the hazy veil with its miniscule instrument of harvest.

In the distance, he saw two familiar figures with wet faces hidden behind masks—a man and a woman. They sat slumped over with terrible postures in a white room. Stainless steel everywhere. In a bundle of blankets, they held a rabbit that looked just like him—sleepy, motionless, and outstretched. They were petting the black rabbit and sobbing uncontrollably, and the sleepy bunny was shaking as they did. The skeletal hand of the rabbit reaper ruffled his shaggy mane and the image became much clearer.

YOU ARE NOT ASLEEP, it repeated, this time with less rigidity. It waited patiently for what seemed like an eternity and a half before it broke the silence. SAY SOMETHING. ANYTHING.

“Are you the Death of Rabbits, then?” It finally spoke. It surprised itself as it did, for it never moved a single muscle. Words simply blossomed out of thin air then evanesced into the void.

AND OF HARES, AND PIKAS, TECHNICALLY, it specified. LIKE I SAID, I EXIST BECAUSE THEY BELIEVE I SHOULD. THEY LUMPED YOU ALL TOGETHER THINKING IT WAS CLOSE ENOUGH, said the Death of Rabbits, Hares, and Pikas.

“Quite rude!”

IT HAPPENS ALL THE TIME. DEATH OF RATS WAS THE FIRST ONE TO ARRIVE AFTER THE ORIGINAL REAPER. THE GRIM SQUEAKER ESCORTS RATS, GUINEA PIGS, GERBILS, AND EVEN HAMSTERS. BUT YOU ARE WHAT YOU ARE, AND I AM THE METAPHOR WHOSE PURPOSE IS TO ESCORT YOU, JET THE RABBIT.

Jet finally shuddered. Remembering his name brought back many memories, and with them, he expected the pangs of remembrance. He was now floating a foot or so above the still remains of his body—a loose manifestation of stardust confined with constellation-like borders of dim lights in the shape of a rabbit. For the first time in his life...no, wait, that was not it. For the first time ever, Jet actually wanted to feel sadness or fear. He wanted to run away from his destiny, to hide from his mortality, to console the inconsolable couple beneath him with a nuzzle or a never-ending session of licks. Oh how he wished to feel afraid.

NON TIMETIS MESSOR, whispered the Death of Rabbits, Hares, and Pikas.

Jet shook his starry mane. “I’m certain Vlad would have corrected your Latin, you know,” he insisted. “You can stuff your fear where the sun don’t shine. Just get on with it. Have I been good or bad? What happens to me now?”

I MIGHT BE A HUMAN METAPHOR, I ADMIT, BUT EVEN HUMAN BELIEF HAS ITS LIMITS. LOOK AT THEM. YOU MADE THEM HAPPY.

“Did I? Look at them. They are a mess! I ruined so much furniture. I scarred Kayla’s lip for life because I was an arsehole hungry for grapefruit chapstick. I also scalped Desna, even if she deserved it. I was always messy and smelly and acted like I was the center of the universe. I have never seen them more sad.”

I SEE ALL, JET. MUCH LIKE A COIN YOU HAD YOUR SIDES AND WORTH, said the tiny Reaper while pulling up his hood once again. BUT IT IS ARROGANT TO BELIEVE THAT YOU’D BE JUDGED BASED ON YOUR DEEDS BY A GRAND JURY OR SOME ARBITER. THEY... And he pointed with the back end of its scythe to the grieving man and woman still sobbing at the Vet, THEY HAVE ALREADY PREDETERMINED YOUR JOURNEY. THEIR FAITH DICTATES YOUR FUTURE ESCAPADES.

“Look, If I could thump at you, I would’ve done so already. Speak plainly, Death of Rabbits, Hares, and Pikas. What’s next? Will they be okay?”

LET US BEGIN THE JOURNEY. I WILL TELL YOU ON THE WAY, JET THE RABBIT.

And so the slightly anthropomorphic skeletal rabbit in robes of black gently grabbed the starry rabbit by an ear and began to escort him through the veiled void. Weightlessly, they levitated through the clouds until the confines of the Material Plane seemed small and insignificant. The world beyond was like a maze of burrows through which they both sprinted at breakneck speeds. The void was like a sea of violet ripples, and...

FOR AS LONG AS THEY ARE ALIVE, THEY WILL HURT, BUT IT IS NOT YOUR FAULT. THEY WILL SEE YOU AS A BLESSING, AND WILL ONE DAY GLADLY BEAR THE BURDEN OF IT ALL. YOU WERE LIKE A CHILD TO THEM, DESPITE THEIR PRETENDING. YOU WERE THEIR COMPANION, JET THE RABBIT. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

They had begun to descend now, and a plane of lush and exotic nature was now rapidly materializing beneath them like an infinite jellyfish of emerald greens. It hungrily devoured all emptiness until its infinite, larger than life greatness stretched as far as Jet could see. It was a garish, yet elegant world of unexpected oddities—mushroom forests taller than the clouds, floating mountains, and cascading rainbows adorned the wild in a way which spoke to Jet in the most primal of ways. Both of them landed triumphantly on a meadow of fluffy dandelions whose tiny seeds scattered in all directions.

Something within Jet stirred.

“Where are we?” He asked.

SOMEWHERE BEYOND THE WILDEST DREAMS OF THOSE WHO WILL FOREVER MOURN YOU. LONG AGO, THE IMAGINATION OF THEIR KIND PLANTED THE SEEDS OF THIS PLACE, AND NOW IT HAS BECOME...UNIMAGINABLE.

IT, LIKE ME, IS A METAPHOR. IT IS TOO UNFATHOMABLE. TOO OUT OF PLACE FOR THEM TO CALL THEIR HOME AFTER DEATH. THEY BELIEVE IN IT, BUT IT IS ALL TOO FAR-FETCHED. NOT FOR YOU, HOWEVER. YOU WERE INCAPABLE OF FAITH AS YOUR PAST SELF, SO THIS PLACE STILL WELCOMES YOU, AND HERE YOU SHALL REMAIN. THERE IS HAPPINESS HERE, BUT YOU'LL HAVE TO FIND IT AGAIN. THINK OF IT AS A NEW LIFE. YOU MIGHT BE ABLE TO LEAVE THIS PLACE, OF COURSE. BUT, HERE, YOU CANNOT DIE. YOUR SOUL IS SAFE HERE, JET THE RABBIT. WELCOME TO THE FEYWILD.

Jet gingerly took a single step—just enough to dip his toes in the greenery beneath him, much like humans did to test the waters of a lake or a bath. It was...pleasant. His fuzzy feet were tickled by the sea of dandelion seeds, and he had to shake his mane to dislodge a myriad of them from his shiny, black fur. He glanced around and raised his neck to see as far as his eyes could see. Instinctively, he crossed his paws as he got on his hind legs, but his sense of balance surprised him. Something was off. He looked at his paws and his heart skipped a beat.

“Hands!?”

The Death of Rabbits, Hares, and Pikas gave him a sagely nod. He was now much shorter than Jet, whose new bipedal and anthropomorphic form allowed him to tower over the flowers.

HAPPY? Jet shook his head. It was all too raw.

“It’s too good to be true! Look at this place! Is there a trick or something?”

This time, The Death of Rabbits, Hares, and Pikas shook his head. Then he paused at the end as if contemplating something.

WELL. THERE IS ONE THING. A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THIS WORLD AND YOUR OLD ONE, I SUPPOSE. THE COST OF LIVING IN A METAPHOR. SOMETHING THEY’LL ALWAYS HAVE AND YOU WILL SOON LOSE FOREVER, I’M AFRAID.

“What is it then?” Jet asked.

A pleasant aroma wafted over him then, and his new form perked up. It was almost too much to consider—so many fragrant flowers! Soporific poppies, gentle irises, shy snowdrops, and decadent violets. And berries, so many berries. He heard the sound of crunchy leaves hitting the ground and fresh cherry blossoms being carried by the warm winds. The air was sweet, and it all became too real and too much for the newest denizen of the Feywild, whatever that was. He leaped in the air—the way only the happiest of rabbits ever could, and he took his new body for a spin in the meadow of dandelions.

Motes of bluish flame flickered inside the Reaper’s eye sockets, then he stared in awe at the galloping rabbit. He twirled a white whisker and then fastened the clasp of his robe as if to congratulate himself on a job well done. He always felt bad about interrupting their joy, so he never did.

And while the newly reborn rabbit was awkwardly zooming, stuffing yellow petals in his mouth, and zigzagging among gnarled oaks and purple pines, Death of Rabbits, Hares, and Pikas tapped on the ground with the blunt end of his scythe and whispered to the wind.

SOMETHING THEY'LL ALWAYS HAVE AND YOU WILL SOON LOSE FOREVER. THE MEMORY OF YOU, it said.

It looked at the beautiful scenery once more, then at the prancing rabbit of flesh-and-blood. It decapitated a tiny dandelion with its scythe, then poofed out of existence.

Only once he was out of breath did Jet the rabbit feel truly alive. He looked around eager to find the tiny Reaper for he was certain he was full of questions he was meant to ask. He parted a patch of daffodils looking for his escort.

"The memory of whom?!" He asked. "The memory of what? Remind me how I got here again."

And he kept on looking and looking until he felt rather foolish and his belly rumbled with hunger.

All he could remember was that his name was Jet. Jet the rabbit.

"What an odd afternoon," Jet thought to himself.

Then he looked back one final time before he parted the patch of daffodils and scampered off following the pleasant scents of the Feywild.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vladimir Valchev is a Bulgarian fan of all things fantasy and yearns to do the things worth telling. He loves putting a smile on people's faces with a story or while plotting behind a Dungeon Master's screen. Beer and old things are his favorite things, and the BA in Classics and BS in Fermentation Science almost within his reach make this more than obvious.



FIREFLIES

BRITTANI MILLER

The hot summer wind blew gently over the field, swaying the prairie grass. The Boy had just turned five in the spring and was barely visible as he ran through the overgrowth, his giggles the only indicator of exactly where he was. Mama sat in an old wooden rocking chair that occupied the front porch, humming as she tried to keep an eye on her children darting in and out of the porch light's glow.

"I caught one, mama! I caught one!" The Girl, older than the Boy by two years, capped the mason jar in her hand and began running toward the porch, brunette pigtails swaying behind her.

The boy huffed, his chunky fingers clasped tightly around his own jar as he watched his sister climbing into Mama's lap and showing her the jar. The old screen door opened, and Daddy appeared, slinging a dish towel over his shoulder as he came to stand beside Mama's rocking chair to look at the Girl's catch. The Boy rubbed his strawberry blonde hair off his sweat-dampened forehead and peered out into the field, further away from the porchlight. The prairie grass grazed the bare skin of his shoulders beneath his overalls, itching as he tumbled through the field.

He was now completely out of the porchlight's glow and waited for Mama's voice to call him back closer to the house at any moment; however, her call never came or did not reach his ears as he kept going. He tip-toed the best he could, trying to keep from stumbling too much and scaring the bugs away. He squinted his eyes as he caught sight of the little, glowing golden light hovering just about the prairie grass a few yards away.

He took a deep breath, tip-toeing until he was closer to the creature and – leaped. He landed on the ground with a thud, eyes closed and scared to look at his jar. He must have laid like that for several minutes, and as he heard Daddy calling his name he finally opened his eyes. The jar, plunged down against the dirt, was emitting the soft golden glow like a lantern. The Boy's eyes lit up just as bright as he dug it from the earth and covered the opening with the jar lid, and he realized something unexpected.

"I CAUGHT TWO!" he screamed, arms raised in triumph as Daddy reached him and ruffled his hair. He was hoisted onto the man's shoulders and carried back to the front porch, watching the bugs in his jar. They would set them free in just a few minutes, but for now he felt triumphant as he and his father sat down on the porch steps to join Mama and the Girl.

"Oh, you're a mess," Mama said, her face falling as she saw the dirt that covered his overalls and face.

"I caught 'em, Mama. Just like sissy."

With a sigh and resignation to the Boy's mess, his mother chuckled.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brittani is a pharmacy technician, full-time student, and cancer survivor. Having grown up in the midst of "Potter Mania," she is an avid fantasy reader and began pursuing writing as a dream career from a young age. She currently attends University of Illinois Springfield where she was the 2020 recipient of the Rosie Richmond English award. Her poem "Mini Mall" can be found in the 2020 edition of *The Alchemist Review* and her short story "Caves" can be found on ChronicallyLit.com.

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An aerial, black and white photograph of a dense forest. The trees are tightly packed, creating a textured, almost abstract pattern of light and dark green. The perspective is from directly above, looking down on the canopy.

POETRY

"THE LAND HAS ITS MEMORY.
WE WALK IN SUMMER SUN
AND IMAGINE WHO ONCE WAS
HERE."

MARTIN MALONE

VISITING

NIC BULLOCK

That night now a faded print of a dream.
As the cold darkness pressed in and cut across the sharp lines of shadows
outside of the warm confines of kitchen walls, the bare porch bulb
pushed back the black edges of crystalline night.
The ground glittered with a fine frost
above my father, whose bones I'm sure are still buried
in a cement vault, miles away and under dirt. I sneak into town for holidays,
and hope that my mother doesn't learn about it.
Hoping to skip her guilt trips, those shattered shards scattered on cracked concrete.
The whiskey bottle on my sister's table bears brown witness
to group therapy, how we survived childhood together.
The coldest months frame the warmest memories.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nic Bullock grew up in Southern Illinois and spent most of his life there until moving north only a few years ago. He is a poet, pianist, and potter. He is currently working toward a bachelor's degree in communication.

SUNFLOWER GIRL

ASHLEY MUETH



Heaviness tips me over,
Like an unbalanced scale,
Pressed down by anxiety,
The fatigue suppresses me,
Resistant to my plea,
Instead, I sleep, the leaves green,
I sleep, the air brisk and the leaves crisp,
In silence, the grey walls interrogate me,
With unemptied boxes, plastic bags, and hangers,
To-do lists, the hundreds of voicemail messages,
Creeping through me, the throbbing pains, I sleep.
The leaves bud and blossom,
I rise.
I rise, emptying the few boxed contents of a healthy family.
I rise, answering the calls.
I rise, looking through the condensation on the window.
I rise, the mirrored image of my daughter on the droplets.
Her smile, her laugh, her love of sunflowers overwhelms me.
Those words choke me, "She is sick, she is at God's will."
Through my tears, the sunflowers wink at me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashley Mueth is a student at Southern Illinois University Carbondale studying English Literature and Classics. She is currently involved in poetry club, Classics club, and Sigma Tau Delta. She currently lives in Makanda, Illinois.

THE LAND HAS ITS MEMORY

MARTIN MALONE

We rise before an early dawn
To walk the ancient fields.
One hundred sweating degrees
By 10 AM.
Spread across the furrowed ground,
A dozen of us crossing this land
That has yielded up its maize
A thousand years,
Cleared now for archaeology.
Our heads bowed
in deference and awe
to whatever sun god
hates southern Illinois.
We have come to learn
the lives now lost
under the weight of years and soil
and the new occupants of the old land.
This Ohio River floodplain,
No houses since the flood in '35,
Tractors still come,
The land too rich to leave.
Good livings to be made
In corn and soybeans.
The farmhouses now in town
Up on the bluffs.
No more Illini, Kaskaskia, Shawnee
Only their names
In the counties and small towns
Kankakee, Wabash, Delaware, Muskingum,
And Keth-tip-pe-cannuck or as we say it now,
Tippecanoe.



The black plowed ground
holds pottery and flints,
small dark circles from rotted posts,
larger stains from houses,
dark stains made by living on the earth.
Ash of fire pits,
assemblies of rock debris
where someone sat
to chip out blades
for knives and arrows
and scrapers for the hides of deer.
The land has its memory.
We walk in summer sun
And imagine who once was
Here.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Martin Malone was a professor of sociology and anthropology for 31 years. His chapbook, *Simple Gifts*, was published in 2014. His poems have appeared in *Dream International Quarterly*, *Lighted Corners*, *The Monocacy Valley Review*, *Scribble*, *Seminary Ridge Review*, *Pennsylvania Bards Against Hunger 2018*, *Backbone Mountain Review*, and are forthcoming in the *Pennsylvania Poetry Society 2021 Anthology*. He is one of the organizers of Gettysburg's First Friday Poetry Series. He lives in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

SHOOTING STARS

LAUREN STENGEL

On dark porch steps
We'd talk about aliens,
Fallen angels, Iron & Wine
And why cigarettes tasted like nostalgia.
I lived for those nights
For smiles and shining eyes,
And the low rumble of distant cars on the highway.
We made our bed on trampolines
And whispered promises we would not keep
And as the stars shot across the sky
We never once imagined they'd disappear.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

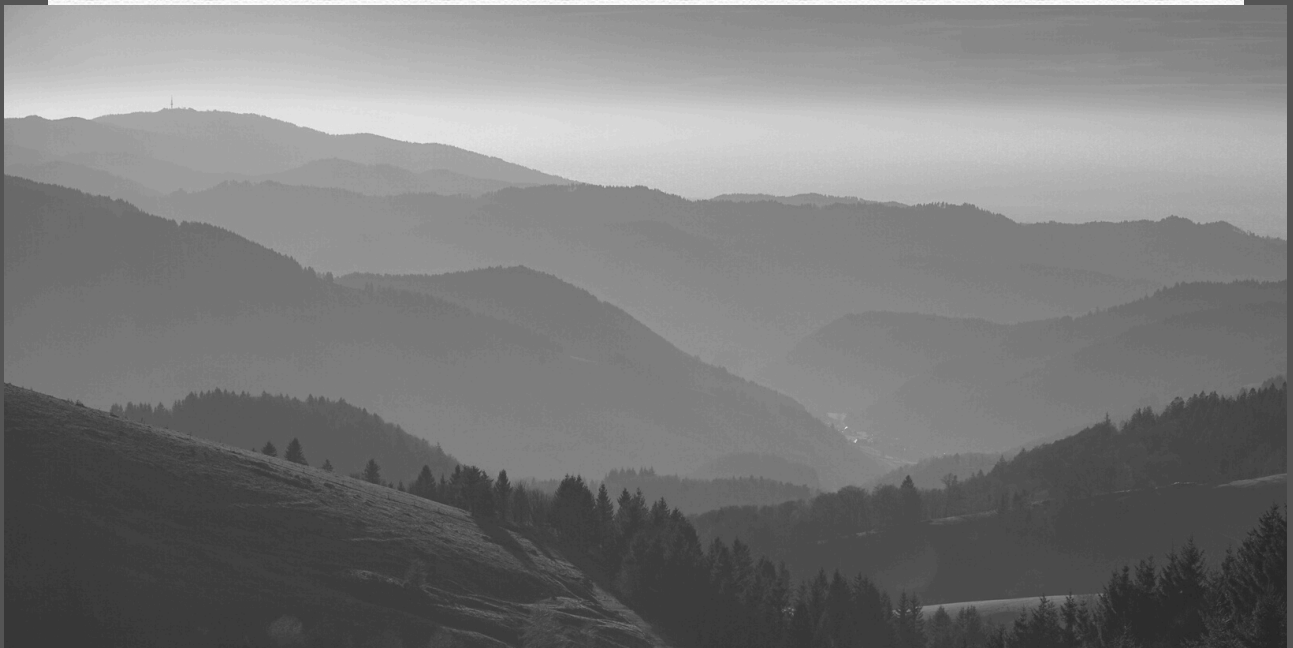
Lauren Hopper is a writer, full-time student, and mother of two. She is a huge fan of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and the Oxford comma. Essays are her primary focus, but she also enjoys writing short fiction and poetry. Her work has appeared in *Areo Magazine* and *Grassroots*. She currently resides in Carbondale, Illinois where she is completing her MA in English literature at Southern Illinois University.

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