



SPIRITED STORIES

2016 FLASH FICTION CONTEST

SPIRITED STORIES

FLASH FICTION CONTEST

flash fic•tion (flăsh fik' shən) **n.** 1. short form storytelling marked by the brief number of words or sentences required to tell the story. syn. micro fiction, sudden fiction, quick fiction, postcard fiction.

The Poudre River Public Library District invited amateur writers ages 12 and older to enter the 2016 Flash Fiction Contest, "Spirited Stories." Submissions were accepted from September 1 – 19 with winners announced during a celebration event on Thursday, October 13 at Avogadro's Number in Fort Collins.

CONTEST ELIGIBILITY AND RULES

WHO: Amateur writers ages 12+ who live in the Poudre River Public Library District boundary area may submit one (1) flash fiction entry.

WHAT: A 500 – 1,000-word original spooky story that is set in or around one of the public library locations.

FORMAT: The word count must fall between 500 – 1,000 words. Entries must be submitted as a Microsoft Word document attachment. Stories must include a title, writer's name and age, and a phone number or email address.

SUBMISSIONS: Submit your story via email as a Word attachment only. Email your entry to librarycontest@PoudreLibraries.org between 9/1 and 9/19 (midnight). No late submissions accepted.

JUDGING: Submissions will be judged by a 4-member panel in four age categories: ages 12 – 15, ages 16 – 19, ages 20 – 35, and ages 36+. Prizes will be awarded in each age category as DBA Downtown Bucks gift cards. *

OTHER: Entries may be used in various formats for promotions and communications, and/or combined to create an eBook available for download. Authorship credit is retained. By submitting a story, you acknowledge that the entry becomes licensed in perpetuity to the Library District and its partners.

**Only one submission was received in the 16-19 age category, after careful deliberation it was decided the entry would be moved up to compete in the age 20-35 category.*

MANY THANKS TO OUR JUDGES:

SARAH CAVENDER
DANIEL ROBINSON
CINDY O'DONNELL
DEBBIE VANCE



www.poudrelibraries.org
221-6740

TABLE OF CONTENTS

AGES 12-15 AND AGES 15-19

A Ghost of A Voice <i>By Emma Beatty</i>	5
Endless <i>By Jaden Scott</i>	7
The Ghost Vanquisher <i>By Sedona Dionne</i>	9
Regret’s Consequence <i>By Iris Li</i>	11
Silver Rain <i>By Maya Carlson</i>	12
Ghosts in the Graveyard <i>By Grace McCormick</i>	13
Blood in the Bookshelves <i>By Kaylen Nesbitt</i>	14

AGES 20-35

Inmunis <i>By Nicholas Torrez</i>	16
The Death Cat <i>By Gemma Robinson</i>	18
Do Not Finish This Puzzle <i>By Ethan Herrle</i>	20
Melting the Mind to Mush and Madness <i>By Tyler Golgart</i>	22
Good Dog <i>By Amanda Lockie</i>	23
Silent Horror <i>By Elizabeth Bean</i>	25
“Untitled” <i>By Brooke Gardner</i>	27

AGES 35+

Firmly Rooted Policy <i>By Laura L. Maha</i>	30
The Girl in the Prairie Dress <i>By Sarah R. Smith</i>	32
Phantom of the Library <i>By Mark Speckien</i>	34
The Halloween the Books Came to Life <i>By Kendra Cuddihy</i>	35
The Transformation <i>By Anne Marie Wallace</i>	37
Shreds <i>By A. E. Fuhrman</i>	39
An Unkindness <i>By Janie Wald</i>	41

AGES 12-15

1ST PLACE WINNER

A GHOST OF A VOICE

Emma Beatty

Eva, a mute and dangerously curious nine-year-old girl, was sneakily eavesdropping under the kitchen table. Old Mrs. Crustworth was visiting Eva's mother, a lady who fascinated Eva. She wore old fashioned black silk clothes and was frighteningly old, but liked Eva, and didn't mind her listening. That day, she was telling a tale about an abandoned Victorian house in the Old Town part of Ft. Collins, where they lived.

"No one knows what could be there. No one's been inside for years. And nobody dares to knock it down."

Anything? Eva wondered, even my voice? Could I look there ?

"I believe one of your ancestors worked at the place- I live so near to it, and I found this in my garden. Here Eva, you'll need this."

Eva took it, crawled out, and thanked her with a big smile. It was a large, tarnished old key. Mrs. Crustworth smiled back (a crinkly sort of smile) winked, and left Eva, wondering , silently.

When Eva had to go to bed, as soon as her door was closed, she sprung to her window to gaze at the dark street below. I can see the way. I'll go right now, she thought. Just a block past the library. Without another thought, she slipped out and ran down the dark sidewalk, shrouded by shadows.

She could see she was nearing the house but where she was didn't look the same as it did from the window. The buildings looked different, and they were placed more sparsely. There were fewer trees, and Eva realized she was running down a dirt road. She turned, fearing she wouldn't see her own home, but as she was, she caught a glimpse of a glowing, conical shape, with a shadowy figure beside it, in the distance. In curiosity, she ran toward it. The shadowy figure took a few steps closer. They met, and in the fire-lit glow, from what Eva now saw was a tipi, she saw the face of a saddened Native American woman.

"Child." she uttered in a low voice, "My people gone. Help me?"

Eva motioned that she couldn't speak, as she always did. The woman put a hand on Eva's shoulder. "Your voice come. I wait." She returned to her tipi.

Eva didn't understand, and she pitied her, and longed to help, but she continued scurrying to her destination.

She was stopped again by a voice saying, "Where you off to?" The remark came from one of two scruffy men with cowboy hats. Their ridiculous grins, with their crooked teeth, frightened small Eva, who continued running, though the other cowboy said, "Her voice will come." Eva sped down the road, till she reached the house.

She was surprised to see, standing in front of the house that usually seemed asleep and devoid of life, that light was flickering through the windows.

Eva tried the key in the old lock, a little awkwardly with her small hands. She succeeded opening the door, entered, and followed the lamp light into the kitchen.

The wallpaper was faded and curled, but still showed its pretty design. China plates remained unharmed in a weathered cabinet, but appeared almost too delicate to touch. The rusty, black, cast iron stove stood lurking in a corner. It had sunk into the decaying floorboards, and so had the table. That was covered with a torn, faded tablecloth; underneath it was worn and splintered, but had otherwise survived time well. On the table was the rustic lamp emitting the flickering glow Eva had followed. Closer to the light, she could see a staircase, and without fear or trepidation, she took the lamp and climbed the rickety stairs.

The wood of the stairs was as rotten as the kitchen floor, and every step squeaked and shrieked as Eva ascended it. Her slightness saved her from breaking through the boards, though the groaning and creaking was formidable, Eva didn't care. She was looking at the fine old portraits on the wall.

While upstairs, a clicking sound, then strange music floated from one of the rooms. A swishing sound, and a voice singing with the distorted, ghostly song eerily came to her ears.

Coming to the hallway, she tried the key in every lock, searching for the sounds' source. There seemed to be a dim light coming from under all the doors, and from each she could faintly hear the music, and singing, too, but when she did, she felt a strange sensation in her throat, and couldn't open a single door.

Suddenly, with a screech, a breeze, and a slam of a door, Eva's lamp was put out. (she felt the odd sensation returning, but amplified, as the voice sang out.) Frightened, but too curious to stop looking, she crawled on the floor, by the only light there was left, towards the breeze.

She reached the door, and fumbling with the key, successfully unlocked the door with a loud clack. She pushed it open slowly, and was surprised to discover the singer was a maid, kneeling on the floor, forever hopelessly trying to sweep the dust from the aged carpet. The musician was a lacquered wooden box (a Victrola) as Eva opened the door, her throat felt strange again, and the song rang from her own lips. The lady stopped, arose, turned and opened her mouth to scream at the sight of Eva (her mirror image). It was Eva who screamed, but as she was screaming, the maid seemed to become a whirlwind, rushing around and through Eva, who, the moment the wind ceased said, "Oh!" for the first time in her life.

With the voice she had waited too long to inherit, she ran from the old house, on a once-again familiar sidewalk, singing with the birds, for it was dawn. She bolted upstairs to her little bed, and when her mother came to wake her, she was shocked to hear, "Good-morning!"

2ND PLACE WINNER

ENDLESS

Jaden Scott

“Annabelle!” my friend Chucky called after me. My name has always been a burden on me from the weirdest Halloween experiences to no one wanting to be my friend for no reason at all, until of course I met Chucky. We met, ironically, at our Middle School’s Halloween party last year because of course he was alone too, doomed by his name. I began talking to him and we became amazing friends because of our shared cursed and uncommonly similar experiences.

And here we are, exactly a year later, on Halloween, in the middle of some library looking for our destiny, but let me start from the beginning of today.

Chucky and I were hiding out at the graveyard, due to a sequence of events including a carnival clown and an insane prank by the popular bullies at our school.

“We know you are back here!” The girl called out to us. I stepped closer to the large angel grave marker I was using as a shield. I heard a crunch under my feet right when I stepped closer. Silently cursing to myself, I looked down to see what it was. There was a small envelope on the soft, dead ground in front of me. I picked it up and stashed it in my pocket for later, not knowing about what would lie ahead for me.

Fast forward to a few hours later, Chucky and I are getting ready for this year’s Halloween party at our middle school. Being eighth graders now, we felt guilty about not going to this party since it is the last year we can go.

“I found this today at the graveyard,” I said to him, handing the envelope over for him to inspect. I have a track record of getting myself into unspeakable situations easily with the simplest of things.

“Well, let’s open it then,” Chucky said and slowly tore open the fragile paper surrounding it.

Inside is a small piece of paper and a key. The paper is worn down and bound to fall apart any second. The key has a peculiar shape to it, catching my attention immediately. I grab the paper out of his hand and cautiously unfold it. The writing is shaky and missing some parts of the words, worn out by age.

Treasure lies in the corner most feared

Beware the consequences that lie near

Follow the path of knowledge

To achieve your true destiny

“Let’s go!” Chucky says before I even have a sliver of time to react.

“What?! Anything that says beware, consequences, or treasure is not something I want to get into, especially on Halloween,” I said and replace the paper back in the envelope with the key.

“Come on. It sounds like fun!” He says, then realizes his mistake, “Right, not fun, but still sounds interesting. Please?” He pleads, making his best puppy dog eyes.

“Alright fine, but no more puppy face, you are awful at it.” I laughed while taking the paper back out.

Needless to say, it was definitely not fun, however it was oddly interesting. At first we thought the clue would lead us to the school, but we were wrong. There was nothing outside and the doors were locked.

I had suggested maybe the museum, but that was too far away. We ended up agreeing to go to the library.

“Okay this is creepy,” I said as soon as we get inside the library. Surrounding us were tons of books, but no people whatsoever. Quite a few lights flickered on and off when we walked by them, aimlessly searching for a clue on where to go.

“Corner most feared. Maybe Horror section?” Chucky suggests. I shrug my shoulders implying why not and start towards the shelves.

The horror section happens to be right in a corner and the light, unlike the others, is completely off.

“Maybe there is a clue inside one of the books?” I asked, not really sure what to do next. We both start scanning the titles for any clues.

After a few seconds I spot it. There is a black book with no words, but has a key shaped the exact same way as the one in the envelope.

“Over here!” I call out to Chucky, who is around the other side. I show him the key from the envelope and the book.

“Let’s take a look then.” He reaches for the book and starts to pull it out, but is stopped by an invisible force. On the exact moment he touched the book, all of the lights went out, making it pitch black, except for the glowing of the key.

“Welcome to your destiny,” A voice says over the intercom of the library, sending a chill down my spine.

And this is where I am now.

“Annabelle!” Chucky calls out, “Where are you?”

“I’m right here,” I said and reached out for his hand. I feel a presence around me, but it isn’t him anymore. I pull away as soon as I can. The floor drops out from underneath me, causing me to scream at the top of my lungs. Just then, the light’s come back on.

I take my time opening my eyes to see nothing. Absolutely nothing. I can see, but everything is black.

“Chucky?!” I call out hoping for an answer. The silence surrounds me. Instead of hearing Chucky’s comforting voice, the same voice from before speaks in my mind.

“He is gone and so are you, lost as a mere memory in the minds of few. This is your lifetime consequence, mocked by death, falling towards the depths of the underworld with no end.” The voice laughs, proud to give her the true destiny, for an endless eternity.

3RD PLACE WINNER

THE GHOST VANQUISHER

Sedona Dionne

I heard a scream, then silence. I was alone except for my boss, Angie, who was in her office getting ready to leave for the night. That scream sounded like her. Was it a spider, a snake, a murder? I huffed at my silly ideas. It was probably only a scream of excitement. Angie did that a lot. Maybe her boyfriend had asked if she wanted to go out tonight. Still, I grabbed a massive book ready to fend off any attacker. Though I wasn't for sure if a book would help me against a killer. I walked towards her office where the scream had come from and peeked in.

I, Elizabeth Kilna, worked at the Council Tree Library in Fort Collins, Colorado. It was a side job that I had taken on for the summer. That fateful day in June was like every other. I had shelved books, helped people find them, and I had checked books in. I had stayed a little late that day to help Angie with this new order of books that had come in. I was finishing putting the last of the books away while Angie was getting ready to leave when I heard a scream that changed my life in an unexpected and deadly way.

Looking into Angie's office my heart froze. For her office was a mess. The floor was covered in Angie's prized book collection, papers, and bits of food left over from lunch. But the worst of all was the blood. Blood smeared the walls, desk, and floor. I covered my eyes. This isn't real. But when I opened them again, the same sight was still before me. I lost it. I screamed loud enough to wake the dead and ran away from the room fumbling for my phone. I called 911 and quickly relayed the information about the carnage that lay in Angie's office. When I got off the phone I realized that the murderer might still be there. I should hide. I hid behind the counter and silently sobbed. The police finally showed up, and I wandered home in a daze.

The library reopened a week later but no evidence of a murderer or of what had happened was found. I kept going to work, but my heart wasn't in it. Then a couple of weeks later a co-worker of mine, Stace, discovered the words on a wall in the back of the library. HELP was written in blood with a green slime oozing around it. She fainted, and later that day quit, saying that the library was haunted. That gave me an idea. The police had no idea so why not try to solve the mystery myself. For maybe, just maybe, Angie who had become a friend to me might still be alive. That night I decided to stay in the library with a baseball bat and await whatever killer or beast emerged. I asked my best friend, Kelly, to help and she agreed for anything supernatural was the best kind of adventure for her.

"Let's go," I whispered to Kelly.

"We'll hide here," Kelly whispered back, gesturing towards massive sign that had plenty of room behind it. I nodded and we settled down with our bats for a long night of waiting and watching in scared silence. Nothing happened and in the morning we agreed to do it again the next night. It was the same for three nights. On the fourth night we were both ready to give up when it happened.

At the strike of twelve three people, two men and one woman all dressed in ragged clothes from the nineteenth century appeared from the walls. Am I dreaming? Is this a scary movie? I pinched myself, and realized I was awake. They had bloody teeth and clothing and all of them were missing at least one body part. They began to circle us like bats, chanting a ghoulish song with gaping mouths:

Suck your blood
Fie fi
Take what we need
Almost there
Suck their souls so we live
Reborn to humanity
Reborn
Fie fi
Suck your blood

Without warning the ghosts attacked. The woman ghost came at me, hair flying and a chilling smile lighting her lips. Her hand reached towards me, but I swung my bat at her. It went straight through her, and I stumbled from the momentum of

the swing. The ghost cackled gleefully, hands encircling my throat. I couldn't breathe! I reached towards her, my own fingers wrapped around her chilling neck. I pushed her head back and even though she tried to resist her neck snapped and she fell to the floor. I gazed at her for a second horrified. How can a ghost be killed? How can I kill a ghost?

But I didn't have time to think. The men were upon me in an instant, mouths gaping open, dripping a black slime. The same thing happened. I grabbed one man's neck and then the others and both fell. I spied Kelly on the floor and ran to her. She had a pulse. She must've just passed out. After a moment, she came around. I told her what happened. I turned to point to the bodies, but they were gone. I'm not imagining this.

And so began my life as a ghost vanquisher.

REGRET'S CONSEQUENCE

Iris Li

"I HATE YOU!" screamed Maxon. He stormed up the stairs and into his room, slamming the door. Maxon was furious with his mother. Every other seventh grader has a phone. Why can't I get one? This is the only way I can fit in in middle school, he thought. His mother had promised to get him his first phone that day, but she broke her promise. Soon, Maxon drifted off to sleep, but in his head, he witnessed a haunting nightmare.

Maxon could make out street lights and rain-slicked roads in the somber night. Everything was blurry. He saw a boy about his height running and slipping on the sidewalk, soaking wet from the pouring rain. Up ahead, he could see a sign with the lit up words: "Poudre Library". Maxon had no idea why the boy was heading there, though. The boy turned his head, still running, to the direction where he had heard two cars' screeching brakes. Maxon saw the reflection on the boy's eyes: a horrid scene of a car collision. The boy halted, because a few feet away, a body was rolling towards him. A victim from the car accident, he thought. The two vehicles had crashed on an intersection located on a slight-sloped road. The dead body was rolling closer to the boy, and he tried to turn and keep running to the Poudre Library, but his body wouldn't budge, causing his eyes to grow large. He panicked, not knowing what to do. He could tell that this was a dead body from the car collision, so he managed to call "Over here! I think you're looking for this!" to the medics filing out of the ambulance parked by the scene. He looked around and found that he was really the only person on the street. Glancing down, he found the body at his feet. The eyes of the dead victim were creepily open and staring at him. A part of the skull of the victim could be seen and the eyeballs looked to be straining out. The boy gasped. The dead body looked like -

Maxon's eyes burst open. He couldn't believe it. He thought, is it true? Could the dead body be my mother? She had on her flowery dress and apron and all. After all, it's only a dream. Maxon pushed away the thought and looked at his alarm clock: 8:37 PM. I must have fallen asleep after dinner, he thought. Suddenly, he remembered everything about the fight with his mother earlier that night. He heard something crash downstairs, disturbing his thoughts. Maybe just the cat, he thought. Maxon really wanted to find out what the loud crashing sound was, so he crept downstairs. He saw his cat sleeping in his little hut, so it couldn't be him. Maybe it was Mom, he thought.

Maxon turned the handle to his mother's room, but paused before opening the door. He was a little afraid to confront his mother after their fight, but he made up his mind and opened the door anyway. His mother's room was empty. Suddenly, his nightmare came to his mind again. Maxon could see the boy from his nightmare in his mind. He was the same height and had the same hair and voice as him. Maxon thought, could that have been me? He took one last look around his mother's room and rushed into his room to put on his sweatshirt.

Maxon rushed out into the dark and cool night and onto the sleek sidewalk. There were rain puddles scattered around him on the street. This is exactly like my nightmare, he thought. Maxon chose to go to the library. He thought he heard card screeching behind him, but he ignored it, thinking he imagined it. He ran to the for a few blocks and finally reached the library - luckily, it was open until 9:00 PM. He glanced at his watch. It was nine minutes until nine. Walking in through the automatic doors, Maxon glanced around and he met a security guard's eyes. "Do you need any help? You look nervous," questioned the tall security guard. Maxon glanced at his name tag. Printed on there was the man's name: Bill Thompson. "I'm looking for my mother. She likes to come out at the library a lot," replied Maxon. Bill nodded. "And I couldn't find her in our house," Maxon added. "I see," said Bill, "I could contact the City Police." Maxon forced a small smile of thanks. "Oh! But I think there was an accident earlier tonight and they reported that one of the victims that didn't make it was named Anna Schoden." Maxon gasped and ran into the men's bathroom to cry. He closed himself up in a stall and stayed there. I didn't get to say my last words. I didn't want her life to end like this. It was all because I wanted a phone, he thought. It was his mother that died. Anna Schoden is his mother's name.

After pulling himself together, Maxon headed out into the library. He didn't want to head home, so he wandered around the library and flipped through books to comfort himself. Pretty soon, a lady's voice was heard on the intercom. She said, "Please exit the library. We are closing."

Maxon headed out of the library. After he passed the piano placed in front the library, the thought of his mother came to his mind again. It spooked him, because he suddenly realized that his nightmare had come true. He missed his mother, so he started crying. His eyes were so blurry from crying so much that when he crossed the street, he didn't realize a car coming towards him. He was hit from the side and he collapsed from the car's force. His life was over. Now he could be in heaven with his mother, but this was not how he wanted his life to end.

SILVER RAIN

Maya Carlson

“Come on Matthew! The clouds!” I shouted as the threatening black horizon drew nearer.

“I know, I know, I’m coming,” Matthew said grudgingly as he picked up his fallen papers and stuffed them into his backpack. A thick drop of silver rain landed on my nose, then another on my hand.

“Hurry, Let’s go!” I said as I walked out of the deserted schoolyard. Matthew hurried to catch up to me, and we started to run down the dirt path into the countryside. Thunder crashed and lightning lit up the sky; the rain came down. We ran over the bridge, the surface of the river rippling with every fat drop. The wind picked up and the rain soaked my jacket. Water poured down my face and my eyes watered, trying desperately to keep out the elements. My boots grew brown and soggy as they churned the dirt path into mud. Thunder so deep I felt the vibration in my bones boomed, and lightning cut the sky in two. The rain poured, making it hard to see, but through the heavy downpour I saw a light shine in the distance; a farm!

“Hey Matthew! A farm! Look!” I looked around. “Matthew?” I turned and saw that Matthew was nowhere to be found.

“Matthew!” I shouted. Frantically, I ran back down the path. Reaching the bridge, I found where Matthew’s footprints left off. They led up to the bridge, then, a slide mark. Lightning flashed and in that instant I saw Matthew’s backpack hanging off a loose nail on the side of the bridge. Panic built up inside of me, but I pushed it down. I ran down to the edge of the river, which was now moving threateningly fast, and waded in, shrugging off my backpack as I did. Tears of desperation and fear mixed with the rain pouring down my face. “Matthew!” I cried, “Matthew!” Please answer me!”

The water was shockingly cold and the current nearly knocked me off my feet. I made my way to the center of the river. Lightning flashed and thunder shook the ground. The constant downpour pelted my aching shoulders as I fearfully searched the river bottom. My foot hit something and I swallowed a scream. My hand went down and I felt a shoe. I felt around, waiting to touch a leg or hand, but no, it was only a shoe. I realized I had been holding my breath, and slowly let it out. I had been so afraid that... no I had to keep looking. I started making my way downstream. The water slowly rose, but I didn’t notice. I was too afraid of finding my best friend dead on the river bottom. It was then that I heard it, a very faint “help”.

“Matthew!” I screamed. I started toward the noise.

The water was nearly waist deep now, and I was getting dangerously close to Creek Falls, a large waterfall with razor sharp rocks on the bottom. The roar of the waterfall drowned out the thunder as I approached. There I saw him, in a sudden flash of lightning, clinging to a boulder a near 5 yards from the waterfall. Fear must have clouded my sense at that point, for I started blindly toward the rock. Halfway there my foot caught a submerged log and I fell. The icy water pulled me under and the current swiftly took me away.

When I finally came to the surface, fighting for breath, I was well past the boulder. I panicked and tried to swim but the river had swelled so much that all my efforts were in vain. I heard Matthew shout my name and then I was flying. It was a wonderful, terrifying feeling, to fly. It felt as if I had traveled to another world. Lightning lit up the sky as I flew and the roar of a distant waterfall drowned out any other noise. I felt something shatter my skull, and then there was nothing.

GHOSTS IN THE GRAVEYARD*Grace McCormick*

48....49....50! Opening my eyes and blinking to get used to the darkness I rise and regard the scene warily. Ghosts in the Graveyard is a common occurrence with my neighborhood friends. But this time it's different. Wandering around in the pitch black at two in the morning is creepy enough without all your friends trying to scare you. Not just one person, but everyone will be hiding in the shadows, waiting to jump me and all I've got is a miniscule flashlight and a bad case of the heebie-jeebies.

Taking a breath to steady my nerves, I advance down the block. This time, we decided to play in the alleyways behind the library. Much spookier than our street. Plus, late tricker-treaters wouldn't disturb us, although I doubted anyone would be out this late with a new moon. Not even the slightest bit of light from stars broke through the impenetrable misty blackness. movement registers behind me and I whip around. Just a squirrel. But then my eyes light on the note. Picking it up I read the message aloud "You are the last one. everyone else is gone. We will be back for you."

"Oh real funny!" I shout into the night. "You guys will be sorry when I find everyone. You can't scare me!" I stride down the street muttering. Just as I am launching my mind into a detailed scheme of how to get back at them, I feel a tap on my shoulder. Inhaling to scream, I'm cut off by a hand over my mouth. "Shh! You'll call them back." I turn to see my brother, Elliot standing there. "Everyone seems to have vanished. I can't find anyone, and then that note...."

"The note-" I gasp. "It's real! They've been taken?!"

Ten minutes later, Elliot and I have regrouped with Nerf swords and a bunch of flashlights. As we scan the area, my flashlight shines on another note. "You are their last chance- do not fail" accompanying this "delightful thought" is a riddle.

Where the moon is blocked, and rarely does one venture,

in the middle of the street a portal

Leads to a room only water dares go

and occasionally a foolish mortal.

Here you shall find your friends -but if you do not hasten,

no more shall they await for you,

Your friends, they shall be taken.

"This just got a whole lot creepier" Elliot whispers. I nod but my mind is scrambling for the answer.

"In the middle of the street- there's no holes in this street-except- the pot hole!"

"Where the moon is blocked- underground!" Elliot exclaims. We run to the hole, lift the cover, and climb down the ladder. The tunnel is pitch black, and slimy water runs over my shoes. Turning on my flashlight, I race down the path with my brother close behind. I reach a larger room and peer ahead into the darkness. Nothing but cobwebs. I turn confused back to Elliot. "Do you think..." A skeleton falls on me. I scream and collapse to the floor in a dead faint.

I awake to peals of laughter and I begin to hear words. "You should've seen your face when we dropped that skeleton on you."

"Nice job Elliot, she never suspected a thing."

I jolt up. "This was a joke!" I cry indignantly. "You guys are so mean. Leading me to believe you were kidnapped and then scaring the daylight out of me." I gasp for breath. "I hate you all."

Their uncertain faces loom in the dark, and finally I have to laugh. "I guess that was pretty funny-if only I could have done it to you guys. We all tramp out of the sewer, laughing and recounting the prank. But I decided something about my friends this night- I'll never play Ghosts in the Graveyard with them at two o'clock in the morning again, on Halloween.

BLOOD IN THE BOOKSHELVES

Kaylen Nesbitt

“Thanks for the ride Jess!” I shouted back at the shiny, red car. I turned to my friend, Emma, as her mother pulled her car out of the parking lot. We walked towards the library. We stopped and rubbed the left paw of Annie the railroad dog, an old tradition of ours. As we walked inside, the cool air hit our skin and a familiar smell of books filled our noses and made us feel at home. We both ran the same direction without a word. As we jogged toward the flight of stairs, we stopped, noticing the smaller bookshelves with staff pick books, which are always our favorites. Nothing looked interesting today, so we continued to the stairs. As we walked up, we passed by a group of 3 girls, all in high school, so about our age, yet they all looked at us with condescending stares that seemed to cut through my eyes into my soul. I was filled with a cold, uncomfortable feeling, but brushed it off, since I was at my favorite place in the world. Emma and I shared an estranged look and raced up. As we settled into our chairs with our backpacks in the other two chairs at the table, we got out our homework. We made small talk about homework, upcoming homecoming and favorite books for a while before focusing entirely on our essays and notes.

After 3 hours of notes and writing, I get up and start looking for a book to read while Emma continues her work. I go over to the language section, hoping to find something that will help with a little extra studying for German. As I looked over the shelves for some books, I found a book that suited my level perfectly. I started walking back to our table to see how Emma was doing, I noticed how everyone had left. Emma was sitting in front of her lowly lit computer, which was obvious because most of the lights had been dimmed. She looked up from her computer, but something was different. Her eyes weren't their usual mid-day summer sky blue. They were closer to a deep brown, and her freckles were gone. She wasn't wearing any makeup, which was unusual for her, and I could have sworn she had some on earlier.

She started walking toward me in a robotic way. Her eyes locked with mine and she wouldn't look away. I tried, but somehow my eyes always found a way back. I was starting to get scared.

“Em? Are you okay?” I asked cautiously. I got no reply, instead she sped up and starting pushing chairs out of the way to get to me. I started walking away from her. Her pace quickened even more, and she was nearly running now. I turned around and started running around the wall around the stairs. She was getting closer and closer with every step. I was holding on to the rail so I didn't trip over myself. As I stepped onto the first stair, my foot got caught behind my other leg and I toppled all the way down to the platform which connected to the next flight of stairs to the lowest level of the library. I heard Emma laughing at the top of the stairs, right before hearing her footsteps parading down each step individually, with an exaggerated pause between each step. I looked up at her while picking myself back up to run away from her. I looked away quickly when I heard speaking in the distance.

“Kayl- No! Run!” I turned around as Emma lunged herself at me. I threw my elbow back and it hit her in the ribs. She doubled over in pain and gave me a split second to get myself together and run away. I ran down the stairs as fast as I could, knowing that she was right behind me. I turned and started running toward the door and past the staff picks that we looked at together earlier.

I felt a warm hand on my shoulder, and turned around only to be brought into a warm embrace with someone I didn't know. As I was pulled out of it, I saw my blue eyed, freckled friend with makeup on.

“Emma, what are you doing? But you were just chasing me and I just-” I looked around to see the lights all back on, and people reading, checking out, and staring at me.

“Are you okay? You started running and screaming and I tried to catch you and calm you down, but you wouldn't stop.” She tried to explain to me, but I just didn't understand. “My mom is picking us up in 3 minutes, let's go grab our stuff. Maybe we can go watch a movie and eat chocolate,” she paused for a minute before continuing again, “If that's okay? Are you sure you're alright?” I nodded, wanting nothing more than to just relax.

We walked back up the stairs, but I made sure to be extra cautious and aware of my surroundings. She packed up my things too, and we walked outside, to see her mom waiting for us in her car. Jess looks up, smiles and waves at us. Emma returns the gesture, but I'm too caught up in my own thoughts to even rub Annie's left paw.

Emma and I got into the backseats of the car and as we took off, I looked behind me and I saw the girl who had attacked me earlier, standing on the sidewalk, waving and smiling at me through the rear windshield.

AGES 20-35

1ST PLACE WINNER

INMUNIS*Nicholas Torrez*

October, 1623.

Mathias West, a student at Range of the Front College, was forced one evening to stay at the Poudre Valley library late to study. Taking a desk in the back, Mathias attempted to work; however his thoughts continuously returned to his beautiful wife thousands of miles away and his son. Despite the overwhelming sadness, Mathias persevered until he heard a book drop from a few aisles behind him. Startled, Mathias followed the sound to a restricted section. Mathias untied the rope that closed off the aisle and spotted an old brown leather bound book. The pages were old and dirt stained vellum bound with a thin leather strap and buckle. Mathias grabbed the book and brought it to his desk to examine it. Unclasping the buckle, he found blank pages. Flipping to the last page, his eyes locked on the solitary word: "INMUNIS." Like a signature concluding a letter, the gorgeous calligraphy was evident of a scholar.

Studying every detail Mathias began mouthing it, inevitably reading out loud to himself, "inmunis." After the last word left his lips, the candles went out throughout the library. Panic sickened, Matthias stood up and looked around. "Hello? Anyone?" He listened only to hear his echo asking him the same question. Then a gasp, not of surprise, but of one who had been suffocating and had now been allowed to breath. Without hesitation, Mathias ran back to his room.

Mathias eventually returned to the library, and convinced himself the events were a result of sleep deprivation. As the night grew longer, Matthias begrudgingly penned away at paper. Running out of ink, he approached the librarian's desk, finding it unattended. He turned and walked back to his desk and was confronted by the old leather book. Mathias examined it. He panned the library. Peeking around a bookshelf appeared a figure with long hands, blue eyes, and skin that flowed like black smoke. Somehow it was thick where a body and limbs would be. Every second it stood, the smoke rose and dissipated. It stared at Mathias and grinned. Its teeth were white as bone and long. Mathias instinctively ran to the door, finding it locked. Turning, he saw the thing at his desk looking at the book. Lifting its head, it gave a low cackle and moved towards him.

The closer the thing walked, the more Mathias pushed the door. Screaming and near tears, he turned to the thing just as it reached out a shadowed hand and whispered in a horrific sound "you have freed me...thus begins eternity..." finishing, the door flew open, and it disappeared.

Days later Mathias' studies forced him back to the library. After a few hours, a strange feeling came upon him, as though he had lost time. He stood up and found the library in ruin. How did this happen?. Mathias walked slowly to the librarian's desk, the horror that greeted him would forever be burned in his mind.

The librarian's eyes were black as if they had been ripped out. From her sternum down, the woman had been ripped open as though something came out of her. Claw marks marked her throat and cheeks as though something held onto her face staring at her before introducing her to such hell. Her mouth, wide open as if still crying for help; Mathias shook off the shock and realized the blood was fresh. Whatever happened to the librarian, happened moments ago.

Mathias heard the distant sound of screaming. He turned quickly only to trip and fall flat in front of the doors to the library. In horror, Mathias realized he had tripped over was the bloody skeletal remains of a human. His heart began to beat faster than his thoughts. Mathias had not realized he was holding his breath until he heard the exhalation of his own air in the sound of a scream.

His scream gave the horrors of the library a voice, the sound echoed, then dissipated and died, leaving Mathias alone. Shortly after the echo of madness left the dead halls, Mathias heard a long "shhhhhh" from behind him. With dread and fear, he turned and came face to face with eyes made of sapphires that gleamed in the brightest of lights. Its teeth shone white with a smattering of blood around the small opening of its mouth. It stood there, grinning at Matthias.

"Shhhh", it repeated. "No need to be scared. We're free, thanks to you. Now eternity has come for all of man." The thing motioned for Mathias to follow, it's eyes growing from blue to red; as if the sapphire eyes were being heated by a furnace. "Why you? To see what your book has written of course," it answered the question Mathias could not ask, pointing. Mathias' confusion gave rest to the fear in his mind. The old book rested atop the desk. Clean of all blood and horrors. Anxiety ridden hands picked the book up and opened it. The book was complete. Every page was filled with dates, pictures of demonic beings, notes from a madman scrawled amongst the words, and...his signature.

2016 SPIRITED STORIES FLASH FICTION CONTEST

Mathias stared in shock. Soon a repulsive smell emanated the room, the sounds of screams more audible. The door to the library was open, and the thing gone. Outside, the sky was pitch black. His vision filled with flames. Time eluded him because the heavens were blanketed with pitch black smoke.

“Welcome to eternity, Scribe.” The thing floated in mid-air. Grinning, again with blue eyes. The world stopped. His tears began to fall as did his body. Moments passed and an ancient and primordial fear threw him to his feet. He ran.

The book fell to the charcoal ridden ground. Before it could burn, a dark smoky hand with long fingers picked it up. Opening to the word “INMUNIS,” the creature grinned placing the book back on the shelf and the library transformed to what it was before.

2ND PLACE WINNER

THE DEATH CAT

Gemma Robinson

“The library will close in fifteen minutes.”

A gray haired old man glanced up, startled by the announcement. He had dosed off and it was later that he realized. The pretty, young librarian who had made the announcement was walking through the rows of book searching for more stragglers.

There weren't many. The library was all but deserted, and glancing out the window, he could see the pale orange glow of lamp light pushing against the black, moonless October night. Under the tall pines near the front entrance where a statue of a famous local dog once sat, a jet black cat had taken its place pawing at the crumpled autumn leaves that rolled across the pavement.

Strange, the old man thought, shivering as he looked down at the eerie scene. He bent slowly and started putting his things back into his faded pack. It wasn't just the cat or the cold wind that was waiting for him, it was also the rumors.

For the past few weeks, vague stories of missing persons had haunted the homeless community, impossible to verify or even concern the authorities, because after all, they were homeless. His people lived on the fringes of society, begging and scrounging, moving from one park or town to the next.

But the rumors were strange. Like that girl and her dog. They had been inseparable, but then early one morning there was only that mangy hound trotting down Riverside. After a few days, the dog had disappeared, too. And then there were that couple. He had suspected they weren't really homeless, but it was said that they vanished out of thin air, walking with some others to the shelter until their companions turned and found they were gone.

It's probably just a stray, he thought giving the cat a last glance before making his way down the stairs.

The pretty librarian was at the doors ushering out the few people that remained.

“Have a good night,” she said as he shuffled past.

“You, too,” the old man said, pleasantly surprised at being addressed.

She smiled, brushing her long dark hair back over her shoulder. The name Libby was written on her name tag.

“You stay safe out there, alright?”

The old man nodded and, pulling his worn coat more tightly around his shoulders, stepped out into the night.

It was almost as if the cat had been waiting for him. It sauntered out in front of him, black tail held high, and walked down the empty side walk that would be packed with trick-or-treaters before darkness fell the following evening.

It was almost as if the cat knew exactly where he was going. Was it bad luck to follow a black cat? The old man stomped out the thought as quickly as it had come. Nonsense! The only thing he needed to worry about right now was finding somewhere out of the wind to sleep.

The black shape of the library's museum loomed out of the darkness surrounded by the smaller shapes of the old cabins and houses that completed the museum's display of early Colorado life.

The old man looked wistfully at the gate. It was always locked, otherwise, he would have gladly spent the night in one of the cabins. He made to walk by, but the cat stopped. It put its front paws against metal and wrought iron gate swung open with a shriek.

The cat walked through. The old man hesitated for a moment, but then followed after the cat.

Dead leaves swirled about his feet as the old man stopped in the middle of the houses. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the playground swings swaying back and forth as if ridden by unseen children. The gate clanged shut.

The black cat walked over to one of the buildings and, swinging his long tail in an almost hypnotic fashion, slipped

through the open doorway. The old man, relieved that one was open, hurried forward, stepped inside, and closed the door behind him.

He knew before the lock clicked that something was wrong.

Standing on the outside, the cabin had been dark, but now the shack was bathed in a dark red light. A sickening smell the old man instinctively recognized filled the air. Blood.

His eyes fell on an indiscernible heap in the far corner. He knew what it was. The girl. Her dog. That couple. And now him.

A figure stood in the center of the room, their back to the door and the old man. The black cat sat down next to the figure as it slowly began to turn.

The old man saw the knife first. And then who it was that stepped towards him holding the dripping blade.

The cat hissed.

Under the now hideous smile, the name tag flickered.

“I told you to say safe out there.”

3RD PLACE WINNER

DO NOT FINISH THIS PUZZLE

Ethan Herrle

Anna had been offered a job by the Poudre River Library in Fort Collins. She had just finished acquiring her masters in library sciences 6 months before her husband had passed away from lung cancer and when she saw the job that was so far from all the bad memories, she snatched it up like a man falling from a tree reaching for a branch.

“You doing anything fun for Halloween?”

Anna jumped with a start, she had been zoned out when the security guard, Brad, had asked her.

“Define ‘fun’. If by ‘fun’ you mean reading a book by my fireplace, then yes.”

“Haha, you’re such a nerd. I’m throwing a Halloween party with, you know, alcohol. Have you ever heard of that? You act like you’re 75!”

“I’ll pass. But maybe next time” Said Anna with a playful smile on her face.

After that shift Anna walked home on her usual route, the wind lightly jostling her hair and the smell of dead leaves made her think of her and Troy’s wedding. It had been on a fall evening a lot like this. She started to think about what Brad said about having fun and decided to do her favorite thing in the world: put together a puzzle.

“I’ll head to the thrift store.” Anna thought to herself.

It was on her way home so wouldn’t take much time, she arrived in about 4 minutes.

“Welcome, lemme know if ya need any help, ma’am.” Said the old man who owned the shop.

Anna nodded unenthusiastically and begin to browse. She noticed a small stack of puzzles almost right away. She begin looking through them but none of them seemed to tickle her fancy until she noticed one of an adorable doll. The doll was perched on a chair, in Victorian clothes with long flowing red locks. This looked very similar to a doll that Anna had had once when she was a little girl. The doll bore a strange expression though. Almost as if it were staring straight into Anna’s eyes. Almost as if it wanted to...

“To what?” Anna thought. “It’s a doll, and it’s cute. I’m buying it.”

Anna opened the box to see if at least it looked like all the pieces were in it. Upon prying the lid off of the box Anna noticed some words on the inside of the lid

“ONE PIECE MISSING. DO NOT FINISH THIS PUZZLE.”

Anna was startled at the sight of the words because they had obviously been scribbled onto the cardboard by a finger. And the substance used to write the letters looked exactly like-

“We’re closing up now, sweetie.”

The sound of the old thrift store owner snapped Anna out of it. She closed the lid, paid for the puzzle and continued her walk home.

Anna unlocked the heavy wooden door of her apartment and entered the quiet, empty living room. She was greeted by her orange cat, Felix. Felix had always been more like a dog since he was very affectionate and craved attention, he never scratched Anna or hissed once. Anna poured herself a big glass of Sangria, lit up her gas fire place and began to assemble the puzzle while sitting on her living room couch in a large, fluffy bath robe. She was a little dissatisfied by the fact that one piece was missing because the piece ended up being the doll’s eyes. But she had a nice, deep wine buzz that made her feel as though she was floating through the upper atmosphere of an impossibly relaxing planet. After completing the puzzle, save for one piece, Anna began her nightly ritual of tooth brushing and face washing. She put on her glasses and walked into the bedroom. What she saw on her bedside table made her skin go cold. Sitting next to her retainer was the last piece of the puzzle.

“Impossible!” Anna said aloud.

She walked up to it and inspected it thoroughly.

“The eyes are different.” Anna had a tendency to think out loud when she was drunk.

The piece had been the missing eyes. But the eyes on this piece were far different than the ones on the box art. They looked evil. They were blood shot eyes scowling at Anna with a furrowed brow. Anna took the piece into the living room and approached the unfinished puzzle on her living room coffee table. She had a horrible feeling in her stomach but dismissed it and put the piece into the puzzle. As soon as she placed it in all the power in her apartment went out. Total blackness.

“What is going on?!” Anna ran to the circuit box and flipped the main switch. The power came back on. The puzzle was gone. Anna was terrified at this point and decided to run to her bedroom and grab her purse before heading off in her car to a motel.

When she got into her room she saw a doll sitting on her bed with its’ back turned to her. Anna was frozen with fear. The doll slowly began to spin its’ head around on its’ shoulders. It was the doll from the puzzle. With its’ head backwards, eyes fixed on Anna’s its’ mouth opened so wide that a baseball could have fit in it. An orange and red light began emitting from the doll’s mouth and it began to speak in Troy’s voice:

“ANNA! HELP! IT’S SO HOT HERE!”

“Wh-what are you?! Troy?! What’s going on?”

Then the doll’s mouth closed and then another voice came from the doll, even though its’ mouth was closed. This voice was filled with hate and death, like it was coming from decaying vocal chords:

“You shouldn’t have finished the puzzle.”

MELTING THE MIND TO MUSH AND MADNESS

Tyler Goltart

December 29th, 1999
Journal Entry #34
Harmony Public Library

I must stop seeing them. People know I'm messing with them again. I can see it in their eyes, in their suspicious looks and impetuous stares. I hear it in their questions, their voices prodding and patronizing. But it occurs to me now: would I rather they come right out and ask me straight? If they asked, "Are you seeing them again?" would I be able to convince them otherwise? Probably not – and that's why I put up with the quiet questions. I know that as long as I'm never confronted, I can keep living a lie.

What's worse is knowing that if I continue my behavior the more prone to mistakes I will become. The little things slip my mind. Fatigue and increased intoxication melt my mind to mush, and blemishes upon my weakened state go unattended. I leave myself exposed to the horrible consequences of external discovery. The knowledge of my decadent actions escapes the haven that is my own consciousness, showing its face, looking grim and despondent. People would see me for what I really am. There would be much suffering... Much suffering, indeed...

So, I must stop. The risks far outweigh any self-perceived 'positives.' Despite the lustful demon inside me, constantly begging for more, terminating my indulgences is the only solution.

But how?

I used to think I could separate myself from them without consequence; the idea of severing our relationship never gave me cause for concern. Back in the old days, in the beginning when we were first introduced, they were everything I'd hoped for, offering an escape from a difficult reality that required nurturing. There were things missing in my life that'd been absent as long as memory serves. A real void comprised of various failings from people in my world needed to be filled.

I'd been warned of the false promises these new saviors were offering – but I ignored the talk of their erroneous nature, and I filled my emptiness with them. I filled it up as much as it would hold, trying to top it off and seal the tomb of hurt emotions once and for all...

The trouble is, the damn thing leaks, and no matter how much I put in there over the years, I could never fill that rotten void. No matter how good it felt, there was never enough. And with a touch of irony: as I repeated that filling frenzy over and over again, I became a slave to their presence, and the walls of the cavern within my soul continued to erode.

After my first attempt at abstinence, I was horrified by the realization that I am bound to them by forces that exist deep within the dark corners of my brain. And as I now find myself confronted with that daunting task yet again, I'm not so sure I can deal with what comes next...

Madness. Terrible, wretched madness seeping through the finest fragments of my mind. Yes – the saddest truth of it all: Persisting would be crazy, but quitting would be madness.

Looking back at these words produces such hopelessness within me that it seems no amount of support, no level of understanding or words of encouragement can bring my habits to rest. What began as an eager entry has transformed into a final farewell.

Only silence can kill the voice...

Only death can stop the monster...

GOOD DOG

Amanda Lockie

It's not only men who die with unfinished business. It's not only men who get jealous.

You might see it on nights when the milk-white eye of the moon is heavy in the night sky, though the date doesn't matter too much. It may be in the summer after the heat has cooked the grass and the flowers wilt such that bees and butterflies don't know them, or maybe a cool fall when the wind shakes the leaves and seems to speak over any human voice that might raise an objection. Maybe when the winter snow is so thick and heavy and silent that nothing living dare moves for fear of shattering the fabric of creation or when the midnight crack of spring thunder splits the sky in two. What could a dog care for seasons or time? It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter much at all.

All that matters is the train whistle down the avenue, the echo that bounces off the plaster and concrete of the neighborhood that surrounds the Poudre River library and the community center. It's a place so quiet and so normal that it plays a trick on you. It played it on me two years ago.

I thought it was a place where nothing terrible could ever happen.

My son, Lucas, and I were coming back from a party, a little girl's birthday party, hell if I remember her name. The party was after school, after the mother came back from work, and it ran late into the night. We had books to return, a jumbled bag of *Curious George* and *Nora Roberts*, Lucas chattering excitedly while I fed the books back to their homes. The noise of your own grandchild is comforting, even as I knew it'd be a challenge getting him down to bed when we got home. He was talking about the girl's dog, a tiny little Shih Tzu he'd spent the whole day playing with.

But then he stopped talking completely. I felt his little hand tug mine.

"Look mommy! A dog!"

I thought it would be a great opportunity to teach some history. "Well, that's Annie the railroad dog! Back in the day, she used to come greet people who were traveling by train, to welcome them to Colorado!"

"Is she around?"

"No, dear, she lived a long time ago. But I bet she still greets people when they get to heaven!"

"Can I pet her?"

"You want to pet a statue?"

"She's not a statue!"

He said it so sure, like his mommy was such a silly for not knowing it was a real dog that when I turned around from the book drop and saw it I froze completely. It wasn't Annie and it wasn't a statue. Black muzzle, fur matted with bloody dirt, it towered over my little Lucas and snarled so loud a chain saw would quiet down in respect. Fangs glistened against blood red gums, rotted away and swollen where they weren't flaking. Maybe a long time ago it had been a German Shepherd, but the bruised bald spots patch-working its fur made it obvious it wasn't a loved one.

A train whistled. My chest suddenly felt tight and painful, my heart skipping beats, jolting my whole body. To this day, I don't know if it was fear that made me do that, or something much worse.

The dog licked its lips and a black tooth fell out into the spotlight of the street lamp. I pulled out phone, shaking. My grandson was at the age where he was learning to call 911. What he hadn't learned yet was that a catastrophe could happen before you hit the first button.

I might have taken a picture, had I been thinking that way. Lord only knows what it would have showed, but it might have kept everything from crumbling to dust out from under me.

Lucas twisted and squirmed in my hand, and the damn zombie dog lunged. I screamed my lungs out and somehow it made no sound. I thought...I thought that the dog was going to maul Lucas. I thought he was going to bite his head open, or tear at the tender skin on his arm. I thought the last thing I'd ever see of my son was a bloody screaming treat for a rabid

monster of a dog.

But it jumped over him.

It ran to me.

And the last thing I saw was my boy running to a small brown fuzzy figure. She smiled and panted at him, ran in a circle and then-

And then I blacked out.

I haven't been home since that day. I don't much care if they've put out a missing person's report or not. I've been riding the rails waiting for whatever night it is that a dog happens to like. Annie's been busy ever since the day she died, welcoming people to her new home just as she did when she was warm and alive.

But an animal can't know where it's meant to direct it's rage, only be pointed at the nearest target. And a dog can't know she's greeting the wrong person. All you can do is scold it.

If it even remembers why it's meant to be scolded in the first place.

SILENT HORROR

Elizabeth Bean

I had ten minutes until the Council Tree Library closed. Ten minutes to finish least four hours' worth of work. I sighed and glanced around to see if I was the last one there. I was alone. Books sat silently on the shelves as the clock ticked its ear splitting warning of the hour. I buried my head back into my current obsession; a book doing a poor job of helping me write my paper for Biology class. My paper that was due tomorrow, mind you. I pulled my long, brown hair up into a knot that meant business.

"What are you doing?" The voice, though friendly in tone, came from nowhere and made me jump.

"Oh, hey John," I pushed the book aside. "Bio paper."

"You haven't finished that yet?" He grabbed the chair next to me, flipped it around, and sat down with his muscular arms resting on the chair back. He brushed his black, floppy hair out of his grey eyes. I wasn't sure he knew my name, though the tall, dark and mysterious guy that sat in the back of class had drawn my attention.

"Procrastination...gotta love it."

"Yikes," John's eyes squinted.

"Tell me about it." I dropped my head into my hands and rubbed my eyes.

"Well, I'm working tonight, so I could hang out. You know, keep the lights on and not leave just yet."

"Really?"

"No big thing."

"If you're sure..."

"I'll be right back." In one graceful move, John stood, spun the chair around and pushed it back into the table. I followed his movement as he disappeared behind the never-ending rows of books. I rubbed my eyes again, grabbed my laptop, and typed. "Even though humans appear to be on the top of the food chain..." The tapping of my fingers started to sound like seconds; long, painful ones.

Three, sketchy pages later, John's voice cut off my train of thought. "Ok...all locked up." John grabbed a book off the shelf and sat down with his feet on the table, inches away from my water bottle. "Let me know when you're done." He started reading, and I resumed typing. I yawned and smacked my cheeks a few times.

Suddenly, a screeching, throbbing sound erupted through the silence. My muscles tightened, and every inch of my body electrified.

"Did you hear that?" I asked John, glancing toward his chair.

He was gone.

My heart vaulted into my throat. I ran up an aisle of dimly lit references and searched through the audio books and fictions. All empty. Only silence announced its whereabouts. A cold chill traveled my arms.

"John?" I called. "John?" Nothing. Then, the screeching and throbbing sounded again.

Sudden blackness invaded the room. Snap! My eyes widened, searching but not finding. When my eyes failed, my ears picked up the rhythmic sound of breathing and my muffled heartbeat. Despite the large picture windows surrounding the library, it was midnight black. My breath quickened, my eyes widened, and I strained to see something, anything. I imagined towering bookshelves that looked like giants going in for the kill.

Ok, calm down, I thought. It's just dark, nothing scary. The smell of ancient pages strangled me. My hands groped a table, a pencil, and then a book. I was a charged battery sitting in a drawer. I gasped when I heard the noise again and froze.

Pressure around my waist sent me into full drive. I flailed, clawed and bucked like a wild horse. The grip was too strong.

“Calm down,” John said, holding tighter.

“Let go and turn the lights on,” I screamed.

“There is nothing wrong with the lights.” John replied. It was still pitch, so either there was something wrong with me or John. How long had I really known him anyway? I couldn’t even remember his last name.

“I’m going home,” I said. My pulse increased, and I felt like a trapped animal.

“You can’t leave,” John replied. My muscles tensed feebly. In a vain attempt, I pressed my fingernails into the skin on his arms. I started feeling weak and dizzy. Had he drugged me? My grip loosened, and I started to sway; my legs gave out first. Then, my awareness went out like a light.

An eternity or a second later, I heard two, deep voices talking in hushed tones. Fuzzy thoughts crept back into my head. My body felt strange; aching arms, weak legs.

“The water bottle?” One of the deep voices said. I heard beeping and smelled the starchy sheets of a bed that wasn’t my own.

“It was contaminated,” the other voice inserted. My eyes fluttered open. Two men, one wearing white and the other in teal, surrounded me.

“She’s awake!” The man wearing teal scrubs said as he started fiddling with the wires that connected me to the bed.

“Doctor...” I started looking at the one in white. He nodded as he took my pulse. “Did you find the boy who drugged me?” The doctor cocked his head like a dog trying to understand English.

“There was no boy. We found Toxoplasmosis, a parasite in your water. Do you own a cat?”

“Yes, but John...”

“Changing a litter box probably. It causes Encephalitis, a swelling of your brain. It can cause blindness and hallucinations. Get some rest.” With that, white and teal left the room leaving me to put together the pieces of a rather large, complicated puzzle.

I turned on the television to numb my tortured mind. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a shadow with floppy hair enter the room. I turned, and he was there. John was wearing green scrubs with an official looking badge clipped to his right pocket.

“Hello sleepy, want some Jell-O?” he asked. I stared, unblinking. My mind was a traitor. Perhaps everything was fine, perhaps I was about to die, perhaps it was the monster within me.

“UNTITLED”*Brooke Gardner*

In between the bookshelves of a ghostly library is a dream for some bookworms, while it is a nightmare for others. It was mid-September, and young Alison Greenwood was looking for a new mystery that the library said they now held in their autumn newsletter. She wanted to read it before anyone else did, and to tell her patient boyfriend, Daniel Collinson all about it before he got the chance to read it. She loved the smell of paper. She adored books and reading. Of the many possible uses for a library, that was her favorite. She wasn't bothered by the creepy, crooked backed, had-to-be-a-witch librarian, Miss Annabel Bertrand, with her long graying black hair, as if it were a new type of smoke, infecting the books, or even that boy that had to be close to her teenage years, playing pointlessly on a computer (with short brown hair and glowing, reflective, green eyes like hers).

She enjoyed drawing the comparison of herself between the people that were one or two shelves away from her. Plain looks, but wild imaginations, much like a stallion that cannot be corralled anywhere but the library. That was when her pleasant moment of reflection stopped vibrantly. In the mostly quiet, usually sound environment of the library, a realistic, unimaginative, curdling scream was heard, that could only foretell of one or two things. Alison should have run away like the mouse from the cat, but she was inquisitive. That scream sounded like it was only a few shelves away from her, shelves that seemed to prompt and forewarn her to turn around. Her legs didn't halt until they met the view of a delicate woman, sprawled out on the floor, obviously hugging a fellow mystery book, with some disastrous red liquid called treacherous blood, beginning to pool around her chest, as if any human could be a broken oozing fountain. Alison started wondering on the spot: "What were those classic, murderous ghost stories told about the library around this time of year?"

Apparently, she wasn't the only one to get a curious ghost, she heard an elderly gasp, not from the air conditioner, behind her.

Thomas Winters pulled into the nearest parking spot to the Poudre River, Old Town Public Library with beaming eyes, refusing to stay focused on anything for that long. He was a detective, recently called to this book repository to begin investigating a supposed murder. First, he surveyed every car in the lot, as if he were a bird flying south for the winter. One of them could belong to a murderer. Slow breathing. Speedy heart. He had the same reaction, no matter how many bizarre murder cases that he solved. A library was an odd place to find a victim though.

The Old Town Poudre River Public Library. That was one of the libraries that his wife, Maggie spent a lot of time at, with their friends, especially when he was thick on a case and she needed something to distract her, like another story in another world. That was then. This was now. He ignored the banging in his ears to observe the extensive, early Halloween decorations that this library had. Check Out Our Newest 'Boo' Books! Did We Scare You?, Ghostly Goblins and Spooky Stories Found Here!, Double, Double, Toss and Turn, Pages Flutter, and Fright, it Burns.

Decorated with cartoon ghosts, goblins, and witches, it made him laugh, in spite of himself. He supposed this was a dramatic reaction, and he didn't need to be there. This library, as evidence showed, loved the spooky holiday, and were sporting that in September. At the immediate moment that he entered through the door, a frazzled, witchy woman with graying, black hair, and dim blue eyes rushed out a nervous spell at him (doing anything but bewitching),

"2nd to last mystery shelf. Someone killed inside my library! It was her!" Thomas squinted at her name tag that addressed her as Librarian-Annabel Bertrand, so of course she would be past nervous enough, she sounded more full of emotion than a steam engine is with coal. Next, he looked at who her long, pointed finger was accusing. The view was too innocent to honestly describe. She looked like she was trying to convict a mouse of murder. The teenage girl had light brown hair and bright, wide green eyes. The young girl was stuttering,

"I-I would never. I was just the first one to find the body. I would n-never."

"Show me the body. I don't know how this library is set up." He broke in, his belief deepening like a pebble slowly falling to the bottom of a pond. The Librarian Bertrand grabbed his arm and dragged him to the 2nd to last shelf, mystery section where the evidence lay there in a gathering pool of blood, a distant crowd huddling full of frightened observers. If this was a scare, it was working, even for him, in his fast flowing of blood stance. Breathing the starch air felt the same as complete intoxication.

Thomas went to the library the next day almost as soon as he woke up. He needed to get this case closed, and off his mind.

2016 SPIRITED STORIES FLASH FICTION CONTEST

He ignored every part of his soul that morning that told him to stay home. Ignorance is not bliss. Never fall in that trap. Librarian Bertrand was the first thing that he saw near any shelves, looking more depressed than ever, seeing the library was empty. Nothing chases people away like a factual, murderous, ghost story. She nodded, to greet him, before he departed to the deadly shelf where Sarah Dispariton was murdered the previous day.

Bertrand would have guided Thomas, but wanted to avoid anything involving this. She did not wish to add anything spooky to the library that was unneeded. He understood this, and began walking himself to the haunting shelf. He almost made it, but like they say; that library is haunted and sometimes, a book can take you away.

AGES 36+

1ST PLACE WINNER

FIRMLY ROOTED POLICY*Laura L. Mahal*

Walter Musgrave should have known better than to leave story time without permission, but he had a policy of not listening to grown-ups which had taken a firm root. It was bad enough he had to spend the entire day with his witchy grandmother. But he definitely wasn't planning on hanging around for read-a-loud. Everyone knew that was for babies.

Walter stomped across the three-foot wooden bridge that led him away from the children's section where he was supposed to be spending the next half hour. He disregarded the placard which promoted in large felt letters: "Spooky story time begins at ten." Walter skirted the shelves of kids' DVDs and audiobooks, then began creeping toward his destination.

He knew exactly where to find scary books. Grandma Delva had shown him on their way into the library, mostly to emphasize: "Don't ever open one of these. At least not until you are eleven or twelve."

Ha, thought Walter. That's two years away, or three, if she really thinks I'll wait that long. An image of his grandma briefly flashed across Walter's mind. She was a wrinkled, feathered bird, prone to wearing shades of brown, her white hair tufting up in swatches that matted like wet leaves. Plus, she smelled like swamp. Or something that might live in a swamp.

Grandma Delva had mentioned she was going to look for a biography about some English lady, a sorcerer called Mother Shipton. By her name alone, Walter could tell that Mother Shipton was just as ugly and old as his grandma. Not to mention boring. Old people were boring. They couldn't help themselves. And mean, making their practically grown-up grandchildren stay for story time. Walter had wanted to spit seeds in Grandma Delva's furry face. She actually had white whiskers on her chin. He had once tried to pull one out when Grandma Delva was napping.

Walter soon reached his journey's end – the adult horror section. He spotted a shiny hardcover novel with a terrific toothy creature snarling at him. The book was exactly at his eye level. Walter jabbed the beast with a finger and said: "You're—not—real." He added a "ha" for good measure. The book fell off the shelf and landed at Walter's feet with a thwump.

Walter spied a seed that seemed to project from the corner of the book creature's mouth. Unlike the two-dimensional jacket cover, the seed was certainly three-dimensional, tangible and touchable ... A wispy, white "grandfather's whisker"—or at least that's what Grandma Delva called it—two-dozen silky hairs fastened to a flat brown oval the size of a watermelon seed.

Walter was tempted to make a wish. People were supposed to wish on grandfather's whiskers. Of course, a boy didn't often find one in a library, but Walter was nine and not prone to either scientific analysis or thinking before acting. A daring explorer did not resist invitations such as this.

He grasped the seed and blew it in the direction of the children's section from whence he'd come. At that moment, Walter slipped, the grown-up book forgotten as he landed on a large bed of leaves, wet and glossy green. The slick leaves formed a sled that propelled Walter at high speed away from the adult section.

Walter reached desperately to slow his skidding progress, bookshelves blurring into tall marsh and milkweed plants. Hotdog-shaped cattails waved at him before bursting into brown and white fuzz that rained down like snow flurries. White whiskers tickled Walter's cheek as hundreds of brown seeds caught in his curls.

Walter hollered "Help!" as he frantically seized fish-shaped seedpods with yellow spiny scales. Sap from snapped stems stuck to Walter's fingers as the shells cracked to reveal four-inch feathered birds. Each bird, once released from its weed-cocooned home, flew about Walter's head, blinding him as to his destination. Walter shut his eyes, begging this be made a bad dream from which he could awaken. His praying skills were rusty. But his ears worked fine.

He heard a strange voice, bubbling as if from underwater: "Whiskers Muskrat, we are glad you've come. We've saved you a pile of flies and minnows, in case you arrived hungry. Mother Shipton always takes care of her babies." The smell of swamp was overpowering. Like Grandma Delva, but much, much worse.

Walter opened his eyes to see creatures very much like the one from the cover of the horror book he ought not to have opened. Dozens of furred beasts swam around him, as Walter found himself up to his waist in murky water. A scum of algae coated Walter's hand, which seemed to be elongating by the minute.

2016 SPIRITED STORIES FLASH FICTION CONTEST

The animals smiled in a toothy, snarling sort of way, clasping knobbed bony fingers together gleefully. Their curved white fingernails tapped a mesmerizing “click, click.” Segmented black tails slithered like rat snakes on top of the greenish water that stretched the length of the library, as far as the eye could see.

Walter slapped his hands behind him in a panic to check for a slimy tail.

One should be at least eleven or twelve before going into the adult section to sneak peeks at horror books, Walter thought wildly. He imagined he could hear his Grandma Delva cackling. In fact, he was sure he heard her, somewhere nearby.

Young Walter Musgrave had had a policy of not listening to grown-ups, which had taken a firm root. As had Whiskers Muskrat’s nine-inch tail.

From a distance, Walter Whiskers heard the sound of applause and then a librarian’s voice saying, “Story time is over, children. You’ve been such a good audience. We hope to see you again soon.”

Walter Whiskers Muskrat Musgrave swam anxiously in the direction of the two-legged children exiting the library. But his path was blocked by a fallen log. Astride it were two witchy women, cackling as they read a book out loud.

Quick Cures for Naughty Little Toads, Tadpoles, and Muskrateers.

2ND PLACE WINNER

THE GIRL IN THE PRAIRIE DRESS*Sarah R. Smith*

It was one of those perfect Colorado fall days. The air was crisp with the trees in a full array of reds, browns, yellows, and greens. All the historic homes that lined the streets of old town were adorned with spider webs, skeletons, ghosts, and jack-o-lanterns. Day was turning to dusk. Candice watched the leaves swirl around in the cool breeze as she took in all the sights and scents of her favorite season. She was on her way to the library to check out books on the occult, as well as some local ghost stories to hopefully scare and thrill everyone at her first-ever Halloween party.

Candice hurried down Olive Street and crossed over Matthews, almost skipping through the crosswalk. She bounded up the curb and onto the sidewalk when she suddenly felt a cold shiver fall down her spine and settle into the bottoms of her feet.

“The air must be getting colder,” She mused.

As the thought wafted through her mind, she turned her attention towards the old Fort Collins cabins that sat near the history museum on the same grounds as the Old Town Library. From the corner of her eye, she saw something dart to the other side of the cabin closest to her.

“Probably just a squirrel,” She thought as she stepped closer to the fence separating the public from the cabins themselves.

She was about to walk away when she caught sight of someone standing in-between two of the cabins. She started to wave and say hi, then noticed that the young girl wearing a long pink calico prairie dress with black boots was in fact transparent. Something about her was reminiscent of another time. She moved her gaze up the girl and noticed her long, brown, unkempt hair. The girl stood still and solemn. Candice noticed that instead of eyes she had nothing but soulless, empty, black sockets. For a moment, Candice was paralyzed with fear. A child screaming in glee from the nearby playground jolted her back to reality. She blinked, shook her head, and reassured herself that there was absolutely no such thing as ghosts.

Candice took off half walking, half running towards the tan brick building. She bolted through the double glass doors of the library. Heading directly for the computer, she began her search for occult and ghost books. She was hoping to get home before it got too dark. She quickly began typing Occult into the catalog when something took over the keyboard and began typing the words, “I See You.” Rapidly backspacing, she began typing again. The words “I’m here” popped up in the box.

“NO!” she said out loud. She tried for the third time, and immediately the results for her search popped up. She scrawled down the call number for Magic, Mystery, and Science: The Occult in Western Civilization and bolted up the stairs to the second floor.

Once she reached the last step she looked up to find the same girl in the prairie dress staring right at her with those soulless, empty, black eyes. Candice gasped as she almost stepped backwards down the stairs. She grabbed the railing and thought to herself, “I’m just seeing things. I’m probably not getting enough sleep lately.”

Approaching the section she was looking for, she heard a loud thump of a book falling from the shelf nearby. She bent down to pick up the book that fell, and noticed that it was the very book she was looking for. As she stood back up with the book, she found herself once again face-to-face with the girl in the prairie dress.

“What is going on? This isn’t real! There is no such thing as a ghost!” She squeezed her eyes shut and when she opened them, the girl was nowhere in sight. She turned on her heel and headed straight to the bathroom.

Candice shoved the bathroom door open and flung the book she was holding onto the counter. She turned the faucet on and splashed cold water on her face. Standing up to look at herself in the mirror, she felt a frigid blast of air rush up her back, turning her blood cold. There she was again, the girl in the prairie dress! Candice froze at the sight of the girl’s reflection in the mirror. She let out a shrill screech as she nearly jumped out of her skin.

“No, no, noooo! Leave me alone!” she screamed at the mirror.

She flipped around to face the girl, but no one was there. She was all alone in the cold, cramped bathroom. The panic swelled in her chest, causing her to flee. Once out the door and back into the warm, welcoming library, she ran smack into one of the librarians.

“Are you okay ma’am?” the librarian asked, holding Candice by the arms.

“Huh? What? Me? I mean, yeah I’m fine. Sorry, I have to go,” Candice stammered.

She rushed down the stairs and out of the front doors of the library. She hurried down the sidewalk, passed the playground, and came to a halt as she approached the black metal fence separating her and the cabins. She stopped, grabbed ahold of the cold iron bars, look directly at the solemn black eyed girl in the prairie dress that was standing in the exact same spot Candice saw her the first time.

Candice screamed into the wind, “WHAT DO YOU WANT!?”

The black eyed girl merely lifted her arm, pointed directly at Candice and whispered, “YOU.”

3RD PLACE WINNER

PHANTOM OF THE LIBRARY

Mark Speckien

The silence wakes me from my restless sleep. The low hum of electricity and the clanging of water flowing through rusted pipes cease each day as the library shuts its doors and the patrons and employees leave for the night. I look through half-open eyes around the dim chamber; the scent of mold and decay fills my nostrils from books long forgotten in the bowels of the old building. My eyes trace the path of soft footsteps across the ceiling of my cell as the last librarian leaves for the night. I pull the torn and dirt-stained rags from my body and roll to me knees, my hands spread across the floor to help me rise. I lift myself into an unsteady crouch, the only position I can manage under the four-foot ceilings of the library crawl space. I lilt slightly to the left and peer down at the stump where my left foot should be, the scars long since healed but the pain of my father's screams still haunt me as if it were only minutes instead of years ago that the doctors led him from the operating room. Too disgusted by what had become of me after the accident he never returned. It was the last time I allowed human eyes to feed upon my disfigured form.

I lift my hands into view and realize there must be remains of my last meal still littering the floor. My hands are covered with bits of flesh and hair, decayed and leathery from the dry air that always permeates my home. The air is forced underground from the conveyors of the book return, always accompanied by the motorized whine, and the oily rubbery breeze. I lick the bits of flesh off my hands, and pick the hairs out from between the few rotting yellowed teeth that remain in my skull. My bloated tongue slathering over the right side of my face since the left is too scarred and stretched to even allow my tongue release from that side of my mouth.

I stoop to pick up the small head of a little girl and cradle it against my chest. The eyes and flesh of the face I consumed long ago, but the scalp and most of the tangled blond hair remain. I stroke the hair back from the face with a meaty palm, a groaning sigh escaping my lips. She is so small her entire skull fits perfectly in one of my mangled hands. She was beautiful and so full of life before I took her, just an innocent child who escaped her mother's watch from the old town library park. She didn't even have time to scream before I crushed her spine and dragged her under the bookshelves to my secret chamber. There was little meat on her tiny frame, but enough to sustain me for the past few weeks, much more satisfying than the rats and vermin on which I usually feed. I observed from my hiding spaces as her parents and police scoured the library grounds. They didn't even bother to inspect the giant chessboard in front of the library. They never do. The tunnel to my home has never been found in all the years I have slept and prowled here.

Thoughts of her parents propel my own thoughts to the first home I in which I dwelled. I was once so happy with my two doting parents always watching over me, my father teaching me to ride a bike, my mother always working in her laboratory. To think she devoted her life to ridding the human race of one of the greatest plagues of mankind. She was too careless in her excitement on finding the cure, dancing around her lab, unaware of the flesh-eating bacteria spilling from the broken vials, saturating her lab coat. The bacteria ended her life in a matter of days, her whole existence simply melting away drowned out by her incessant screaming. Her suffering constant before her life was devoured. The embrace we shared upon discovering the cure didn't transfer enough of the bacteria to me to snuff out my life the way it did hers, but enough to eat away at most of skin and some of my extremities. My father didn't stay long enough to see either of us suffer.

My mind is thrown back into the present by the laughter of the last few children enjoying the park before heading to their loving homes for the evening. I watch as a last brown haired boy is scooped into his mother's arms and loaded into the family van. He is too far away for me to reach, and too engulfed in his mother's protection for me to use as my next meal. I am not concerned that I will not eat tonight. The night approaches fast when I can leave my cell and walk among these boys and girls with no fear. They don costumes in a pathetic attempt to look as gruesome as me, and stuff themselves on chocolate. They want to see me that night; they love the chill I send down their trembling spines when their eyes peer on what they think is a costume. To me they are just living meals, and they bring their own dessert. It is my night, my thanksgiving, and yes, I will feast.

THE HALLOWEEN THE BOOKS CAME TO LIFE

Kendra Cuddihy

Alex and Conor were out trick-or-treating last Halloween when they just happened to be passing by the Council Tree Library. They didn't think anything about it being closed because of the time of night, but it seemed strange that the door slid open when they went to walk by. They knew that they shouldn't enter the library when it was closed, but their curiosity got the better of them. They had to see why the door had opened.

Being two boys of 10 years of age they should have probably have just left without entering the library, but they wanted to see what had opened the door for them. They walked into the library and walked up the stairs. They never realized how scary a library could be with no lights on. They had been in the library numerous times with their moms and teachers, but they had never been in the library by themselves.

They took the flashlights that their moms had made them carry and began to shine them around the bookcases. They didn't see anyone in the library who could have opened the door to let them in. Conor turned around to tell Alex that they should leave when he saw something that made him stop in his tracks. In front of him was a ghost. She hovered in front of him. She looked like she may have been a librarian, but she looked like she was from the 1920s.

Alex was about to look for Conor when he found his own problem. He would say that his problem was a ghost, but he wasn't so sure. If he had to guess, he would say he was face a kid's section full of witches and monsters straight from the books themselves. They all looked liked his favorite characters, but they were truly alive.

Alex was about to sneak out and go find Conor when one of the monsters grabbed him from behind and dragged him to the librarian ghost where Conor was standing frozen.

"The sacrifices have arrived just in time." One of the witches cackled near Alex's ear. All Alex could think of was the word sacrifices. Just what did the witch mean by sacrifices. Just what were they sacrificing him and Conor to or for.

"Prepare them. If we are to ever leave these paper tombs forever they must be sacrificed now on All Hallows Eve. This is our only chance for the next 100 years." The Ghost Librarian told the monster holding him, and the witch holding Conor. Alex began to struggle. He needed to get him and Conor out of this. He couldn't let the characters out of the books or who know what would happen not only with the books but in the real world as well.

Conor felt his arm being tugged and shook his head. He seemed to be coming out of a fog. The Ghost Librarian had sent him into a sort of shock, because she was the main character from one of his favorite books. The Ghost Librarian was the villain from 'The Haunted Library'. Conor read it every Halloween. In the book the Ghost Librarian wanted to bring the books to life. In the book she could never figure out how to bring the characters out of the books though. It seemed as though the characters are out of the books now though.

Conor noticed that Alex was struggling against the monster that was holding him. He wanted to say something to him but knew that it needed to be the right time. If the Ghost Librarian knew that Conor knew about her, then they were going to be in more trouble then they already were. Right now he needed to keep his cool and remember how the book went. If he could find out what was going on, than he could figure out how to get out of the library.

The monster and witch dragged Alex and Conor to the center of The Council Tree Library. There stood the information desk with ghostly chains coming from it. Alex and Conor were chained to the desk and left while the characters left to go finish getting ready to sacrifice them. Conor knew that this was the time to talk to Alex.

Conor got Alex's attention and they began to make plans to stop the ghosts, monsters, witches, and other villains from the books on the library shelves. Who would have thought that Halloween would have brought them all to life. Their only hope was to hope they were released from the chains before they were sacrificed.

The characters came back to the information desk with armfuls of books. Alex and Conor each noticed the titles of the books. They were 'The Haunted Library', 'The Witches Coven', 'The Monsters Handbook', and a lot more. Each of the books had the villains standing in front of them. This worried Conor. He now knew that they were going to destroy the books during the sacrifice. The Ghost Librarian directed the monster and witch from before to release them from the chains as the other began to stack the books around their feet.

2016 SPIRITED STORIES FLASH FICTION CONTEST

Conor and Alex found moving their feet were becoming more and more difficult, but they continued to try. They new that they had to get out of the library before they were sacrificed. The ghosts, monsters, witches, and other villains were listening to The Ghost Librarian when Alex and Conor finally got their feet free from the books. None of them noticed as the two of them began sneaking out of the library.

Unfortunately Conor ran into one of the shelves because they no longer had their flashlights with them. That was when they were alerted to the fact that their sacrifices had escaped. Conor and Alex ran for the exit. They hit the outside just as the characters reached them. Conor and Alex had barely escaped with their lives.

Thankfully the characters were back in their books.

THE TRANSFORMATION

Anne Marie Wallace

He awoke in the dirt. The ground was soft where fallen leaves had collected, the familiar scent comforting. The warm musty odor of floral decay always came with this time of year, heralding the change of seasons. It stirred a desire in him that was reflected in the sudden urgency that came from the animals he hunted—at least in the ones who hibernated in winter. He smiled, thinking of how they had unknowingly fattened themselves for him. As the sweet perfume of blood filled his nostrils, he recalled the satisfying taste of their raw flesh in his mouth. But now something was wrong. The scent of his own stench ruined the thrill.

He was unable to ignore the sticky puddle that congealed on the ground around his head. His face and eyes burned where it had mixed with sweat and dripped over his brow. He tried to clear his vision by rubbing his eyes with his hands. His hands. Terror filled him as he looked at them, white in the morning sun. Dark maroon stains darkened them where blood had dried. His eyes still burned, but tears were now the cause. They felt foreign and came without permission. He tried to blink them away.

His body screamed with new sensations. His hearing, which had always been so keen, was now dulled. His vision overpowered him with strange colors, but lacked acuity. He inspected his extremities—small raised bumps on the surface alerted the meager hair-cover to stand at attention. He shivered in the cool morning air. He had never been so exposed.

He wondered how he'd gotten here. What happened the previous evening? He squeezed his eyes shut, willing shattered fragments of memory to return. He recalled the hunt—if you could even call it that. He hadn't meant for it to get so out of hand. He squished his eyes tighter, remembering how he'd lain there after it was over, squinting at the moon so full and large. The peace he'd sought was overshadowed by the sense of dread he'd felt while looking up through the meager branches that covered him. There was no forest to hide in anymore. He recalled the deafening crack of thunder and smoke that had come with the evil firestick—the thing that had started it all. He'd felt the pain on the side of his head instantaneously. It wasn't a deep injury, but it bled profusely and still throbbed more than he thought it should. He knew from his family about firesticks, brought by the men that built the strange square caves on the land that had been his ancestral home. The invaders started long ago and kept adding to them until his family was forced to move on, afraid to stay so close. When he finally saw the men for himself, he'd been awestruck. Their skin was mesmerizing, like nothing he had ever seen, bare and glistening in the bright sunlight.

He tried to remember more. It was dusk and he'd been downwind. Even so, how had the man snuck up on him? He cursed, recalling the small cubs—hairless, loud, unruly. The strange little animals had drawn his curiosity, howling as they made their way into and out of the largest cave, emerging with blocks of dead tree skins. He knew he shouldn't have gone near them, but their smell had been oily and ripe, and he'd wanted to taste their flesh the moment he came upon them. Suddenly, and too late, he'd heard the footsteps behind him.

He'd gotten away on sheer luck and instinct. He'd crawled across the hard black dirt, retreating to the open prairie, following the high pitched howl of his clan. In what he'd thought were his death throws, a vision of the healer came to him. With his last bit of strength, he'd crawled forward on his haunches, keeping low and resting often until he'd made it to the sacred cave. All life came to an end, but he shivered now, recalling who and what he'd risked to stay alive.

Like images from a dream, he again felt how his large ears had buzzed, his visual fields narrowing into a tunnel. His sense of smell had been the last thing to fail him. Before it happened, he knew his loved ones were close by. His father had stood before him, outlined like a brilliant shadow against the glow of the moon—his magnificent fur raised in full awareness, head high, ears flat, the proud neck extended in a mournful howl. Then from behind, a second shadow appeared. A softer version, his mother had approached quietly, licking him like when he was a pup. The only way to save him, she explained, was to allow the ancient transformation. Her warning also returned—he could never come home again and risk the lives of his pack. He was dangerous now.

Sobs erupted from his lips with the realization of so much lost. Then suddenly, he felt an evil presence. The man with the firestick now stood like a giant between him and the sun. Crawling backwards, stumbling, scooting away from the hideous beast, he tried to howl. All that came out from his lips now was the alien scream of a human.

The wicked man confirmed his fears. "I shot you with a silver bullet dipped in my blood. Now you're infected. Says here in this book there's no cure. When the sun's up, you're human—a killer of wolves." The man threw the bound pages at him,

laughing as he left.

His body collapsed, alone now in the dirt. Salty streams ran into his ears—what a ridiculous location for ears. He was sure he'd never get used to it. He'd heard the legends, realizing too late this was where the humans kept records of their stories. This was the Harmony Library, and he was a Wereman—doomed to roam the grounds, infecting other unwary wolves and turning them into beasts forevermore...

SHREDS

A. E. Fuhrman

A petite figure hurried around the corner of Old Town Library and made a beeline through the Library Park. Spotting a reclining figure under a large bur oak, she slowed her pace.

“All right, Adams, my shift is up. I’ve processed enough books for one day. See you tomorrow?”

The man turned his shaggy head her direction and smiled. “You know this is where I like to hang out. Catch a few zzzz’s.”

“Yeah, well just keep your head up. The police don’t like people to loiter around here.”

“You think I don’t know that?” he said dismissively. “I got this, Missy.”

“I know you do,” she smiled sympathetically. “Oh, by the way, I almost forgot—the leftovers from my lunch.”

“You’re so good to me, Missy,” he replied reaching for the paper bag.

“Well, just don’t let those killer squirrels get your lunch!”

“Those? They’re harmless,” he said, waving a hand. “Just a little pesky.”

“Are you kidding me? Last time I ate my lunch out here I felt like I was being hunted by a pack of miniature wolves. I even kicked at one, didn’t faze it. Those things scare me.”

He shrugged. “You just have to know how to handle them.”

“Fine, then you handle them and we’ll rely on you to protect us. Adams versus the demonic library squirrels,” she laughed. “Now I really am out of here. See you later.”

“Same place, same time,” he nodded.

Adams woke with a start. A girl’s scream had pierced through his afternoon reverie. It came again, shrill and panicked. He lifted his head off his pack and looked in the direction of the playground. It was unusually empty for a warm spring afternoon. No adults in sight, only a small girl with blond ringlets. She was on the railing of the playground ramp. Her hysterical sobs and shrieks made Adams take a closer look.

“What the hell?” He sat up.

Three squirrels skittered underneath the child. More seemed to be heading in her direction.

Hefting himself up off the damp ground, Adams strode toward the scene, hollering. He fully expected the squirrels to scatter as he approached, but they did not.

“Shoo,” he yelled, kicking and stamping at the rodents as he reached for the girl.

She hesitated slightly. His appearance was rough, dirty. Hadn’t her mamma told her to stay away from men like him? But Mamma wasn’t here right now. I’m just going to grab two books on hold. I’ll be back in a second, she’d said.

“Come on!” he urged, still kicking at the fearless creatures around his feet. “I won’t hurt you.”

Terrified, she took a shuddered breath and jumped into his arms.

Lifting her over the other side of the railing and into the grass, he gave her a rough shove.

“Run, girlie, run!”

And she ran.

The squirrels did not. One was climbing his jeans, another gnawing at his boot.

“Dear God!” he cried as one sitting on top of the little slide leaped for his chest.

Melissa noted the bundle as she hurried through the park toward the library. I know that pack, she thought. Strange, Adams doesn't usually leave it lying around.

But there wasn't time right now. She'd overslept and was late for her shift.

At lunch the sunshine and warm temperature drew her outside.

Might as well enjoy some fresh air and sunshine, she thought. Snow's in the forecast again.

Adam's pack still sat under the same tree. She scanned the park and library grounds for her friend as she munched on her sandwich and apple, taking note of the fact that the obnoxious squirrels seemed strangely absent. By the time her lunch break was up, Adams still hadn't resurfaced.

I'll look for him when I come out, she decided.

Late afternoon sunlight streamed across the grungy backpack and bedroll. Panic welled up in Melissa's chest. This was not at all like her buddy. But what could she do? The police wouldn't do anything. Nobody cared what happened to a homeless veteran.

Taking a systematic approach, she combed the entire block's perimeter then worked her way inward. Nothing. Then something half buried in the sand of the playground caught her attention. It wasn't much. Just a shred really, but she was sure it was a piece of Adam's plaid flannel shirt. She picked it up, brushing off the damp sand. Shred was right. It looked like it had been ripped from his body. And there was no mistaking the dark stain across it—blood.

Melissa raised her eyes and glanced around. There was no one. Only a lone squirrel staring her dead in the face.

AN UNKINDNESS

Janie Wald

My hand flails for the snooze button,” when did it get so loud.” Sleepy and not yet coherent I stumble from bed rubbing me eyes. Shivering from the cold draft seeping out the old window panes, the retched alarm still buzzes in my head. Sharp pain slams me awake and I am gasp for breath and rub my thigh, where I slammed it into the corner of the massive thrift store bureau. “God, I hate that thing.” As I limp into the bathroom contemplating the hideous bruise that will greet me later, I raise my face to the mirror noting the blurry pain pinched reflection in need of coffee.

The curvy glass and black speckles of the vintage mirror does nothing to improve my look, I squint and wonder how many faces have looked in this mirror. “Cccrrick, cccraaack...a patchwork of splintering glass spreads the width of the mirror, ending with a distinct popping sound. “What the, what... my words fall from my mouth as I back quickly out of the tiny space. “Ok, something is not right, I gotta get outta here, I gotta study.”

I quickly dress in my daily uniform; raggedy CSU sweatshirt, perfectly worn jeans, vans, and backpack. I crash out the door and down the steps of my ancient apartment building, The Park View, I just can’t make sense of the mirror. “Seven years’ bad luck sonny,” is drumming in my head when I just miss colliding with a black cat ”eeoww it screeches at me; really?!” Arched back like a boomerang and electrified hair, it’s eyes dare me to walk another step without imploding on the spot. My heart is pumping as I try to ease my way around the fury in front of me, a guttural sound emanates from the cat, as it darts away. “Is this really my day so far, I need a bucks, quick!” Grumbling thunder and whipping wind have me tightening the straps on my backpack as I begin to jog up the corner towards the old town square, “coffee, stat.” Feeling the prickle up my spine I slow to look behind me, but I am greeted only by the looming brick façade and the dark soulless windows of my building. Shaking off the doubt, I continue my quest for my morning elixir.

Then I hear it; the caw. It is the only sound, low and menacing. Massive trees line the street and I can’t make out where the disturbing caw is coming from; then I see it, a lone raven. Blackish blue and shiny it caws right to me, acknowledging me. Then comes another caw answered by another and another. I twist to find that there is a mob of them behind me now, I am recalling my grandmother once telling me that a group of ravens is called an unkindness, getting the meaning loud and clear I bust outta there. Big fat drops begin to descend. The rain is earnest now and the ravens all start to flap, their thunderous cacophony of caws is disorienting, they swoop at me and I try to bat them away as I run up LaPorte. Completely out of sorts I almost run smack into a set of ladders, but as I try to steer out of the way I send myself under! “Did I actually just run under a ladder, how many years of bad luck is that?”

Instantly, my eyes are drawn to the gash of a crack in the sidewalk and my mind is reeling as the nursery rhyme burns across my mind “step on a crack, break your mother’s back!” Oh God no, I spiral to avoid the giant crack, but my sloppy wet shoes give way and I fall right down onto it with a hard thud. The ravens have gone, my hair is plastered against my face and my sweatshirt is sopping. As I look up from my predicament I notice a small man standing in the doorway of the Old Firehouse Bookstore dressed in yellow rubber sailing slickers, too big for him. The rubber pants and jacket are rolled several times, he is shaking his head and grinning like some toothless clown when he raises his coffee cup at me, in greetings. I can just make out the steam rising out of the cup as the man points to a horseshoe nailed to the brick wall next to him, in this moment the horseshoe is facing up and I begin to feel a ridiculous laugh come forth, when slowly the horseshoe tilts, then clank, down it twists. The man is still looking at me with that grin, which now seems maniacal. Scrambling to my feet and I can hear him laugh, “not too lucky is you kid...heh heh.” I rush inside Starbucks, nearly bumping into a group of older ladies, who look at me with curiosity. I just need that coffee, I just need to sit down and collect my thoughts, it’s like I’m in some Stephen King novel. As I order my venti bold black I sigh. I ask for no sleeve, I want to feel the heat of the brew in my hands, my shoulders decompress as I, thwack, the older lady’s umbrella is unleashed and my venti is lost. “No no no, I can’t have any more bad luck I yell!”

Shuddering, my eyes fly open, as shrieking children assault my ears. Frantically I look around, little witches, aliens, and firemen are everywhere. A whimper escapes my lips and as I raise my head off my backpack, I realize I’m in the Old Town library. “A Halloween parade, whoa, I totally fell asleep. Man that dream seemed so real.” I lean back in my chair to stretch, confidence draining back into my being, good thing I don’t put much stock in all that stuff, I rub my thighs to wake myself up, ugg what is that pain?