

ISSUE 1.3: HEXXED

# WRETCHED CREATIONS

MAGAZINE



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# Contents

[Letter from the editor](#)

[Index](#)

[Missed Connection](#)

[The Lighthouse Committee](#)

[Its Not You, It's me](#)

[Witchwords](#)

[Best Wedding Dresses for Pear-Shaped Brides](#)

[A Cautionary Tale \(Love Isn't for Sale.\)](#)

[Left for Dead](#)

[Night Noise](#)

[Seance at the Wax Musuem](#)

[Ink and Scales](#)

[Biographies](#)

[Information](#)

## Letter from the editor:

Hi and welcome to WCM's first themed issue, Issue 1.3: Hexxed, releasing on March 1st, 2021. When I started this thing I had a lot of floating ideas about how I was going to run the magazine. Things like:

- How often I was going to release stories.
- Whether I was going to accept poetry or not
- What the covers might look like
- How I would handle submissions

And many more things that didn't take that long to come to grips with reality. The fact is that when you look at a well run, or even a bad run magazine, its not hard to find yourself thinking "Well I could do that, and I would do \_\_\_", filling in the blank with whatever thing you love or hate about some specific place. Thats kind of what happened with me here.

Its not that I ran into any "troubles" per say, but it just doesn't take very long to realize certain things, and then you have to make choices. One of those choices was decided to try out themed issues for a while. I wasn't sure I would like it, but I knew that I wanted the issues to have some sort of coherency. So I picked a theme that I love writing about and kind of thrust it out there.

And ya'll really just ran with it, I tell you. I really enjoyed reading through the stories people sent in for this issue, and there was something a little special about finding a sort of string through them all. My question for readers is if they can find that string.

Can *you* see what made all these stories come together around a single word?

Until next time.

In this issue:

1. Missed Connection
2. The Lighthouse Committee
3. Its Not You, It's me
4. Witchwords
5. Best Wedding Dresses for Pear-Shaped Brides
6. A Cautionary Tale (love Isnt for Sale.)
7. Left for Dead
8. Night Noise
9. Seance at the Wax Musuem
10. Ink and Scales

# Missed connection

**By: Sheldon Birnie**

This odd couple shuffled along the road through the fresh snow as I shoveled the walk, gloaming gathering from the east. As they passed, I nodded my greeting, bent as I was to the task at hand. They smiled, teeth as crooked as any fence post sunk into this silty loam ever was, ducking their heads in return. Then they made their way up the street and out onto the levee road that kept the creek from wiping this whole side of town out when it spills its banks in the spring, headed for the big lake with the thaw.

The pair could have been nearly any age, I couldn't tell. The man walked slightly hunched over and limping to the left, while the woman clutched something wrapped tight to her chest. Otherwise they could have been just about anybody.

I bent back to my shoveling, grumbling about the snowfall, early as it was. When I came back after finishing up another pass, the pair were up on the levee, silhouetted against the pink and blue bleeding through the branches of the bare, diseased elms above. The woman pulled big dripping chunks of something out of her bundle—just what, I couldn't make out in the fading light—and passed them over to the man. Grinning, he'd wind up and chuck them off down the bank into the bush and brambles. They'd share a little knowing smile, then do it again.

What the shit? I muttered, slipping away to tuck my shovel away in the shed back of the house and go have a closer look at what this pair were up to.

But when I got back out front they were gone. Still, I walked up to the levee. I couldn't make out their tracks, but I followed the tire ruts the pair had no doubt followed themselves not five minutes prior. I

stopped where I figured I'd last seen them, and gave a look up and down the road each way. Then I did it again, quick.

There was no sign of them anywhere. No way they could have hightailed it out of sight in either direction, not given the brief time that had passed. They were just gone.

Though I saw no footprints leading off the road and down the bank, I took a step in that direction. Where else could they be? Yet when I looked down the bank, I saw neither sign of the pair nor the mysterious scraps they'd seemingly spread about the area. Nothing. With shadows falling from the tree tops, creeping in from all sides, I turned back and headed home.

In the ensuing days, each shorter, darker, colder than the last, I all but forgot about the strange pair. There were more pressing concerns. Such is life. But weeks later, as the afternoon bled out blue, I saw them shuffle down the road past my front window once again, the man with his limp and the woman clutching something to her chest.

Without hesitation, I made for my mud room to pull on boots and a coat. As I closed the door behind me, the twilight pair had turned up the access road and gained the embankment.

Hey, I called out, breath pluming before me as I hustled down the lane after them. You there, wait.

The pair paid me no mind. Rather, as before, the woman pulled apart her package, handing chunks of whatever it was to the man, who'd throw them forthwith down toward the frozen creek bed below. As I approached the access road, it appeared they had completed their task, for the woman tossed her towel over her shoulder, and the two clasped mittened hands. When I made to call out again, I must have caught a patch of ice beneath the snow. I slipped and fell. Hard. I cried out in pain and frustration, eyes blurred.

By the time I'd regained my feet, the two were gone. I scrambled up the bank, hoping to catch them scurrying down into the snowy underbrush on the other side. But no. The snow below was unbroken, not even by the tracks of squirrels, rabbits and birds. There was no sign of them. They were gone. Just gone. Again.

Whereas any thought of the pair slipped likewise from my mind with ease the first time, this second visit left me deeply unsettled. There was no rhyme or reason to it, nor could I fathom any explanation. None whatsoever. Beyond the manner in which the series of events played out, the only other commonalities that I could deduce was their appearance at dusk following a relatively new fall of snow.

With the mania of a new religious convert, I awaited the next fall of snow, zealously scouring the daily weather reports among these very pages. But the snows seemed to pass us by, or deliver but a sprinkle if the clouds so deigned to favour us at all. Until the other night, some four weeks since the pair's last visitation.

When the sky cleared mid-afternoon, I put my tasks aside, and made my way down into the woods by the creek, taking a circuitous route so as not to make my presence immediately obvious. I crossed the frozen creek, then walked well past the spot I had marked in my mind as being the approximate location from which the pair would pitch the contents of their package before creeping up to the bank. Crouching, I ducked behind a tangle of willows which I hoped would provide adequate cover. Then, the waiting began.

As the sun dipped behind the western horizon, golden light climbing the bare limbs of the trees growing atop the riverbank to vanish into the cold winter air, a nearby jay fell silent. A full moon a glowing sepulchre against the darkening bruise in the east. My heart quickened. I held my breath as the world was wrapped in shadow. Only then did the two figures appear on the bank above.

With winter near upon us now, day fades quickly to black with little ceremony. Despite the gloom, still I could make out their features well enough. The pair were self-same as had passed me by before; the limping man grinning, the woman clutching a parcel to her chest. Both their eyes were shadowed, but I could feel them looking upon me. The woman smiled, though, and began to unwrap the scarf from her package.

Frozen as the world around me, I could say nor do anything but crouch, as though I were nothing more than a common river rat,

hungry and cold. As though I were unworthy of what they were about to bestow. I trembled. But if any were worthy, would it not be me?

Slowly, deliberately, the woman passed her charge to the man; grinning, he tossed it down through the bushes to me. Greedily, I caught each offering, gathering the warm, wet pieces to my chest. I held them close. Safe. When they had finished, they stood a moment, staring down, ice crackling to a rising roar around me as I was down into the frigid waters below. Quiet and quick as they'd come, they turned and were gone yet again without a word passed between us.

# The Lighthouse Committee

**By: Leonie Rowland**

Desires that occur in the forest are corporeal. I have often caught myself yearning for an animal skin to drape across my shoulders—or, out of respect for my veganism, to become naked altogether. Desires that occur in the mountains are spiritual. I am closer to God, I tell myself, even though he is far away, and altitude cannot close the distance between us.

The Lighthouse Committee found me on a forest-covered mountain, thinking of neither God nor sex but of eating the ground, which, mixed with water, might persuade me it was coffee. I was bending down, hands submerged in soil, when a voice called to me, and I saw the light.

I knew it was a lighthouse even though I was nowhere near the sea. I have only come across light like that in stories, so bright it shuts you out. The voice said, 'Disturb the ground and it will remember.' I felt the dirt under my fingernails and hoped that, after a wash, they would forget.

The voice took me into the light and up to the mouth of a building, which was made entirely of glass. Inside, plump buns and chocolate cookies were wrapped in colourful packets. When the voice told me to enter, I knew it belonged to them.

I am in the habit of consuming bodies, so what followed was the corporeal equivalent of church. Coffee waited in branded plastic, and I was overcome with the urge to make it part of me. I drank until I thought my heart would stop.

When I was finished, the voice said, 'Welcome to the Lighthouse Committee.' My first thought was that I had no money to pay it with. I looked around for a person, but all I could see were processed meals and ice cream. I noticed the till was empty and felt compelled to stand behind it.

There is a slowness to healing that sometimes feels like pain. The Lighthouse Committee allowed me to drink, but I couldn't ignore the taste that settled in my mouth, the way it made my body bitter.

I slept at the counter with my head on the till. Each night, having failed to fill it, it filled my dreams instead. My debts were mounting, and I could never seem to count the hours I'd been at work. Sometimes, the door swung open, and I echoed, 'Welcome to the Lighthouse Committee.' When I went to close it, there was no wind and no sign of life, human or otherwise, save for the faint trail of mud that always appeared no matter how much I cleaned. Once, I stood for hours watching a roll of kitchen towel soak it up, thinking that the Lighthouse, white and paper-thin, was absorbing me too.

My body felt full, and yet I was always hungry. In the morning, I would catch myself unwrapping a pain au chocolat or drinking from a carton of long-life milk, only to find it was already gone. The condiments conspired, and I let them, knowing that a congregation must believe in its freedom. The voice said, 'Kneel before me,' and I answered, 'I have nothing.' I bowed my head.

In my flat, there is a mug that says, sorry for what I did before my coffee. My sister bought it for me after we had an argument, and I thought at the time how convenient it was to blame the hurt I had caused on my own incompleteness. Starbucks would have saved me from myself, saved her from me. I am half-here without it, like a sleepwalker, guided gently and then startled when she wakes.

Because truthfully, I had known for a while, from the way acid lingered on my tongue, that the coffee was made of soil, repackaged to look like home. I walked to the fridge and picked out an empty can, filled it with water and then with mud. It occurred to me later that I was drinking my own body, traveled here from the future. I imagined it decomposing, rotting, becoming dust. Then, I imagined scooping it up with both hands, boiling the kettle.

That night, with my hunger at its strongest, I left the Lighthouse. I walked until the darkness clouded my vision, and for a moment I thought I was blind, but when I turned around, the Lighthouse shone like a distant star. I lay down, swaddling myself in leaves. My hands were covered in mud.

A voice said, 'Return to me.' Listening, looking at the Lighthouse, I knew one of them was God, but I couldn't tell which.

# It's Not You, It's Me

**By: Katy Madgwick**

My past life was a vigil. An empty container of minutes, hours, days spent apart from you, counting down toward those precious moments when I could fill up on you again. Walking to your house, the clock ticked faster, speeding up to match my racing heart. Both stopping as you opened the door.

I lived you. Breathed you. Allowed you to soak into my skin like moisture into arid soil. I grew you in my mind, blooming flourishes onto your perfect template. Echoed your beauty into every corner of my mind: the facets of your jawline. The soft indecision of hair at the back of your neck. The angle of your head when it dropped to study lines of text. Electrifying moments where you rewarded me with a smile so simple and real it etched itself indelibly on my soul. That image echoes down the long months without you like a signature, tattooed in place behind my eyelids.

I sought you in the most unlikely places. I drove long ways when short ones would have done; doubling the chance of possibly, maybe, catching a glimpse of you. In your absence, you continued to grow in my mind. Putting down roots which reached and twisted their way inside my neural pathways. Sprouting buds of an idealised future. You prospered as I watered the soil and shone the sunlight of enduring adoration to enrich you.

\*

When we meet again, you seem a little smaller than I remember, a little paler. The indecision on your hairline has made its mind up. The mystery is lost. You are a shadow.

I am disappointed in you. You fail to live up to the version of You I keep within my mind. He sits in judgment; finds you wanting. Appraises you coolly and shakes his head, once. I shake my head in turn and see your slender face contort with misunderstanding. The

You inside me will not abide an inferior copy stalking the earth pretending to be Him. A worthless rat, wretched imposter. He will have you destroyed.

He sees the kitchen knife behind you and I lean in. You back away, confusion blemishing your formerly perfect face with disenchantment. He reaches my hand out for the knife. His roots and branches now so intertwined that he controls me, dictates my movements. He speaks to you, says—

'It's not You, it's Me.'

Your blood trickles into the grooves between the floor tiles and is carried along them like water in a viaduct. Uniform channels of red tide neatly along their designated pathways like good little soldiers. I watch the colour drain from your face, and as you dim, so too does your image in my mind. He slackens His grip on me. Where is He going, when I need Him the most? His image blurs at its edges, roots withering, exposing bare nerves. It's not you, it's me, he murmurs. Tears for you both drip and mingle, diluting the blood at my feet as you fade.

# Witchwords

**By: Elyssa Tappero**

my metaphors are ground up and mixed with bone meal and salt, a dash of graveyard dirt and a pinch of mausoleum dust, then left out overnight to bathe in the light of the absent moon, sit and think about what you've done, and in the morning i take whatever the fairies and scavengers left behind, wet it with water from the well, and smear a line over my forehead to mark me as the beast's, you know they said he'd come for me at the end and yet here i am, all dressed up with nowhere to go, late to my own party, and i'm pretty sure the end is extremely fucking nigh so exactly how much longer do i have to wait, c'mon man

# Best Wedding Dresses for Pear-Shaped Brides

**By: K. Blair**

I pull myself out of the earth  
from beneath the pear tree,  
struggling against the roots

A lace ripping rebirth  
You left me here  
in this abandoned orchard,

where summer fruit moths  
have desecrated the crops  
Everything is fermentation

Cider sour

Panting on the surface,  
what a thing it is  
to be breathing again.

Is this how the moths feel  
when they emerge?  
Did I dissolve down there,

my matter undoing itself  
A brand-new creature  
The average lifespan of a

moth is eighteen days  
Will I be so lucky?  
You buried me in spring

Whispering frantic prayers as  
you dug with your fathers' shovel  
His wedding gift

Was this always the intention?  
I'll find out and like these moths  
I will eat through to your core

# A Cautionary Tale (Love isn't for sale)

**By: Lisa Mary Armstrong**

Is love a gamble or  
a game we must play?  
She promised that he'd love me  
till his dying day

I bought a love potion  
from a witch on the web  
I would have given the ocean  
Sold my soul instead

This was no fairy-tale  
or love at first sight  
but a spell that induced madness  
and robbed her of light

A sickness with no cure  
you'll be sorry for sure  
for this undying love

An un-healthy obsession  
You'd watch his eyes catch fire  
He called you his possession  
it was a deadly desire

Love needs patience  
in order to grow  
When you meddle with magic  
you reap what  
you sow

# Left for Dead

**By: Buck Weiss**

I sit at the wheel,  
my body covered in the gore of those who took you from me.  
The blood of their prophet leaks from the edges of my mouth.  
I look at the cuts on my hands from where I crazed their barb wire smiles.  
The cells under my nails that would be traced back to ripped beating hearts.

The soldier I fought in the wood.  
A shot from afar to ground him.  
Fire and diesel to bleed him black.

The demon I caught in the night.  
Light to blind his red rimmed eyes.  
Silver to slice off the jaw that scraped your flesh.

The witch found me half mad,  
thought she had me in her pride.  
I tore her throat with my teeth and watched her drown in crimson.

Their leader begged me in the end,  
talked of regrets and the need to forgive.  
I cut him apart an inch at a time,  
his screams the sound of seraphim climax.

So, now I sit in the car where we first made love,  
set aflame by frenzy and petrol bombs.  
My enemies gone, my vengeance given succor.  
I rage out at the infinite darkness as the music crescendos  
  
and you, you're still gone.

# Night Noise

By: **Brooke Kolcow**

the crackle cackle crickets  
and the creaking creepy tree chiroo chiroo the night noise makes chiroo chiroo  
chiree  
the house sick aches a thousand let the peeping spirits be  
knock thrice, night-witch, my baby cackle crack chiree  
the frogs and toady beetles  
lost owl in the shed  
chiroo cackle cackle  
a banshee wailing dead  
a man in tattered garment  
now brush he by the door  
all silence make.  
Pause  
give kiss and this and more  
a thousand salted doorways his footsteps echoed sinned a cricket haunted  
house ache but perhaps, perchance the wind

# The Séance at the Wax Museum

**By: Cecilia Kennedy**

In the wax museum, I smell smoke. Smoke marks my first day owning the museum. The next day, seventeenth and eighteenth-century figures join the Aerosmith Band display—and I didn't put them there. Each day, I open the door to more unsettling surprises—and I avoid the basement. A stench—a rank, awful smell—gets into my clothes. When I go home at night, I feel waxy fingers playing with my hair.

"Ooh! What you need is a séance!" Jacqueline says. "I'll bet the museum is cursed!"

I don't tell her what I found in the basement on the fourth day: a grotesque half-woman, half-coyote head, fixed onto the wax body of a woman. Jagged purple sutures ran down the middle of the woman's face. On the other side, the coyote's face was partially sliced to reveal the skeletal jaw and sharp, ragged teeth.

#

The medium arrives at the museum, dressed in a cape, and when she removes it, flowing scarves fall in draped lines about her shoulders. She turns to look at me, studying me intently.

"Are you afraid of loud noises?" she asks.

"No," I answer. "Sometimes."

"The dark?"

"Sometimes. I guess?"

"Unexpected things happen at seances, and you can't be easily scared."

Jacqueline stifles a squeal of excitement.

"I can put up with a few more scares—as long as they go away for good."

"Oh, I can't promise you that."

"But that's why I'm paying you, right?"

"No—I just find out who's here, and then . . ."

The medium turns her head.

"Let's move quickly. Gather around a table—it's time," she says.

Then, her head hits the table. The medium is slumped over—and I'm not sure what to do. But then, she sits right back up again, with her eyes rolled back into her head.

"I'm Robert Solstow," she says, in a male voice that sounds authentic. "All of this is mine—everything in this place. I created them all—and other things that you, Doreen, know about."

"What other things?" Jacqueline asks.

"Shh," I tell her.

"You know, Doreen? There are more. And I can't stop," the medium says.

"What's this about?" Jacqueline asks.

Before I can answer, the medium's face stretches and changes. The forehead widens. The right side of her face curves into a snarl that reveals sharpened teeth. Jagged sutures appear on her face—and she opens her mouth to scream. Jacqueline runs for the door when the medium rises from the table. With a red marker, she writes on the wall behind her: "Stop me before I make more. Lift the curse."

#

At night, I have dreams of that thing. It speaks to me in Robert's voice and tells me to make him stop. In the morning, I see, in the news, the names of people who have disappeared—and I wonder. I wonder if Robert still walks among the living—creating hideous hybrids—and hiding them.

The medium still won't help me get rid of the thing in my museum, but she does give me an ordinary-looking housekey.

"This key doesn't open any physical doors," she says. "However, if you put it under your pillow as you sleep, it could end the curse."

I'm skeptical, but I take it and place it under my pillow. My dream that night takes me to an ice cream parlor, where my parents and I used to go on vacation. It's no longer there, but in my dream, it's just

as bright, pink, and green as it was when I was young. The ice cream tastes terrible, but another sensation takes over as I eat. My mouth is dry, and I can't breathe. I choke on something rough and fibrous. I clutch at my throat and reach down with my fingers to pull whatever it is that's stuck in my throat, out. As I pull, a rope emerges. All around me, the parlor walls grow hands that reach out to grab the rope and tie it into knots. When I awake, I know what I must do.

#

In the moonlight, near the streets behind the beach resorts, I hear waves crashing on sand. I open the door to the museum. When I turn on the lights, my heart stops. The walls are covered in rows of red writing: "Stop me, Doreen. Stop me." I go down the stairs to the basement and find that horrible thing that Robert made. This time, the waxy chest rises and falls as it breathes—as if for the first time. A disembodied voice calls my name, and I turn around. "Doreen," it says. "Make me stop."

I've brought some sturdy rope—the kind I'd swallowed in my dreams. The creature growls—and springs to life, lunging at my throat. I push back with my hands—the sting of sharp teeth pierces through my flesh and feels like fire, but I keep pushing back. Up close, the jagged sutures seep with thick, purple ooze. The creature grows claws to tear at my face, but my hands are free. I see its narrow, fiercely determined evil eye burning from within—so I gouge it out. I jab my thumb right into the eye and press it down, hard. The creature recoils. Reaching for a broom, I thrust the handle into its throat. It falls, but the chest still rises. Feeling the heat of its breath, I bind the hands and feet with the rope, and I throw the body into the trunk of my car. To stop the curse, Robert's hands must be tied.

In the dark, I drive to the desolate spots near the undeveloped areas. I dig through layers of gray sand, past the shell fragments, and finer grains. I bury that thing alive and cover it. When I return to the museum, the waves crash beyond the four-lane road—and above the sound, I think I hear my name—and then silence—rising up from the layers of sand.

# Ink and Scales

**By: Corrine Watson**

The rain pelted Edward Baker's head as he weaved his way through dark alleyways. Barely able to see through the downpour, he dove into the first bar with a blinking florescent open sign and let himself drip in the doorway. As the door slammed shut, he realized that the room was empty, save for himself as the only sodden bastard in the city who forgot a god-damn umbrella. Assuming they must be closed as well, Edward turned to slip back out into the deluge to find a more populated sanctuary.

Then, from behind the bar a melodic voice pulled him back. "What'll it be then," called the voice.

"I'm sorry," he said. "If you're closing, I can leave."

"You can leave after a drink." Her lip curled to form a flirtatious half smile as she leaned over the bar. "What can I get you?"

Edward's face grew warm and he looked down quickly. "Just a pint," he said. He stepped over to the bar and removed his jacket. After giving the drenched coat a rough shake, he draped it over a stool to dry. It didn't help much. His shirt was soaked through and the drafty bar gave him chills.

As Edward took a seat, the bartender pushed a strand of smooth black hair behind her ear as she slid across the bar and grabbed a glass. "You're not from here, are you?" she asked. Her loose purple flannel flowed around her as she swung herself around to hold the glass under the tap. Beneath one of her rolled sleeves, Edward could see the black lining of a tattoo on her forearm.

"No," he said. "I'm only in the city for work. Is it so obvious?"

"Afraid so love," she said with a wink. "No local would have gone out without an umbrella or at least a half decent hood."

When she reached out to place the beer on a coaster, he considered asking her about the tattoo. Before he could speak, he

could have sworn, he saw the tattoo wriggle farther up her sleeve. Startled, Edward's gaze darted to her green eyes and a shiver run through his body.

With a smirk, she pulled a rag out of her back pocket and wiped down the bar. Edward felt unsettled, but he told himself it was only the dim bar lighting playing tricks on his eyes.

"What's your name, love?"

He took a sip of his beer. "Edward. Edward Baker."

"Ed," she smiled.

Edward flinched. "That's what they call me at work."

"It's simple, but I can tell you hate it."

Edward watched her closely as he drank his beer, trying to get a closer look at the tattoo, but he could only make out a thin black line. Once he finished his pint, she passed him another. "So, you're a businessman then," she asked.

Edward took another swig. "More like a glorified secretary. I doubt anyone would notice if I drowned in this rain."

"I'm sure they'd notice."

"Ya, they'd notice that there'd be no coffee, no one to stay after hours to file reports." As Edward finished his second pint in a few long gulps, he swore he heard whispers echo through the bar. Startled, he put down his glass and twisted around on the stool to find the source, but discovered the bar to be just as uninhabited as the moment he walked in.

"Everything alright?" asked his hostess.

"I thought I heard something, but I suppose it's just the wind."

She didn't respond, but took the empty glass and ran it under the tap, allowing some foam to froth over the side as she placed it in front of him. When she moved from behind the counter to stack the chairs on the tables, Edward turned to his focus back to his beer. After a few long gulps, he placed the glass back on the counter. Then, his eyes caught a glimpse of a distorted face reflected in the glass. Edward's blood ran cold and he spun around, only to find the bartender stacking chairs. His body broke out in a cold sweat, and he felt as if he was being watched. Quickly, Edward chugged the rest

of bitter brew and wiped his mouth. Foamy residue slid down the side of the glass.

When he turned on his bar stool to ask for another drink, he noticed the hostess had removed her layer of flannel to sweep the floors. In solid black ink, a tattoo of a snake was wrapped around her arm. It seemed to coil tighter the more Edward focused. Just as he was about to admit to his insanity, a reptilian head slithered up from the back of her shirt.

Nearly toppling over the stool, Edward jumped to his feet.

"Leaving so soon," she asked.

"Um, yes," he muttered. "I'm pretty sure the rain has cleared up by now, and I wouldn't want to be in your way."

She propped the broom against a table and walked towards him. Edward felt a lump rise in his throat. The tattoo on her arm slowly slithered up her shoulder and across her chest. As she moved closer, Edward backed away until he collided with the wall. The room seemed smaller as he broke out into a full sweat. Her warm breath hit his face and he heard a menacing hiss from the snake.

"It's not often we get visitors like you," she said. "And we think you'd make a fine addition to our collection."

"Collection?" he stuttered. "Please, just let me leave before I'm missed."

The woman smiled and stroked the ink on her shoulder. "Nice try, love, but you said it yourself; no one's going to notice the disappearance of someone so insignificant. We're offering you the chance to be something more, and join a world beyond your imagination."

"W – we? It's just us here."

With a crooked smile she gave me a wink. "You'll understand soon enough."

Edward's eyes darted from the bartender's menacing stare to the slithering black ink, until a diamond shaped head wrapped itself around her neck. Thick beads of sweat rolled down Edward's face and he quivered as he locked eyes with the creature. With a hiss, the bartender leaned in closer, and the head of the snake leapt from her shoulder, striking Edward on the side of his neck. Startled, he

clutched at the bite and slid to the floor as the venom burned through his veins. As if her work was done, the woman turned to leave Edward writhing on the bar floor until the world faded to black.

When Edward awoke, he found himself lying on the bar floor. As he blinked, the room came into focus, and he found the bar filled with people. Dazed, he sat up, and a burly man walked towards him.

"Welcome back lad," he shouted. His red hair cascaded around his head and blended seamlessly with his beard.

Edward's neck was crusted over with dry blood, and his limbs ached. Holding the wall for support, he rose to my feet. "What happened," Edward asked. "There was this woman, and – I must have been hallucinating." As his vision came into focus, he clearly saw the man in front of him and his eyes grew wide with shock as he stared into the face of a lion.

"Don't worry, it'll all make sense soon enough." The man smiled wide, revealing his long, pointed teeth.

Edward jumped back and bumped into a woman. She pushed him off with the brush of her long white wings while her companion with the legs of a goat laughed at his surprise. Spinning around the bar, he saw people with claws, reptilian skin, wings, and beaks.

For a moment, Edward thought he might vomit. Stumbling, he made his way to the bathroom. As he stood bracing myself over the sink, he began to splash cold water over his face. Drops of red splashed against the porcelain. Afraid he might reopen the wound, Edward dampened the rough brown paper towel and began to wipe the blood from his neck. Once the blood was gone, he didn't find a bite or a wound of any kind, just a patch of smooth scales that coiled at the touch.

## Biographies:

Sheldon Birnie is a writer who calls Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada home. He can be found lurking online @badguybirnie



Katy Madgwick lives in the beautiful North-East of England with two small humans, one larger one, and an unruly spaniel named Skye. Katy is an aspiring author currently working on several novels. She has had success in short fiction with pieces published in *Ellipsis Zine*, *Reflex*, and *FlashFlood*, and she has a longer piece due for publication with *Fusion Fragment* in May 2021.



Elyssa Tappero is a queer pagan who writes fragments of prose and poetry about mental illness, the gods, the agony of writing, and how it feels to be alive for the end of the world (which is pretty not great) in hopes of touching others who might feel the same. You can find more of her work at [www.onlyfragments.com](http://www.onlyfragments.com) and follow her on Twitter at @OnlyFragments.



Corrine Watson is a freelance editor based in Charlotte, NC with her baby dragon, Ophelia. Corrine enjoys writing speculative fiction that hovers on the edges of reality and dares to dip into the mysterious.



K.Blair (she/they) is a proud member of London Queer Writers and helps to run and host their LGBTQ+ spoken word night, SPEAK =. They have been published in *Spoken Word London's Anti-Hate Anthology*, *The Valley Press Anthology of Prose Poetry*, the *Dear Damsels* website and *Opia magazine*. Their favourite band is The Mountain Goats, their favourite ice cream flavour is mint choc chip, and her husband didn't really die in mysterious circumstances, that's just the way she dresses. Find her in the wild, on Twitter @WhattheBlair, on Instagram, @urban\_barbarian.



Lisa Mary Armstrong is a Scottish poet and law tutor researching women and children's experiences of the criminal justice system. In what's left of her spare time she enjoys writing poetry and fiction, drinking tea and playing the piano. Her poetry has been published in @poeticallymag @aurorajournal @fahmidanjournal and forthcoming in @dwellinglit @royalrosemag @TheIndianFemRev @dailydrunkenmag



Buck Weiss (he/him) is a writer and American Literature professor who lives in Chattanooga, TN. His poems appear in *Dwelling Literary*, *Mansion* (Dancing Girl Press), *Invisible Bear*, and *The TYCA\_SE Journal*. Follow him on Twitter @WhyBuckWhy.



Brooke Kolcow is a queer writer living in Buffalo, NY. Their work has appeared in *XRAY*, *Hobart After Dark*, and *Stone of Madness*. Mx.

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Leonie lives in Manchester and has an MA in Gothic literature. Her most recent work has been published by *Ad Hoc Fiction*, *The Cabinet of Heed* and *Emerge Literary Journal*, among others. Leonie's debut chapbook, *In Bed with Melon Bread*, is forthcoming from *Dreich* in March 2021. She is Editor-in-Chief of *The Hungry Ghost Project*. You can find her on Twitter @leonie\_rowland or visit her website at <http://leonierowland.com>.



Cecilia Kennedy taught English and Spanish courses in Ohio for over 20 years. Currently, she lives in the Greater Seattle area with her family. Since 2017, she has been writing and publishing short stories (mostly in the horror genre) in literary journals, magazines, and anthologies online and in print. *The Places We Haunt* (*Potter's Grove Publishing*) is her first short story collection, which was released June 30th, and she is the adult beverages columnist for *The Daily Drunk*. She also keeps a blog of her humorous attempts at cooking and home repairs: *Fixin' Leaks and Leeks*: <https://fixinleaksnleeksdiy.blog/>

Issue 1.4: Webs coming 4/1/2021

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